Stereotypes of African American Women in US Television

Analysis of *Scandal* and *Hawthorne*

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1. Introduction

Over the past couple of decades, African American actors have secured themselves an ever more prominent place on the Big Screen. Denzel Washington, Jamie Foxx, Viola Davis, Will Smith, Halle Berry,… Without much of an effort, one can come up with a seemingly endless list of African American actors and actresses, who have been able to make fame in film and television and who are often regarded as symbols of black emancipation and equality.

Ever since African slaves were brought to the shores of America and forced to work on Southern plantations, African Americans have struggled to define themselves in American culture, for they have long been subject to ridicule and shame in American popular media such as theatre and film. (Wilkins Cantanese 2008: 1) Although the current situation of African American actors has certainly improved since the early ages of US film and theatre, it is important to understand that many actors still do not have access to certain roles because of their skin colour or are typecast as stereotypical enlargements of black personalities.

Especially African American actresses are severely underrepresented in US film and television. Whereas actors such as Will Smith or Jamie Foxx are often cast in leading roles in many different film genres ranging from action and sci-fi to romantic comedies, black actresses seem to have it more difficult to obtain a leading role in a big Hollywood production or television series, or cast in a role that does not represent the African American woman as a slave, a welfare queen or just a “pretty little thang” (Harris-Perry 2011: 8-15).

According to Melissa Harris-Perry, author of the critically acclaimed Sister Citizen, “women have always had to wrestle with derogatory assumptions about their character and identity” (2011: 4). Women have been continuously discriminated against in terms of their position on the social, political and economic spectrum of society and although this lack of recognition is due to a very complex web of issues and socio-political factors, it is safe to state that television plays a huge part in this distorted image of African American women (2011: 13).

This paper will analyse the presence of stereotypes of African American women in the American television series Scandal and Hawthorne. Both TV series are one of the only shows in the past two decades that cast an African American woman in the leading role and were applauded for their stance against a predominantly white television landscape. It will, however, be interesting to see whether these TV series -written and produced by African American women Shonda Rhimes and Jada Pinkett Smith respectively- have incorporated some of the well-known stereotypes of African American women as well. As Harris-Perry mentioned, it is rather difficult “to stand up in a crooked room” (2011: 29) and many black women, often unconsciously, tilt and bend themselves to fit these false depictions and degrading stereotypes (Ibid.).
2. Theoretical Framework: Stereotypes of African American Women

Stereotype (noun): a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing.

The term stereotype has become an entrenched concept in our modern-day society and has influenced our social and psychological image of the world and the people in it (Dente Ross 2011: preface). Although the definition by Oxford Dictionary above illustrates that stereotypes are highly oversimplifying, they are also able to communicate certain messages “without much subtlety or nuance” (Ibid.). That is why the visual media -from filmmakers to cartoonists- keep using these stereotypes as vehicles of clear and easily understood images. When it comes to stereotypes of ethnic minorities, the images often become one-dimensional, unfair and can embed a distorted negative understanding of those minorities within our social memory (Dente Ross 2011: preface). Apart from the fact that these stereotypes do not represent reality, they also influence the audiences’ perceptions of their own ethnic identities (Pornsakulvanich 2007:22). In terms of white Americans, ethnicity is an unconscious concept, since US societal norms have been constructed around their ethnic and cultural frameworks. They no longer distinguish it as their “ethnic identity” but as “standard American culture” (Chavez & Guido Di-Brito 1999: 39). However, for the racial and ethnic minorities in the United States, ethnic identity is manifested in a very conscious manner. A positive ethnic identity is created through the pride of cultural traditions and through familial and neighbourhood communities. This sense of pride towards their own background stands in sharp contrast with the stereotypical portrayals of ethnic minorities in US media. Because of the negative treatment they receive in the media and the image that is being projected of one ethnic group being more desirable than another, some members of a minority group may start to feel shame towards their own ethnic identity (Ibid.). Studies, therefore, suggest that people would generally select television programs that depicted their ethnic groups in a positive way, for it gratifies their needs for maintaining social identities (Pornsakulvanich 2007:25).

Since television shows portray constructed realities of society and stereotypical images of ethnic and racial minorities, the next chapters will give a historical background to the depiction of African Americans and a theoretical analysis of the different stereotypes used of African American women.
2.1 Historical Overview: African Americans in US film and television

Even before the development of the film industry, images of African Americans were used to sell a distorted picture of Southern plantation life. According to Patricia A. Turner, theatrical productions romanticized slavery and depicted slaves as non-threatening, inferior imbeciles (1994: 29). One of the most famous stereotypes of African Americans is the *Uncle Tom* character, created by author Harriet Beecher Stowe in her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). It is, however, important to clarify that the original image of Uncle Tom as described by Beecher Stowe has little in common with the many adaptations that soon followed. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote her world famous novel in the antebellum period and she provoked many angry Southerners by writing her novel from a clear anti-slavery perspective. Her abolitionist mindset might trace back to her Christian upbringing, for she believed that if you really were a good Christian, you should not tolerate the atrocities of slavery. (Silke 1990: 119)

Beecher Stowe described Uncle Tom as follows (1852: 32):

> He was a large, broad-chested, powerfully made man, of a full glossy black ,and a face whose truly African features were characterized by an expression of grave and steady good sense, united with much kindliness and benevolence.

This description clearly illustrates how she considered him to be a hero; someone who is wise and kind, but strong at the same time. The many theatrical adaptations that were created during the Reconstruction era, nonetheless, depicted Uncle Tom as a passive and docile old man (Turner 1994: 71). By taking enormous liberties with the personality traits of the original Uncle Tom, theatre entrepreneurs were able to dilute the horrors of slavery and make a profit by creating a nostalgic version of slavery (Ibid. 1994: 84). Moreover, it is important to mention that the roles of African American slaves in these theatre productions were played by white actors in black face, not by African Americans themselves (Ibid.).

When the first films were being produced, African Americans were portrayed as objects of ridicule. According to Cathrine and John Silke (1990: 123), the reasons for depicting them as non-threatening buffoons are two-fold. First of all, there was the need to create a sense of unity between the North and the South after the Civil War. Considering their difference in opinion about the institution of slavery, film makers understood they needed to create an image that would appeal to both Northerners and Southerners. Hence, the comic and non-threatening Black was developed, since both groups of people -regardless of their difference in mentality- considered themselves superior to African Americans (Ibid.). Secondly, after 1905 film producers were able to make longer films, which led to a boom in production costs. In order to still make a profit, producers needed to attract the largest audience possible and therefore standardized their portrayal of African Americans.
This non-threatening depiction of blacks disappeared when *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) was released. This film, which was set in the Civil War era, can be considered one of the most controversial films in US history, for it not only emphasized the violent and sexually aggressive characteristics of African Americans, it also portrayed the Ku Klux Klan as a heroic organization (Silke 1990: 125). Although the film was an instant success among white Americans, African Americans were outraged and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) organized numerous campaigns and protest marches against the film (Ibid.).

During the Red Summer of 1919 relations between whites and blacks became even more hostile. Race riots occurred in many large American cities, turning whites and blacks against each other. Many African Americans were attacked out of nowhere by angry white Americans, but in some cases blacks fought back, empowered by the NAACP (Silke 1990: 129). Because of this hostile atmosphere, many film makers stepped away from producing films that portrayed African Americans as aggressive. Although this form of mild self-censorship had some positive short term effects (e.g. ethnic name-calling was forbidden), in the long run this turned out to be disastrous for African American actors, since even fewer African Americans were cast. When the Great Depression hit, African Americans were the first to be laid off, which created a situation in which practically no black actor could get a job in the film industry. The early years of Hollywood can therefore be seen as an almost entirely black-free business, in which racism was expressed by either assigning African Americans demeaning roles, or ignoring them completely (Silke 1990: 130-131).

In the period before and after the Second World War, popular culture was to stress national unity. The Office of War produced films in which the interracial relationship between whites and blacks was portrayed as tolerant. However, the racial integration as shown in these films was a figment of the director’s imagination, as it did not exist in reality (Silke 1990: 148).

The 1960s marked the first step towards greater diversity on screen. More roles for African American actors became available, thanks to pressure by the NAACP and the progressive wave led by the Civil Rights Movement. However, production was still a predominantly white field and because producers deemed the profit-driven commercial aspects of film more important than artistic value, they did not attempt to stop the racist portrayals of blacks (Silke 1990: 155).

One of the most successful African American actors at that time was Sidney Poitier. He was the first African American actor to win an Academy Award for Best Actor in 1964 (for his role in *Lilies of the Fields*) and he is generally regarded as the first black actor to refuse stereotypical roles, which paved the way for more positive African American characters in films (Silke 1990:162). Although Poitier made history at that moment, his win is sometimes seen as more of a victory for Hollywood than a victory for black America. Sidney Poitier portrayed African Americans who were impeccably dressed, noble and self-sacrificial. Hollywood patted itself on the back for creating such positive roles, but at the same time
African American actors were forced in this almost superhuman role to which no real African American could possibly relate (Harris 2008: 58-59).

By the end of the 1960s, Hollywood began to see the commercial potential of black audiences and studios released Blaxploitation films. These films were not only aimed at a young and urban black audience but also incorporated many other symbols of Black culture such as soul and funk music and African American slang. Although many people saw Blaxploitation films as a step towards greater black empowerment, for these films had an almost solely black cast, many African Americans (including the NAACP) also protested the popularity of Blaxploitation films. African American men were depicted as violent -albeit sexy- savages and especially women were subject to sexist and unflattering portrayals. Hence, critics stated that Blaxploitation would in no way lead to better racial relations and their massive protests eventually led to the downfall of the subgenre in the late seventies (Silke 1990: 167-169).

The 1980s are generally perceived as the boom of television shows, since the monopoly of the Big Three networks (ABC, NBC and CBS) was in decline due to the arrival of independent and cable television (Mauk & Oakland 2009: 317-318). The emergence of a more diverse TV landscape led to a greater commercialization of TV shows, for both the traditional networks and the new players wanted to attract as many viewers as possible (Ibid.). Hence, many new and often comedic television series were created. (e.g. Cheers (1982), The A-Team (1983) and Married With Children (1987))

It is, however, to be noted that this broadened television landscape also introduced the American public to its first black television primetime shows (Turner 1994: 133). The Cosby Show is still the most successful primetime comedy show in US history and also The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air managed to secure itself a place in television history. For the first time since the development of the film industry, African Americans were now cast in leading roles that represented them in a positive all-American way. Moreover, the audience -both black and white- was now laughing with rather than at their family situations (Ibid.).

Although the emergence of successful black television shows certainly indicated a huge step towards greater race equality in media and broadcasting, it also uncovered two recurring issues concerning African American advancement in society (Turner 1994: 146). The first issue is the imbalance of African American representation between comedy and drama series. Whereas black actors could now obtain roles in comedy series, in which they were depicted in a generally positive way, dramatic series still portrayed them in derogatory and highly stereotyped manners (e.g. as a victim, suspect, prisoner, pimp, drug dealer,…) (Ibid.). The second problem with television shows from the 1980-1990s is the lack of positive black female characters. For example, in The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air (1990) the main character of Will Smith is often accompanied by his cousin Carlton. Their adventures are the main topic of the show, whereas Carlton’s sisters Ashley and Hilary remain one-dimensional side characters. Furthermore, dramatic series have hardly ever cast African American actresses in a leading role and these actresses are caught in a vicious circle of nonspeaking background roles as prostitutes or victims (Turner 1994: 155-156). Hence, my interest in the television
series *Scandal* and *Hawthorne*, for these are the only two television series in the last two decades that have opted for an African American female lead in a drama series.

Looking at the situation of black actors today - both in film and television - one could conclude that African American actors are now in greater demand than ever. Patricia A. Turner (1994:167), however, explains that this success is peculiarly linked with the success of films based on true stories. She asks herself whether writers or producers lack inspiration when it comes to writing fictional stories about blacks. “Filmmakers are nearly incapable of constructing non-stereotypical African American characters, so when they do stray away from the safety of stereotypes, they rely on adaptations of real-life stories as vehicles through which they portray blacks on screen” (Ibid.). Her theory can be easily confirmed when one looks at recent films starring African American lead actors in a leading role. Forest Whitaker played Cecil Gaines in *The Butler* (2013), a character which was loosely based on the life of White House butler Eugene Allen. Idris Elba starred as Mandela in the film by the same name (2013) and Chiwetel Ejofor plays Solomon Northup in the film *12 Years A Slave*, based on Northup’s own memoir written in 1853. Not only were all three films based on true stories but they were also the only films with an African American lead to be nominated for prestigious awards. *The Butler* was nominated for three Screen Actors Guild Awards, *Mandela Long Walk To Freedom* was nominated for three Golden Globes and *12 Years A Slave* won a Bafta for Best Picture and Best Actor in a Leading Role and won three Oscars, including Best Picture (Shoard 03.03.2014). These facts certainly make it seem as if only true stories starring African American actors can receive prestigious prizes.

