The Mammy, the Strong, Or the Broken:

# Politics Of Hair Afrocentricities In Scripted Television

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The general literature on the experiences of Black women in America consistently discusses the way that more Afrocentric appearances—whether through skin tone, hairstyles and textures, clothing, language, or a combination of all the above— have been negatively framed throughout cultural and media histories (e.g., Byrd & Tharps, 2014; Collins, 2004; Harris-Perry, 2011; hooks, 2015; Rooks, 1996). Images of race on television often provide misinformation about racial minorities, which reinforce stereotypes, especially when the viewers have limited interactions in their daily lives with members of the represented group (Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, & Ortiz, 2007; Mastro 2015; Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016). Televised images create an argument for what is important, acceptable, and salient to a culture: television most commonly influences perceptions of political sentiment; views of race, class, and gender; and what haircuts, fashions, and body types are attractive and valued (Gray & Lotz, 2012, p. 26). Television's ability to provide meaningful representation, even when biased, reflects Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theory of literature as equipment for living. Burke suggests that rhetorical texts define situations and offer strategies to maneuver through life by providing a boundary for thought, emotions, and

attitudes (Burke, 1941). At the intersection of race and television rests stereotypes of Othered groups that consistently evolve with social contexts and require periodic investigation into how tropes and problematic representations persist (Smith-Shomade, 2002). This article unpacks three frequent representations of Black women in scripted American television to inform socio-political boundaries on Afrocentric expression and Black performance.

Specific elements in visual rhetoric, the symbols—images with a learned convention and reference (Harrison, 2003)—contribute to television's meaning-making capabilities for the audience. This study focused on hair as a distinct symbol in the rhetoric of the sampled television programs. As Mercer (1994) explains, hair has a unique ability to "function as a key *ethnic signifier* because, compared with the bodily shape or facial features, it can be changed more easily by cultural practices such as straightening" (p. 103). The ability to transform and thus conform to or disregard dominant standards creates space for hair to be judged as a symbol of expression, even if the wearer is not actively encoding specific messages (Prince, 2009). Peers tend to evaluate hairstyle and texture to form associations about femininity, freedom, beauty, and attraction while perceiving conformity or deviation from religious, political, sexual, occupational, and various other social norms (Synnott, 1987). Hair is never *just* hair because of the constant decoding of that choice given the complicated sociopolitical history of hairstyling and textures—the racist framing of Black hair goes back to colonial America where advertisements for enslaved Black people often used terms like "wool" when describing hair texture, setting up a fraught cultural relationship between *good* and *bad* hair (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). The way hairstyle and texture functions as a site of interpretation exposes the wearer to potential Othering, especially in a racial neoliberal framework that discourages racializing oneself.
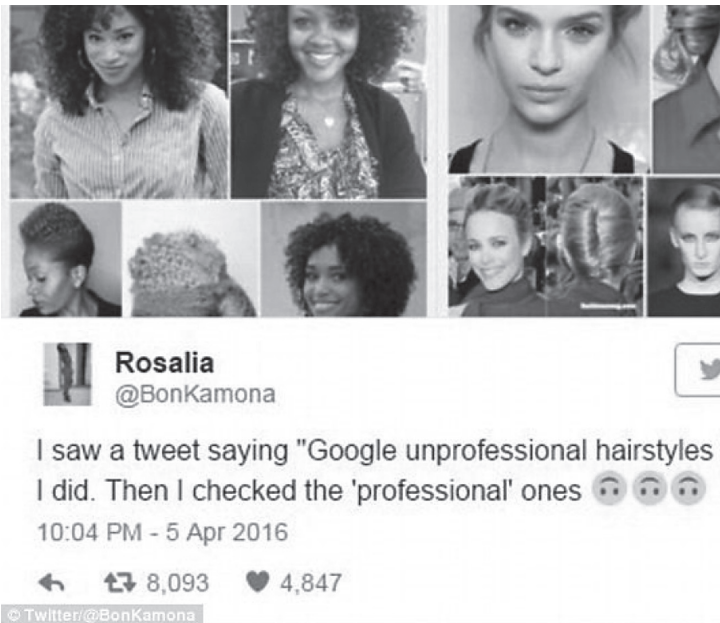
This study draws on critical race, media analysis, and rhetorical traditions to unpack a reading on Black women within scripted American television dramas with a focus on hair framing. The results of this study reflect 1) how the Mammy trope is reinforced through service work reserved for more Afrocentric Black women, 2) how the Strong Black Woman trope functions as validation for the sacrifice of more Afrocentric Black women, and 3) how more Afrocentric Black women are cast as physically or psychologically unstable through the Broken Black Woman construct. The Broken Black Woman has not been deeply explored and presents a site for Black feminist scholars and those working in media rhetoric to expand the typical framing devices of Black performance. This study contributes contemporary examples of how scripted dramas available through popular streaming platforms, thus available to expanded audiences, treat Black women with natural hairstyles to inform critical cultural and sociological work in areas of feminism, racism, and media studies.

