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## Oprah Winfrey and Shonda Rhimes : changing the faces and stories on contemporary American television

Caprice Butts

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## ABSTRACT

### OPRAH WINFREY AND SHONDA RHIMES: CHANGING THE FACES AND STORIES ON CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN TELEVISION

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This thesis explores the history of Black women in television beginning with the start of Black women being on air and to the present. It investigates the politics and education of Black women to tie into both the history of Oprah Winfrey and Shonda Rhimes to make connections on how these factors had an impact on their professional careers and storytelling and conclude that, while the background of television with Black women and individual lives of these two women have made differences in the world of Hollywood, there is still much that needs to be done. It also discusses the importance of storytelling and representation in the media, not just on the screen, but behind the scenes. Even though there have been stories told about minorities, it is different from having them told by people who have lived the inequalities perpetuated in American society. Unless one has lived the actual experiences they are portraying, it is hard, or perhaps impossible, to tell the story in a meaningful way. Having other Black women tell stories about shared experiences is a way to relate, to know that someone else out there understands, and ensure that they are getting the representation they deserve.

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OPRAH WINFREY AND SHONDA RHIMES: CHANGING THE FACES AND  
STORIES ON CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN TELEVISION

BY  
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The Hollywood industry has never been an easy place for a Black woman. Once, not even being allowed to grace the screen, Black women have struggled and fought for their place in an industry that did not want them nor felt they needed them. Even when they could be on the screen it was in positions of servitude and always beneath a white person. For example, the first Black woman to star in a major television series was Ethel Waters, who played the maid in the show *Beulah* (1950-1951). Over the last few decades, things have changed greatly, but it still is not easy. Women of all races still struggle for positions not just on the screen, but behind the scenes as well.

Even today Black women are still a minority in Hollywood, despite some of the growing recognition that they are achieving. You hear even less about the women that work behind the scenes creating ideas and stories for people of color so that relatable stories can be told for an audience that does not always see themselves represented in television. In the new scripted shows for the 2016-2017 season, 90% of showrunners are white and 80% are male. Based on the five broadcast networks: NBC, CBS, ABC, The CW, and Fox, only 4% of the showrunners are non-White females (Ryan, 2016). With such a small percentage it is still hard to get the representation that is needed for Black women.

This representation is becoming more and more important to people who watch these shows. Even though the numbers are small, the industry is recognizing that with America's increasingly diverse audience, that audience demands characters whose experiences are like theirs, characters who look like them, and with whom they can relate. The best way to do this is to hire showrunners who have lived experiences, of racial, economic and social inequality. By having programs that were primarily in scripted shows for female leads, broadcast television for leads, and show creators of colors they gained a wider audience. The increase is very small and could use a lot more work, it is headed in the right direction (City News Service, 2018).

It is vastly important that women of color have this representation of themselves, especially in the media that is such a large part of people's everyday lives. The average American spends 719 minutes daily with some source of media, whether it is television, computers, radio, or cellphones (Statista, 2018). That means that daily people spend almost half of their time with media. With this much interaction with media on a regular basis, people are constantly having information input from the daily usage of their chosen media platforms. If people are spending this much time with media, it is important that they are seeing people who look like them and who share their goals and aspirations. When you see someone that is like you achieve a goal, it becomes much easier to believe that the same successful path is possible for you too. It could be a young girl dreaming of what she will be when she grows up, or a graduate starting off their career, or a middle manager aspiring to reach the senior executive level — they will all set their sights higher when they have someone to look up to. So, if you think of these success stories as nothing more than

entertainment, it's time to look again; they are powerful tools in the push for gender equality (Varalli, 2017).

It is easy to tell people that you can be anything you put your mind to. We ingrain in children from a young age that they can be anything that they want to be. As inspiring as this is, it is hard to believe when you are not a member of the dominant group. It is far easier to believe when everyone that is successful looks like you. When one is a member of a minority, that belief diminishes especially when no one in power looks like you. If children of color do not see doctors, lawyers, actors, actresses, entrepreneurs, or any other profession that looks like them, they are not going to believe that they could do it as well.

More recently, however, researchers have documented the heterogeneity in academic achievement among African American students and have explored factors that may contribute to positive educational outcomes within this group. Among the factors that have been explored, racial identity has emerged as a construct that has been predictive of African American middle and late adolescents' academic outcomes. Researchers have, for example, found that stronger racial group affiliation and connectedness may promote more academic motivation among African American middle and high school students. This increased motivation may stem from a heightened awareness of the institutional barriers African Americans have traditionally faced in accessing education and a desire to work hard in school to overcome these barriers. Furthermore, feeling connected to other African Americans may help African American adolescents reject the negative perceptions of their group held by members of other racial and ethnic groups. (Hurd & Sanchez, 2012, p. 1196)

Minority characters in film and on television are most often represented as stereotypes with no social power and little or no economic wealth leaving them with no place in the American dream.

In 2008, America got its very first Black president. Out of 45 presidents so far only one has been Black. Yet we continue to tell children that they, too, could be president one day. For Blacks everywhere, Obama's election was a groundbreaking event but even more so

for Black children who finally saw someone like them leading the most powerful country in the world. America is still struggling to have a woman of any race become president. Instances like this is so important. Even on a smaller scale of television production, it becomes important that Black girls see that women like themselves have made a way for them in a white, male dominated industry. Oprah Winfrey and Shonda Rhimes are two powerful women who have changed the story of the American entertainment industry. If these women could possibly make such a mark, then they can as well.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

As with most of Black history in the United States, Blacks have been denied the right to participate in much of what America had to offer until recently. Television was no exception to this. Because the women who are the subject of this thesis have attained the most career success in television, this review will cover the advances Black women have made in the television industry both in front of and behind the camera. Starting in the 1940's, television was nearly all-white, making Blacks all but invisible. The first 30 years of broadcast, people of color were cast in stereotypical roles, either as servants or comedy relief, such as in shows like "Amos and Andy" (PBS, 2008).

Black women have had to fight against all odds in a sexist and racist industry to make a name for themselves. Fighting a white male dominated industry for recognition during the time of television was not an easy road. In 1939 "The Ethel Waters Show" aired on NBC. It was a variety program with a Black woman starring in it and was the beginning of Blacks on network television, during a time when television was just getting started and had yet to surpass radio. Water's show was a one-shot deal at the time, and no Black woman would star in a national program until 1948, though Blacks still made appearances on local stations in the 40's (Hill, Floyd Johnson, & Raglin, 1990). Waters in her time was a singer and actress and

was very popular among white audiences. In 1962 Waters became the first Black woman to be nominated for an Emmy (Hill et al., 1990).

Hattie McDaniel became the first Black to star in a major television series, “Beulah” from 1950-1951, (she was replaced by Ethel Waters in 1952; *Beulah*, IMDb, n.d.) though she had previously starred in “Gone with the Wind” where she was cast as a servant. On television, she starred in a stereotypical role; the maid of her employer the Henderson’s, who appeared to love her employers more than herself.

While Waters and McDaniel were making their mark, “Amos and Andy” was another showing making strides in a different way. The show had employed more Black women than any one show in both television and radio. Even though the screen roles were stereotypical and were canceled because of the demeaning roles that Black people played, these women were superb actresses making one believe in the role they were playing. Yet, it must be remembered that these roles were created by white men and their idea how what Black women should be portrayed; normally hefty, overbearing mammies who ruled the home and their husbands. During that time there were no other screen roles for Blacks (Hill et al., 1990).

In 1948, Amanda Randolph, was the first Black person to star in a network series called “The Layton’s” that aired from August to October on the DuMont Network. She also hosted a home-oriented show five mornings during the week in the early 1950’s on the same network. Her sister Lillian Randolph worked on the “Amos and Andy” show as well as performing as the domestic help on “The Great Gildersleeve” (1955-1956). She went on to play Cosby’s mother on “The Bill Cosby Show” which aired in 1969. (Hill et al., 1990)

In 1950, Hazel Scoot was the first Black woman to host a musical network show. the show was only 15 minutes long and lasted through July to September. During this time, as the Truman presidency was coming to an end and the Eisenhower era was beginning, there were very few Blacks on television. There were a few Black men were on television still including Nat King Cole who hosted his own show until 1957, but their screen presence was also on a steady decline (Hill et al., 1990).

In the 1960's during the era of Presidents Kennedy Johnson, television was once again changing. This comes to no surprise as President Kennedy was working to make strides in the Civil Rights movement to give Blacks a chance at equal opportunities, a fight that he unfortunately did not live to see resolve. The 1960's was an era of new consciousness for Black's in the television industry. One of the most memorable actresses was Diahann Carroll, who became one of the most popular actresses of her time. With her acting and her beautiful looks, she became famously known for her co-star role in the famous soap opera "Dynasty" (1981). She first stared on the sitcom "Julia" (1968-1971) as the character Julia Baker. This was the first show since "Beulah" that had an integrated cast and had a Black character in a starring role. There was a lot of controversy behind the role from critics believing that the show was not relevant to the times. Carroll fought the producer multiple times to make changes, but never lost her professionalism and continued her role. During the first season of "Julia", Carroll became the first Black to be nominated for an Emmy in a comedy (Hill et al., 1990).

The 1960's was a prosperous time for Black actresses. Cicely Tyson, who after performances such as Jane Foster in 1963 on the show "East Side/West Side" went on to

become a popular dramatic actress in the seventies. In the same show Diana Sands was nominated for a guest appearance that got her an Emmy nomination in 1964. During the same year Ruby Dee received her first nomination for the show “Nurses”, her second for “Roots”, and her third for “Gore Vidal’s Lincoln” in 1987. She also starred in her own PBS series with her husband Ossie Davis, “With Ossie and Ruby.” She made an even bigger impact when she became the first Black woman to have a recurring role in a prime-time soap opera, “Peyton Place” (1966) (Hill et al., 1990).

The sixties were a time that more Black women had Emmy nominations than ever before; a total of five. This included Carroll, Dee, Waters, McNeil, and an upcoming star: Eartha Kitt nominated for her roles in “I Spy” and “The Loser”. All the women nominated were only nominated for guest appearances. On the other side of the scale, Black men were doing marginally better. Harry Belafonte was the only Black man to win an Emmy for his performance in “Revlon Review: Tonight, with Belafonte”. Bill Cosby had won three Emmys between 1966 and 1968, unheard of until Darlene Hayes won her third Emmy in 1985 as producer of the “Donahue Show” (Hill et al., 1990).