Thus, it would be highly inaccurate to state that the issue of race in film and television is non-existent. While this so-called post-racial society may have created more roles for African Americans, it still remains hard for both African American writers and actors to tell unique stories, and that is why this research focuses on *Scandal* and *Hawthorne*, two TV series which were written and produced by African Americans.

2.2 Stereotypes of African American women

Stereotypes of African American women have played an important role throughout the history of the United States, for they were used to justify economic and social structures such as slavery and segregation. These unflattering depictions soothed the conscience of the white American majority, or to quote Patricia Hill Collins, author of *Black Feminist Thought*: “Portraying African American women as stereotypical mammys, matriarchs, welfare recipients and hot mammas helps justify US black women’s oppression” (1991: 69).

Famous stereotypes such as the mammy, the jezebel and the sapphire, which will be analysed further on in this text, have been regularly used in both politics and popular culture alike. However, none of these stereotypes represent the truly complex nature of the individual. They are simply blatant caricatures of an African American woman’s life, without any form of
nuance or in-depth understanding of what it means to be a black woman in today’s society. (Turner 1994: Xi-Xii)

As mentioned in the introduction, television plays an important part in the distribution of these stereotypes. According to Patricia A. Turner, African American characters in TV series are often one-dimensional and it is these distorted images of reality that form the biggest problem for black women’s advancement in society. The way African American women are represented in popular culture affects how they are treated in their daily lives, because “when white people are confronted with blacks in the real world, do they not rely on expectations created by the reel [sic] world?” (1994: Xii)

Three main stereotypes of African American women keep recurring in US history: the Mammy, the Jezebel and the Sapphire. However, throughout the course of history, other distortions of the image of African American women have occurred, one of which was developed by African American women themselves (i.e. the stereotype of the strong black woman) as a response to all the negative images circulating about them in society (Harris-Perry 2011: 200). Moreover, one can distinguish an additional category which is not based on one particular stereotype, but deals with the generally accepted assumption that African Americans -both male and female- speak a particular kind of English; one that is deemed inferior to standard American English. The prejudice among white Americans that all African Americans speak with a “Blaccent” (i.e. a black accent), has far reaching consequences on how blacks are perceived, for language plays a crucial role in the construction of racial and ethnic identities. (Alim & Smitherman 2012: 3) The following paragraphs will deal with these stereotypes in further detail.

1.2.1 The Mammy

According to Patricia A. Turner “a truly fictional character” (1994: 43), the mammy traces back to the post-Civil War period. Many Southerners were nostalgic towards antebellum plantation life and felt the desire to imagine an idyllic version of the past. African American women were forced to work in the Big House: cook elaborate dinners, clean the entire premises and take care of the children. In reality these women were often teenagers, ripped away from their families in order to take care of white families they had never met. The myth that was created, however, depicted a totally different image of the mammy character. The mammy became an asexual grandmother type who dedicated her life to her white family. She became the symbol of maternal care and instinct, solely moulded to create a past that never was (1994: 47). She was depicted as overweight, even though her food supply was severely rationed by the white slave-owners. She was turned into an old lady, even though the hard labour she carried out guaranteed a short life. It may, therefore, be safe to argue that the myth of the mammy was created to remove all the “heinous dimensions of slavery” (Turner 1994: 48) and soothe the Southerners’ conscience.
Moreover, Melissa Harris-Perry believes that the reasons behind the birth of the mammy are two-fold. Not only was it created to justify past enslavement, but it was also necessary to condone current oppression and segregation (2011: 76). After the Civil War, African American women often still worked for white families as domestic help. They were badly mistreated and forced to work under hard conditions and yet this harsh reality was accepted in society, for it was veiled with the fictional representation of the smiling mammy; an image that by then was used in promotional material and advertisements across the country (2011: 76).

This commercial aspect of the mammy myth could also be interpreted as an attempt to reunify the nation in the aftermath of the Civil War. By depicting the relationship between a black woman and her white family as harmonious, the North and South gradually smoothed over their differences concerning past enslavement and it acted as “a healing salve for a nation ruptured by the sins of racism.” (Harris-Perry 2011: 77).

The most popular interpretation of the mammy in American culture is the role played by Hattie McDaniel in Gone With the Wind (1939) (Turner 1994: 52). Although the role as house slave won her the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress, making her the first African American actress ever to win an Oscar, it is important to mention that her success in US cinema was made on the backs of misrecognized African American women who in real life looked nothing like the Gone With the Wind character.

2.2.2 The Jezebel

The Jezebel stereotype represents African American women as promiscuous man-eaters whose sexual appetites are “at best inappropriately and , at worst, insatiable” (Hill Collins. 2000: 83). Just like the stereotype of the mammy, the jezebel was invented to rationalize the concept of slavery. According to Harris-Perry (2011: 55), true womanhood in the nineteenth century required strict adherence to a code of piety. This image of the virtuous Victorian lady contrasted sharply with African American women working in slavery. Many black women were forced to work half naked; labouring in cotton fields with their skirts hiked up. In order for white slave-owners to reconcile with the fact that they forced these women to nudity, the jezebel image was created to justify their cruel behaviour and reaffirm white superiority (Harris-Perry 2011: 55-56).

Not only did the jezebel stereotype excuse the profit-driven aspect of slavery, it also condoned the sexual exploitation by white slave-owners (Ibid). Since African American women were seen as promiscuous, rape was not seen as a crime. On the contrary, the sexual exploitation of black women by white slave-owners was seen as the result of black women seducing white men, instead of white men abusing black women (Ibid. 2011: 57).

The jezebel stereotype remained popular for decades. So much so that in the early twentieth century African American women tried to resist this stereotype by advocating temperance and
piety. Consequently, many African American women were afraid that if they put on make-up, wore revealing clothes or expressed affection in public, it would confirm the image of the jezebel (Harris-Perry 2011: 59-61).

Peculiarly enough, the modern-day equivalent of the jezebel stereotype -most of the time referred to as the “hoochie”- is not just pervasive in popular culture overall, but has especially permeated everyday Black Culture as well. (Hill Collins. 2000: 82) Practically all Hip Hop music videos, of both male and female artists, portray scantily dressed women dancing promiscuously in front of the camera. Hip Hop culture confirms the demeaning stereotype that black women are all “bitches” and “hoes”, the question remains whether it is women’s fault for choosing to be cast in such a role (Harris-Perry 2011: 64-67). As previously mentioned, it is difficult for an African American woman to stand up straight in a room full of degrading stereotypes (Ibid. 2011: 29). In order to fit in and be part of society, she may feel it is required to bend and shape herself to fit into that stereotypical box. This would explain why Hattie McDaniel chose to play the Mammy in Gone With the Wind, or why Halle Berry did not mind playing a promiscuous woman in Monster’s Ball (2001), if it would get her an Oscar.

2.2.3 The Sapphire

The Sapphire, also known as the angry black woman (ABW) stereotype, depicts an African American woman as a loud, verbally abusive, emasculating matriarch. According to Harris-Perry (2011: 88), the Sapphire typically shows no vulnerability and often channels her anger by shouting or criticizing others. Whereas the mammy can be seen as the symbol of “good” motherhood, the Sapphire symbolizes the “bad” black mother (Hill Collins. 2000: 75). Patricia Hill Collins further analyses that this replacement of strong patriarchy by strong matriarchy is often used as evidence for African American cultural inferiority, since the lack of a dominant father figure seems to illustrate flawed gender relations (Ibid. 2000: 77).

Along with the jezebel and the mammy, the origins of the sapphire stereotype trace back to the period of slavery, although it has to be noted that there is a huge discrepancy between the impressive amount of research conducted on the mammy and jezebel images and the little research on the angry black woman stereotype. Nonetheless, it is generally accepted that the sapphire stereotype was created to emphasize the superiority of the white Victorian woman. Black women often worked in the fields together with the men, which required them to be loud, tough and resilient. This image of a black woman raising her voice was enlarged by white Southerners to clearly show the contrast between the “uncivilized” loud blacks, and the respectable, morally behaved white women (Gray White 1999: 176).

The reason why there is so little research on the sapphire stereotype, is because not only white Americans, but African American women themselves often identify character traits such as “angry” and “tough” as key elements of their personality. Harris-Perry (2011: 96) suggests that the creation of the sapphire, therefore, might be found elsewhere. The crux of the matter
is explained with the words of W.E.B Du Bois in *Souls of a Black Folk*: “Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question... how does it feel to be a problem?” (1903: Chapter I “Of Our Spiritual Strivings”) This statement illustrates that shame is an essential part of African American life and that it indirectly has led to the creation of the sapphire. In order to keep from feeling ashamed, some people try to protect themselves by turning that shame outward in the form of rage (Harris-Perry 2011: 122). “If African American women’s position at the intersection of race and gender makes them uniquely vulnerable to shaming, it may also make them particularly susceptible to the humiliated fury that shame provokes” (Ibid.).

The term “sapphire” was given to the angry black woman stereotype when the TV series *Amos ‘n’ Andy* (1951-1953) was broadcast on television, starring a character named Sapphire Stevens. She was the epitome of the angry black woman stereotype and because of the show’s popularity, the name stuck. (Harris-Perry 2011: 52) Even today, the sapphire is omnipresent in US film and television, and often recognizable by the trademark hands-on-hips body language. Good examples are the character of aggressive mother Mary (played by Mo’Nique) in the film *Precious* (2009) or the outspoken maid Minnie Jackson (played by Octavia Spencer) in *The Help* (2011). Both actresses won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress, in 2009 and 2011 respectively for their roles as sapphire and it is also interesting to note that the novel *Push* on which the film *Precious* was based, was written by Ramona Loften under her pen name Sapphire.

However, the fact that the angry black woman stereotype is often accepted among black women as well does not mean we should dismiss the importance of this depiction. The sapphire still remains an oversimplified enlargement of actual individuals.

### 2.2.4 The Strong Black Woman

The stereotype of the strong black woman, also often referred to as “the superwoman complex”, was developed by African American women themselves to fight back against the degrading three previously discussed stereotypes that were created by white Americans (Harris-Perry 2011: 200).

African American women could not identify with jezebels, mammies or sapphires, but wanted to create a positive image of black women instead; an image to which every black woman could look up. The stereotype of the strong black woman, however, adopted the positive personality traits of the three traditional stereotypes and blended them together to create the ultimate independent black woman. The strong black woman has a self-sacrificial strength and provides unlimited support to friends and family (i.e. characteristics of the mammy). She can take care of herself and does not require financial or physical protection from men (i.e. characteristics of the jezebel) and she goes to extremes to do what needs to be done (i.e. characteristics of the sapphire) (Harris-Perry 2011: 195-200).
Although this stereotype could be interpreted as a symbol of hope and endurance, for it tries to depict black women in a more positive light, it also links their ability to be strong with the necessity to suppress emotions. Showing emotions or seeking help is seen as a sign of weakness and, according to Harris-Perry, it is this attitude that could possibly prove to be dangerous. (2011: 185) Many African American women today put the stereotype of the strong black woman at the centre of Black womanhood, for it is something to aspire to. However, “when black women are expected to be super strong, they cannot be super human. [...] What begins as an empowering self-definition can quickly become a prison” (Ibid).

2.2.5 Black Language

When Barack Obama became President of the United States, many critics claimed that he literally spoke his way into office thanks to his ability to speak “standard” English. (Dyson 2012: ix-xi) Many people were amazed about how articulate and well-spoken he was, so much so that in 2007 senator Joe Biden made the following statement when he was still running against Obama for the Democratic nomination (CNN. February 9, 2007.):

He is the first mainstream African American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy.