## Racial Neoliberalism and Othering

Molefi Asante (1992/2007) describes Afrocentricity as a philosophical position that centralizes the African perspective. While he asserts that one is either Afrocentric or not, Asante provides room for the boundaries of Afrocentricity to be expanded for context (p. 506). Maulana Karenga (1988/2007) also articulates the cultural importance of expression and the "freedom to realize oneself in one's human fullness...and enjoyable encounters with other humans and nature without coercion or repressive limitation" (p. 361). Much of American hegemonic discourses visible through mass media entertainment center a racial neoliberal, "colorblind," framework that ultimately limits non-white peoples' freedom of full cultural expression and reinforces elements of domination by discouraging strong racial identities and emphasizing antiracialism

(Goldberg, 2009). Critical cultural scholars often interrogate the tension between expressions of difference and repressive limitations by the dominant ideologies.

This critical cultural work interrogates tension at the site of *subverted hair norms* that center the racial heritage of the person and invite engagement with racial difference rather than fostering color-blind viewership: e.g., hair imagery that emphasizes and celebrates Otherness as a specific performance of Blackness would be Afro-centric for subverting hegemonic norms of hair grounded in fine, silky, smooth textures. Curly, coily, and braided hair textures are examples of subversive hair as contextualized through a Tweet from Rosalia (@BonKamona) in 2016, showing a snapshot of culturally acceptable and unacceptable hairstyles for professional women as filtered through Google algorithms ( Jackson-Edwards, 2016).



**Rosalia**
@BonKamona

I saw a tweet saying "Google unprofessional hairstyles
I did. Then I checked the 'professional' ones 😶 😶 😶

10:04 PM - 5 Apr 2016

↩    ⟳ 8,093    ♥ 4,847

1@BonKamona from Jackson-Edwards (2016).
Tweet with various natural hair examples.

Evidence of the cultural tension at the site of hair exists beyond a single tweet: many Black women express feeling pressure to align their hair with white-normed styles (Bates, 2017; Prince, 2009; Randle, 2015; Rooks, 1996; Thompson, 2009); some fashion magazines imply how curly hair can be seen as too wild or carefree for the workplace (Herbert, 2010); and controversies against companies enforcing dress codes biased against Afrocentric styles circulate in the news (e.g., Meteorologist Rhonda Lee fired from a Louisiana news station in 2012). This article provides examples and insight into where harmful hair frames that impact our cultural consciousness persist in our media-landscape.

Culturally subversive hair is a potentially threatening symbol because it serves as a visual call towards the race of the wearer and emphasizes difference that runs directly counter to the racial neoliberal discourse in society, which seeks antiracialism. Antiracialism stands against raced-categorizations to evoke racelessness and fuels racial evaporation: focusing on the act of "having to deal with the nonsense of race itself" than confronting the legacy of U.S. racial formations and harm to the individuals and groups (Goldberg, 2009, p. 344; Omi & Winant, 2015). Racial neoliberalism allows Black persons to be viewed as valuable to society if they do not call attention to their racial identity by appearing *too* Black. The racial framing places people of color who "do not openly discuss or emphasize their and others' racial oppressions" as acceptable because the mainstream audience "can 'forget' these individuals are black" (Wingfield & Feagin, 2013, p. 24). The quest for antiracialism contributes to downplaying racialized markers like language, clothing, and hair in mainstream media markets. Byrd and Tharps (2014) affirm the tendency to downplay the Otherness of Black women in the media: "Natural, unstraightened looks that display Black hair textures are generally perceived as 'too ethnic,' 'too Black,' or an ag-

gressive challenge to middle-class American values" (p. 170). A character that subverts middle-class American values, still grounded the white-mainstream, becomes an Other (Omi & Winant).

I use the term *Natural Other* to describe Black characters with hair deviating from Eurocentric norms (smooth, straight to wavy) but acknowledge that naturally textured, curly hair is not exclusive to Blackness nor do all Black persons have naturally curly or coily textures. Additionally, I acknowledge that "natural" looking styles can be achieved with artificial elements. The term natural is culturally pervasive in many Black communities to describe hair treatment without chemical, heat, and other texture altering products. Natural Other describes the aesthetic in the sample that visually moves the wearer closer to an Afrocentric symbol in hegemonic discourse. These styles presented as curly, coily, braided, and afro in the sample. I also use the term *altered hair* to refer to a straightened form as characters routinely used sew-in weaves, wigs, or heat treatment to alter the presentation of the hair.

This study connects the meaning-making power of the media to the presentation of hair for Black women within a context of racial neoliberal antiracialism. Rhetorical containment, such as stereotyping, often manifests by reinforcing perceptions that the differences marking the Other are also inferior to the mainstream, thus containing the acceptance and power of Others while elevating the hegemonic institutions (Vats & Nishime, 2013). Images of Black women conforming to hegemonic norms, coupled with the existing cultural stereotypes of Black bodies, creates an understanding that Black women should subscribe to a particular aesthetic or risk being interpreted as inferior and unprofessional. The intersection of professional Black womanhood and media symbols influencing reality drives the investigation into how *natural hairstyles are framed in professional contexts on scripted television that may reinforce hegemonic*

*values and maintain traditional stereotypes of Black women in the work-place.* Within the text sample, the more Afrocentric women who subverted cultural norms as a Natural Other were more likely to be represented as either a *Mammy* in subordinate roles, as a *Strong Black Woman* who could be readily sacrificed, or as a *Broken Black Woman* with a framing of physical or psychological distress. This work can be used by Black feminist scholars, in particular, to investigate how racism and antiracialism manifested in the 2010s and inform the subsequent decades of social consciousness building across disciplines.