One of the most famous science fiction programs, “Star Trek”, has a Black actress that has been on the screen since 1966. Nichelle Nichols portrayed the communications officer, Uhura. “Star Trek” has been syndicated since 1969, and Nichols has been a part of the show and four movies, finding herself experiencing success for two decades, which was rare for both Blacks and Caucasian (Hill et al., 1990).

In 1970, Gail Fisher, became the first Black woman to win an Emmy for her role on “Mannix” as Peggy Fair on the detective show. She won on her very first nomination and the

next three years she was nominated as Best Supporting Actress. She was the start of many successes that Black women had in the 1970's. Pearl Bailey was the star of her own show in 1971, Beah Richards was on both "The Bill Cosby Show" (1970-1971) and "Sandford and Son" (1972) where she teamed up with Lynn Hamilton and LaWanda Page for Redd Foxx's starring role. In 1974-1975, Teresa Graves was the only Black woman to star in a cop series, "Get Christie Love" until the 90's. It was the first weekly detective program with a Black hero in the starring role. Other shows either did not air weekly, or the Black characters were playing sidekick to their white counterparts. "Get Christie Love" became the starting point of having women star in roles as police and set the stage for white women to have starring roles in law enforcement shows.

"Good Times" (1974-1979) added even more Black women to the screen to the screen than had ever been seen before on a television series. It starred Ester Rolle; who later won an Emmy for "Summer of My German Soldier," as the Evans family mother, BernNadette Stanis; who played Thelma, Ja'net DuBois, who was Rolle's character's best friend, and Janet Jackson as DuBois' adopted daughter. This show was even more groundbreaking as it showed a Black blue-collar family that went through the everyday struggles of their race and class, while living on the South Side of Chicago. Blacks everywhere were able to relate to the small family, that despite their struggles continued to be grateful for the "good times." (Hill et al., 1990).

One of the most memorable Black sitcoms of all time is "The Jefferson's" running for eleven years (1975-1985) and becoming syndicated. It gave Black women unprecedented exposure and the women of the show were nominated for ten Emmy awards. In 1981, Isabel

Sanford, who played Louise Jefferson, became the first Black woman to win an Emmy for comedy. Marla Gibbs, who played the sassy domestic was nominated for her role in the show four times. She also won several NAACP Image Awards for her roles as Florence, on “The Jefferson’s” spin off series “Checking In” (1981). “The Jefferson’s” also was the very first show to have an interracial couple (Hill et al., 1990).

Cicely Tyson was known for portrayals that reflected the inner feelings of Blacks. She had a total of six Emmy nominations and actually won twice as Best Lead Actress in a Drama and Actress of the Year for her role in “The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman” yet the success of the 1970’s did not end with her (Hill et al., 1990).

The show “Roots” (1977) was iconic in many ways. The story of the enslavement of Kunta Kinte leading down the line to his ancestor’s liberation, the show was one of the first mini-series that portrayed what slavery was like for Africans that was brought against their will to America. This was not the stereotypical role people were used to seeing Blacks portray on television, but the dramatization of what slaves truly endured brought to homes everywhere. Three women of the cast were nominated for awards; Madge Sinclair, Ruby Dee, and Olivia Cole. Cole won the Emmy and was nominated for another role two years later. Sixteen Black women had major roles in “Roots.” We were also introduced to Leslie Uggam who played Kizzy Kinte. Even though she did not get Emmy nominations she won an Emmy for her role as a hostess in the game show “Fantasy.” An award named in her honor called “The Kizzy” is now given each year to an outstanding Black woman in any field. Concluding the 70’s were two actresses who received Emmys for their roles in children’s television.

Butterfly McQueen won for “Seven Wishes of a Little Rich Kid” (1979) and Pearl Bailey for “Cindy Eller: A Modern Fairy Tale” (1983) (Hill et al., 1990).

The 1980’s brought about Alfre Woodard who received five Emmy nominations and won two of them. Cicely Tyson had been the only actress to win two Emmys. Woodard won her nominations through guest appearances, but it does not diminish the things that she has gained and her wins for her roles in “Hill Street Blues” (1983) and “L.A. Law” in 1986. Madge Sinclair was also nominated with Debbie Allen who was up four times, and Whoopi Goldberg who won a nomination for her guest appearance on “Moonlighting” (1986) (Hill et al., 1990).

“The Cosby Show” and its spinoff series “A Different World” brought fame and recognition to television in different ways, but each gave a brand-new view to how Blacks were portrayed in television. “The Cosby Show” (1984) showed an upper middle-class Black family. Bill Cosby (Cliff Huxtable) was an Obstetrician and his wife Claire Huxtable played a lawyer and their family included five children. They were living the “American Dream” with a family that could come together and have fun. <sup>1</sup>The children did not feel threatened and could talk to their parents and after decades together Cliff and Claire still had a romantic beautiful relationship. With this show three generations of Black families had been on TV since “The Jefferson’s” and these three generations were all recognized by the Emmy’s. Phylicia Rashad who played Claire, was nominated in both 1985 and 1986 as well as winning two NAACP Image Awards as best actress. Clarice Taylor, who played Claire’s mother in-

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<sup>1</sup> With recent developments with Bill Cosby, it is important to note that his current standing in society after the charges he has faced for sexual abuse affects his reputation now as a television dad. With these charges, all the episodes of the Cosby Show have been pulled off television. His real-life persona has now affected his television persona showing that there are thin lines between celebrity and real life.

law was nominated for her guest appearance in 1986 and the two young women who played two of Claire's daughters, Lisa Bonet and Keshia Knight Pulliam both received nominations for best supporting actresses in 1985 (Hill et al., 1990).

Lisa Bonet continued with acting excellence with her portrayal of Denise in the spinoff series "A Different World" (1987). The show itself was groundbreaking as it was the first series that portrayed life at an HBCU (historically Black college or university). Besides having more Black actresses on a show than any before it, it also depicted these women in an educational setting, learning and becoming someone with greater opportunities as opposed to previous depictions as mammies and ladies of the night. What many found to be the best part of the show was that it was written in a way to depict the sensitivity that is an actual Black woman instead of experiences written by non-Black women that just assume they understand the Black experience. What also came out of this show was a character that people loved even more than Denise, Whitley played by Jasmine Guy. (Hill et al., 1990)

This was an era to show Black women as more than the stereotypical characters and "A Different World" was just the starting point. The show "227" (1985) brought about another famed character, Mary Jenkins played by Marla Gibbs from her previous role as Florence on the Jefferson's. Gibbs portrayal of Mary Jenkins showed a working class Black woman. Regina King who played her daughter Brenda gained fame as well and received her own NAACP Image Award nominations in 1987 and 1988 for best youth actress. Sandra Clarke took the world by storm with her portrayal of Jacee in the show, as no one had seen a character quite like her either Black or white. She was restrained but sassy, sexy but austere and had no problem handling men, to the point they did not know they were being handled. In

1987 she became the first Black woman to receive the Emmy as the best supporting actress in a comedy series. (Hill et al., 1990).

During this time, audiences saw Black children grow up on television such as Kim Fields as Tootie on “The Facts of Life” (1988) who then later on went on to star in the show “Living Single” (1993). Many Black women have helped shows become syndicated such as “What’s Happening Now” with Anne Marie Johnson and Shirley Hemphill. “For You, Black Woman” was syndicated and the first nationwide public affairs program focusing on issues relating to Black women. The show was hosted by Alice Travis and Freda Payne. Black women have even left their mark on Daytime televisions and Soap Operas. Ellen Holly was the first Black to integrate soap operas in 1968. Many Black women played roles on famous soap operas that are still going to this day such as “General Hospital” (1963), “Days of Our Lives” (1965), “The Young and the Restless” (1973), and “All My Children” (1970). Many Black women were nominated for Emmy’s in soap operas, but Debbie Morgan became the first Black woman to win for dramatic acting in soaps in 1989 (Hill et al., 1990).

The 80’s were also a time that Black women were being recognized for their time off screen as well. It was rare to hear of women working as television executives and producers yet Susan DePasse, as President of Motown Productions was heading film, TV, video, and cable. She was the first Black woman to win an Emmy as executive producer for her special “Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, Forever” in 1983 and then won again in 1986 for “Motown Returns to the Apollo”. DePasse earned not only her Emmy’s but her reputation as a tough negotiator for an industry dominated by white men. A similar woman who took her talents both on and off screen was Darlene Hayes winning the most Emmy Awards for a Black

woman on and off camera. She received three Emmy's for daytime television as producer for the "The Donahue Show" which was the biggest and most successful talk show until "the Oprah Winfrey Show" came a few years later. Winifred Hervey became the first Black woman to take home a prime-time Emmy for producer in 1988 for "The Golden Girls" (1985). Debbie Allen took her talents both on and off camera and won two Emmy's for choreography and seven nominations for acting and choreography (Hill et al., 1990).

The 1990's into the 2000's have now become a little more well known for Black women to make their mark in the world of television. There were shows that starred more women than ever such as "Living Single" (1993-1998), "Sister, Sister" (1994-1999), "Moesha" (1996-2001) and many others. Black women were still gaining awards and nominations. In 1990 Alfre Woodard won for "A Mother's Courage: The Mary Thomas Story the Magi" (1989). In 1992 and 1993 Regina Taylor was nominated for "I'll Fly Away" and 1995 Cicely Tyson was nominated for "Sweet Justice". Diahann Carol, Whoopi Goldberg, and Ruby Dee were all nominated for Emmy's as guest in a comedy series and Diahann Carol was the first Black woman to be nominated in that chosen category. In 1999, Ja'net Dubois was the first Black person to be nominated for and win an Emmy for Voice Acting.

Black women had become regular nominees in the Emmy before long, but wins were still few. In the 2000s though, there were still firsts to be had. For the first time in Emmy history, in 2015 both Taraji P. Henson and Viola Davis were nominated for Outstanding Lead Actress in a drama series. This was the first time two Black women had been nominated for the category. To further make history, Viola Davis ended up winning the award making her the first Black woman to win the award for lead actress in a drama series. On the producing

side, even though there have been Black women to win Emmy's for production, Lena Waithe became the first Black woman to win the Emmy for best comedy writing in 2017. What makes this even more outstanding is that Waithe is part of the LGBT community and she gave mention to it during her acceptance speech (Cohen, 2017).