Not only does this indicate that mastering the art of speaking so-called standard English is obligatory if you aspire to a career in politics, it also - more importantly- highlights the fact that “standard” in this case means White American English (Alim & Smitherman 2012: 21). Joe Biden and all the other political critics who believed they were paying Barack Obama a compliment by referring to his exceptional speaking skills and eloquence, therefore, (unintentionally) drew racist links between articularateness, whiteness and intelligence (Ibid.). Lynette Clemetson, author of The Racial Politics of Speaking Well, elaborates that when people refer to President Obama -or any other African American- as articulate, the word often carries a subtext of amazement and bewilderment (New York Times. 2007).This implies that African Americans are not deemed capable of engaging in articulate speech whilst white people are automatically assumed to be articulate. This assumption thus clearly illustrates the complex relationship between race and language (Alim & Smitherman 2012: 34).

The stereotype that only white Americans speak “standard” English, signals the importance of language in the perception of racial identities, for how African Americans are heard makes a big difference in how they are perceived. African American English is a version of English, just as White American English is one, and yet African American English is considered to be inferior to the one spoken by the white majority. African Americans’ accents are judged in an index of intelligence and humanity versus stupidity and savagery (Dyson 2012: Xiv) and the difference in pronunciation, lexicon and grammar is often deemed as African American laziness. Black Language, however, has nothing to do with laziness. The different accent is about understanding cultural traditions and it encompasses geographical, political and social history (Ibid.).
Contrary to popular opinion, Black Language (also often derogatory referred to as “Blaccent”) has a more complex verbal system than so-called “standard” American English, due to its origins in Creolized forms of African and European language varieties (Alim & Smitherman 2012: 8).

Black Language consists of three different linguistic features (Ibid. 2012: 7). The first aspect of Black Language is the monophthongization of diphthongs, e.g. diphthongs such as no or my are pronounced nah and mah. A second diversion from White American English pronunciation is the different enunciation of words, since African American speakers often drop the last syllable or combine two syllables. For example, going to becomes gon (e.g. “He’s gon do it”) or alright becomes aight (e.g. “Let me know when you’re coming, aight?”)

Another related aspect to this is the often silent pronunciation of the letter “r” (e.g. The two most famous but controversial words of Black Language -nigger and motherfucker- are always pronounced as nigga and motherfucka.). The last important difference between Black Language and White American English is possibly the most peculiar one: copula absence (Alim & Smitherman 2012: 8). Instead of two ways of representing the copula verb to be as in White American English, African Americans have three ways of representing it. For example (Ibid.):

1) We are straight
2) We’re straight
3) We ø straight

This different grammatical structure and the typical black slang words and phrases have in the last decade become more mainstream due to the Afro-Americanization of youth. What was once considered typically black has now become stylish and cool for non-black youngsters as well, in regard to fashion (e.g. baggy pants and hoop earrings), dance styles (e.g. dancehall) and of course the world famous Hip Hop music (Alim & Smitherman 2012: 105). The controversial use of African American terms such as nigga and motherfucka are now used outside black communities as well, but it is important to note that the use of these terms is only considered acceptable by African Americans when used among African Americans and can still come across as insulting when used by white Americans (Ibid. 2012: 110).

Moreover, it is necessary to emphasize that Hip Hop music and consequently Black Language in general –regardless of the popularity of Hip Hop in mainstream American culture- are still subject to disproportionate monitoring and critique. “Every syllable that comes out of their mouths are instantly framed as unintelligent, lazy or even dangerous” (Alim & Smitherman 2012: 159) and it is therefore essential to the present investigation that we regard the racist assumptions about Black Language and African Americans’ (in)adequacy to speak articulate “standard” English as one of the most pervasive stereotypes of African Americans circulating in society today.
2.2.6 Research Questions

To find out whether these stereotypes of African American women are still present in today’s media, this paper will focus on two American TV series, *Hawthorne* (2008) and *Scandal* (2011). Both TV series have an African American actress in the leading role, which is still a rare thing in today’s television and film industry. Given their progressive attitude towards casting in terms of racial and gender equality, it will therefore be interesting to scrutinize whether the five stereotypes explained above are also manifested in the lead characters of Christina Hawthorne (*Hawthorne*) and Olivia Pope (*Scandal*).

Taking into account the progressive attitude of both series, as well as the stereotypes of African American women listed above, the following research questions were drafted:

1. Do the characters of Olivia Pope and Christina Hawthorne display the stereotypical features of African American women?
2. If so, does the depiction of the lead characters correspond to the traditional blatant and one-dimensional stereotypes or are their depictions nuanced and adapted versions of the classic stereotypes?
3. If these series still portray stereotypes, what does that tell us about the series’ seemingly progressive stance?

In order to limit the span of this research, this paper will focus on only the first season of each television series, even though three seasons were made of *Hawthorne* and *Scandal* has currently aired its third season and is to be extended for a forth. The following chapters will provide an analysis of both series, based on the five stereotypes of African American women.
3. Scandal

“Everyone has a secret and Olivia Pope has dedicated her life to protecting and defending the public images of the nation’s elite by keeping those secrets under wrap” (ABC). On visiting the official webpage of the TV series *Scandal*, one immediately gets a clear description of what the show is all about. Lead character Olivia Pope, played by African-American actress Kerry Washington, is DC’s finest crisis manager or “fixer” and together with her team of “gladiators in suits” she does everything to fix the problems of her well-to-do clients. Olivia, however, has a secret herself; one that is coming back to haunt her throughout the development of season one. She used to work as a campaign manager for the then presidential candidate Fitzgerald Grant, with whom she also had an affair. During the first season of *Scandal*, Olivia Pope therefore not only has to deal with her clients’ problems but also with her own.

The show is created by Shonda Rhimes and is loosely based on the life of Judy Smith, who used to work in Washington as a crisis manager. Smith also co-produced the series. Kerry Washington, who was nominated for an Emmy Award and a Golden Globe for her role as Olivia Pope, is the second African American female lead in a network drama in US history, the first being Teresa Graves in *Get Christie Love!* in 1974 (New York Times. 17 January 2013).

In the following chapters the character of Olivia Pope will be analysed vis-à-vis the stereotypes of African American women, as discussed in the introduction.

3.1 The Mammy

The characteristics of the Mammy, as mentioned by African American critics such as Harris-Perry, Turner and Collins, are easy to summarize: nurturing, caring and dedicated to helping others. The character of Olivia Pope embodies many of those personality traits both professionally and personally.

On a professional level, Olivia Pope is nothing short of a career woman who has made her way up the social ladder and is able to enjoy a luxurious lifestyle. However, when one looks at her actual job description, it is easy to draw certain parallels between her job as a “fixer” and the traditional Mammy profession of the domestic help. As mentioned by Patricia Hill Collins, the Mammy cares for her white “family” and protects them no matter what (2000: 72). The same thing can be said about Olivia Pope, for her job requires her to help her mostly white clients. Rich and powerful people pay her to “clean up their mess” (figuratively in this case) and Pope does whatever it takes to make sure her clients get what they want, no
questions asked. The resemblance with the traditional Mammy taking care of her white family, instead of spending time with her own, is striking. Both Pope and the Mammy neglect their own personal well-being and family in order to satisfy the clients and solve their problems.

Throughout season one, there is one major scandal that keeps recurring and evolving into ever bigger intrigues, and that is the case of Amanda Tanner. Amanda Tanner is a former White House aide who is now threatening to go public with the accusation that President Grant had an affair with her. Once Pope finds out that this is indeed true, she takes Tanner on as her new client. In contrast to the other scandals and clients that appear in the different episodes of Scandal, Amanda Tanner is offered to stay at Olivia Pope’s apartment for safety reasons. The fact that Pope is willing to share her home with someone she hardly knows, just in order to protect and help her, is a clear expression of Mammy characteristics.

There are certain moments in the series, however, when Pope tries to debunk the Mammy stereotype that everyone apparently assumes her to be. In the third episode, Olivia and her team are defending a young man named Travis, who is being accused of rape. He is the epitome of the rich, conceited and privileged prep school kid, but Olivia defends him because he is the son of one of her closest friends. Whereas this case might indeed confirm the Mammy stereotype, Olivia does try to emphasize that she is his lawyer and that their relationship is strictly business. During an argument with Travis’ mother, Olivia replies:

Olivia Pope: “I’m not his babysitter.”

In episode 4, Olivia Pope takes on the case of “El General”, a dictator from Latin America whose wife and kids have been kidnapped. By portraying Pope as someone who feels obliged to help him, regardless of his profession and criminal record, the TV-show portrays her as the ultimate Mammy. Whereas the traditional Mammy would supposedly do anything to help her white family - her white oppressors- Pope would do anything to help a vicious dictator.

Looking at the variety of Pope’s clients, we can state that Olivia Pope’s profession as a fixer is the highbrow, modern-day version of the traditional Mammy. Moreover, when we look at Pope’s previous profession as a White House campaign manager, we are able to distinguish certain Mammy characteristics as well. In the sixth episode of Scandal we jump back a couple of years in time to shine a light on how Olivia Pope and President Fitzgerald Grant first met and when she decided to join his Presidential campaign. This flashback gives the viewer a clear understanding of how her work behind the scenes was of vital importance of getting Fitzgerald Grant elected. She is represented as the silent force and backbone of the campaign and, therefore, incorporates many of the Mammy characteristics. As a domestic help, the Mammy was hired to make sure that the household of the white family ran smoothly. Although the Mammy did most of the work to guarantee that her family would come across as the perfect suburban family, she was never credited for it (Turner. 1994: 46-47). This is also a recurring element of Pope’s work on Grant’s campaign, for all her hard work was with the prospect of making somebody else look perfect or –in this case- eligible. Although it has to be
noted that in contrast to the domestic Mammy, Pope does get respect and credit for what she does and accomplishes.

On a personal level, many Mammy personality traits can be detected as well, for it is clear from the very first episode that Olivia Pope has strong motherly feelings towards the people working for her. Throughout the season the viewer gets more information on why Pope hired her associates. Abby was being abused by her husband, so Olivia not only offered her a job but also a place to stay. Huck was homeless, so Olivia hired him. Harrison was sentenced to eight years of prison for insider trading but only served six months, because Olivia got him out on probation. Stephen, after suffering from a nervous breakdown, became a lawyer at Pope’s firm and Olivia herself frequently gives him relationship advice. All her associates needed help and she gave it to them, even though they were complete strangers to one another in the beginning, which confirms the Mammy qualities.

3.2 The Jezebel

The Jezebel stereotype represents African American women as man-eaters with inappropriate or insatiable sexual appetites (Hill Collins 2000: 83). The presence of the Jezebel stereotype in the TV series Scandal can best be analyzed by looking into Olivia’s relationship with her former employer, The White House, and in particular the US President. In the second episode it is revealed that Pope had an affair with US President Grant. On the one hand this confirms the Jezebel stereotype, for it is possible to draw parallels between her affair with the President of the United States and the historical relationship between a white slave-owner and a black female slave. As mentioned by Harris-Perry (2011: 55-56) and Hill Collins (2000: 88), the white slave-owner often abused black slaves and justified his behaviour by referring to their promiscuity. Although Olivia Pope is definitely not portrayed as a promiscuous man-eater, it is striking to see the links with the historical slavery issue. No matter how hard Olivia tries to free herself from the spell of the President, she cannot help succumbing to the wishes of the President, both on a romantic and professional level. Every time the White House asks for help, Olivia feels obliged to help, even though she does not work for them anymore. Romantically, Olivia Pope finds it difficult not to give in to her feelings for the President.

What is interesting about the Jezebel stereotype is that, although the series in general tries to portray her as anything but a “hootchie” (Hill Collins 2000: 82), the people around her often refer to her in such a derogatory way. When Cyrus Beene, the White House Chief of Staff, finds out Pope had an affair with President Grant and when he hears Pope is defending Amanda Tanner’s case (see Mammy analysis of Scandal), he quickly goes on to insult her for a slut:

Cyrus Beene: “I never took you for the Hell hath no fury kind, it’s a bit trashy but then again so is sleeping with a married man. […]You’re being played. You’re being played by the best politician in the world. The up side, the tell-
all book that you can write, when you’re old. The President’s Whore, it’s all very dirty and best seller.” (episode Three)

Because of her secret affair with the President, the relationship between Cyrus and Olivia, who used to be close friends, gets hostile and cold. Due to further developments in the Amanda Tanner case, Pope finds out that Amanda Tanner is pregnant with President Grant’s baby. Olivia Pope, in order to make sure Amanda is telling the truth, pays Cyrus a visit. She asks him whether the President used a condom or not, to which Cyrus sarcastically sneers:

Cyrus Beene: “That is your area. Did he wear one with you?”

By constantly referring to Olivia in terms of her alleged sexuality, Cyrus confirms the one-dimensional and stereotypical thinking about African American women. This illustrates how Cyrus now constantly tries to depict her as man-eating Jezebel.

