Journal of e-Media Studies
Volume 4, Issue 1, 2015
Dartmouth College

Flashback/Flashblack

Bambi Haggins and Kristen Warner

Introduction: When considering what kind conversation we wanted to have about television, we decided to unpack how the interplay between contemporary industrial, social, and political forces and the place of blackness therein continues to construct and reconstruct the televisual landscape. As scholars who deal with issues of representations, we have the pedagogical imperative to integrate discussions of race—and class, gender, sexuality—into our teaching and our discussions of American television history. For the purposes of this conversation, we chose to focus on how the medium, the industry, and the manner in which television reflects and refracts American popular consciousness are inextricably tied to notions of acceptability, objectionability, respectability, and constructions of blackness. Also: Shonda Rhimes. Sighs. BH & KW

Bambi Haggins: I think we need to consider how external pressures have generated change within the broadcast networks? Can special interest groups change the way that network executives think about folks that do not fit into the mythic norms of whiteness and middle classness. I think the answer is "Yes and No." You know Hal Kanter, who had been a writer for *Beulah*, claimed that the speech given by Roy Wilkins at an industry luncheon acted as the impetus to create *Julia*? However, Julia Baker, the Super Negro *Mrs. Miniver* nurse, embodied all of the things that made mainstream audiences comfortable. As the epitome of respectability, she provided the incarnation of a war widow (more akin to World War II than Vietnam) and possessed also what star Diahann Carroll would describe as "very little Negro-ness." It's funny, Kristen, when I had the opportunity to talk to Kanter at a luncheon at UCLA about an eon ago, he "seemed" unaware that Carroll had ever uttered that statement or the one about Julia being a "white Negro." Nevertheless, this was not new in terms of branding

programming regarding race as relevant, safe, and sanitized: from *I Spy* to *Julia* to *Mod Squad*. They all modeled a way to not deal with real issues regarding race while still adding enough color to the narrative to elicit self-congratulatory kudos on being "edgy" without actual edginess.

Kristen Warner: Interestingly enough, Bambi, not much has changed. After the release of the 1999 fall television schedule featuring twenty-three new series across all the networks with no people of color included, NAACP president Kweisi Mfume described the programming faux pas as "a virtual whitewash" and a mockery of actual diversity in front of and behind the camera. NAACP called for blackout/brownout in coalition with National Council for La Raza, National Asian American Telecommunications Association. Spurred on by television critics at the *Los Angeles Times* as well as actors' guilds such as SAG and AFTRA, the watchdog organizations were able to leverage enough power to shame the networks into immediately creating "diversity programs" and even into holding "hearings" at the Beverly Hilton to discuss ways of closing the gap. What resulted was a number of cosmetic initiatives designed to create immediate stopgaps against an all-white televisual landscape. Part of the reason we can look back and describe the initiatives as cosmetic is because, since 1998, very little has changed. Each year, studies are released indicating that both in positions in front of and behind the camera, people of color, and more specifically, women of color are still barely finding employment. Thus, while external pressure can and has generated change at the broadcast network level, I think these power brokers have become more and more immune to the public shaming, choosing instead to adopt discursive workarounds as justifications for why diverse employment is still so stunted. This most recent 2015-2016 pilot season with an exceptional number of people of color cast in network pilots was praised for its inclusivity yet still remains to be seen if this phenomenon is sustainable over multiple years.

BH: We remember how the 2000 season, which followed the threatened "brownout," responded to these calls for diversity, and we also recall how successful they were on post-network Big 4: for example, the hospital drama *City of Angels* (CBS Jan.-Dec. 2000), created by Stephen Bochco, Paris Barclay, Nicholas Wootton, was both the

poster show for diversity and short-lived.

KW: I think that era of cosmetic diversity was still occurring, providing a few opportunities for series with the possibility of becoming more than physically diverse to get past the never-ending development stage. While *City of Angels* fortuitously appeared on CBS's landscape around the time as the calls for more diverse television programming, the promotional strategy tethered to generating audience interest indicated that the networks only desired different-looking actors and not necessarily different experiences reflected on television screens. Briefly, they split the audience into white and black demographics and had showrunner Steven Bochco offering a safe, universal appeal to the former, and co-executive producer Paris Barclay insisting the latter watch to ensure future diverse inclusion. Both realities could not be true simultaneously, ultimately canceling each other out and failing to attract either demographic.