As history has shown, Black women have struggled from the very bottom to make themselves noted in an industry that did not want them at first. Even once they were accepted to be a part of it, their screen roles were degrading stereotypes as maids and jezebels. Yet they continued to fight. Over time they have made it known that they are here to stay. They have made amazing strides for Black women everywhere in both Hollywood and television. As far as we have progressed, even current times shows we still have a very long way to go before Black women are completely included in the industry. The steps necessary to take are still under debate. What did these women have to do to achieve what they did? Is there a path that women could take following in the footsteps of their predecessors? We now have women such as Oprah Winfrey and Shonda Rhimes who are making significant contributions in the television industry and making their mark on the world of storytelling. They have come behind many great women that have made change possible and continued to make it possible in other ways. What did they do, and can their own personal stories help others? This paper will explore these women and the avenues that they have taken to help them reach the levels of success they have achieved. It will explore that by using the examples of these two women through their education, professional lives, and storytelling indicating that it is possible to pave a beginning for more Black women to reach levels of success and make their mark on the television industry.

## CHAPTER 3

### POLITICS OF RACE IN AMERICA AS IT IMPACTS WOMEN OF COLOR

America uses media for entertainment. Besides entertainment it is source of information for many people. Having such influence on Americans, it mediated entertainment has become a dominant influence in how people view the world and the ideas they form about others. Entertainment has more power than people acknowledge and that is true even in the realm of politics. Politics is not just government, which consists of those that run the country, but many parts of the world and how it functions outside of government including things such as education, workforce, and other aspects and how they come together in making that section work. In terms of entertainment politics, it can come in the form of representation. Outside of the community people interact with daily entertainment gives people a broader picture of American culture and society than what they are used to. Entertainment promulgates and disseminates dominant values, which are the values that are held by the majority of a culture. Entertainment embeds those values within the media thus asserting that the stories and characters are “reality.” (Larson, 2006).

Entertainment media has distinct values associated with Black women. The ideas of race do not diminish when it comes to televisual representations. The main values of entertainment politics that enter the picture when discussing Black women normally come in the form of colorism, poverty, and self-esteem. These traits were historically represented in

common stereotypes like that of the hypersexualized Black woman (Jezebel) or the mammy, whose earthy wisdom made her the choice caretaker for white families.

Colorism is one of the most frequent forms of discrimination when it comes to Black women in the media. Colorism is defined as the intraracial discrimination and privilege system based on skin color and other phenotypical characteristics such as hair texture, broadness of nose, and lip thickness (Baxley, 2014). Colorism is a familiar phenomenon amongst Black people, many valuing lighter skin over darker skin. It has been an important issue in the African American community that lighter skin is considered a positive attribute. White-washing is a frequent practice in celebrity circles.

Now, “whitewashing” describes the habit of casting white actors to play non-white characters, often to shoehorn in a star, sometimes out of racial insensitivity, invariably to the detriment of people (and especially actors) of color (Rose, 2017). An example of this is in the 2014 movie *Exodus: God's and Kings* where the story about Ancient Egyptians was portrayed by an all-white cast, or the 2017 movie *Ghost in the Shell*, based on the Japanese anime, main character was played by white actress Scarlett Johansson.

This is the basis of colorism which assumes that the concept of beauty can be summed up in one trait based on the relative lightness or darkness of one's skin. According to Russell, Wilson, and Hall (1993 as cited by Manatu, 2003), the origins of colorism can be traced back to the Antebellum South. What was referred to as the “mulatto hypothesis,” the belief that the infusion of White blood uplifted Blacks from their innate inferiority, privileged lighter-skinned Black female slaves, many of whom were slaveholders' own children. Thus, skin color signified desirability and attractiveness:

Lighter skin as perceived by Thomas Jefferson was equated with femininity and physical beauty; hence light-skinned Black female slaves were valued for their exotic beauty. Darker skinned female slaves, on the other hand, were equated with physical strength, but were perceived as possessing no femininity nor beauty. (Manatu, 2003, p. 56)

This idea did not change once slavery was ended. It has continued to intensify and even to this day is a strong cultural attitude. Only recently is being darker skinned with natural hair and features becoming more acceptable. It is not surprising that this colorism still lives on to this day as more people learn and get their ideals from media as opposed from their inner circles of family and friends. Children grow up spending more time with televisions and electronic devices than parents, not necessarily always by choice, so they see it more and are persuaded by the values being represented. This can be detrimental to African Americans, especially young African American women who are not fairer skinned and see themselves as inferior to lighter skinned women.

Poverty is frequently associated with all Black people. Poor, ghetto, and uneducated are stereotypical characteristics applied to Black people. It is aimed at Black women more so as images of Black men are more my typically violent thugs. Black women are perceived as having too many children, poor, and living on welfare. Negative stereotypes of poor women of color maintain oppression based on race, class, and gender and become the point from which other groups define their normality. Thus, stereotypes of poor women simultaneously demonstrate their exclusion from membership in society and demarcate the boundaries of that society. Moreover, stereotypical images of Blacks become opposed to corresponding positive images of whites so that race becomes the referent for several personal characteristics. The facets of the "welfare queen" image become fused together so that poor always means Black,

Black always means poor, and these characteristics attached to "woman" symbolize sexual irresponsibility, defective parenthood, and deviancy (Albiston, 1994).

These stereotypes are damaging to young Black girls who grow up hearing and seeing this constantly. The belief that they will be nothing more than young, pregnant, whores who will do nothing more than have a lot of children fathered by multiple men, none of whom will stick around and take care of their children forcing them to move on to the next male companion and repeating the vicious cycle. This does not leave much hope for the young women that are forced to hear it constantly. Growing up in the unfortunate areas they do with few opportunities as discussed earlier, means many do fall prey to that exact stereotype believing that once they do there is no way forward than exactly what the world has deemed would be their future. Therefore, the few stories that African American women hear of single mothers who have found a way to move forward and create a future outside of the stereotype are very welcomed. The mothers who finished school and went to college, who still raise their children by themselves while working full time, so they do not need to receive assistance are encouraging role models.

Many minority women live in poverty in the United States, a high percentage of them being African American women. More than one in eight women, nearly 16.3 million, lived in poverty in 2016. Poverty rates were particularly high for Black women (21.4%), Latinas (18.7%) and Native women (22.8%). Families headed by single mothers (35.6%) were 5.4 times more likely than married couple families to live in poverty. Nearly six in ten poor children (59.5%) lived in female-headed families in 2016 (NWLC, 2016). These statistics

though do not necessarily lead to the stereotypes of the cycle of poverty associated with it. Just because a woman is poor does not mean she has only negative character traits.

Growing up in ghettos offers few chances of self-improvement, mostly caused by systematic racism. Forcing African Americans into cluttered segregated and impoverished community's limits opportunities for personal advancement and success. The possibilities for better schools, homes, and job opportunities are few and far between. "The limited body of scholarship currently available about Black women in college is helpful in illuminating their isolating experiences as they endure racism, sexism, and other forms of marginalization. Most scholarship however, rarely if ever centers on the voices of Black women," (Croom & Patton, 2017).

With the damning image discussed earlier about Black women, it is no wonder that many Black women could suffer from self-esteem issues. Black women struggle with the idea that unless they are a light-skinned beauty who lives outside impoverished areas, their prospects for success and personal advancement are seriously limited if at all possible.

There is a certain mold that many women are expected to live up to, how they look, how they dress, their basic upkeep, and that is without the pressures of media portraying the idea of the "perfect woman." This is even harder on Black women, who would be praised for being smaller, but have an hourglass figure, lighter skin, and straighter hair. This failure would lead to insecurity and a sense of inferiority among women of color if they do not attain this ideal of the "acceptable" African American woman.

Through the effects of colonialism, many Africans, especially women, also have come to believe that they are "ugly" and therefore can become "beautiful" only when they have lighter skin. They have in a way, become alienated and indoctrinated by the

White standard of beauty. Many Black people started hating their Black complexion and wanted to acquire a White complexion. In a way, they tended to become “Negrophobic.” (Begehou, 2015, p. 5)

White women are still seen as the most acceptable standard of beauty. It is slowly changing, as Black women embrace natural features, such as hair, lips, and body. Despite embracing these features, they are more appreciated on White women. There are many White women and celebrities that now wish to achieve the look of fuller lips, fuller derrieres, and tanned skin.

If Black women must live in a world where they are constantly barraged by these issues, how can they be expected to succeed. It is important to explore how Black women overcome these stereotypes that are fostered on television and in Hollywood.

## CHAPTER 4

### EDUCATION AND MENTORSHIP

Education is a staple in American society. It is impressed upon everyone that the key to success and the way to good jobs and careers is through education. The more education you have the better off you will be in life. We encourage children to do well, finish high school, go to college and then if they choose further their education. However, a quality education is not always available to everyone. There are some that are left out of the equation on what typically lead to successful careers. Minorities are frequently unable to experience what is considered quality education based upon the areas that they grow up in and parental support that they have at their disposal.

Outside of economic status, representation is an important matter in educating young Black people. Just telling someone that they are “expected” to get an education is not enough to make people want to continue to succeed. In American society, White people see those like themselves going through life succeeding by this model of education. Black people have less representation of success in schools no matter where they attend or when they aim for an education. This contributes to the importance of education and mentorship can give Black children the belief that they can succeed just as the person that they are emulating.

Mentorship is becoming increasingly important in Black communities, working towards aiming Black students towards success and opportunities that they may not have

normally found just sitting in a classroom with no mentoring interactions with their teachers.

It is even more important with the lack of African American teachers in schools, especially if the school is already lacking in diversity.

[A] report released this week by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics shows that a majority of America's nearly 4 million public school educators are still primarily White....According to the survey, "About 80% of all public-school teachers were non-Hispanic White, 9% were Hispanic, 7% were non-Hispanic Black, and 2% were non-Hispanic Asian" during the 2015-16 school year. Meanwhile, America's public-school population has been majority children of color since 2014 – and it's only getting more diverse. Data compiled by the Education Department in the fall of 2016 found that of the nation's 50.4 million public school kids, 24.6 million (49%) were White children and 25.9 million (51%) were kids of color. (Dwyer, 2017)

Thus, there is a major lack of diversity in schools when it comes to students seeing people that look like them in teaching or administrative roles. It is hard to believe that one can even find success when they are not seeing people like themselves being successful, and the first place this starts is in the classroom. In a country that is exceedingly racially charged and has been proven for the White majority to be the most successful, it is rare to find minority success as abundantly. With this constant image it is not hard to believe that the only way to be successful is to be White making mentorship in Black communities so important. When you show young children that they can be successful without being White is when improvement starts to show in African American youths. Simply starting early with education, having role models has a vast impact.