Whereas Cyrus does everything he can to portray Olivia as a Jezebel, the President himself does all he can to emphasize that their relationship was more than just sex. He tries to debunk the Jezebel prejudice by repeating that he truly loved her and she loved him. He therefore not only debunks the Jezebel myth but consequently also tries to distance himself from the traditional pattern of the white powerful slave-owner abusing the black slave girl. In the second episode, President Grant tells Cyrus Beene the following:

President Grant: “Liv is the love of my life.”

It is also interesting to note that President Grant not only feels the need to debunk the Jezebel myth with others, but also needs to convince Olivia that he is not just using her. In episode 6, the President tells Olivia:

President Grant: “Don’t ever call yourself a mistress, we both know better.”

Thus, he demonstrates that in contrast to the traditional slave-master pattern, he does respect her.

An interesting episode to measure the impact of the Jezebel stereotype on her professional career is the second episode “Dirty Little Secrets”, for Pope’s latest client is one of the city’s finest madams, who provides high-end escorts to rich and powerful men in DC. When US attorney David Rosen wants to arrest Sharon Marquette for organized prostitution, Pope tries to stall him, an act which Rosen does not appreciate. He states the following:

David Rosen: “So you’re the patron saint of street walkers now?”

Although it might not have been intentional, Rosen’s accusation shows his prejudice about Pope being a Jezebel character; someone who might not at all be averse to prostitution.

Furthermore, it is revealed that one of her associates, Stephen, is one of the heavyweights who made use of Marquette’s escort services. When Abby, the strong headed feminist in Pope’s firm, asks her whether she is fine with the fact that he sleeps with prostitutes, Pope states:
Olivia Pope: “In this line of work, I don’t judge. “

Her response illustrates that she neither condones nor disapproves of Stephen’s sexual escapades. However, one might expect that if she wanted to step away from the Jezebel stereotype, she would have aggressively distanced herself from his behaviour. On the other hand one might interpret her lack of moral judgement as Olivia’s way of trying to surpass traditional pro-con distinctions and Jezebel stereotypes.

A final way to look at the Jezebel stereotype is to look at the relationship between Olivia Pope and the First Lady, Mellie Grant. In the final episode, Pope finds out that Mellie knew all along about the affair between her husband and Olivia. Their relationship, therefore, shows many parallels with the traditional relationship between a black female slave and the wife of the slave-owner. In both cases the relationship gets hostile and aggressive, especially on a verbal level.

When Billy Chambers, Chief of Staff to Vice President Sally Langston, announces to the press that President Grant had an affair with Amanda Tanner and has an audio tape to prove it, Olivia Pope rushes to the White House to prevent the scandal from spinning out of control. Moreover, President Grant is willing to resign and step down from office, for he is no longer happy as the Leader of the Free World. The First Lady, hence, has a hard talk with Pope and orders her to fix the scandal once and for all, for Mellie deems Olivia responsible:

Mellie Grant: “You fell down on the job. You broke his heart, and you left him open, vulnerable and helpless. That is how that snake Billy Chambers got that shiny red Amanda apple right into Fitz’ hand. I do my job. I smile and I push and I make sure he has what he needs. I do my job. Why couldn’t you do yours?”

This quote clearly implies that the first lady was willing to close an eye on the whole affair, if it meant keeping the President in office. Basically, you could conclude that Mellie was angry because Pope refused to take up her role as Jezebel.

3.3 The Sapphire

According to Harris-Perry (2011: 85-89) and Hill Collins (2000: 75-77) the Angry Black Woman (ABW) or Sapphire stereotype can best be described as a loud and verbally abusive matriarch. The first time we meet Olivia Pope in the pilot episode one immediately gets a glimpse of how she works. In this scene she is negotiating with Russian mobsters about her client, and the way she speaks and behaves both debunks and confirms the Sapphire stereotype. It debunks the stereotype, for she does not raise her voice, which is a-typical for a Sapphire who is usually very loud. On the other hand, it also confirms the stereotype because she speaks incredibly fast, which makes it impossible for anyone to interrupt her. This clearly illustrates how she emasculates her opponents by being such a powerful personality.
Moreover, the Sapphire is often deemed to be over-emotional in conversations and dialogue; a personality trait that in White Americans’ eyes is a key characteristic of all African American women (Hill Collins 2000: 263). Western society, furthermore, is likely to adhere to the notion that this expressiveness of African American women in their speech is a sign of emotional instability and lack of rationality; as if emotions and intellect cannot co-exist (Ibid.). The assumption that a Sapphire is guided by her emotions rather than by reason, is also visible in the character of Olivia Pope. In the pilot episode, when the viewer is explained how Pope’s firm selects clients, Olivia says:

Olivia Pope: “My vote always comes down to my gut. My gut tells me everything”

This statement clearly confirms Pope’s Sapphire characteristics, for she herself states that she trusts her heart (or her gut) more than her head.

Another reason why Pope can be seen as a modern-day Sapphire is because others find her annoying and bossy. In the first episode “Sweet Baby”, Olivia Pope wakes up US Attorney David Rosen in the middle of the night to try and stop him from arresting her client, Sully St James, who is being accused of killing his girlfriend. Rosen, still half asleep, opens the door:

David Rosen: “Why am I not surprised you’re on this…”

Olivia Pope: “You have to give me 48 hours before you arrest or charge Sully Saint James.”

David Rosen: “I was sleeping.”

Olivia Pope: “The US Attorney’s Office never sleeps, you told me that one.”

David Rosen: “I was being ironi..”

[Olivia interrupts him.]

Olivia Pope: “48 hours before you arrest or charge.”

David Rosen: “Olivia, you don’t have the muscle of the White House behind you anymore. You’re just a private citizen who is, by the way, annoying!”

Olivia Pope: “He’s a decorated war hero. He’s a patriot. Do you realize the blowback you get for rushing judgment on a patriot?”

David Rosen: “The blowback you’ll create…”

Olivia Pope: “Well, yeah. That’s my job.”

David Rosen: “Do you actually have the naïve belief that waking me in the middle of the night and threatening me, is the correct path in getting your way?”

Olivia Pope: “I wasn’t threatening you. My gut says he didn’t…”
[David interrupts her now.]

David Rosen: “Your spidey senses aren’t evidence.”

This dialogue depicts many Sapphire personality traits. Apart from being called annoying, Olivia also confirms the Sapphire stereotype by not letting him finish his sentence and interrupting him. Moreover, she again refers to her application of emotions (“my gut”) instead of having solid proof why he should not arrest her client. It is also interesting to note how David Rosen refers to her emotional conscience in a very derogatory way (“your spidey senses”), confirming how society does not believe in an entanglement of emotion and rationality.

In episode 5, Pope tries to step away from this aspect of the Sapphire. She takes on the case of a female pilot accused of drinking while flying, which allegedly has led to the death of hundreds of innocent passengers. In order to clear the pilot’s name she interrogates the CEO of the airline company to find out whether there might have been some technical defaults that caused the crash. The CEO puts her in the role of Sapphire by asking her with noticeable disdain:

CEO: “What are you insinuating?”

In this case, the CEO refers to her emotional reasoning by using the verb to insinuate, as in: not based on solid arguments. Pope on the other hand replies calmly:

Olivia Pope: “I’m not insinuating. I’m simply deducing logical explanations.”

Her reply clearly demonstrates how she is trying to showcase that she is anything but a Sapphire and she bases her arguments on the application of reason instead of emotions.

One of the modern-day characteristics of the Sapphire is that she is persistent and action-driven (Hill Collins 2000: 120). This mentality of “making a way out of no way” (Ibid. 2000: 121) is clearly visible in Scandal. The previously mentioned dialogue with David Rosen is already a good example of that. Olivia Pope will do anything to get the job done, even if that means visiting (some would say “harassing”) people on a Sunday morning. When she wants to talk to Cyrus Beene and goes to his home on a Sunday morning, his husband James opens the door and only very reluctantly decides to let her in. He says:

James Novak: “When my husband is dead, I’m blaming you.”

Finally, the Sapphire is also often portrayed as someone who does not shy away from using physical violence, for she is not always able to control her anger. Olivia Pope never uses physical violence, except once when she finds out that the client she was trying to protect, Amanda Tanner, is dead. Olivia immediately suspects the President and his entourage. She walks out to a Presidential surveillance car and slams her fists on the hood of the car. This burst of aggression is the only example in the entire season of Pope losing her posture and acting in a violent manner.
3.4 The Strong Black Woman

The stereotype of the Strong Black Woman, also known as “the superwoman complex”, was created by African American women themselves to fight back against the derogatory stereotypes of the Mammy, the Jezebel and the Sapphire (Harris-Perry 2011: 200). A Strong Black Woman is self-sacrificial and does not want or need the protection of men. Moreover, she is extremely focused on making something out of her life and on being successful, especially on a professional level (Ibid. 2011: 190).

In the opening scene of the pilot episode “Sweet Baby”, one of Olivia Pope’s associates, Harrison Wright, is meeting with Quinn Perkins in a bar. He is there to offer Quinn a job at Olivia’s firm. From the moment Quinn hears that she has been hired by Olivia Pope, her jaw literally drops.

Harrison Wright: “I know you want the job because you stopped breathing when you heard the name Olivia Pope”

Quinn’s admiration for Olivia Pope illustrates how successful Pope is and how she is considered to be one of the most respected and powerful women in DC, clearly a Strong Black Woman.

One of the side effects of this supposedly positive stereotype is the refusal to show emotions, for showing emotions or seeking help is considered to be a sign of weakness (Harris-Perry 2011: 185). This particular personality trait is very much present in the character of Olivia Pope. From the very first episode, this side of Olivia is often highlighted. For example, once Quinn starts her first day at the firm, she is immediately confronted with the rapid and intense way business is done. She feels ignored and has to cope with severe stress. When Huck, one of Olivia’s associates, finds Quinn crying in the toilets, he does not comfort her. Instead, he reprimands her and orders her to stop crying.

Huck: “Olivia does not believe in crying”

As a Strong Black Woman, Olivia does not tolerate crying or other signs of emotional weakness. Interestingly enough, she not only suppresses her own emotions but expects her associates to do the same.

The notion of that “crying is for babies” is a recurring theme throughout the season. In episode four, Pope finds out that Amanda Tanner is pregnant with the President’s baby. Since Olivia used to have a romantic relationship with the President and still has feelings for him, she is clearly upset. Once she is in her apartment she starts crying. One of her associates, Stephen, notices the sudden unusual burst of emotions and tries to comfort her by saying:

Stephen: “There is no shame in saying you can’t handle this…”
Pope, on the other hand, pulls herself together and remarks:

Olivia Pope: “I can handle anything”.

This clearly illustrates how Olivia Pope herself is trying to live up to the stereotype of the Strong Black Woman. This can be seen as a logical result of the origins of this stereotype, for this particular stereotype was created by African American women themselves. The above situation also clearly shows that Olivia has a severe Superwoman complex, because she feels that she has to help everyone else, while neglecting her own personal wellbeing.

Furthermore her job as a “fixer”, apart from demonstrating clear Mammy traits (as mentioned in section 3.1), contains many Strong Black Woman trademarks as well. In her profession, she must be able to deal with everything that comes her way. She denies herself any personal leisure time in order to get things done. Because she is such a successful career woman, many people around her look up to her. This is best illustrated with a quote from the final episode of season 1, in which one of the guards at the White House praises Pope:

Guard: “You did it again. I don’t know exactly what you do, but when you walk through these gates, things starts happening. The press starts falling in line, the Secret Service gets extra secret and the problems they just kinda disappear. When you go back out, everyone is breathing a little bit easier.”

Furthermore, throughout the season many people often drop the same line:

“If you want something done, get Olivia Pope on it.”

This is a very interesting quote, for it not only shows that Olivia herself tries to be a Strong Black Woman, but that others distinguish this quality in Olivia as well. It might therefore be safe to argue that because others concur with her superwoman qualities, Olivia feels obliged always to live up to those high standards. This confirms Harris-Perry’s theory (2011: 185) which states that the previously empowering notion of strength and perseverance can soon feel like an emotional confinement, that makes the African American woman feel trapped between high expectations of others and her own pride.

3.5 Black Language

As explained in the introduction, African Americans are often deemed incapable of articulate speech (Alim & Smitherman 2012: 34). The assumption that only white Americans speak “standard” English or are able to be eloquent in conversation has created the “blaccent” stereotype. This means that white Americans often portray African Americans as speaking with very distinct linguistic features (Ibid. 2012: 7).