BH: But netlet programming was playing a different game—especially in terms of comedy. The focus moved from men to women on the netlets that were still courting the "urban" market in the new millennium. And the presence of black women in front of and behind the camera was not entirely unproblematic. With *The Parkers*, created by Ralph Farquhar, Sara V. Finney, and Vida Spears (UPN 1999-2004), and *Girlfriends*, created by Mara Brock Akil (UPN 2000-2004; CW 2006-2008)—the former, a much broader spinoff of the positivist teen comedy *Moesha*, and the latter, *Sex and the City* in black (and in Los Angeles)—audiences were given televisual fare that differed in terms of gender—if not in tone—from the Black Block comedies of niched and narrowcasted nineties. Like their predecessors, these shows were used to build an audience until they were able to shift to a more desirable (read: whiter) demographic. *Girlfriends* survived longer than its nineties' counterpart, *Living Single*. While following Fox's lead in "lightening" their programming fare, the CW initially decided to retain the former UPN sitcom on the newly merged netlet, using Akil's sitcom (and largely black audience) to grow the numbers for the upstart. Although the CW opted to program *Girlfriends* into its fall 2006 lineup, when, two years later, the netlet chose to cancel its comedy block to narrow the target demographics toward white youth, few were surprised that the lingering aftereffects of the post-1999 boycott still resonated.

Nevertheless, although the representations might have been problematic, without Black Block programming, there weren't many places for black actors on the small screen—after all, work is work. Of course, you could argue that with the appearance of first year ABC television comedies including *Blackish*, *Fresh Off The Boat* and *Cristela* (which was recently cancelled), there are more meaningful spaces for people of color in comedy as something other than the neighbor or the BBF (Yes, I'm talking to you, *Modern Family* and *The New Girl*, respectively).

KW: But Bambi, your points about ways black-cast series fought to survive on the netlets makes me think more about the role of employment as an unconsidered "barrier" to different kinds of representations for black folks. One of the many lessons I learned while conducting interviews with actors' guilds is the importance of employment. Actors, obviously, need to act—not just to fulfill their passions, but also to pay their bills. As such, the content of the jobs booked may be questionable, but for the guilds solely devoted to employment, any of their representable members hired to act is a victory. I mention this because, while for us scholars and critics, representation begins at the end of the production cycle, if we step back and consider and have our students consider how limited roles are for actors of color, the questions about why we always play these specific, and in many cases, racially stereotypical parts become more nuanced.

BH: Jennifer Fuller talks about how narrowcasted premium networks like HBO use black identity as a branding tactic to draw white audiences because blackness represents "edginess" or "hipness." While arguably, blackness has been used throughout television history as a narrowcasting strategy, it does in some ways ultimately benefit black folks—the inclusion of black bodies and black experiences within the televisual landscape. As I look back on certain landmark HBO series that were given the "quality" label, such as Tom Fontana's *Oz* and David Simon's *The Wire*, they are undoubtedly great television, and they possess a sense of verisimilitude and emotional realism powerful enough to pull the prime demographic of an HBO audience into the harrowing experiences of people of color in decidedly bleak urban spaces—although never rewarded with Emmys, but that's another story.

KW: Yeah, a story where Simon calls the Emmys "lily white."

BH: On the other, as I have discovered from the work that I am currently doing on representations of Baltimore, *The Wire* provides a slice of Baltimore's black community, in particular, but not all of it. I've had to critique my own readings of black Baltimore-centric series including *Homicide* and *The Corner*, all connected to Simon's vision of Baltimore. While traveling to Baltimore, getting to know different segments of the city's black communities, I have discovered how little I know about Baltimore from these texts. In some ways, it makes me wonder how many folks feel they understand blackness after watching *The Wire*, a fan favorite in academia.

KW: As the people on social media say: YASSS. I would only just add that part of why *The Wire* gets credited for its verisimilitude and realism is because, while I do deeply love David Simon, he's a white guy. And HBO can be "edgy" and greenlight projects full of black bodies as long as there's some insurance that their demographics won't feel too threatened. I mean, point me to an HBO series in the last ten years with a black showrunner.[1] I'll wait…
(Crickets)

KW: Let's go get a snack?
(Crickets . . .)