## Sample and Method

This study utilized qualitative, textual observation principles through a visual analysis of specific scripted television programs featuring Black women characters: *Being Mary Jane, Empire, The Flash, How to Get Away with Murder, Mistresses,* and *Sleepy Hollow.* After browsing through Netflix and Hulu's "most popular," "recently added," and drama categories; utilizing the algorithmic function of Netflix and Hulu's recommended programming lists based on previously identified shows fitting the sampling boundaries; and recommendations from peers who were aware of my research objectives, the sample was reduced to six programs accessible for streaming that included creators from multiple intersections of race/gender and producing networks: Fox (*Empire, Sleepy Hollow*), ABC (*HTGAWM, Mistresses*), CW (*The Flash*), and BET (*Being Mary Jane*).

The six programs were chosen based on 1) the centrality of Black women and their occupations to the narrative, 2) the contemporariness of the program with at least three seasons available and set within the most recent decade (2010), and 3) the accessibility of the program on streaming platforms. Children's programming, such

as *Doc McStuffins,* were excluded as children process media differently than adults and outside this scope; and sitcoms, such as *Blackish,* were excluded because of the tendency to use satire as a comedic device within the genre. Analyses of the social commentary provided by contemporary Black sitcoms require a lens beyond this study's scope on dramatic narratives, and I hope future work replicates this method to expand on varying genres of television and film. Programs originally airing before 2010, like *The Bernie Mac Show,* were excluded to reduce fashion variances across decades. And programs requiring additional paid subscriptions, such as *Insecure* on HBO, were excluded because they are not accessible through basic streaming packages. Lastly, *How to Get Away with Murder* was chosen over *Scandal* (both created by Shonda Rhimes) because it includes more Black women at the forefront, is more recent, and was less discussed in the literature at the time of research. The sample of six programs included one cop/detective, one lawyer, one business owner, one music/entertainment manager, and two journalists, providing a variety of occupational settings to consider in the textual/visual analysis. Each episode spanning the most recent three seasons, through early 2017, were analyzed through the critical cultural perspective focused on interrogating the relationship of dominant ideologies to the plot, visual elements, lighting, framing, editing, shooting, and other production choices that contribute to decoding television messages and textual discourse (Fairclough, 2003; O'Donnell, 2007). A total of 259 episodes were viewed for analysis, with around 26% offering a prominent Natural Other on-screen.

To draw conclusions about the framing of Black women within the sample, the discursive and visual approach to textual analysis, modeled by Fairclough (2003), served as the most appropriate method of research because television represents recontextualized social events through the interaction of visual symbols, linguistic

elements in dialogue, and genre; to adequately untangle the nuanced messages an audience may receive when watching any particular scene, researchers must distinguish the principles of representation: presence, abstraction, arrangement, and additions alongside material, verbal, and relational processes (p. 139-155). Discourse analysis typically provides a method for language-based texts but maps readily to visuals and multi-media narratives due to the semiotic relationship between visual symbols, meaning, and interactive interpretation for the video landscape (Moriarts, 1994; Harrison, 2003; Lester, 2006; Gross, 2009). Further, Fairclough calls for close attention to "which elements of events, or events in a chain of events, are present/absent, prominent/backgrounded" (p. 139), for which visual analysis is well-suited. I assessed the presence and absence of scenarios with Natural Others.

Each episode was watched from start to finish in order of appearance within the season in a binging style, watching at least three episodes in one sitting, to increase the method's ecological validity as streaming and binge-watching increases in popularity for American audiences (Spangler, 2015). As data collection proceeded, notes and memos were recorded, and units containing potential messages about Afrocentricity were flagged for further review. A grounded theory approach was not viable due to the extensive literature on media representations and stereotypes for Black women in popular culture; however, I maintained a very loose analytical framework with intentional naiveté during the first round of data collection and reserved deeper exploration into the literature until after the most salient tropes were established. Once the initial round of observation was completed, the flagged units were revisited multiple times with a critical cultural eye to deconstruct, compare, and reconstruct the visual and linguistic events needed to (re)build an analytic framework for the Mammy,

the Strong Black Woman, and the emergent Broken Black Woman in context with Afrocentric expression in scripted television.

## Results: Three Persisting Tropes of Afrocentric Black Women

The traditional stereotypes of Othered groups are consistently evolving to fit into contemporary social contexts, necessitating an investigation into how tropes and problematic representations persist (Smith-Shomade, 2012). Considering visibility and absence, three distinct reconstructions of tropes were most salient in the sample of Afrocentric representations: the Mammy, the Strong Black Woman, and the emergent Broken Black Woman. The Mammy is the image of a good-natured, caring Black woman who is eager to and happiest when in service used to justify enslavement (West, 2008; Bogle, 2010). The Strong Black Woman (SBW) perpetuates a mythic rationalization of the brutality endured by Black women during chattel enslavement and Jim Crow because the women were viewed as strong enough to handle the mistreatment (Morgan, 1999). The SBW shares many characteristics with the Sapphire, first established on the *Andy and Amos* radio show in the 1940s as the assertive and angry caretaker that masks vulnerabilities (West, 2008). I opt for the SBW to reflect more contemporary literature (Harris-Perry, 2011). The Broken Black Woman reflects the aftermath and/or failure of an Afrocentric woman to uphold the expectations of the SBW and represents an under-discussed trope in the literature. The  Broken Black Woman represents a woman in physical or mental crisis with an emphasis on decreasing well-being.