Olivia Pope, however, does not use any form of Black Language, for all the different linguistic features discussed in the introduction are practically non-existent in Scandal. Pope
pronounces diphthongs, never drops or combines a syllable and never uses any typically African American slang words.

Furthermore, what makes Olivia Pope such a powerful business woman is the fact that she is very articulate. The parallels between her and the case of President Obama (see section 1.2.5) are easy to draw, for both of them are praised and respected for their high level of articulateness. Pope’s main trademark is how she speaks at a very rapid pace, so it is almost impossible to get a word in edgeways. This is a very interesting linguistic feature, because Olivia uses her fast speech to startle and overwhelm her conversation partner/ opposition. It is also important to note that Olivia’s rapid speech is her secret to winning a conversation or discussion. Whereas the previously discussed Sapphire stereotype would normally raise her voice in order to dominate the debate, Olivia never raises her voice, but speaks even more faster.

The following dialogue is a great example of Olivia’s articulateness, for it not only demonstrates her speed, but also her brilliant eloquence and the lack of small talk. This dialogue is the first encounter between Olivia Pope and Amanda Tanner. In the pilot episode, Olivia is still convinced Amanda is lying about having an affair with the President and she confronts her while Amanda is walking her dog in the park.

Olivia Pope: “Cute dog.”

Amanda Tanner: “Thanks. His name is Thomas Jefferson, which is lame, I know.”

Olivia Pope: “Amanda, it would be a mistake to think that there would be no consequences to you spreading lies about the President.”

This very short attempt at small talk, in which Olivia complements her dog, clearly depicts how Olivia does not like to beat about the bush.

Amanda Tanner: “How do you know my name? Who are you?”

Olivia Pope: “My name is Olivia Pope and I wanna make clear, I’m not here on any official capacity. I’m only here to warn you, because you should know what could happen. It will become hard for you to find employment. Your face would be everywhere, people would associate you with a sex scandal. All kinds of information about you would easily become available to the press. For example: you had twenty two sexual partners that we know of. Also, there’s that ugly bout of gonorrhoea. Your family, your mother’s mental illness, a psychotic break, two years in a Bradford Hospital. I bet that’s private. She runs a day-care now, right?”

Olivia Pope takes over the entire conversation. Each sentence follows the other at a rapid pace and that is why we opted to use commas in the transcript (instead of full stops) in order to highlight how she does not pause.
Amanda Tanner: “He told me he loved me. He gave me this dog.”

Olivia Pope: “See, it’s those kind of lies that could hurt you if you said them to other people, people not as nice as me. I’ll give you some free advice: hand in your resignation and pack up your dog and your things and get in your car and go. Find a small city, Minneapolis maybe or Denver. Get a job, meet a boring boy, make some friends, because in this town your career is over. You’re done.”

Amanda Tanner: “Why are you doing this to me? I’m a good person.”

Olivia Pope: “Do you know who else was a good person? Monica Lewinsky. And she was telling the truth but she still got destroyed.”

This conversation is a representative example of many other conversations in season One. It depicts her typical way of speaking, but also gives a good picture of how she phrases her arguments. For example, she has a large vocabulary and often uses creative phrasings to get her point across. The Monica Lewinsky-reference in the above dialogue was one of those final strikes that made Olivia “win” the argument.

Her pointedness and powerful choice of words are assets Olivia Pope often uses to give more gravitas to certain threats. In episode 4, Olivia Pope is threatening Cyrus Beene and President Grant with a paternity test to prove that the President is the father of Amanda Tanner’s baby. Cyrus Beene, at first, is not impressed and says that it is not wise to go to war with the White House, because the White House will always win. Olivia replies:

Olivia Pope: “You want to go nuclear? I have that option too. You should see the size of the mushroom cloud that is going to go up when the President is hit with a paternity suit for Amanda’s baby. It’s going to make our 20-20 interview look like a hug.”

Another example of how Olivia Pope completely debunks the Black Language stereotype is episode five. In this episode, Pope and her team of associates have to deal with a plane crash that has killed 119 people. In order to defend the pilot who is being accused of being drunk while flying the plane, Olivia addresses the press at a press conference. This scene not only illustrates how Pope is eloquent and articulate, but also demonstrates that she is able to use said articulateness and present comfortably to a large audience.

Scandal takes it even one step further to highlight Olivia’s articulateness, because apart from being able to persuade people in articulate “standard” English, she is also able to converse in fluent Spanish with Dictator El General in episode 4.

All the above examples showcase how Olivia Pope breaks down the Black Language stereotype. Moreover, it might be possible to draw a link between her success and her ability to throw off the blaccurt yoke.
3.6 Scandal: The Verdict

In light of the analysis above, how can we now interpret these findings? Is Scandal breaking gender and race barriers or is it confirming them? Taking into account the detailed analysis of the stereotypes of African American women, we might conclude that the series manages to do both. It confirms gender and racial stereotypes, for the character of Olivia Pope clearly embodies modern-day interpretations of the Mammy, the Jezebel, the Sapphire and the Strong Black Woman. The only stereotype that is debunked is the characteristic presence of a blaccent, which is a general stereotype that is applicable to both female and male African Americans. It may, therefore, be deduced that when it comes to stereotypes of African American women – who are at the center of gender and racial stereotypes - it is still difficult for writers to step away from the traditional, archetypical character traits.

Even in a what appears to be a progressive TV series such as Scandal, Shonda Rhimes -as an African American woman herself- cannot seem to reject age-old stereotypes of African American women. Olivia Pope can be seen as a 21st century Mammy, whose emasculating techniques are reminiscent of a Sapphire and who has a Jezebel-like affair with a white married man. So why is Shonda Rhimes, who is highly committed to casting diverse actors with different genders and ethnicities, still writing a show of which the storyline centers on the conservative and traditional system of white male leadership, portrayed by the fictional character of President Grant, a white male Republican in the White House? Why does Olivia Pope, a symbol for many black women, and her team of “gladiators” still go to lengths to protect, defend and preserve such a white supremacist/patriarchic system? A possible answer for this question may be found in the essence of the television and entertainment industry. Culture, and TV shows in particular, mirror the society we live in. In order to make a profit, producers and writers are much more likely to depict realities and recreate the familiar than create something entirely new. The problem with this is that television does not just mimic society, but that at the same time society mimics television. So instead of going against those traditional depictions of what we take to be reality and counterbalancing our current expectations, Shonda Rhimes sticks to depicting a reality and mindset everyone is more or less familiar with.

Although the persistence of the stereotypes of African American women is indeed worrying, that does not mean that Scandal in essence is not a progressive drama series in terms of gender and race. The show does break down some barriers, for it embraces a high level of colour blind casting, with protagonists representing different genders, ethnicities and backgrounds. Scandal indeed has a very diverse cast, which is very rare for a primetime television show, and what is even more rare is that Shonda Rhimes puts a woman, an African American woman, at the center of the story and does not opt for the standard and safe white male lead. Moreover, even though Olivia Pope embodies certain characteristics of the traditional stereotypes, she remains in essence a role model, for she is intelligent, successful and respected. For the first time, an African American woman is depicted as part of the
political power game, and the interesting thing is that she is often portrayed as being a more powerful player than her male counterparts. In the end, it is always Olivia Pope who triumphs, which can be empowering for many black women watching the show. Furthermore, Olivia Pope runs her own firm, in which traditional roles seem reversed, because her associates are dedicated to her and do whatever she wants them to do.

This generally positive depiction of Olivia Pope might therefore help African American women to regain pride in their own ethnic identity. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, the constant negative and stereotypical depiction of certain minorities can have a damaging effect on their ethnic identities. According to recent Nielsen data, Scandal is the most popular show among African American viewers, for an average of 10.1 percent of African American households watch Scandal (Vega 16.01.2013). Moreover, Kerry Washington has made the 2014 list of Time’s “100 Most Influential People”. Valerie Jarrett wrote in the corresponding Time Issue that the character of Olivia Pope illustrates the changing times in which we live. “In her role as Olivia Pope, […] Kerry Washington has used her grace and vibrant magnetism to transcend age, race and gender, and to provide a new mainstream media lens through which to view modern womanhood and professional excellence” (Jarrett 23.04.2014). The show’s popularity among African Americans and Kerry Washington’s recognition by Time Magazine, not only confirm the theory that states that ethnic groups tend to watch television series which depict their ethnic group in a positive way (Pornsakulvanich 2007:25), but it may also extend this theory, for it illustrates that all ethnic groups, including the white American majority, feel a sense of pride towards this positive depiction, not just the African American minority.

To conclude, the main argument for calling Scandal a progressive show is that it depicts a female African American lead character as a complicated person with many sides and emotions. Yes, she does embody certain stereotypes of African American women, but that is counterbalanced by the depiction of Pope as a smart, powerful yet flawed human being. As to representations of African American women, Scandal can therefore be seen as a revolutionary TV series, for it finally steps away from the traditional one-dimensional, flat, black female character.
4. Hawthorne

Jada Pinkett Smith is cast in cable network TNT’s medical drama *Hawthorne* as the Chief Nursing Officer, Christina Hawthorne, who works at the fictional Richmond Trinity Hospital. Unlike the traditional hospital drama, *Hawthorne* depicts the ups and downs of the health system through the eyes of the nursing staff (New York Times. 11 June 2009). At the centre of it all is Christina, who not only has to deal with a rather chaotic nursing staff, but also has to remain on good terms with the medical doctors. Apart from a hectic and long-hours job, she –as a recent widow- has to deal with a rebellious teenage daughter as well. Or to use the words of Ms. Pinkett Smith herself: “Christina is basically a woman with a God complex that’s really going to have to, like, get real. She’s going to have to learn to take care of herself as intensely as the patients.” (Ibid.).

The series is created by John Masius, who also co-produced the show together with Pinkett Smith. The series’ Pilot episode aired in 2008 and *Hawthorne* was cancelled after three seasons in 2011 (Huffington Post. 2 September 2011). Jada Pinkett Smith was the second African American woman to star in the leading role of a drama series shown on cable television. Besides *Hawthorne*, which was aired on TNT, there was also the HBO drama *The No.1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* starring Jill Scott (2008) (Huffington Post. 7 December 2012). The reason why we did not opt to discuss the latter is because *The No.1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* was based on the novels written by Alexander McCall Smith. If we wanted to analyse the television series, we would have to focus on the novels as well, which would have affected the accuracy of this study, for the main focus of this research is television not literature.

4.1 The Mammy

The main personality traits of the Mammy - the desire to help and nurture (Turner 1994: 47) - form the basis of Christina Hawthorne’s professional career, since it is her job as Chief Nursing Officer to help people and tend to the needs of others. Furthermore, the hierarchical structure of the hospital is similar to the hierarchy of the traditional Southern household. In times of slavery and segregation, African American women were forced to work for white superiors (Harris-Perry 2011: 76) and in *Hawthorne*, Christina and the other nurses also have to listen and follow the (pre-dominantly white) doctors’ orders. Thus, you can clearly see the similarities between Christina and the archetypical Mammy who takes care of her white family and has to obey the white man of the house.

The opening scene of *Hawthorne* immediately showcases Christina’s desire to help people. She gets a call from her friend in the middle of the night, who says that he wants to commit suicide by jumping off the hospital’s rooftop. In order to save his life, she runs to the hospital to make sure he does not jump. This scene immediately sets the tone of the series, which is
dedicated to depicting its lead character as an over-caring Mammy. The best example, however, to illustrate Christina’s over-caring attitude is her relationship with Isobel, a mentally unstable African American homeless woman who often visits the hospital to see Christina. Although Isobel often causes trouble, Christina protects her as if she were family. The fact that Isobel is black, however, slightly nuances Christina’s Mammy features, because it breaks away from the traditional Mammy, who first and foremost protects her white family. Christina gives the stereotype a modern interpretation, since her help is not (solely) dedicated to white “oppressors” but to her “own” family as well, i.e. people from the same African American background.

In episode six, Isobel’s child gets taken into foster care, even though Christina has promised that the boy could stay with the mother. Isobel therefore blames Christina, who feels terribly guilty. Christina expresses her guilt to fellow nurse, Bobby:

Christina Hawthorne: “Bobby, she didn’t depend on social workers. She depended on me to take care of her and that baby boy and I didn’t.”

This is a very interesting remark, for it reveals that Christina not only acts as a Mammy because she has to (professionally), but because she wants to. She seems to believe that taking care of people is not just her job description, but also part of her own personality. She, therefore, feels a complete failure for not being able to help Isobel; something a traditional nurse might not necessarily feel, for it was not in her job description to help someone who is not a patient in the hospital.