Exposure to a Black teacher during elementary school raises long-run educational attainment for Black male students, especially among those from low-income households. For the most disadvantaged Black males, conservative estimates suggest that exposure to a Black teacher in primary school cuts high school dropout rates 39%. It also raises college aspirations along with the probability of taking a college entrance exam. These results come from two unique analyses that utilize datasets from two

states and two distinct identification strategies. Thus, well-established evidence of demographic match effects are not limited to short-run outcomes, such as test scores or teacher perceptions or expectations. Rather, they extend to educational investments several years later. Our findings also suggest that a straightforward policy lever – assignment of Black male students to Black teachers – can help to close frustratingly persistent achievement gaps. (Gershenson, Hart, Lindsay, & Papageorge, 2017, p. 35)

Having African American role models such as Oprah Winfrey, Barack Obama, Michelle Obama, Denzel Washington, and others gives children the sense that they too can find success in a world that they may not have believed was once possible. That is why there is such a need for more Black educators in classrooms that are increasingly becoming more diversified.

“Mentorship is the key for sustaining Black women leaders especially those in high levels because there are few Black women there, Pierce said. I think having a mentor is a really valuable and important thing. I also think that questions of racism and sexism always come into play,” she said. “I think it’s very true that Black women have to be two and three and four times better than their other counterparts in order to be taken seriously, in terms of their leadership.” (Paige, 2018, p. 5)

Even after the encouragement to complete school and seeing people like them graduate and finish, there is still the difficulty regarding what happens after one graduates. Many students struggle after graduation often leading to taking paths and jobs that are not in their field, because of the difficult economy and lack of options.

Recent research suggests that millennials have the highest rates of depression and anxiety of any generation, with job concerns high on their list of worries. A study by the University of Pittsburgh Schools of the Health Sciences found an association between high rates of depression and high rates of social media use: People who reported being depressed tended to be active on many social media platforms. “They are following their friends on social media and have this out-of-proportion sense that everyone else has figured it out and is

getting jobs,” Ziegler <sup>2</sup>said. “They have a sense that everyone has it together but them, which causes them to further isolate themselves.” According to the National Alliance on Mental Health, 75 percent of mental-health conditions begin by age 24, which means that both the college years and the abrupt transition when it’s over can be a particularly challenging time emotionally, (Meadows-Fernandez, 2017).

This only compounds the kinds of issues Black women face as they strive for success in a society where success is typically defined as White and male. With these odds against girls of color it is a wonder that they continue to move forward and thrive at all. What keeps them striving what strategies continue to motivate them if they struggle to see successful Black women as role models? It is clear that Black women and girls are not giving up and it is important to examine mentorship and role models can foster personal and career growth. This is why Black women in the entertainment industry are so powerfully important. They can be both role models themselves and tell stories of powerful and successful Black women in contemporary American society.

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<sup>2</sup> Sheryl Ziegler, a Colorado psychologist and licensed professional counselor

## CHAPTER 5

### ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY LEADERS

There are several Black women producers that could have been studied for this research, but we will be using Oprah Winfrey and Shonda Rhimes. The reason for choosing these two women was considering their success levels in television both as Black women and their storytelling. They are well-known faces in television production with several popular shows that were or are still running. They also focus on Black women mostly as the main characters in several of their shows that are shown, with the characters being relatable to other Black women despite the fictional storylines.

#### Oprah Winfrey

Oprah Winfrey is one of the most iconic names in Hollywood and is one of the most influential and wealthy women who has received titles from multiple professions. In the celebrity world, she is one that is known best when it comes to success as an African American woman. She is so well-known that just her first name is enough to know who one is talking about when she is mentioned. According to Garson,

Because “Oprah” means instant cognizance, we expect people, if only occasionally, to have watched her daily television program, seen her movies, or read the books she recommends or *O*, her magazine. But even if they’ve done none of these things, they are able to place her. (Garson, 2004, p. 1)

Her fame has spread across the ocean to other nations, especially Africa where she has performed significant charity work including building her school. The levels of success she has reached is a rarity for an African American woman in today's world, especially during the time that she grew up. Yet, she has managed to amass an empire with her name on it everywhere. From hard beginnings to billions, Oprah is a woman to be admired. It has even been suggested recently that she consider running for president of the United States (Izadi, 2018). Yet, many people wonder how she was able to accomplish building notoriety and fortune simultaneously.

### Early Years

She had rather rough beginnings – no famous rich parents, no silver spoons, and no easy access opportunities afforded to other White children her age. Many have heard Oprah's story and realized that she quite literally pulled herself up out of the gutter and made herself known in the world and entertainment industry, where many other young African American women are overlooked.

Oprah has already left an indelible mark on the face of television. From her humble beginnings in rural Mississippi, Oprah's legacy has established her as one of the most important figures in popular culture. Her contributions can be felt beyond the world of television and into areas such as publishing, music, film, philanthropy, education, health, fitness, as well as social awareness. As supervising producer and host of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Oprah entertains, enlightens, and empowers millions of viewers around the world. (Illouz, 2003, p. 2)

Oprah Gail Winfrey was born in Mississippi, one of the poorest states in our nation, with the most racial tension, and had a race-driven violent past. She was born on January 29<sup>th</sup>, 1954 to Vernita Lee and Vernon Winfrey in Kosciusko, Mississippi. She stayed there until the

age of six with her grandparents Hattie Mae and Earless Lee. Mississippi is not a hub of celebrities like New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles, but it has produced quite a few famous African Americans who are still well-known today. Oprah speaks often her love of books and how they affected her life as she was growing up. She mentions several of her favorites such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston and *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960) by Harper Lee. Other favorite writers she mentions come from Mississippi such as the author Richard Wright, who is famously known for works such as *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945). For writers like Wright, the cultural era in which he lived came out in his works, speaking of hard times for African Americans and dealing with issues of race and division, especially in the southern states that had slavery for centuries.

It is understandable that Winfrey found so many connections to her life through the literature that she read. Black literature has been impactful in many ways on the lives of African Americans. Explaining the Black experience through books and poetry is a staple in the African American community. It is encouraging that African Americans read about the history their ancestors have experienced and appreciate the creativity that came out of that era, despite the restrictions and traumas that they had to share.

Oprah credits most of her successful traits to her grandmother. The discipline Hattie Mae taught through the humble beginnings and simple living, though not appreciated at the time or understood like the hard chores and corporal punishment, were appreciated as she got older. She was also taught to read, though the sole purpose was to fulfill the religious ideals her grandmother heralded.

Winfrey herself does not know why she was sent to live with her mother. Lee lived in a one-bedroom apartment, leaving Winfrey to sleep in the foyer. Lee lived on welfare and the money she earned as a maid who cleaned houses was meager. It did not seem like she was capable of raising a child. Yet, while Oprah was still in Mississippi, Lee had another illegitimate child, and then a third when Oprah was nine. Oprah felt unwanted in the home, inferior to a younger sister who was lighter skinned and supposedly prettier. Oprah was never complimented for intelligence, but the younger child was praised for her lighter skin tone and looks.

As Oprah ascended to fame, she helped destroy the image of light skinned women as pretty and successful when young girls everywhere saw this dark skinned African American woman find success, despite what was said against her. Many made comments about Oprah not being as attractive as other women in Hollywood, but she still found success and still convinced women everywhere that beauty came in all shades. She has been a strong advocate for self-love and that beauty comes in many different forms, no matter size, skin tone, hair style, or any other standards that Hollywood imposed women. Growing up, she found herself fighting this battle as well.

From early on, like many other African Americans, Oprah has been conscious of color, not only of race, but of what differences in color could mean in people's lives. when she was a small girl, she envied White children for what she thought of as their easier and more pampered existence, and because it seemed to her that White children were more beautiful than she was; she envied not just skin color, but noses, lips, and hair. (Garson, 2004, p. 6)

African American women over time have been ridiculed for large noses, fuller lips, “nappy” hair, as opposed to White women who are praised for straight long hair, thin lips, and

noses. Again, only recently are African American women being more accepted and not just in the overt sexual way women were portrayed during the years. This is what sparked Winfrey's interest in Black history.

Oprah's undeniable interest in Black history in the last two decades has taken many forms like books, movies, and artifacts. Her preferred books often focus on racial issues: slavery, segregation, both overt and covert, violence against Blacks (rape, lynching, and other forms of murder), injustice and the legal system, discrimination in all its varieties. Many of the novels she chose to read over the years are either by Black writers, often women – Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison, for example – or about Black characters, and some of the books have been made into films. (Garson, 2004, p. 11)

Winfrey was determined to take a different path in her life than her mother. She did not want to be poor with multiple children that she could not properly care for. She did not want to follow in the footsteps of her mother but achieve beyond it. This could also be attributed to the time she spent living with her mother and her other siblings. Both her siblings had drug habits, and her mother was poor and in and out of relationships frequently during Winfrey's youth.

When Winfrey was eight years old, she was sent to live with her father because her mother was struggling financially. Living with her father and his wife, she saw a very different change in the living standards she was used to. This family was more middle class, with better neighborhoods and schools. As her father and his wife did not have any other children, they wanted to keep Winfrey full time. The improvements in school were instrumental for her. Unfortunately for Winfrey, when she was nine, many of her hopes for her future were dashed when her mother requested custody from her father. Reluctant to send her back to that life, her father had no choice but to return Oprah to her mother. Lee, who was

getting married at the time, believed this was her chance to have the happy family that she had previously wished for. Oprah was devastated by this change, regressing back into the life that she had led previously, all her growth withering away. Even more traumatizing, once she returned, she became the object of persistent sexual abuse beginning with being raped by a cousin when she was nine. Over the next five years, she experienced molestation from other relatives and her mother's boyfriends, the abuse only ending when she returned to her father. For years, she kept silent about the abuse never telling anyone until she was 24 years old, admitting it to her mother and other members of her family. Sadly, no one believed her, making it a more traumatic experience and causing her to never bring it up again until a public confession years later.

Winfrey first revealed this abuse on her television program when a guest appeared on her show, and the guest discussed the years of abuse she experienced as a child. It was such an identifying testimony for Winfrey that she ended up admitting to her own dark past of sexual abuse. Oprah did not bring it up again until almost 30 years later when she was internationally famous and used her prestige to speak out against child abuse and the secrecy that surrounded it. Through several outlets such as a documentary, a mix of a fiction and documentary, as well as creating a scholarship fund for children of abuse, Winfrey became a strong advocate for those who have suffered abuse.