To adequately describe the proliferation of these tropes, exemplary scenes of events from the research sample are provided with

attention to Fairclough's textual analysis strategy of presence, abstraction, arrangement, and additions alongside material, verbal, and relational processes (2003). I remind you that only a quarter of the sample reflected visible, salient scenes to unpack. The infrequent portrayal of Natural Others increases each instance's weight: Natural Others were not seen often and, when on-screen, tended to be disciplined through one of the three tropes. Of course, not every Natural Other was framed within one of these tropes: these tropes represent the most frequent and consistent framing of Natural Others across and within programs.

## The Persisting Caretaker: Mammy

Natural Others were consistently present in hospitals as nurses, in restaurants as servers, and mainly as "extras" and minor characters. *Sleepy Hollow, How to Get Away with Murder, Empire,* and *Being Mary Jane* featured moderate to frequent background characters with Afrocentric hair, most often in the restaurant, general office, and hospital settings. The natural Other was typically a subordinate event element within the scene compared to the principal characters, typically with more normed visual elements. The consistency of the Natural Other as a caregiver, waitress, office aid, and other service positions symbolizes a reinvented Mammy trope. The Mammy was the embodiment of Black servitude in the white home, and now nurses, waitresses, and other support occupations, whose value is in service and personal care, are represented in ways that call attention to their race and refocus the notion that Afrocentric Black women are best suited in personal service and background support. Even more pressing, nurses and medical students, such as Meggy (Corbin Reid) in *HTGAWM,* are subordinate to the supervising doctor, who is more likely to be a white male (Association of American Medical Colleges, 2019). This

snapshot of culture from television can inform physical-world research in professions where Black women remain a minority and may be subjected to stereotyping as caretakers.

Natural Others' presence in the narrow contexts of background support interacts with the absence of Natural Others from the upper class, white-collar workforce. Natural Others were abundant in the lower class, blue-collar sphere, reinforcing a connection between professional and social ascendance with elements of whiteness in the intersection of race and class. Black persons have historically been shut out from the upper-middle class because of the legacy of enslavement and explicit policies affecting education, housing, and employment opportunities (Omi & Winant, 2015; Rothstein, 2017). The absence of Natural Others in upper-class positions reflects and reinforces the intersection of race, class, and gender. The characters within the upper-class spheres with more power and professional ranking were featured with traditionally accepted hair, reflecting cultural assimilation, while the more Afrocentric characters did not experience those social and professional rewards. The Natural Others served as a rhetorical tool to reinforce the protagonist's social and class standing.

For example, the curly-haired Jennifer Mills (Lyndie Greenwood) of *Sleepy Hollow* was a waitress living in a small trailer in the woods while moonlighting as a "rare item collector" (as a euphemism for black market trader). Jennifer does not reach the same class level, signified by the material home and social standing within the town, as her straight-haired sister, Abby Mills (Nicole Beharie), a detective and later an FBI agent living in a modest single-family home on a quiet residential street. Within *Being Mary Jane,* Cece (Loretta DeVine), portrayed as a Natural Other, extorts the financially and professionally successful, straight-haired Mary Jane Paul

(Gabrielle Union) for money because Cece's community bookstore is failing. Cece was injured in a car accident caused by Mary Jane, who was driving under the influence and distracted by a phone call. In "Being Kara," Mary Jane tells Cece,

"And you wonder why so much of society sees criminals when they see Black men and women. Really?"



2[Untitled image of Cece facing Mary Jane]. 2015. Being Kara, Season 3 Episode 4

Mary Jane is referring to the fact that Cece is blackmailing her. Cece, the Natural Other, serves as a foil to elevate the hegemonic Mary Jane's moral, financial, and professional standing for the audience. Cece does not have insurance, indicating her relative financial and class standing, and already received $100,000 from the network settlement. She also threatened a civil lawsuit, the legal way to receive money from wrongdoings, but manipulated Mary Jane away from legal proceedings. The framing and salience of Cece's actions over several episodes make it easier for the audience to forget that Mary Jane Paul, our moral and professional protagonist, did break

the law by driving drunk and did result in injuries to Cece. Our protagonist's verbal cues play off the visual cues juxtaposing the two Black women and invite the audience to decide, based largely on heuristic interpretations, which one *we see as criminal.* The plotting, framing, and dialogue over five episodes set up the Natural Other as the criminal antagonist and foil to our upper-classed protagonist, leading the audience to root against Cece. Their arc concludes in "Wake Up Call," with Mary Jane paying the rest of the money at a bookstore event. The final scene frames Cece and her bookstore as a proxy for the issues of the Black community, which Mary Jane contributes the money towards with a more positive dynamic. In the end, Cece remains in service to Mary Jane as her foil and serves to make her reevaluate her priorities and shine in the eyes of the audience.