Apart from Christina viewing herself as a Mammy, what is interesting is that her colleagues - the nurses and doctors- also see her as a Mammy and, more importantly, recognize it as a negative character trait, for her over-caring attitude often gets the hospital into trouble. However, they seem to have reconciled with her often unintentionally over-caring and nurturing personality, because they know that she will never change. In episode three, Christina Hawthorne does not want a young boy to be taken into foster care while his mother is lying in the hospital. When she tells this to Doctor Wakefield, he is not in the least surprised:

Doctor Wakefield: “Is he going to foster parents?”

Christina Hawthorne: “No, he’s gonna stay with me.”

Doctor Wakefield: “Of course he is…”

Doctor Wakefield’s reply clearly demonstrates that he feels that there is no point in arguing with Christina, for her nurturing side is part of who she is.

Moreover, one of the other key characteristics of the way Christina handles her patients is personal involvement. She often becomes involved in the patient’s personal life, which blurs the lines between the supposedly professional relationship between hospital staff and patients. In episode 5, for example, a young girl checks into the hospital. From the first moment Amy
meets Christina, it becomes clear to the viewer that it is not the first time the girl sets foot in this hospital. Christina and Amy clearly have a special bond and she even shows Christina pictures of her dog, her family and her boyfriend. This illustrates that Christina has very motherly feelings towards Amy, which is very similar to how the stereotype of the Mammy depicted the relationship between her and the white children of the house.

### 4.2 The Jezebel

The Jezebel stereotype which represents the African American woman as a promiscuous man-eater (Hill Collins 2000: 83) is almost entirely debunked in season one of *Hawthorne*. As a recent widow, she is still grieving over the loss of her husband. Her mourning, her responsibilities as a single mother and her all-requiring job, leave her no room for dating, let alone for sleeping around with plenty of men.

The possible Jezebel character traits can therefore only be found in the details. In episode seven, she tells a pregnant eighteen-year old who is about to go into labour that she herself was pregnant at the age of eighteen. Although this does not tell you anything about Christina’s promiscuity, it does confirm the stereotypical assumption that African American women get pregnant at an early age.

Another minor incident that portrays Christina as a possible Jezebel occurs in episode seven. It is, however, important to emphasize that it is not the series who depicts her that way, but one of the characters on the show who does not know Christina very well, who sees her with such prejudice. Doctor Tom Wakefield is supposed to go on a date with Fay, but the date is delayed because of a hospital emergency. While Fay is sitting in the waiting room, Christina goes up to talk to her:

- **Fay:** “Do you leave your dates stranded in the lobby?”
- **Christina Hawthorne:** “You’re confusing me with someone who actually has dates.”
- **Fay:** “Oh, come on! Look at you! I’m sure you have a date every other night.”

This clearly illustrates how Fay thinks Christina might possess some characteristics of the Jezebel based on Christina’s looks, but the show and Christina herself, are quick to burst her bubble, for later on that evening -when Tom eventually cannot go on a date with Fay- he asks Christina:

- **Tom Wakefield:** “Is she pissed?”
- **Christina Hawthorne:** “Yeah, kind of.”
- **Tom Wakefield:** “What am I going to do, this is my job.”
[Christina shrugs.]

Tom Wakefield: “Maybe I should do what you do.”

Christina Hawthorne: “Which is…?”

Tom Wakefield: “Forget dating and stick to my DVD.”

It does have to be mentioned, however, that at the end of that same episode, some romantic chemistry is detectable between Christina and Wakefield, which might allude to a more Jezebel-confirming personality. Christina has set up a romantic table with candles and flowers to make up for his lost date. It is supposed to be ironic and just for fun, because they are eating cold left-over pizza and are joking about it. However, after a while the mood shifts and Tom talks to her in French and tells her how beautiful she is.

Although there are certain flirtatious moments between her and Wakefield, it is impossible to call Christina Hawthorne a Jezebel. Indeed, the fact that she, as a black woman, flirts with a white man, might be interpreted as a vague confirmation of the traditional black slave/white superior pattern, but the level of flirting is left to a minimum, so it is impossible to draw any conclusions on that part. Furthermore, the hints of possible romance between Christina and Doctor Wakefield are not necessarily a sign that the series is (un)consciously depicting her as a Jezebel, but simply a standard element of any successful mass media product, since romance and love is essential in practically all films and television series.

Moreover, the series mostly emphasizes that Christina is still mourning over her deceased husband, who died of cancer. She still has dreams about him and in the very first episode she even talks to his ashes. The priority in Hawthorne—in terms of romance—goes to the platonic, painful “relationship” between Christina and the memory of her husband, and not to the sexual tensions between her and Wakefield. This is one of the biggest contrasts between Hawthorne and Scandal, for the sexual relationship between Olivia Pope and the President of the United States in Scandal is often exploited.

In the final episode of Hawthorne, Christina tells Wakefield about her marriage and her husband’s passing:

Christina Hawthorne:

“The last year has all been about Michael (note: her husband). When he died, I thought I would crawl under the covers and never come out. Instead, I haven’t been able to sit still.”

[...]

“Did I ever tell you about the problems in our marriage? We were filing for divorce… And then he got sick and I was like… wow, okay, I know what this is. This is what I do. I take care of people for a living, you know. The sicker he
got, the more I loved him. The more he needed me, the more I needed him and we were finally happy and every night we would pray… Literally, we would hold hands and pray together. Not once, not one time did I ever pray for him to get better. I didn’t want him to die, I didn’t want him to be sick. But I didn’t want him to get better, because it was perfect. I loved him more then, than I ever had. I couldn’t help but think, what wife does that?”

This is a very interesting monologue for it again focusses on the friendship and platonic romance in her marriage with Michael (e.g. they pray together). More importantly, it is fascinating to see how Christina views her duties as a wife in a very mammy-like fashion. She felt like she only truly loved him when she was able to take care of him, which is another perfect example of the fact that her over-caring attitude is rooted within herself and not just part of the job. Since Christina lies so much emphasis on the caring aspect in a relationship, she is struggling with a moral dilemma. She questions herself as a wife, for she can only love him when he becomes sick. What wife does not want her husband to get better? What does that mean for true love? These profound moral questions stand in sharp contrast with the superficial personality traits of the Jezebel.

4.3 The Sapphire

The image that comes to mind when one thinks of the Sapphire stereotype is that of the “caustic, critical, hands on hips, neck rolling African American woman” (Craig-Henderson 2011: 113) and that is exactly the image you get of Christina Hawthorne from the very first episode onwards.

In the opening scene of the series, the viewer immediately understands why the Sapphire stereotype is also known as the Angry Black Woman stereotype. Not only is Christina very loud, she is also not afraid to use verbal and physical aggression (Harris-Perry 2011: 88). In the pilot episode, Christina tries to get into the hospital in the middle of the night to save her friend. The Security guard, however, stops her:

Security: “Hey lady, you can’t come in here.”

Christina Hawthorne: “No, it’s okay. I’m Christina Hawthorne, Chief Nursing Officer.”

Security: “Yeah, and I’m Denzel Washington”

The reason why he does not want to believe her is because she looks dishevelled in her sweatshirt and messy hair. The guard, who interestingly is also African American, treats her like an inferior and calls in back up. Eventually Christina gets arrested for breaking security protocol. Feeling that she is treated unfairly, she starts screaming and kicking around to get out of the cops’ grip, thus confirming the Sapphire stereotype. It is, however, to be noted that the series tries to emphasize that Christina uses violence because she feels discriminated
against, which confirms Harris-Perry’s theory that the rage experienced by African American women is the result of shame turned outward (2011: 122).

Moreover, the opening scene which demonstrates that Christina is often treated without respect also contrasts sharply with the opening scene of Scandal, in which Olivia Pope is depicted as a strong woman to whom everyone looks up.

Another example of Christina using physical aggression can be found in the penultimate episode of Hawthorne. This time the series does not link her use of violence with shame, but with necessity. When the hospital staff finds out that there is a baby locked up in a car during a heat wave, Christina, although a rather petite woman, does not want to waste time and smashes in the car window herself. This illustrates how Hawthorne may indeed confirm stereotypes, but it always tries to justify these stereotypes by providing the viewer with a solid reason for Christina’s behaviour.

Body language is an important characteristic of the Sapphire as well. Apart from being loud, the Sapphire has a rather “threatening body language” which includes heavy hand gestures, hands on hips and neck/eye rolling (McKoy 2012: 143). A good example of Christina Hawthorne’s expressive body language occurs in the first episode when Christina is summoned to her daughter’s school because Camille has chained herself to the coffee machine out of protest. Christina indeed points her finger at her daughter in a very dismissive way and puts her hands on her hips. Moreover, when Christina is talking to the principal she even swears and says “Kiss my ass”, thus clearly showcasing a Sapphire’s verbal aggression.

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the key elements of the Sapphire is her role as matriarch (Hill Collins 2000: 75), which may also be applicable to the character of Christina. Throughout season one, much attention is paid to the relationship between Christina and her daughter Camille. Christina is depicted as the archetypical matriarch; the boss of the house. It is, however, to be noted that this depiction is nuanced, because the writers of the series allude to the fact that it is necessary for Christina to act as a matriarch, since her daughter is acting as a rebellious teenager who needs a strong hand. Another argument to support the view that Christina is a matriarch out of necessity is the fact that there is no father figure in the family. Her husband died, which means that Christina is forced to assume the role of both the mother and the father. Her matriarchal behaviour, hence, has nothing to do with her “emasculating” her husband.

Just like Olivia Pope on Scandal, Christina Hawthorne is action-driven and persistent, which confirms yet another element of the Sapphire stereotype (Hill Collins 2000: 120). In order to get things done, Christina is not afraid to bend the rules or even break them. For example, in episode five, Christina has sent a patient’s records to an expert in another hospital to get a second opinion. Since this is against hospital protocol, she gets reprimanded by the hospital CEO.
CEO Morrissey: “Help me understand this. Despite advice from our two top surgeons, you sent medical records to a doctor in a different hospital.”

Christina Hawthorne: “A world renowned expert in ABM.”

CEO Morrissey: “Did the parents request this?”

Christina Hawthorne: “They gave their consent.”

CEO Morrissey: “Written consent?”

Christina Hawthorne: “They told me to do what I needed to do.”

CEO Morrissey: “What does that mean? Did you have explicit consent to send the records or not?”

Christina Hawthorne: “I had a moral obligation…”

[Morrissey interrupts her.]

CEO Morrissey: “…to commit a federal crime? You violate hospital protocol, you offend our rock star surgeon and you deliberately broke the law and then said you would do it all again tomorrow. If I report this, which I’m obliged to do, we open up this hospital to a huge liability.”

One of the other characteristics of the Sapphire is that she is bossy and likes to be in charge (Harris-Perry 2011: 34). The fact that Christina Hawthorne is viewed in that way becomes clear in the ninth episode in which one of Christina’s best nurses, Bobby, is allowed to be in charge of the E.R. for one day, because Christina has to negotiate with CEO Morrissey about hospital cuts. When Christina tells Bobby that she is in charge, Bobby is full of surprise:

Bobby: “I can’t believe you’re letting somebody else drive.”

Bobby’s surprise clearly indicates that Christina likes to be the boss and control the situation.

### 4.4 The Strong Black Woman

Whilst analysing season one of *Hawthorne*, it became clear that in order to properly scrutinize the Strong Black Woman stereotype, a distinction needs to be made between Christina’s personal and professional life.

First of all, Christina’s family situation demonstrates that she has many qualities of the Strong Black Woman. She is represented as an independent woman, who can take care of herself and her child without help from a man, and she is clearly depicted as someone who would walk through fire to help and support her daughter, Camille (Harris-Perry 2011: 195-200).
However, the series’ representation of Christina’s superwoman qualities is nuanced, because the series often alludes to the fact that Christina struggles in the process of being a superwoman/mother. In order to be a Strong Black Woman on both a personal and professional level she has to come up with rather unorthodox parenting tricks. For example, in episode four, Camille has flunked English. Christina therefore takes her daughter with her to work and locks her up in her office to make sure that Camille finishes her essay and does not get distracted.