Winfrey shows the importance of having mentors and role models, just like she had to find someone else that was willing to be open and honest for her to open herself up. Even someone who could be as successful as Oprah shows that they need someone to look up to and have a role model. Even though she did not know how her life would turn out and that she

would become the person she did, she still followed her philosophy throughout her life believing that she could do better, despite the terrors that she experienced, eventually turning into the person that would become an inspiration to others.

### Education

Winfrey's time at Nicolet High was also a time to be remembered in history. In 1968 both Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated, and the issue of race was prevalent. In 1954, the year she was born, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation in schools was unconstitutional, although Mississippi did not integrate schools until 1964. It was even more prevalent when in the summer of 1955, Emmett Till was murdered by White men in Mississippi for supposedly whistling at a White woman. During Winfrey's teens Rosa Parks made her stand on refusing to give her seat on the bus up to a White man in Montgomery, Alabama. One could only imagine what growing up in a time of such historical change would mean and how it would influence Oprah.

As her older years showed, she believed strongly in her history remembering it and acknowledging it quite a bit in her lifetime. Also, it would explain her strong desire to make sure that African Americans were given the very best opportunities if they were willing to work for them. It also explains much of her charity work when she had the funds to be so generous. "Oprah is captivated by the history and powerful heritage left by a few Black women," (Garson, 2004). Despite her interest in her history and the rights of those that are not as blessed, she has no real interest in politics. Oprah has reiterated this recently when the topic of Michelle Obama and Oprah Winfrey running for President and Vice-President respectively

came up. It was even an idea that Oprah herself could run for president and she easily turned the thought down during an interview with In Style Magazine “I’ve always felt very secure and confident with myself in knowing what I could do and what I could not. And so, it’s not something that interests me. I don’t have the DNA for it” (Brown, 2018).

Education is a strong point in Winfrey’s views for the future of African American children everywhere. She established 10 ongoing scholarships in her father’s name at her alma mater, Tennessee State University. She still gives major sums of money to all types of colleges and universities, large and small. She gave money to universities that could not accept students due to lack of money available for scholarships. She gave \$5 million to Morehouse college, and many others. She remains the top donor at a lot of universities. She is not just limited to the United States, she has been active in philanthropic role in providing funds for international schools. This has become so prevalent to her that she has started several schools for girls in Africa.

Much of this could also be explained by the many traumas she experienced including becoming pregnant at 14 years old due to her abuse. She was sent to her father during her pregnancy and could no longer hide it from him. Yet he was supportive and tried his best to be helpful.

Sadly, Oprah lost the child to premature birth and he died two weeks after he was born. Yet, Oprah did not see this a loss, rather an opportunity and a choice for her future. She does not question the path that she would take which nothing like would be the one that she had previously been on. She admits that she would have never guessed that she was going to become the person she did. “There are many examples of teenagers whose futures have been

defined by the boundaries of motherhood, and in 1968 a pregnant Black girl of 14 would have had few prospects of hope,” (Garson, 2004). Oprah knew at that point that she would have to make a change and take this second chance to become something different.

Oprah was consistently motivated by her father and his words of praise that she would one day become famous. Oprah followed her father’s strict rules, he was determined to help her succeed, believing that A’s were a requirement and that being awarded for achievements was unnecessary because it was expected (Garson, 2004)

Believing in her father’s words Oprah set out to accomplish just that. Though still having the normal woes as any teenager she worked to excel. After entering Nashville’s East High School, she was chosen as vice president of her class, president of the student council, drama club, and National Forensics League. She was also given membership of the honor society. In 1971, during the Nixon administration she was chosen to attend a White House Conference on Youth as Tennessee’s representative. Not long after this, she was interviewed at a radio station in Nashville, which is what is believed to have sent her in the direction of her career (Garson, 2004)

### Professional Life

In 1971, after graduating high school, she went to Tennessee State University on a scholarship paid for by an Elks lodge where she won a contest. She majored in speech and language arts. During her education she got a job with the radio station WVOL, reading the news. Her father was the one that encouraged her to take it, after her doubting she should do it for fear of her not focusing on school. While in college she moved on to a larger radio station

WLAC, and then at 19 she moved on to a television station, WLAC-TV. Here she became a reporter and an anchorperson, the first woman and Black person to hold the position.

As young Black women, one constantly hears you must be ten times better than everyone else just to get acknowledged for the same thing. Oprah did exactly that, she joined organizations that would help her excel, she studied hard and got good grades so that she could be well educated and continued to fight every day to become better than what the world and stereotypes told her that she would be.

Surprisingly Oprah did not finish her degree during her first tenure there. She dropped out since she was already receiving jobs in her field and continued working for quite a few years. In 1987, when she was asked to speak at Tennessee State University she refused because she had not finished her studies. She decided to finish her coursework and got her degree. She showed her dedication to education and others education by honoring the students that had completed and pushing herself to finish.

Two years after making the big move to Chicago her show was syndicated and something brilliant was born in the form of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. In 1987, Oprah was awarded an Emmy for daytime television, the beginning of many. The syndication of this show was the first step towards much of the fame that Oprah accumulated over the time as it first went national and then international. The Kings Brothers Corporation, a company owned by two distributors Roger and Michael King, renamed the show and put it on 137 stations nationwide.

Oprah has been praised for her talent of connecting with her audience, probably one of the many things that had her show skyrocketing to the top, doing in one year what it took Phil

Donahue a decade to accomplish. That same talent and hard work that she earned and learned in Tennessee took her extremely far in the world of television. Her ambitions and refusal to give up saw her doing amazing things and in just a few short years of moving to Chicago also made her a millionaire and one of the richest entertainers in the world. In 1993 she had made \$98 million, surpassing Steven Spielberg who gave her the first of her many movie roles, and even surpassed Bill Cosby. In 2003 she was the first African American billionaire, putting her on Forbes top 100 richest people list (Garson, 2004).

Eventually her wealth led not only to luxuries such as homes and cars, but it allowed her to take control of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* from Chicago ABC-TV and formed the company Harpo. She was the first Black woman to have her own studio and production company. Only two other American women achieved that, Lucille Ball and Mary Pickford, and they were both White (Garson, 2004).

In 1997 Oprah created the Angel Network to continue her philanthropy. The organization was created with participants in the network coming together to give help to the community together whether in the form of good deeds, money or both. Despite all her wealth Oprah alone could not handle giving everything to help, so she created a community of people that could. It also worked with other organizations such as Habitat for Humanity (Garson, 2004).

In 1999 she did another business deal and bought 8 percent of the cable company Oxygen Media. Her reasoning behind buying it was to make sure that she would always have a voice and a way to express herself that is different from other network programs. Oxygen Media is focused on women and topics that concern them. Even though it had a slow start,

due to competition with networks such as Lifetime, with a little revamping and an addition of a little broader showcasing, mainly in its crime television series, it is now one of the fastest growing cable networks. “Oxygen Media, the destination for high quality crime programming, is bucking industry trends by finishing 2017 as the fastest growing cable entertainment network among total viewers in primetime (up 25% vs. 2016) and in total day (up 53% vs. 2016). Additionally, Oxygen is up 14% among P18-49 and up 17% among P25-54 in total day versus last year,” (NBC Universal, 2017).

By this time Oprah had also produced several shows and movies, again expanding her range. She produced a television series *The Women of Brewster Place*, which was dropped after 10 weeks. She produced *Waiting to Exhale*, in 1996 based off the book by Terri McMillan, and still regarded as one of the more popular Black 90s movies to come out of that era. She produced and starred in the television film, *Before Women Had Wings*. In 1998, she starred and produced the movie *Beloved* another film based off the book by Toni Morrison that was nominated for an Oscar.

She launched her magazine O in 2000, which in a few months went international. Continuing her success, she has done many amazing and brilliant things, putting herself in many good business opportunities and flourishing in ways that many thought she would fail. She has cookbooks, deals with diet plans, a book club that intertwines with her television networks, she has won numerous awards overtime from entertainment, to humanitarian, to most influential.

Oprah Winfrey arose to stardom and became one of the most famous, richest, most influential women in the world. Many are very much aware of everything that Oprah has

accomplished and even if they are not privy of every single detail, they are aware that she has done a lot in her lifetime. Between her almost angellike charity work and no limits on what she is willing to share, her amazing show and longevity on television continued when her talk show ended after she moved into movies and her own television channel.

### Storytelling

Being in the position that she is in Oprah has the unique opportunity to reach millions of people with the stories she chooses to tell on her shows. Oprah has been producing since 1989, beginning with her two-episode series *The Women of Brewster Place* and has continued to her current production projects. The stories she chooses are very powerful and talk about things that frequently happen in the world and more specifically the African American community. Even with the added dramatics people can easily relate to many of the tales she chooses. It also shows African Americans in a light other than what is normally portrayed on television.

Many shows you see about minorities depend on unflattering stereotypes. For a while it was rare to see African Americans portrayed in non-stereotypical roles, with few exceptions shining through. “The inclusion of Blacks in films and television is not necessarily good news because they tend to fit into certain negative stereotypes, showing them as subservient, hypersexualized, dangerous, or incomplete” (Larson, 2006). Although it has changed in recent years there are still numerous portrayals of African Americans in negative ways.

Oprah has given African Americans the opportunity to change their views in the media. Many of her shows focused on African Americans and their stories -- both the good

and bad sides of it. They also focused strongly on African American women as main characters. Her two-episode series, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1989), explored the lives of four strong-willed women in an unidentified eastern city. The women lived in a rundown housing projects on Brewster Place. The story spans 30 years as they struggle with poverty, bigotry, and the problematic men in their lives (*The Women of Brewster Place*, IMBD, n.d.).

Though it was simply two episodes, this show tackled a lot of issues that Black women in the community faced during that time. Society was not as accepting of these kinds of strong women as they are today. With tolerance at a low point, this production was a bold move for television. It was rare to discuss lack of men in the home, promiscuity among women, and of course homosexuality amongst African Americans. It was a taboo that was not approached but hidden in the family and kept quiet.

African American women have always been seen as promiscuous sexual creatures because they were already seen as lower creatures being Black and then they were often curvier.