The Mammy provides a docile, amenable construction of Black women confined to the domestic sphere (Bogle, 2010): not the qualities traditionally associated with power in the American workplace. The problematic associations of a mammified character with disempowerment and service show up in *How to Get Away with Murder*: "It's a Trap." Annalise Keating (Viola Davis) is a top defense attorney with a straight, cropped hairstyle, consistently dominating the room and demonstrating unwavering confidence and power. But in this flashback scene, when numerous long braids cascade over her shoulders and she is two-trimesters pregnant, she is displayed as subordinate to her client and merely a means to an end like a service product. Senior Mahoney, the defendant's father, is berating her and Othering Keating in the dialogue,

> "My corporate attorneys told me not to hire you…I went against my instincts and chose this. Don't give your people a bad name."

The challenging of Keating and direct acknowledgment of her Otherness provides new imagery for the audience. I argue that her natural hair and maternal state—another signifier of the Mammy as motherly caretaker—are factors why Keating is understood as a woman of color and Othered at this moment. Natural hair is visually distinctive, so it can strengthen associations that people make amongst each other; hair symbolism was used to unite Black people during the Civil Rights Movement, for example (Thompson, 2009).

As Mahoney threatens, "don't give your people a bad name," the implications for Blackness and woman-ness in professional roles reverberates. If Keating, especially as a Natural Other, does not prove her usefulness in service to this white man, she will be replaced with someone more aligned with "instincts," as coded for aligning with hegemonic expectations. More telling, the mammified Keating allows this client to berate her continuously throughout the episode, something uncharacteristic in the show. Ultimately, Keating is removed from her position, and the audience is not invited to see Keating with natural hair *while in the courtroom* again.



3[Untitled image of Analise in court as Natural Other]. 2016. It's a Trap, Season 2 Episode 12

Overall, the consistent portrayal of more Afrocentric Black women acting in service, being berated, and playing a subordinate role reinforces the tendency to categorize Natural Others as Mammies to uphold hegemonic preferences for Eurocentricity disciplining Black women who practice hairstyling that draws attention to their race. The culmination of these representations reinforces the stereotype of more racialized Black women being Mammies in service to those with hegemonic power due to social and financial class. The Mammy in this sample either literally serves dominant characters in restaurants and hospitals or rhetorically serves the dominant characters as the defining opposite to reinforce class, morality, and social desirability. Afrocentric Black women are constrained to the socially acceptable, historically familiar, and safe roles of the subordinate Mammy designated for service to hegemonically accepted peers. Framing how the Mammy trope appears in media of the late 2010s provides context for scholars exploring the manifestations of racism and sexism in contemporary society.

## Strong Does Not Mean Sacrifice: The Strong Black Woman

Another theme that emerged throughout the sample placed more Afrocentric Black women as the object for sacrifice to reimagine the Strong Black Woman (SBW). *Sleepy Hollow* invites the audience to see the Natural Others as the persons expected to sacrifice themselves via Abby Mills and Abby's mother. *How to Get Away with Murder* presents Rose (Kelsey Scott) and Renee Atwood (Milauna Jackson) in a similar context of sacrifices to protect the boss, and Keating is targeted with violence. Lastly, *Empire* offers Tiana (Serayah McNeill) as a performer who can be sacrificed via replacement for business benefit. Natural hair and altered hair continually being divided along a line of objects to be sacrificed versus the valued body is an is-

sue. If a Black woman wears Afrocentric hair to work, she may be expected to sacrifice in the name of business without complaint or devalued to the point of invisibility. Morgan (1999) describes being a strong Black woman as something that was "cutting off my air supply" (87). Therefore, a real danger exists in framing natural hair as a visual marker for an object worth losing or someone expendable. The reality of 2020 speaks to the continued devaluing of Afrocentric bodies through the necessity of Black Lives Matter and the cultural view of Black bodies as disposable or sacrificial objects in performative protection behaviors of the police institution. Scholars studying media frames for BLM could unpack tensions between Afrocentric symbols, gender, and sacrifice, as seen in this sample.

Abby Mills serves as an FBI agent and a "witness" for the show's supernatural storyline. Although not a profession, the responsibilities of being a witness drive the entire narrative forward and dominate her life in career-parallel ways. In "Ragnarok," Mills successfully performs the most important job that a witness has: she saves the world. Mills wears natural hair, a feature only recently adopted after being trapped in a demonic realm, as she stops the Chosen One from unleashing evil monsters onto the planet. She stops him by sacrificing herself. At this moment, the audience is invited to view a Black woman with natural hair giving the ultimate gift to save all of humanity. Unfortunately, as she gives up her soul, she becomes the currency in the transaction to save the civilized world. The Afrocentric savior was also viewed in "Mama" when the audience sees Abby's mother, with her natural hair, sacrifice herself to save the next generation of humanity—her children. The plotting and visual cues framed the racialized body as a commodity to exchange for civilization to continue forward: just as colonization reduced racialized, enslaved bodies to objects needed for the growth of a civilized, classed society.

4[Untitled image of Abby as Natural Other]. 2016. Ragnarok,
Season 3 Episode 18.