This illustrates how on a macro level her personal life confirms the Strong Black Woman stereotype -because she is a single mother trying to raise a rebellious teenager- but on a micro level her personal life debunks the superwoman complex herself. Although Christina is trying hard to save everyone, in the end she is often merely able to stay afloat and survive. Christina even debunks the superwoman complex by confirming that she cannot raise her daughter all by herself. In episode three, when Christina finds out her daughter had been lying to her, she says to her mother-in-law:

Christina Hawthorne: “Do you see what I’m dealing with? I can’t do this all by myself!”

In contrast to the nuanced depiction of Christina as the Strong Black Woman on a personal level, the series does not let a chance go by to represent her as the saviour of the day professionally. It is also interesting to see how the superwoman complex is strongly linked to the Mammy characteristic of wanting to help and care for people. The supposedly negative Mammy stereotype, created by white Americans to justify past enslavement (Harris-Perry 2011: 76) by putting emphasis on the fact that the Mammy loved being the domestic help in a white household, gets nuanced and reinforced at the same time. Not only does Christina want to help people, she wants to save them, thus adding a superwoman-like quality to the Mammy stereotype. It demonstrates that Christina likes being the hero of the day. The question, however, is whether she feels the need to save people out of a moral obligation or does she act like a hero to boost her own self-confidence? One could argue that it is Christina’s way to stand up against constantly being cast in stereotypical roles such as the Sapphire or the Jezebel, and to show that she is actually worth something and not just the sum of all negative stereotypes.

There are plenty of examples of the superwoman complex in Hawthorne. First, there are the more general references to Christina as some sort of superwoman. Episode six would be a great example of that, for in this episode, the hospital is swamped with patients from all the other neighbouring hospitals. The situation, however, does not spin out of control thanks to the leadership of Christina who can juggle many things at once.

Furthermore, it is also remarkable how Christina sees herself as a superwoman. In episode seven, she is forced to work a night shift on top of her day shift, which Bobby is quick to denounce as unhealthy:
Bobby: “Please don’t tell me you’re crazy enough to think you can work a straight 24.”

Christina Hawthorne: “Say hello to my little friend…”

[Christina hold up a large cup of coffee. The mug has “World’s Best Nurse” written on it.]

What is interesting about this scene, is that it clearly demonstrates that Christina likes to think of herself as a superwoman, or in this case super nurse. The contrast with her lack of confidence in terms of parenthood could not be any greater. Although the series as a whole tries to portray Christina as a woman who tries to be a superwoman on both fronts - private and professional- Christina herself acknowledges that she needs help with her daughter (see the example above) but clearly does not need/want help as a nurse.

Moreover, Christina’s professional superwoman complex is confirmed by her colleagues. In episode four, Christina’s mother-in-law is in the hospital for surgery. She does not want Christina to find out, however, because she knows Christina would be worried otherwise. In the end, Christina does manage to find out she is having surgery and the way the doctors react to her finding out demonstrates how they regard her as a super woman/nurse. For example, when Christina manages to sneak a good luck-note under her mother-in-law’s pillow, Doctor Wakefield says in amazement:

Tom Wakefield: “How does she do it?”

The audible admiration in his voice may indicate how he did not expect Christina to be capable of juggling many things at once, but the fact that she does, gives him a great deal of respect for her.

Whereas Wakefield regards her superwoman qualities as something almost magical, nurse Bobby makes fun of them. In episode eight, one of the patients is being abused by her boyfriend. When Christina tells the other nurses, Bobby remarks:

Christina Hawthorne: “I really think there’s some abuse going on with that boyfriend.”

Nurse Kelly: “What are you going to do about it?”

Nurse Bobby: “She’s going to swoop in and rescue that poor damsel using her sassy wit and plucky determination!”

The sarcasm in nurse Bobby’s voice shows that Christina is known among the nursing staff for always wanting to be the hero and save the day. It is to be noted that the above quote from nurse Bobby not only illustrates the Strong Black Woman stereotype but also has certain Sapphire elements as well, for she refers to Christina as being “sassy”, one of the key characteristics of the Sapphire.
Although Bobby’s remark has obvious sarcastic undertones, it has to be mentioned that the relationship between Bobby and Christina is one of mutual respect and admiration. Not everyone is in awe of Christina’s superwoman capability, however, because some see it as a way for Hawthorne to look down on others who do not get things done as easily as her. When Christina tries to prevent that Isobel’s son is taken into foster care (as previously mentioned), she talks to Susan from social services while she is having lunch.

Christina Hawthorne: “So this is where people come and sit and eat, huh?”

Susan: “You don’t eat?”

Christina Hawthorne: “Actually, I’d love to eat. I just never get a chance to sit.”

Susan: “Said super nurse to the lazy bureaucrat”

Susan’s final remark is dripping with sarcasm, just like Bobby’s previous remark. The big difference between the two is that Bobby was merely teasing Christina, whereas Susan is showing her disapproval of Christina’s haughty attitude.

Christina Hawthorne’s relationship with Susan is a perfect way to illustrate the Strong Black Woman stereotype, for Christina has many arguments with Susan in which the super nurse versus lazy bureaucrat issue comes up. In episode 8, they have the following conversation:

Susan: “Miss Hawthorne, are you implying that I’m not doing my job?”

Christina Hawthorne: “Quite the opposite. You’re doing exactly what your job description states.”

Susan: “Must be nice to be better than everyone else.”

Christina: “It’s not. It’s actually a terrible burden.”

Not only does this again illustrate how Susan does not appreciate Christina’s superwoman complex, for it makes her act superior to the rest, it is also interesting to see how Christina Hawthorne confirms this statement. However, in order to justify her superwoman complex, Christina acknowledges that her being a Strong Black Woman often interferes with her personal life. It is a burden and thus confirms Harris-Perry’s statement that the desire to be a superwoman can easily become a prison instead of a symbol of confidence (2011: 185).

Although Christina does her best to come across as a Strong Black Woman, there are moments when one can see cracks in the seemingly perfect superwoman. In episode nine, when Christina is forced by the hospital’s CEO to cut the staff and fire one of the nurses, Christina breaks down and starts crying. This sudden burst of emotions, often deemed by black women as a sign of weakness (Harris-Perry 2011: 185), momentarily debunks the Strong Black Woman stereotype, for crying is the last thing a Strong Black Woman wants to do.
Later on in the episode, the Strong Black Women bubble gets completely punctured, for Christina even starts hyperventilating out of pure emotional exhaustion and panic. It is, however, important to emphasize that -although this is a clear departure from the Strong Black Woman myth- this sudden burst of emotional weakness is only a short moment in one episode of an entire series. The overarching representation of the character of Christina Hawthorne harbours simply too many Strong Black Woman traits and situations for one short relapse to fully deflate such a rooted stereotype.

4.5 Black Language

As explained in the introduction, the “Blaccent” is a derogatory term for African American English. African American English or Black Language, in contrast to White American English, is often considered to be inferior to the version spoken by the white American majority and African Americans’ difference in pronunciation or grammar is often discarded as a sign of laziness (Alim & Smitherman 2012: 21). Whereas Olivia Pope on Scandal completely debunked the myth that every African American speaks with a “Blaccent” and cannot be articulate, Hawthorne at first sight seems to confirm the stereotype.

Christina Hawthorne does not speak in standard white American English and her speech consists of many of the linguistic features of Black Language as discussed in the introduction. According to Alim & Smitherman (2012: 7), one of the first aspects of Black language is the monophthongization of diphthongs; an aspect which is also present in Christina’s speech. For example:

Christina Hawthorne: “That doesn’t flaa by aa boy, Tom. (fly : /aː/ instead of /aɪ/ and our: /aː/ instead of /aʊr/)” (episode 3)

Christina Hawthorne: “Whaa (why: /aː/ instead of /aɪ/), I haven’t said anything ye[t]” (episode 10)

Another aspect of Black language is the different enunciation of words, in which some syllables or letters are dropped, combined or elongated (Ibid. 2012: 7). These aspects also occur in Christina’s dialogue:

e.g. elongation of vowels

Christina Hawthorne: “It’s really easy once you get the haaaaabit.” (episode 1)

e.g. silent last letter

Christina Hawthorne: “It’s no[t] pretty.” (episode 1)

Christina Hawthorne: “Whaa (why), I haven’t said anything ye[t]” (episode 10)

e.g. combining of syllables
Christina Hawthorne: “I’m gon (going to) take care a (of) you” (episode 3)

The only element of Black Language that is not present in Christina Hawthorne’s speech is copula absence (Alim & Smitherman 2012: 8). However, Christina does use the form “ain’t” plenty of times. For example:

Christina Hawthorne: “My daughter ain’t going to Washington on no field trip. She ain’t going nowhere.” (episode 3)

Although the colloquial use of “ain’t” is common in African American English, it has to be emphasized that the negation “ain’t” is used as the vernacular form of am not, isn’t, haven’t and hasn’t in many different English dialects and accents, not just by African American speakers. What is interesting about the above example, however, is that it also contains a double negation, which one would normally not find in standard American English but is a key characteristic of African American English (Martin and Wolfram 1998: 18).

Another distinction between Scandal and Hawthorne can be made in terms of the usage of Black slang. Whereas the former never uses any form of slang, the latter sometimes uses typical African American expressions.

Christina Hawthorne: “You’re the bomb.” (episode 3)

Christina Hawthorne: “Hey wassup, haay ya doin (how are you doing)?” (episode 7)

Furthermore, it has to be mentioned that Christina is not afraid to use swear words once in a while, something Olivia Pope never does.

Christina Hawthorne: “Where is that SOB?” (episode 2)

Christina Hawthorne: “Well, kiss my ass” (episode 2)

Although the above mentioned examples mark a clear deviation from Olivia Pope’s English, it does need to be highlighted that the use of swear words is not something that is only used by African Americans but by practically all groups in society. A possible explanation for Christina’s use of swear words, hence, might be linked with the stereotype of the Sapphire, not the Black Language stereotype. Sapphires are always depicted as loud and verbally aggressive and one could therefore conclude that they do not mind using swear words either. Furthermore, it is important to mention that the use of Black slang such as “the bomb” and “wassup” is nowadays not just considered to be a Black phenomenon, but something that is used outside Black communities as well, thanks to the popularity of Hip Hop culture (Alim & Smitherman 2012: 110).

A final element in this analysis is the ability to speak a foreign language. Although this is not traditionally a part of Black Language studies, it is striking to see how Olivia Pope on Scandal speaks perfect Spanish, whereas Christina Hawthorne can hardly speak a couple of words in
Spanish. In episode seven, Doctor Wakefield demonstrates his fluent French to Christina. Christina is both charmed and pleasantly surprised and replies with the following line:

Christina Hawthorne: “Hasta Manana! … That’s all I got.”

By replying with a well-known Spanish phrase to Tom’s fluent French, the series suggests that Christina is really bad at languages. This may be an interesting illustration of the existing racist links between articulateness, whiteness and intelligence (Alim & Smitherman 2012: 21), for Doctor Wakefield is white and a renowned surgeon who speaks fluent French, whereas Christina is the black nurse who cannot even seem to be able to tell the difference between Spanish and French. Moreover, the jokingly addition of “that’s all I got” might indicate that Christina knows that she is bad at it, but does not really care, especially since she shrugs her shoulders when she says it.

Although this analysis might lead us to conclude that the series confirms the Black language myth, for it depicts Christina as someone who does not fully master standard American English, it is important to make a side note. Although her articulation is not as “tight” as Olivia Pope’s, Christina is always able to convince the people around her with her speech and her well-formulated arguments. The writers of Hawthorne, never allude to the fact that her use of Black Language is the result of laziness, but rather that it is just part of who she is.

4.6 Hawthorne: The Verdict

Taking into account the analyses of all five stereotypes, is it possible to make a clear ruling on the show’s seemingly progressive stance? The answer -as was the case with Scandal- is ambiguous. On the one hand the show breaks gender and race barriers, for Hawthorne has a very diverse cast. Not only does the show portray characters with African American, Latino and Indian roots, one of the main characters also has a disability (i.e. Nurse Bobby has an amputated leg.), which is practically unheard of in American television series.