The mainstream cultural history of Black women sexuality is a deeply troubled and bitter terrain. Black women's bodies remain a critical negative point of reference in the racist and sexist battle to define good and evil, normalcy and abnormality, sexual purity and sexual contamination, property and ownership. (Rose, 1998, p. 171)

Homosexuality was also a taboo subject, especially in the Black community. It is almost a curse to be spoken in a home, avoiding all topics of it. Many people feeling as if they could not be their true selves to family and friends for fear of judgement and shame. "Black homophobia is very different than White homophobia," she<sup>3</sup> maintained. When White families are homophobic, she said, they are more likely to kick their LGBT children out of

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<sup>3</sup> Faith Cheltenham, a Black bisexual woman and the head of BiNet USA, being interviewed by Reynolds.

their homes. Black families tend to turn to leaders in the church “to get rid of the demon of homosexuality,” she said. And they are much more likely to say, “I love you. I don’t love your sin” (Reynolds, 2015). On top of the discrimination brought against African American women because of race, sexuality, and gender; people also have to deal with their family and religion. A big part of homophobia in the Black community is to turn to religion condemning them to hell for who they are, constantly being told it is a choice and if they do not change they are not deserving of God’s love.

These concepts were brought to the forefront of Oprah’s show challenging what people believed. Even if it was based itself on stereotypes, it brought the issues to light as opposed to constantly hiding them in the shadows.

Some of Oprah’s more recent shows focus on women in different ways. The times change as do the situations, but the stories have roots and similarities from her earlier shows and life. Shows like *Queen Sugar* and *Greenleaf* all show a different side to the Black community and experience.

*Queen Sugar* (2016) tells the story of the three Bordelon siblings in Louisiana as they come together to run their father’s sugar cane farm after the unexpected passing of their father. (Sugar Queen, IMBD, n.d.) The characters in this show are relatable with their own dramas going on in their lives with which people can identify. The character tropes for each one of the main siblings are issues many people can say they have gone through. One that will be familiar and resonate with the audience regards, Nova, the oldest sibling. She is bisexual and is currently seeing a White police officer from the NOPD who happens to be

married She is a very down to earth, spiritualist and herbal healer who wears her head in dreads.

Interracial dating and interracial marriage are difficult issues for most White Americans. This is especially true when those involved in such dating and marriages are White and Black Americans. Thus, one national survey found two-thirds of White respondents saying that they would have a negative reaction if a close relative of theirs married a Black person.' This negative reaction generally signals how deeply rooted certain anti-Black attitudes are. Indeed, attitudes toward interracial dating and marriage reveal that many otherwise liberal Whites are less liberal when it comes to issues of mates, marriages, and families. This seems to be as true for elite White men as for the general White population. (Feagin & O'Brien, 2004, p. 131)

Even though as a nation we claim that we are more accepting and tolerable of people loving who they wish to love, race is still a large barrier that many must cross. There is still racism running rampant to this day as the recent stories in the news and social media will constantly remind us. Trying to be pro-Black and love a White cop is not an easy struggle for Nova. Many people who are in interracial dating relationships can understand the struggles of dealing with the looks and stares that they receive from judgmental people. It cannot be any easier when it comes to family members that do not approve.

The show *Greenleaf* (2016) takes family in a different direction. The story focuses on the Greenleaf family in Memphis, who runs the megachurch Calvary Fellowship World Ministries. On the surface they appear to be a loving, caring, god-fearing family, but beneath that lies scandals, secrets, adultery, and rivalry. As they try to keep their family dirt under wraps, the return of Bishop James Greenleaf's estranged daughter, Grace after twenty years, threatens to dig up the entire thing (Greenleaf, IMBD, n.d.). Both religion and sexual abuse are woven into the shows themes.

Religion is a strong factor in most Black communities. Generationally the beginning of a family or older member have stronger religious ties that they then pass down to their children. Many Black people build social relationships and ties amongst the church and people that they worship with.

African-Americans are markedly more religious on a variety of measures than the U.S. population as a whole, including level of affiliation with a religion, attendance at religious services, frequency of prayer and religion's importance in life. Compared with other racial and ethnic groups, African-Americans are among the most likely to report a formal religious affiliation, with fully 87% of African-Americans describing themselves as belonging to one religious group or another, according to the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, conducted in 2007 by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life (Pew Research Center, 2009, p. 1).

With the addition of megachurches as opposed to small corner churches, the need to grow in the community expands. Megachurches now have all manner of social events for those of all ages that are members of their community. Between regular services, bible study, group outings, and social events people are tied to the church even more. It has gone beyond just seeing everyone on Sunday and not seeing them again until the next service, but people are now joining with members several days of the week. The church itself is its own community, meaning that many people are connected in one way or another.

Sexual assault in the Black community is another difficult topic, but one unfortunately known to many. Rape in any community is unfortunate and as research has shown, most cases of rape involve someone the victims know likely a family member especially if the assault started at a young age. In the Black community especially, it is frowned upon to report on sexual abuse in the home. If one does happen to tell, they are often not believed and told to keep quiet about it. This secrecy is based around the idea that the justice system is already

unfair to Black men and to report against one's own race, one is then seen as a traitor to their community. The mentality of protect, don't expose runs strongly in the Black community. Black people do not tell on their own people. This stops many women and men from reporting the abuse and it has the likelihood of going on for years because of this secrecy (Terry, 2004).

Navigating the waters of secrecy, race, family and personal grief is a difficult but relatable situation that Grace is dealing with in the story. As her story develops people will likely feel even closer and more sympathetic with her character. This goes for many of the other characters that Oprah has developed in the shows that she has produced that were mentioned above and many others that she has created over the years. Oprah herself has similar situations that are in line with the characters in the shows she produces, and she tells the stories in a way that gets her audience's attention without losing any of the entertainment value. Oprah writes stories to relate to the Black community telling the tale of people that look like her, that they do not have the same opportunity to tell it as she does. Oprah tells stories of successes and triumphs, acknowledging both the good and the bad, in the same way that she has both good and bad experiences to get to the point she is in today.

Oprah's success did not come easy and many have used this talent to describe Black women in both positive and negative ways. Oprah is generally described as a positive influence implying that if she can do it then any Black person should be able to become successful and that there is no reason for poverty as an excuse in becoming successful. In others she can be used as an excuse to show that there are good Black people and bad Black people. The bad ones are the ones that are not working as hard and do not try using Oprah as

the example. Thus, her success is used to deny racism on several levels as described by many that study the media.

ABC News feature “Person of the Week: inherently individualized success. When choosing Black winners, it also denied institutional oppression. Of the people selected for this accolade, 13 percent were Black, and their stories celebrated their overcoming adversity and succeeding, despite humble beginnings. Blacks were more likely than Whites to be selected for having overcome victimization. The media apply the Horatio Alger narrative to Black people, like Oprah Winfrey, who overcome poverty, abuse, and broken homes to become successful. By showing that they are included in the great American rags - to - riches narrative, they paint a picture of a race-neutral society and celebrate “culture icons of racial harmony and opportunity, (Larson, 2006, p. 99).

Oprah is a story that can be used for both uplifting her and diminishing those who are not successful. Her accomplishments are used almost as if anyone can do what she did regardless of skin color, when the reality is that Oprah had to work harder than most to get what she wanted and to where she is today. With her access to billions, she is allowed freedom in ways that many others are not. Her money gives her a chance to reach outlets that she would have otherwise not been available to and to some people it makes people more willing to work with her and bend to what she has to say and what she wants to promote. To say that her color had nothing to do with it or it’s not so hard, regardless of her skin tone is insulting. Yet, for every other Black girl out there she is a hope; a rare hope, but a hope that even though you will have to work harder and prove yourself even more, even if your accomplishments are diminished by saying anyone can do what you have done, you have proven that it is possible to be successful. It’s a tough road to climb and clearly the pitfalls are visible, but Oprah gives inspiration as well as an explanation on why this road is not so well traveled.

## Shonda Rhimes

Shonda Rhimes <sup>4</sup>is a strong new face in production. As a younger Black woman in the industry she has been dominating the scene with highly popular shows. Between *Grey's Anatomy* (2005), *Scandal* (2012), and *How to get Away with Murder* (2014), she is taking over the airwaves and making a name for herself. She is keeping her name out there and doing her best in her field. So how did she get there? As a woman that grew up in a different time than Oprah in an everchanging field, how was it possible for her to reach the level of fame that she has achieved, and how did the people before her, like Oprah, pave the way?

As we have already explored Black women are a minority in the world of Hollywood or television so to reach the levels of success that she has is no easy feat. Even in the times where it seems society has moved forward and is more accepting it is still rather difficult.

Because Shonda Rhimes is a woman. And a Black woman at that. Hollywood has a history of being slow on the trigger when recognizing women and minorities. It took well into the 60's before Black actors and actresses were given more than comic relief or sex object to do. But Hollywood finally got it and, by 2015, women and minorities were getting top billing...albeit in front of the camera and far from any notice behind it. The reason being that the decision makers in movies and television were almost completely White and when they looked at the credits they only wanted to see themselves. (Shapiro, 2015, p. 4)

For Rhimes, succeeding in television production took a very different path than Oprah. As previously stated, Black women are not readily welcomed behind the scenes in production. Rhimes has only acted in one episode of one television show. Unlike Oprah, who has her hands in acting, producing, and so many other things, Rhimes has stuck to what she knows.

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<sup>4</sup> The biographical information in this thesis comes from the unauthorized biography *Welcome to Shondaland: An Unauthorized biography of Shonda Rhimes*, by Marc Shapiro. This discusses her early life before the *Year of Yes* by Shonda Rhimes that discusses her personal life beginning in 2013.

So, reaching this level of success had to be vastly different from the path that Oprah took, especially considering the times in which they each progressed.

### Early Years

Rhimes was born to Llee and Vera Rhimes in Chicago, Illinois in 1970. Llee Rhimes was a Professor of Education at several prestigious universities. Vera undertook the task of raising 5 children and getting her Ph.D. that earned her several teaching positions including Professor of Education at DePaul University. Rhimes ended up growing up in the affluent suburb of University Park in Chicago. Rhimes was born in a time when civil rights movements for African Americans had made major strides and the women's movement was entering a new era.

She was born on the back of African Americans receiving more rights when more schools were mixing including colleges, Blacks were being registered to vote, segregation in more and more business was lessening, and equal employment opportunity was enacted. (Ware, 2013, p. 6)

With successful parents and competition amongst her siblings from the high expectations and belief that they would succeed, Rhimes started early on being a strong reader with a desire to be the best. She was constantly encouraged to read and enjoyed being alone at school rather than socializing; she was always found with her nose in a book. She also often found herself the only Black child in her class as she went through her education. In 1980 she went to St. Mary's Catholic School in Chicago where she met an inspiration in her young life, one of her teachers Mrs. Hanks. She was one of the few teachers she had that was not a nun and was a bit younger than most of the other teachers. Mrs. Hanks was more adventurous and

a little more unorthodox, but that is what attracted Rhimes to her. She remembers waiting for her mother after school one day and watching *General Hospital* with Mrs. Hanks.