In season two of *How to Get Away with Murder,* the pregnant, Afrocentric Keating [the same case as described in the Mammy section when Keating has her braids] and the Afrocentric Rose are framed as objects of sacrifice. Rose, who was also the survivor of rape by the defendant's father, is coerced into testifying as the defendant's alibi. Rose did not show up to testify, making her ineligible for mammification since she did not adequately serve the master, and this new threatening show of strength prompted a "sacrifice." Rose stabbed herself, telling Keating that "there is no reason to hurt him [her son] now." Due to the fear of and pressure to falsely testify, she sacrificed her own life to protect her child: the next generation of humanity. In the same case, when Keating

no longer acted in direct service as a Mammy to the white men on trial by speaking out against the coercive practices, she was the target of a car "accident" that resulted in her loss of pregnancy and the termination of her law services. The white men on trial organized this car accident that would either sacrifice Keating for the good of their trial outcomes or at least discipline the Strong Black Woman through physical harm. The visuals of physical violence against these Natural Others reinforce that Black bodies are disposable to those in power. Both programs place Natural Others as sacrificial objects by killing off the character, or parts of the character, from the show. With only one-quarter of the episodes, including Natural Others, the proportion that these women are killed, physically and emotionally harmed, and sacrificed illuminates the racialized body's devaluation. Scholars tracking gender-based violence could consider the intersections of media visuals such as these in their intersectional work.

Moving away from physical sacrifice to a loss of opportunity, Tiana is one of Empire's top recording artists and consistently wears her hair in a natural style. Throughout the three seasons, Tiana is portrayed with afros, braids, buns, and curls. She is successful, but Cookie (Taraji P. Henson), with her altered hair holds power over the Natural Other as her manager with the heavy influence on Tiana's career. "The Unkindest Cut" invites the audience to associate Tiana's Natural Otherness with an outspokenness that evokes the strength of the SBW followed by a disciplinary sacrifice.

5[Untitled image of Tiana as Natural Other]. 2016. The Unkindest Cut, Season 3 Episode 8

The episode opens with Tiana rehearsing her song for a runway show from HVW Fashion. She has her usual natural hair with soft ringlets bouncing off her shoulders. Later, Tiana complains in her dressing room to her assistant,

"How does she expect me to perform in that [meaning the assigned dress]? And she wants me to straighten my hair too! As for what?"

Tiana is commenting on Helen Von Wyatt's request for the performance look. The dialogue invites the audience to wonder for themselves why Tiana would be asked to straighten her hair. After Nessa (Sierra McClain), a rival singer, ruins Tiana's performance dress, Tiana delivers an empowered speech that directly explains to the audience what is going on with the HVW fashion show. At this moment, Tiana is both an SBW within the show and a meta-Mammy in service to the audience explaining what is happening.

> "Helen Von Wyatt will destroy me for this. That bitch didn't want me in her stupid white-washed show to begin with. The only reason she teamed up with Empire is that she got dragged out for doing some whack ass Out of Africa collection with no Black people in it. Then home girl tries to shove me in this damn dress meant for an anorexic white chick. That skinny racist bitch can't handle my realness."

The incident is filmed and posted online, costing Tiana the headline of the show as she proves herself to be a threatening Strong Black Women; therefore, needing removal. Nessa, another Afrocentric character who is more aligned with the docile, do-as-told, Mammy is chosen to replace Tiana. Tiana is forced to sit at home, with her braids, and watch the show she was meant to headline on television. Nessa and Tiana are clearly items to be exchanged, replaced, and if necessary sacrificed by the business and in the name of public relations for those in power.

Similarly, a lawyer in *HTGAWM*, Renee Atwood, is viewed with an Afro style both in and out of the courtroom before being sacrificed to save face for the D.A. office. Atwood was fired due to the office mishandling evidence as discovered by Keating (with her Eurocentric hair). Despite the fault resting beyond Atwood, the plot places the SBW as the viable scapegoat to save the district attorney's

credibility. The visibility of natural hair in the DA office is promising as the audience is invited to view Atwood as a successful and competent woman early on. However, it then turns problematic as she loses her professional status and becomes criminalized, an already harmful stereotype for the Black community.



6[Untitled image of ADA Atwood as Natural Other]. 2017. It's War, Season 3, Episode 13

Overall, the association between racialized Black women who are outspoken or perceived to have strength and the framing as objects to sacrifice for the future generation, powerful good, or capitalistic interests offer a highly problematic way to invite the audience to view Natural Others. To be clear, I am not suggesting that only Afrocentric Black women are treated as SBWs, but rather that Natural Others are consistently sacrificed and removed, promoting a one-dimensional representation and model for treatment. Not many Natural Others were present to begin with, and they tended to be disposable to the narrative. Compared to the Mammy, who is

safe because of the submissiveness, the Strong Black Women presents a threat and must be sacrificed or removed throughout the sample.

## Curls Don't Mean Crazy: The Broken Black Woman

The last emerging interpretation from the sample was Natural Others' consistent presence as physically or psychologically fragile: Broken Black Women. Examples of this construction were key plot devices in *Being Mary Jane, The Flash, HTGAWM*, and *Sleepy Hollow*, and observed through several instances of suicide or mental health implications across the sample by Natural Others.