On the other hand, it is important to mention that all the non-white actors are cast as nurses - or in case of the African American Isobel, even homeless- whereas the doctors and surgeons are all white. Hence, one might also argue that Hawthorne perpetuates the social divide between races (and sexes) instead of narrowing it. Moreover, as the above analysis has illustrated, plenty of the stereotypes of African American women are confirmed or were given an up-graded and modern interpretation. Christina Hawthorne talks with a Black accent, is loud and her body language has much in common with the Sapphire. Furthermore, Hawthorne depicts Christina as the ultimate Mammy. Although she is the modern-day version of the stereotype, the show does little to provide nuance, and it focusses on her desire to help others, regardless her personal well-being. It is also striking how the Strong Black Woman stereotype is one of the pre-dominant stereotypes in season one. We first assumed that this was because Jada Pinkett Smith –co-producer of Hawthorne- wanted to add as many positive images of
African American women as possible, but after analysing the stereotype it is clear that the Strong Black Woman stereotype is often depicted as a negative instead of a positive personality trait. Even Pinkett Smith herself called Christina a “woman with a God complex” (New York Times. 11 June 2009), and the series focusses on Christina’s over-caring, nosy and bossy side, instead of highlighting positive traits such as courage, honesty, success and intelligence. In short, the show only implicitly refers to the positive, while explicitly emphasizing the negative.

The only stereotype that is completely debunked is the Jezebel stereotype. At first sight, this certainly seems a positive point, but when one looks closer, one could argue that the series debunks the Jezebel myth by focussing on Christina’s rather unhealthy obsession with her deceased husband. Thus, the show might not depict her as a Jezebel, but just makes her look like an emotionally unstable woman.

In conclusion, Hawthorne’s progressive attitude is both sincere and deceiving at the same time. One a superficial level, the series is progressive in its use of actors from different ethnic backgrounds, but after some more scrutiny it is visible that Hawthorne still depicts many rooted stereotypes about African American women, albeit with a slightly more nuanced and modern twist. Yes, the show still includes stereotypes of African American women. Yes, it still confirms the social divide between black and white. However, Hawthorne did cast an African American woman in the leading role; a bold step towards a more racially diverse TV landscape. Furthermore, whereas Scandal is progressive in depicting a scenario of how things could be (with Olivia Pope as one of the most powerful women in Washington), Hawthorne is progressive in that it depicts today’s (unfortunate) reality to which many African American women can relate. Christina Hawthorne is not a role model but her life may represent certain difficulties that many African American women may experience as well. Hawthorne depicts a bleaker version of discrimination than Scandal and is not afraid to discuss issues such as racial prejudice. This is essentially a good thing, were it not that its depiction of this often harsh reality is sometimes completely overshadowed by the racial stereotypes it still clings to.

However, the fact that the show tries to depict reality instead of showing a possible future, might be one of the reasons why Hawthorne was cancelled after three seasons due to disappointing television ratings. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, minorities tend to select television series which depict their minority in a positive way (Pornsakulvanich 2007:25). Since the representation of Christina emphasizes how hard her life is, African Americans may not have wanted to watch the show, for it lowered their sense of pride regarding their own ethnic identity.
5. Conclusion

“Black women have always had to wrestle with derogatory assumptions about their character and identity” (2011: 4). These words by African American author Melissa Harris-Perry may sound harsh, but it is still the unpleasant truth African American women today have to deal with. Throughout American history, African American women have been discriminated against on a social, political and economic level, and over the last couple of decades their inferior position has been affected by the influence of television on society. Indeed, not only does television mirror society, but society also mirrors the things it sees on television (Harris-Perry 2011: 13).

The American film and television industry has certainly made progress since what was probably the most racist film of all time -The Birth of a Nation (1919)- but there still remain issues that illustrate that racial discrimination in American cinema is not yet fully obliterated. African American actors, and other ethnic minorities, are mostly depicted in a rather stereotypical manner. That is to say, if these actors are given the chance to appear on screen in the first place, for most African Americans are just not cast at all. African American women seem to be hit twice as hard by this injustice, since they are part of two minorities at the same time (i.e. they are women and black).

That is why this paper has chosen to analyse the presence of stereotypes of African American women in the American television series Scandal and Hawthorne, for these shows were practically the only television series in the last couple of decades to have cast an African American woman in a leading role. Since both series were written and produced by African American women, the idea was to find out whether these shows still portray African American women stereotypically, even though they were written by people from the same minority.

First, a list of stereotypes was established, which incorporates the most common stereotypes of African American women: the Mammy, the Jezebel, the Sapphire, the Strong Black Woman and the Blaccent. After the main stereotypes of African American women were scrutinized, three research questions were drawn up with respect to the lead characters of Olivia Pope and Christina Hawthorne:

1) Do the characters of Olivia Pope and Christina Hawthorne display the stereotypical features of African American women?
2) If so, does the depiction of the lead characters correspond to the traditional blatant and one-dimensional stereotypes or are their depictions nuanced and adapted versions of the classic stereotypes?
3) If these series still portray stereotypes, what does that tell us about the series’ seemingly progressive stance?
The answer to the first research question was rather easy to find, for both *Scandal* and *Hawthorne* display all but one of the stereotypical features of our list. The only stereotype that is debunked in *Scandal* is the “Blaccent” myth, since one of Olivia Pope’s main characteristics is her eloquence. In *Hawthorne*, on the other hand, it is the Jezebel bubble that is punctured, for Christina Hawthorne is depicted rather as a grieving widow than as a sleazy pretty little thang. Although it may indeed be worrying that these shows still portray numerous stereotypes, even though they were written by African American women, it does need to be emphasized that these stereotypes are not identical to their historical counterparts, but are nuanced, more up-to-date versions of these classic stereotypical depictions. This result leads us to the next research question, which is to establish whether the characters of Olivia Pope and Christina Hawthorne are blatant and one-dimensional stereotypes or not.

It is safe to state that although both *Scandal* and *Hawthorne* contain stereotypes about African American women, they are not as blatantly one-dimensional as in the past. The main characteristic of the Mammy (i.e. her desire to help people) is definitely present in both television series, but apart from the core Mammy personality traits, the shows also offer a more nuanced take on the Mammy. The first deviation from the traditional Mammy stereotype are Pope’s and Hawthorne’s appearances. Both women are beautiful and thin, whereas the traditional Mammy was severely overweight and grandmother-like. This change from fat to thin is easy to explain, since the producers and casting directors deem it of vital importance that their leading roles fit the Hollywood beauty standards. It is therefore important to highlight that Olivia Pope and Christina Hawthorne were thin and beautiful not because the writers wanted to step away from the traditional Mammy, but because they had to succumb to Hollywood’s profit-driven beauty standards. Moreover, there is also a more profound difference from the traditional Mammy in *Scandal* and *Hawthorne*. Originally, the Mammy was supposed to help the white family whilst her white “superiors” remained strongly in charge of the household. Although Pope and Hawthorne have to answer to the White House and the Hospital Board respectively, these series also provide the opposite perspective; that of the African American woman being in charge. Olivia Pope has her team of associates who would walk through fire to get her approval and Christina Hawthorne as the Chief Nursing Officer has plenty of people under her.

As previously mentioned, the Jezebel myth is debunked in *Hawthorne*, but also *Scandal* tries to give the viewer a more positive depiction of the stereotype. The traditional bond of the white superior with the black inferior remains intact, but Olivia Pope is not depicted as a man-eater. *Scandal* highlights that the relationship between Pope and the President is not just sexual but is first and foremost based on love, which is a clear departure from the traditional stereotype.

When it comes to the Sapphire stereotype, *Scandal* does a better job at nuancing the image than *Hawthorne*. Pope may indeed be a powerful, bossy woman from time to time, who makes her decisions based on emotions instead of reason, but she never uses physical violence or raises her voice. Hawthorne, on the other hand, does use plenty of verbally aggressive
attacks and is not afraid to use violence when necessary and thus sticks more to the traditional stereotype than *Scandal*.

The Strong Black Woman stereotype can be seen as the most pervasive stereotype in both series. Given that both series were written by African American women, this result hardly seems surprising. It is interesting, however, to see how both *Scandal* and *Hawthorne* are not afraid to demonstrate that Pope and Hawthorne’s desire to be superwomen has led to serious personal neglect and often feels like a burden. The fact that this aspect is shown in a television series might indicate a more progressive evolution, since African American women (and thus these African American writers) normally would not depict the negative aspects of the Strong Black Woman stereotype (Harris-Perry 2011: 185).

Finally, in terms of the “Blaccent” even *Hawthorne* portrays a slightly nuanced picture of the fact that African Americans are not able to speak articulate English. Although Christina Hawthorne may not always pronounce words according to standard white American English, she is depicted as someone who can persuade people with her words, no matter how they are pronounced. When she talks, everybody listens, not because her Blaccent contributes a threatening dimension to her speech, but because of the power in her arguments. That is a major improvement on the traditional Black Language stereotype.

The final research question is probably the most profound one and, therefore, the most difficult to answer. If these series still portray stereotypes, what does that tell us about the series’ seemingly progressive stance? As mentioned in the series’ “Verdicts”, both *Scandal* and *Hawthorne* contain both progressive and conservative views on race and gender stereotypes, but in general we may conclude that *Scandal* does a better job at breaking race and gender barriers than *Hawthorne*. Olivia Pope is portrayed as a powerful, intelligent and successful woman in Washington. The fact that her character is played by an African American woman makes it all the more unique, for one normally would not see an African American actress play one of the driving political forces of the United States. If only for that, *Scandal* should be applauded.

The character of Christina Hawthorne on the other hand is problematic in many respects. Although the series depicts her as a strong woman, she does always manage to get herself into trouble. The bleak situation she often finds herself in, may be the reason why the series did not get the television ratings hoped for by the producers and why it was cancelled after three seasons. African American women seek television series which could possibly give them a sense of pride towards their ethnic identity, for the sense of ethnic identities with minorities (and thus African American women) are manifested much more consciously than with white Americans. Ethnicity for white Americans is usually invisible, because the US cultural and social framework has been constructed on their racial identity and is referred to as “Standard American culture” instead of ethnic identity (Chavez & Guido Di-Brito 1999: 39). Since white Americans’ ethnic identity is considered standard culture, they do not care whether television shows portray them in a positive or negative way, for the predominant whiteness in television in combination with their unconscious manifestation of ethnic identity already
gratify their social identities (Pornsakulvanich 2007:25). Hence, white Americans do not mind watching series such as *Breaking Bad* or *Homeland* (in which the white lead characters often find themselves in dire straits), whereas minorities do find it important to get a positive image about their ethnic identity, for there are already so few representations of minorities on television to begin with. *Scandal* gives African American women gratification by creating a role to which many can look up, whereas *Hawthorne*’s main character is just muddling on.

Kerry Washington in her role as Olivia Pope has become a role model for many (African American) women. Even though this study has shown that her character contains many stereotypical characteristics, many women do see her as a symbol of change. When Kerry Washington made *Time*’s 100 Most Influential People List, Valerie Jarrett (Senior Advisor to President Obama) said that she “provides a new mainstream media lens through which to view modern womanhood and professional excellence” (Jarrett 24.04.2014). Does this mean that *Scandal* may have an impact on African American women’s position in society? Although television indeed plays an important role in the establishment of a positive racial and ethnic identity and does help to influence society, *Scandal* unfortunately remains one of the only (slightly) positive examples for African American women. So, even if *Scandal* manages to instil a sense of pride within African American women and does manage to instigate slow changes in society, more positive television shows about African American women (and African Americans in general) are needed if television really wants to change how we see race in US society.

Gradually, the United States seem to be shifting towards more stereotype-free depictions of race and gender. The days of blatant caricatures of African Americans that have dominated US television for decades seem to be coming to an end, but the fact that recent shows such as *Hawthorne* and *Scandal* still portray stereotypes -albeit in more nuanced ways- remains worrying. Hence, it would be a bridge too far to proclaim that the United States has reached a “post-racial” age. Ever since the election of President Obama, it was said that this marked an age in which race no longer matters (Esposito 2009: 521) and that in terms of television and film, this post-racial society would lead to a larger degree of colour-blind casting. Was this view too optimistic? More African American actors may be cast in non-stereotypical roles, but that does not necessarily mean we have moved beyond race. The producers and writers of television shows and films may call their choice for an African American actor a sign of colour-blind casting, but is it really colour-blind when their decision to cast an African American actor is a fully conscious and well-considered choice? The representation of race and the incorporation of ethnic diversity is still created within a white supremacist scope (Thornton 2012: 428) and although the characters may now be more non-white, these personalities still mimic the dominant group within society, i.e. white Americans. Thus, television characters may seem more multicultural, but television as a whole still remain firmly one-cultural (Ibid.).

In conclusion, American television will only be able to contribute to a racially equal society, when it stops reproducing these racial stereotypes. When producers are able to cast actors
from all different ethnic backgrounds without having to think about it. As long as whiteness remains the prevailing point of reference regarding race (Thornton Ibid.), racial equality in US television and in US society will remain a fiction.
6. Bibliography


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