BH: …And we're back and moderately satiated…

KW: How might looking at the types of roles black women were offered throughout television history, not simply through the lens of stereotype, but through a consideration of employment shift how we consider their performance?

BH: In the definitively post-network, allegedly postracial era, representations of black womanhood in front of and behind the camera continue to be seen through the lens of all-too-familiar stereotypical tropes. The trope of the month appears to be the "angry black woman," a phrase used by *New York Times* television writer Alessandra Stanley in a piece on Shonda Rhimes, a powerhouse showrunner for *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scandal*, a black woman and a champion of "colorblind" casting, and her new drama, *How to Get Away with Murder*. Stanley began the article with the sentence, "When Shonda Rhimes writes her

autobiography, it should be called 'How to Get Away With Being an Angry Black Woman.'" The firestorm of criticism on social media, the tone-deaf attempts by the *Times* to assuage the furor, and the statements by Rhimes, her actors, and other folks in the world of media criticism has been brought into focus how postracial we are not. As media scholar Racquel Gates so aptly put it, the "interesting thing about the Shonda Rhimes/Angry Black Woman discussion is the fact that some people really believed that a 'quality' 'colorblind' show with a well-dressed lead was somehow exempt from the stereotypical pigeonholing that affects all representations of blackness in the media."

KW: See, I'm so conflicted on all this it's not even funny. First, Stanley should neither consider herself a critic of television or any other kind of medium. That said, I sort of love that, despite all of Rhimes's claims of being too busy to think about her race or gender in her post-Civil Rights, postfeminist life, Stanley bursts through those plausible deniability claims and manages to find an angry black woman when all that was presented to her was a racially neutral woman who "happened" to be black. I totally agree with Gates's point about how disguising a show and dunking in the smooth clean feel of whiteness would make people not notice that the leads are black and, regardless of Rhimes's insistence, a cultural and historic blackness embodied in these characters. It is silly and, quite frankly, pointless to compare the representations of Shonda's white characters to that of her black ones, if only because quite simply, whiteness has an infinite number of representations. White people can be anybody—they can be American Indians, they can be vampires, they can be well-paid surgeons in a Seattle hospital. The possibilities are endless. On the other hand, the possibilities for black characterization is far more limited if only because the range of representations that circulate and recirculate socially demand that we consider the costs of portrayal far more often. Thus I think it's hilarious considering Shonda as the subject of the piece because, I mean, no matter how hard she tries to neutralize it, race will not go away. Like…what do you do *after* convincing yourself and your home network ABC that race (outside of phenotype) is not a variable in your show, and Stanley injects racial discourse like what you said never existed? Rhimes says she didn't know she was angry. But, ironically, as black women, none of us do. And sadly, how we are perceived is largely out of our control.

Shonda tried to create a formula that would allow her to exist outside of that and simultaneously use her media to control her message. She incorrectly assumed that if she placed a distance between herself and the realities of racialization, choosing instead to put stock in creating a visually different look, she could navigate around historically racial tropes. But like sands in the hourglass, so are the inevitable pitfalls of colorblind representation. And while I do not enjoy that article at all and think Stanley was trolling for internet clicks (which, damn, when did *NYT* need clickbait?) I do think it is productive to observe Rhimes be accidentally placed in the same space her colorblind (either in spirit or casting strategic) characters of color have been by her own hands for years.

BH: I think it is also interesting that all of this angry black woman talk came in the discussion of a series whose star is not of the Kerry Washington school of beauty—in other words, someone who could be considered beautiful in Eurocentric terms. Did she become an "angry black woman," when she cast Viola Davis, a two-time Academy Award nominee and a black woman darker than caramel?

KW: Welp…there's the rub. Try as she might, Washington's features make her in some ways familiar and relatable to a white audience in ways that Davis never could. Moreover, despite taking the role written for a white lady (I mean, Annalise Keating[2] is her name . . . you draw the conclusions), Davis's racialization is damn near impossible to neutralize in the same ways that Washington is allowed. So, yeah, I don't care how many lovely wigs she puts on over her unrelaxed hair, it's bound to be much more difficult for non-black audiences to not read her body according to the racialized tropes the regime of representation (RIP Stuart Hall) will always attribute to her. And she's married to a white man on the show, too? Hmmm.