Mary Jane Paul is featured with braids and a scarf, a typical protective style, after her severe car accident in "Facing Fears." During the sequence, she is on sick-leave and does not need to be professional or "presentable." She is physically recovering from her wounds, and when she does return to the public-eye and a state of good health, her hair also returns to the Eurocentric style. An association with natural hair and limited physical well-being is on display with Francine West (Vanessa Williams). In *The Flash*: "Family of Rogues," Iris' mother, the only key Black character with natural hair I observed, returns to her family 20 years after disappearing from rehab. Iris discovers that her mother returned because her mother is very sick. The contrast between the healthy and vibrant Iris, with Eurocentric hair, and her sick, ex-drug addicted mother with natural hair, visually reinforces the symbolism that natural hair is a sign and symptom of a Black woman unable to care for herself. These programs' plotting and visual cues frame the assumption that if a Black woman can do something with her natural hair—she will. Otherwise, something must be wrong with the Black woman who keeps her hair natural. The association of *doing something* with natural hair

whenever physically able is further reinforced through the imagery of captivity and lack of agency for Broken Black Women.

Abby Mills in *Sleepy Hollow* was taken into a demonic alternate universe where she was trapped for nine months. During those months, coinciding with her decaying mental state from being in solitude, her hair transformed from its altered straight norm to a natural curly style. This type of captive decay is also in line with the change in hairstyle from Cookie Lyon, *Empire,* in prison. Being held captive without the usual access to hair care treatments, on the surface, is a reasonable justification for the sudden appearance of natural hair. Natural styles, such as the braids seen on Cookie in prison, were critical when the enslaved people were forced to live in horrific conditions without hair care resources (Rooks, 1996). What is not acceptable is the depiction that natural hair should and would **only** occur if the woman has no other alternative while rendering the care and love that the Black community has for various hairstyling techniques invisible. When Natural Others are consistently contained in a physical capacity, their natural hair stands as the symbol for the regression into Broken Black Womanhood not participating in the professional, civilized world.

In *HTGWM:* "Let's Get to Scooping" and "We're Not Friends," the audience is invited to see Annalise Keating removing her wig and interacting with her natural hair. The sequence begins at the end of "Let's Get to Scooping" with Annalise sitting in her bedroom in front of the mirror with the lyrics, *you were always faster than me,* playing in the background framing our protagonist as behind or less than in the moment. She just discovered her husband has been cheating. Annalise always seems to be ahead of the game and faster than everyone else, at least when she has her altered hair. Altered hair remains framed as the symbol of a body in control of her business. The audience sees Keating pulling her wig off and removing

her fake eyelashes; we get to see her take off the mask and transition from her professional self to a highly private one. Keating is crying and emotional, something the audience is not accustomed to seeing from the usually calm and cool Annalise Keating up to this point. This scene ends with a jump cut to Keating in the lecture hall discussing a case. The audience is taken directly from the emotionally vulnerable, natural-haired Black woman to the confident and in charge altered-haired Black woman. That striking jump is what frames the previous moment with a racialized body the most negatively; the audience is invited to make a clear comparison between a devastated, broken hot-mess and a powerful, competent woman in control of the moment.

When it comes to mental health, *Sleepy Hollow* invites the audience to question the competence and psychological state of Abby Mills once she returns from the demonic entrapment with uncharacteristic natural hair. Once Mills escapes the demon realm in "Incident at the Stone," her hair remains natural for the remainder of the season. During those episodes, everyone around her is worried about her mental state; the most notable dialogue came from her boss, who explicitly said,

> "Is Abby okay? She seems less stable than she used too" and Jennifer Mills saying "You're different than before you disappeared. You are dealing with it every day, and I can see it."

Hair as a highly visible symbol is something the audience and the characters can see. The plotting, dialogue, and visual distinction between Abby's straight hair before being trapped and her curly hair after frame her Natural Otherness as a signal to her mental and physical health. Once Abby makes peace with her experience, her hair

returns to the usual hegemonic norm of straight. In "Ragnorak," Abby sits with Ichabod Crane and says, "I made peace with it, Crane. Whatever this next stage is. I am ready." This is so impactful because the scene is a dream sequence by Crane helping *him* find peace with Abby's sacrifice. Crane envisions Abby with altered hair in this visual of peaceful reflection. The return of altered hair once the audience understands she is better, after the questioning of her sanity as a Natural Other, strengthens the association that natural hair is a sign of psychological un-wellness or brokenness.

Lisa Hudson (Latarsha Rose), from *Being Mary Jane*, was one of few salient characters in the predominantly Black cast to wear natural hair consistently. Throughout the three seasons, she showed signs of mental health concerns, but in "Sparrow," she took her life. After her death, one friend further disciplines Hudson's character by saying,

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"Black people don't kill themselves. That is what they did. We took pride in the fact that we didn't do that."

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Lisa, even in death, is the object of discipline within her community and further alienated from her peers, reinforcing Hudson's Otherness from acceptable performances of Blackness. Many of the depictions of natural hair did not take the context so far as suicide but was associated with a loss of control, both emotionally and physically for the characters.

Natural hair became a symbol for someone "weak-minded" or physically constrained within the sample. The natural-haired Broken Black Woman is not strong enough to ward off evil (the demonic possession themes in the sample), keep her composure, or maintain physical and mental health. An unstable person does not fit into the corporate understanding of professionalism: competent, confi-

dent, and able. The Broken Black Woman was a trope I had less existing literature around. This emergent theme from the sample observations provides a foundation for exploration in Black feminist and media representation work on associations between mental health, physical appearance, and Black identity symbols.