Mrs. Hanks also helped instill in her the belief that it was ok for her to care and that she could succeed. This is important in many young, Black girls lives and unfortunately is missing yet this encouragement was good for Rhimes. “Inspired by Mrs. Hanks and an overall optimistic attitude that grew with the years, Shonda made her way through elementary and secondary school on the emotional high of having everything in her future be possible,” (Shapiro, 2015).

### Education

Rhimes attended Marian Catholic High School, where she joined marching band and started volunteering as a candy striper at a hospital in Chicago Heights. Rhimes became interested in medicine and surgery and enjoyed watching medical shows on the Discovery Channel and The Learning Channel. She maintained a strong passion for writing, which perhaps led to her first interest in her future career. During high school Rhimes also had the opportunity to go to New York where she was able to experience theatre for the first time. She was inspired by what she saw but what left an impact on her were two shows; *Whoopi Goldberg Live* and *The Colored Museum*. This was an opportunity not many teenagers received especially during high school and provided her with a well-rounded education outside of the classroom. (Shapiro, 2015).

Despite a few adolescent disruptions in high school culminating in many detentions, Rhimes had excellent grades outside of science and math. Rhimes college application process

led to many acceptances to top tier schools, “The likes of Dartmouth, University of Pennsylvania, Mount Holyoke, St. Mary’s of Notre Dame, University of Illinois, and Bryn Mawr, were all ready and willing to accept her based on her academic scores and all offered good prospects for furthering her academic life” (Shapiro, 2015).

Her parents who were thrilled with the caliber of options that their daughter had, helped her diligently in choosing what would be the best school for her. Knowing the importance of an education and believing that she could succeed, they discussed her options while keeping in mind the future that their daughter was hoping to have, and which schools offered her the best path to that future. In the end she picked Dartmouth College, a prestigious school that produced many successful alums. Dartmouth also gave her the opportunity to explore her creativity with their ambitious theatre arts and writing programs and she ended up choosing English as her major (Shapiro, 2015).

It was in theatre that Rhimes discovered her calling, not by acting, but by becoming a member and director of her schools *Black Underground Theatre and Arts Association*. In this association she flourished, directing several shows over the span of her time in the organization learning and creating and it is in these moments when she knew where she wanted to take her career (Shapiro, 2015).

### Professional Life

After graduating and being caught up in what many would call post-graduation depression she decided to move to San Francisco and stay with her sister, while she worked on getting her career started. It was no wonder Rhimes was having a hard time after school,

having experienced the best years of her life and being sure of what she wanted to do, but not sure of the path that she would take to get there. Rhimes ended up getting a job at an advertising agency called McCann Erickson, that offered an opportunity into the work world and a steady paycheck. After barely a year feeling unhappy and stifled creatively, she quit her job. She started looking again towards heading to medical school as a good option to go for a career, despite her passion for writing. Her parents were pressuring her to go to graduate school and finally she decided to head in a new direction. Even though she had heard rumors of how hard it was to get in she applied to University of Southern California Film School. Surprisingly she was accepted (Shapiro, 2015).

At USC she found a combination of what she loved, theatre arts and writing, with a shortcut in between. She felt that screenwriting was simpler, cleaner cut and suited her better. She enjoyed what she was learning, avoiding the theory and lengthy process and seemed to be drawn to the bare bones of screenwriting. She could write and would be critiqued by her fellow classmates. That kind of training helped her greatly develop as a writer. USC did wonders for her. Using networking and a combination of her own charisma and people skills, she was able to take advantage of wonderful opportunities. Rhimes ended up with an intern position at *Mundy Lane Entertainment*, the production company of Denzel Washington and under the supervision of producer Debra Martin Chase (Shapiro, 2015).

After graduating from USC, she realized that it would not be as simple as it would be to get into “the business” (the familiar term for entering the LA production field. There were thousands of other scriptwriters with diplomas, striving for the same positions she sought. Luckily, she used her connections well and Debra Chase helped her get an assistants position

at the production company Spring Creek. The quote “it’s who you know, not what you know,” is a big part of getting jobs in LA and not just for Rhimes. In the world today much of getting a job is having a connection or a recommendation. Even if one is superbly talented and could be the absolute best fit for the job, they may easily get passed over for someone that knows someone. Unfortunately for poor Black girls, that cannot make such prestigious connections it can be a bit daunting. Again, this leads back to the need to work even harder to reach a place, so you can make those connections and find ways to do things that one normally could not do (Shapiro, 2015).

This turned out to be a blessing in disguise as part of her job was to read and report on the spec scripts that would come into the office every day. Eventually, after reading so many and watching the process she learned what would get a yes for a script. Eventually though, the job at Spring Creek lost her interest. She was paying bills and keeping herself afloat but reading other people’s scripts all day was not what she wanted to do with her life. Working all morning left only the evenings for her to work towards her own dreams. Making a major decision, Rhimes quit her job at Spring Creek and began writing spec scripts to pursue her own dreams. She heard from friends and family frequently that this was not a good idea and that she should pursue other less risky ideas (Shapiro, 2015).

Her first script, *Humans Seeking Same*, was put out in hopes by both her and her agent that someone would be interested in the story. It was about an older White woman who goes on a dating site and becomes interested in a younger Black man. Even though it got put in turnaround twice, meaning that the movie production was put on hold and could cause debt to the places trying to produce so they do not want to pull out completely but do not want to

continue to make it, leading to her scripts never getting made, it gave Rhimes enough hope that she could still pursue this idea and not give up and just go to medical school (Shapiro, 2015).

That little bit of faith and that first script put her on a couple of people's radar, even if not high, she got a little more recognition her first step being the research director on a documentary called, *Hank Aaron: Chasing the Dream* (1995). That small job was what convinced her that she was on the right path and that was the environment that she loved to be in. what is believed to be her "big break" came with the short film *Blossoms and Veils* (1998). She received the opportunity to direct with her own small cast, with the help of Will and Jada Smith, with Jada herself starring in the film. Even though not much is known about the making of that film, it was impressive enough for Will Smith to back her in another film and co-produce *When Willows Touch*, the script that Rhimes wrote for her thesis (Shapiro, 2015).

This was an amazing opportunity for Rhimes as she was on the way to accomplishing one of her dreams. It is important to note that she was helped by other Black people in the industry, giving each other that leg up to help her succeed that she likely would not have gotten sending it to White producers.

Unfortunately, due to walkouts by one of the stars, production on the film never began even though it was three weeks to its start date. The project fell through and was never made and Rhimes once again was in a dark space. Yet, before she could completely spiral and give up on her dreams she got the opportunity to script the HBO biography, *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge*. It would star Halle Berry and be produced by Martha Coolidge. Even though excited she was nervous realizing the enormity of what she had been asked to do. Instead of

shying away from the project she did all the research and necessary work to make Dandridge come alive. With all the awards that the film started to receive it put her on track to gain even more opportunities (Shapiro, 2015).

She was then brought on to write the script for *Crossroads*, starring Britney Spears. Even though it got several negative reviews it ended up making \$60 million in the box offices. She then collaborated once again with Debra Chase to work on Disney's *Princess Diaries* sequel, *Princess Diaries 2: Royal Engagement* (Shapiro, 2015).

It was not long after this that she decided that she would adopt her daughter Harper Lee. During her time when she transitioned from working to be a stay at home mom is when she began watching a lot of television shows and catching up on the trends that were now popular. She realized while sitting there with her daughter watching all these shows that television was a creative avenue that she had yet to explore and that she wanted to try her hand at it. So, she contacted her agents and they put her in touch with, with Touchstone/ABC. It was there that she met Mark Gordon and Betsy Beers and together they set to work on a pilot for a new drama. Rhimes mentions that she does not remember when she had her first network pitch meeting as there were a lot of false starts. She came up with a lot of ideas, not knowing how it worked due to inexperience. Her first script, a story about four female correspondents who reported, drank, and sexed their way through conflict zones. That script did not hit, and the project was dropped (Press, 2018).

Rhimes recalls that she was a lot more focused when she got back around to giving a script. She wanted a pilot this time not just another script. She ended up asking around to find out what the head of ABC Robert Iger was looking for in a show. She was told that he was

interested in the old network TV staple, medical dramas. She was still familiar with the way things worked from her time as a candy striper and her previous fascination to real-life medical procedures that she watched on the Discovery Channel. She was ready to give ABC what they wanted (Press, 2018).

ABC was desperately looking for their next best thing and started to focus on another show. While they were searching, Rhimes and Beers continued to quietly work on their medical drama. The first working title was called *Surgeons*, but what they really wanted to call it was *Grey's Anatomy*. Rhimes mentions that since ABC was working on their other shows they were not under any pressure and no one really cared what they were up to. Rhimes was able to capture the complexity of women's lives with the expectations of a prime-time network format. There was not a lot of programming at the time that reflected women and people in the workplace at the same time. It was a show that showed that you could be good at your job, competitive, interesting, and good friends. It was everything that wasn't normally on TV and more diverse like *America* (Press, 2018).

Rhimes mentions that since she was not familiar with television and since she did not know that she was breaking the rules of TV, so she never really followed them. "Any rules that anybody had, or any suggestions never actually sank in, mainly because I didn't know that I was supposed to take everybody's notes or be afraid that something wasn't going to get made" Rhimes said (Press, 2018). The second thing that stood out about Rhimes not knowing television was that she had a "color-blind casting." This meant that she opened the roles to every ethnicity, which celebrated diversity of *Shondaland*, where doctors, lawyers, and

politicians come in every race and gender. It was different, but it worked because it opened roles up to more actors and actresses (Press, 2018).

Casting was still a challenge for Rhimes, even with all her options each character had an attitude and personality that had to get done right. She had no last names for her characters, letting the writers cast as they felt. She even made casting changes that she was insistent about. Her original wish for Dr. Miranda, one of the lead surgeons on *Grey's*, was to be an adorable, blond Caucasian who she wanted to be cute as a button but scary underneath the look. Once she saw Chandra Wilson audition though, she quickly changed her mind (Press, 2018).

Even though *Grey's* was popular among most of the ABC team, the new network president Steve McPherson was not convinced. He insulted and swore at Rhimes and insisted that she make changes to her script, but eventually it was completed.