BH: Does that supply more postracial legitimacy? I mean, the interracial marriage has a different resonance than having a little something interracial on the side. I am not criticizing Kerry Washington for fitting into tropes of beauty that enable audiences to accept that she could turn the head of the president (Fitz), I just feel as though there was a way in which Stanley was emboldened to make a (poor) joke with a degree of impunity that she clearly did not have.

KW: Oh, for sure. It is exactly Rhimes's neutralizing that makes it possible for Stanley to make those points and divine some sort of hackneyed racial formula. However, I do recall Davis in interviews stating how she did not fashion herself as a "classical beauty," providing Stanley the fodder to take her out of context and tether that phrase to a racialized trope like an angry black woman.

BH: From her first sentence, Stanley's description of Davis's character, Annalise Keating, as "a powerful, intimidating black woman," she appeared to be conflating her views about Rhimes and Keating. Does that mean that a powerful black woman has to be an angry one?

KW: Well, it means that Stanley didn't know there were at least four or five more limited types for black women to be. Honestly, reaching for ABW as a descriptor for any or all of Shonda's black characters was far too easy. But also, it is what happens when a creator or executive producer or writer has black women in their cast but won't think through the historical trajectory of her representation.

BH: I find it extremely telling that we began talking about how Hal Kanter created the antithesis of an angry black woman in Julia Baker, the happy Super Negro, and we are wrapping up this conversation by exploring the furor over the champion of colorblind casting and creator of allegedly postracial and postfeminist worlds, Shonda Rhimes, being called an "angry black woman." The former congratulated himself for creating *Julia*, to "make up" for the role he played in writing *Beulah*, the quintessential happy darky domestic. In the case of Rhimes, the televisual milieu she creates does not inoculate her from being identified by the racial trope often associated with bright and outspoken black women. To be honest, there are times when I *am* an angry black woman. Given the ways black women are chastised, dismissed, or essentialized when we refuse to accept or fit into the well-worn tropes created to contain us—in media and in life—it's hard not to be.[3]

KW: Again…YASSS.

Comment on this article

About the Author

Bambi Haggins is an Associate Professor of Film and Media Studies at Arizona State University. Her research explores representations of class, ethnicity, gender, race and region in American film and television. Her book, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post Soul America* won the Katherine Singer Kovacs Book Award from the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. Dr. Haggins' recent film credits are acting as writer for Showtime's *Why We Laugh: Funny Women* and historical consultant and onscreen talent for HBO's *Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley*. Her current autoethnographic study examines mediated and lived experiences of home and the interplay between belonging, identity, place and race in Baltimore, MD, and Pasadena, CA.

Kristen Warner is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Telecommunication and Film at The University of Alabama. Her research interests are centered at the juxtaposition of televisual racial representation and its place within the media industries, particularly within the practice of casting. Warner's work can be found in Television and New Media and Camera Obscura. She is also the author of the just released book entitled *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* (Routledge,2015).

Endnotes

[1] As of this writing, Steve McQueen's HBO series *Codes of Conduct* had not yet been announced. The limited series co-created with Matthew Michael Carnahan will premiere late in 2015.

[2] Later in the series, Rhimes co-wrote an episode that revealed Annalise changed her name from Anna Mae.

[3] We could easily dedicate another conversation to Rhimes and race in Shondaland. For example in *Scandal*'s most direct engagement of race acts as a response to numerous police shootings and actually forces Olivia to remember that she is Black. However, instead of "The Lawn Chair," the title of the episode could have been, "Olivia Makes Black Lives Matter." Although the episode had some genuine emotional resonance with the anger and frustration of communities of color in the face of violence, its resolution, which supplied the kind of justice and compassion that we have yet to see in real life, shows another situation being "handled" by Olivia Pope.

Published by the Dartmouth College Library.

http://journals.dartmouth.edu/joems/
DOI: 10.1349/PS1.1938-6060.A.450