## Conclusion: Persisting Stereotypes and Future Work

This study provides insight into the persisting racism towards Black women as understood through media environments and the Othering of those with Afrocentric aesthetics. Television is not just a fictional world consumed for entertainment, but a reflexive medium influenced by society and exerting influence on culture (Livingston, 1998; Entman & Rojecki, 2001). Scholars working across disciplines can use media rhetoric to contextualize and point towards critical scenarios in the physical, social landscape. This study provides multiple snapshots of the treatment of Black women and Afrocentric features across six diverse and popular media samples to inform contemporary critical cultural research at the intersections of feminism, racism, and social consciousness. In and out of the media environment, the subtle disciplining of styles that naturally occur in a specific group is a systematic, institutional form of cordial racism to unpack. The hegemony remains able to discriminate and over-burden one group of people without evoking race itself because, as decided by the Eleventh Circuit Court in 2016, "[a] hairstyle, even one more closely associated with a particular ethnic group, is a mutable characteristic," therefore Title VII does not apply in cases of discrimination for Afrocentric (or any Othered) hair, clothing, and another changeable symbol due to the *choice* an individual has in the styling (Equal Employment Opportunity, 2016). This choice, however, consumes time, money, health, and emotional

resources for the individuals asked to change their natural or pre-ferred styles while isolating them from their cultural expressions.

One scene in this sample provides the clearest snapshot and reflection of the emotional impacts from the real and legalized racism surrounding hair. Mary Jane Paul, *Being Mary Jane,* explicates the fear of perceptions at work if she did not wear a weave. A scene in "Let's Go Crazy," opens with a shot of a weave sitting on the bathroom counter and Mary Jane playing with her natural hair—with a whisper of a smile in the mirror. She dials her hairdresser to confirm if she should wash her hair before the appointment to sew in a new weave. The hairdresser explains that she must cancel, and Paul responds, with clear panic, "I already had Tami take out my weave!" The thought of her having to either manually straighten her hair or go to work tomorrow with natural hair distresses Mary Jane. She then calls her niece, whom she is fighting with, and begs her to come over and help. Begging is highly uncharacteristic for the strong-willed and highly independent Mary Jane Paul, further adding to the desperation felt in this moment, inviting the audience to disassociate power and confidence from the Natural Other. While Niecy is sewing the new weave into Mary Jane's hair, Mary Jane explains why she begged Niecy to come over.

> "Because your perfect aunt is terrified of going to work without her weave. Terrified that no one would think I was beautiful. That people would think I was average, and I would be invisible."

This short exchange, so easy to miss, reflects the historic devaluing of Afrocentricity in American culture. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) writes about the objectification of Black women and the tension experienced due to our binary processes of categorizations:

"One part is not simply different from its counterpart: it is inherently opposed to its Other" (pg.77). For Mary Jane—and observed across the sample of intelligent, strong, beautiful Black women—this binary means striving for hegemonic, Eurocentric beauty or be categorized as ugly, possibly broken. It means being defined in opposition to the superior, possibly cast in servitude. If she is not confident and visible, she must be weak and invisible, appropriate to sacrifice.



7[Untitled image of Mary Jane with natural hair]. 2015.
Let's Go Crazy, Season 2 Episode 7

Black people have been treated that their very presence, that being visible in their full humanity, is a problem in American society (DuBois, 1903/2005). The visual, verbal, and behavioral symbols of the Black community often provide meme entertainment for public ridicule (Johnson, 2013), and while not particularly ridiculed in this sample, natural hairstyles are consistently framed as symbols of devaluation and Otherness. Assimilation, conformity, and codeswitching have long been protective behaviors for Othered

groups, such as reducing the racial attributes most noticeable to whites like "braids or dreadlocks" (Harris-Perry, 2014, p. 120). The textual evidence in this sample invites audiences to understand some Black women as *too* Black or *too* different, which evokes rhetorical disciplinary strategies that contain the characters into problematic tropes of the Mammy, the Strong Black Woman, and the emerging Broken Black Woman. This study unpacked contemporary manifestations of traditional stereotypes for specific performances of Black womanhood that serve to reinforce the hegemonically accepted, largely biased prescriptions for Black performance in the media and society. This also extends the literature on Black women and television by focusing on network dramas, where much of the consideration has been with comedies, talk shows, music videos, and news (Smith-Shomade, 2002). This article intersects the literature at Black Feminism, Black experiences, and media studies to articulate how the Afrocentric perspective remains disciplined within fully scripted television available on streaming platforms—thus an accessible archive— subsequently allowing audiences to continuously (re)discover, (re)watch and (re)stereotype certain performances of Blackness.

The repacking of racist tropes in contemporary media provides snapshots of real cultural phenomena to be interrogated and rooted out across disciplines. Scholars working in sociology, organizational communication, and economics, just to point to a few, can use the examples of the modern-day Mammy, Strong Black Woman, and Broken Black Woman media tropes to inform the investigation of workplace cultures and trends for Black women. This study can also be replicated with samples of different genres and premium status to unpack the nuances of market influences, cultural production, and economics on representation. The sample of this study aired in the mid to late 2010s with the early seasons for these programs. A fol-

low-up investigation of later seasons or a similar sample to compare the representations in the 2010s to the 2020s is needed to track how the tropes and representations evolve.

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