The first reviews for *Grey's Anatomy* (2005) were lukewarm. It was called everything from a girl's power version of *ER* (1994) to a casserole made of equal parts ham and corn. It was understandable that many people were confused by the series. It was not what people were used to finding on television. Even though it was a hospital procedural it was also something different. Inside the medical plot was a combination of snappy dialogue, indie rock, and relationship story lines. The constant crises happening in the show grabbed audience's attention and the network kept it for the rest of the season. With that decision made the writers could build upon the world they had begun (Press, 2018).

At the end of season one, more than twenty-two million people were tuning in to *Grey's Anatomy* (2005). By the end of the second season it had become a pop culture

phenomenon. ABC made the decision to give Rhimes the time-slot after the 2006 Super Bowl, and Rhimes two-part episode about a time-bomb lodged in a patient's body brought in thirty-eight million viewers; the highest rating for any scripted TV episode since the *Friends* (1994) finale the year before (Press, 2018).

Rhimes pushed the boundaries of comfortability with *Grey's*. During her writing the network had issues with using the word vagina on screen, regardless of it being a medical show. She then pushed for the word vajayjay, making it a well-used euphemism until they normalized the term vagina. She also pushed the edge on the idea of abortion, having one of her characters go through the issue of an unwanted pregnancy and deciding on abortion. The story took a turn there and she did not, but the script shined a light on the issue, when television normally did not (Press, 2018).

Four seasons into *Grey's Anatomy* (2005), Rhimes premiered her second show *Private Practice* (2007), a more mature medical show that she had written, meant to be a spinoff from *Grey's*. It was not as big of a success as its' predecessor, many hoping that it would bring the same excitement that *Grey's* had brought to the screen. In the middle of the show though, an issue came up with the Writer's Guild giving Rhimes a chance to show what she stood for. During this process though, Rhimes never strayed far from what she believed in, even joining the protest between the Writer's Guild and the production companies, refusing to write until negotiations could be agreed upon leaving her shows at a standstill (Shapiro, 2015). In 2012 she ended *Private Practice* (2007) and began what would soon be another huge hit with *Scandal*, (2012) drifting far from her medical practice shows (Press, 2018).

*Scandal* (2012), was something totally different than *Grey's* (2005) and even more different from what people were used to. It took diversity to a whole new level with representation from so many different backgrounds. The show focused on a brilliant Black woman, who held the most shocking American government secrets in her hands, while helping the White, married, Republican president with whom she was having an affair and who was not afraid to kill to maintain power, along with his gay White House chief of staff. Other characters included a vice president with a gay husband and a First Lady who eventually runs for President (Press, 2018).

*Scandal* (2012) was new and bold in ways that even cable television was not used to or particularly ready for. The idea for *Scandal* (2012) emerged from a meeting with Judy Smith, a former White House press secretary who was also a political-crisis manager, who did image cleanup for people like Monica Lewinsky. Rhimes and Beers let the idea for a show based on Smith's career sit for more than a year before beginning production.

Eventually Rhimes came up with Olivia Pope, the fictional alter ego of Judy Smith. She was an enamoring creature, both a righteous avenger on behalf of her clients and the public good, and a woman haunted by her love for her Mr. Wrong; the President Fitzgerald Grant. *Scandal* would be the first network drama since 1974 to feature a Black female lead. Kerry Washington, a popular actress at the time, was awarded the role of Olivia Pope. There were some issues with dealing with Washington as she already had previous ties to the real White House when she campaigned for Barack Obama in 2009 and been appointed to the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. Washington wanted to be sure that her

character did not have any negative side effects on the country's first Black president (Press, 2018).

Casting for *Scandal* (2012) was a lot easier than for other shows Rhimes produced. Rhimes and her production partner, Beers, were excited to know that some ideal people were available for their characters. They were able to get Tony Goldwyn, who had made a few cameos on *Grey's Anatomy* (2005) and were excited to know that he was free. He was cast as President Fitzgerald with no audition. They also skipped a few steps with the casting of Quinn, played by Katie Lowes. Quinn was a character that would join the "Gladiators, the nickname Olivia liked to give her team. Lowes also had a few cameos in both *Grey's* (2005) and *Private Practice* (2007) (Press, 2018).

*Scandal* (2012) was once again another show that had mixed reviews upon its release. It was a show with drama in each episode in ways that had never been explored before. The reviews and viewers rose dramatically as time went on especially when the show incorporated the use of social media to boost its following. The cast was encouraged by Washington to live tweet the show upon each episode broadcast (Press, 2018).

The show was meant to be a hellish alternate version of the US capital. It was a show meant to make political rights and wrongs irrelevant in the face of power, status, glory, and sex. The characters that were good guys could easily become bad guys and the bad guys could be infinitely worse, with a twist that you might agree with them. *Scandal* (2012) also included the idea of racial consciousness and powerful Black women (Press, 2018).

Rhimes next project brought for another powerful Black woman to the forefront. It was the 10<sup>th</sup> season of *Grey's Anatomy* (2005) and *Scandal* (2012) was still going strong. This

next idea was not her own brainchild, but the idea from another writer Peter Nowalk. *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014) was another show that went against the norm for network television. Everyone was familiar with the typical formula of law shows but this one was different. The show focused on a law professor and criminal defense attorney at a prestigious Philadelphia university, who hired five of her brightest students as interns. The students focus on the cold cases of two murders, one of which involved the professor's husband (Shapiro, 2015).

Rhimes was firm in noting that this was not her idea, but Nowalk's, yet there is no denying that she had part in what became another popular show on ABC. Rhimes added personal touch on casting touches though and was proven to have hit gold again with the hire of Viola Davis. *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014) on the backs of popular shows from Shondaland, went straight to the front of the line and was picked up for a pilot season for the fall of 2014. Rhimes was once again playing with a diverse cast and addressing issues that were not normally addressed in network television (Shapiro, 2015).

### Storytelling

Rhimes has taken a new outlook on what people are used to for network television. When she began with *Grey's Anatomy* (2005) she was already heading in a direction of a diverse cast that many people were not familiar with. It was a different and bold move made by an innovative writer that was not afraid to challenge norms and tell her story the way she wanted to tell. Rhimes shows this best in her two shows *Scandal* (2012) and *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014).

*Scandal* (2012) was an anomaly because it was based on the idea of a powerful Black woman at the helm of the country who had the secrets of the government in her head and the president's heart in her hands. Yet, it was not the power of Olivia Pope that made her relatable. There are few people in the world that can relate to White House access. It was Pope's personality strength and background that made her relatable and attractive to Black women everywhere.

Pope's struggle with her Blackness was a point of much distress in her life. This was shown mostly in the appearance of her father Papa Pope, the father everyone loved to hate. As Rhimes mentions, before her father showed up, Olivia had been living a particular life as a woman of color who was dating a White man. It was not until her father showed up that she had to truly embrace her Blackness and everything that he had taught her until then. Before he is introduced, she was of the mindset that she had surpassed the restrictions of race being an issue or even skipped them over altogether. Her father though reminded her that she must figure out who she is while embracing her Blackness. Her father engrained in her early on that she had to be twice as good as White people to be successful.

This line is a concept that is familiar to Black people everywhere, the idea that Black people, especially women can get by doing the bare minimum. It is believed that to achieve for anything that has prestige, Black people had to be better than their White counterparts. They do not have the right skin color to skate to success or the background that is needed to take the easy way out. Even with the right background it is necessary for Black people to go above and beyond. They could be of a higher economic class and still need to do more. This was seen constantly in the comparisons of the last two presidencies. Just overlooking the

actual presidents, if you look at the first ladies and how they were depicted, there is a big difference in the handling of Michelle Obama and Melania Trump.

Many of the press constantly criticized Michelle Obama for everything she did besides her background. She was well educated, receiving her bachelors at Princeton University and her degree in law from Harvard University. From there forward she had a string of successful positions that kept her involved in the law scene of Chicago (Michele Obama, *Biography.com*, n.d.). Yet, most of her time as First Lady was spent fending off racial slurs and dealing with criticism from the press. Melania Trump was a former model, who had been performing since she was 16 years old. She sought her green card in 2001 after being in the states for years. She met Trump in 1998 and they were married in 2004 (Melania Trump, *Biography.com*, n.d.). She was not treated with as much disdain as Obama was, despite less prestigious past.

Olivia Pope was reminded of these difficulties when her father came back and from that point forward was more aware of her place as a Black woman. It was even more noticeable when the show dived into reinventing, the real-life murder of Michael Brown; who was shot and killed by police officers in 2014. The episode focuses on a father of a teenage Black boy, with a shotgun in his hand demanding justice for his dead son. When a Black activist shows up, he is unimpressed with her trying to play both sides of the field; the cops and Black people. The activist challenges Olivia's idea of her Blackness, pointing out that she says she is pro-Black, but she has not actually been in the neighborhoods of Black people or knows what's happening in those neighborhoods.

By the blatant display of diversity and Blackness portrayed in some of the more powerful episodes, *Scandal* (2012) offered a way for Black people to relate to powerful issues of identity in stories that they understand. The audience may not be able to relate to the idea that there is a crisis in the White House, but they can relate to the struggles that Black people are going through in America, especially when it comes closer to home in terms of racial experiences regarding power and success. The character of Oliva faces problems that many Black people are forced to face these days and having a character that struggles just like any average person brings reality to the show's portrayals.

*How to Get Away with Murder* (2014) is another show that examined the realness of Black characters in television shows. Viola Davis brought a powerfulness to Annalise Keating that audiences loved; her tough no nonsense attitude grabbed audience's attention. She never cracked, never showed weakness until one day. In season 1, episode 4 of *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014), Davis shows her character in emotional distress, removing her wig and makeup (Lin, 2015). This idea was powerful when it aired. It showed more about how Black women are portrayed and expected to look in the face of society.

The "Strong Black Woman" (SBW) ideal is a long-established image in U.S. society that celebrates strength, self-sufficiency, and resilience in Black American women. although this image is glorified, its strict expectations encourage many Black American women to maintain a pretense of fortitude in several dimensions of their lives. (Davis, 2015, p. 20)

Black women are not supposed to be weak, and they are not supposed to show emotion or tiredness. They are expected to carry the weight of the world on their backs without complaint, without breaking. This showing of her at her weakest was an important revelation for this powerful character. Women everywhere especially White women could

relate to the showing of finally breaking after carrying the weight of their lives and the lives of others. This scene was a way of showing Black women that they are not alone and that it is ok to be weak sometimes; that they do not always have to keep up a glamorous image to be considered powerful and in control. This show gave powerful Black women a chance to see themselves as vulnerable and realize that they too can cry and show their real selves.

Despite Shonda Rimes upper middle-class background still had her share of challenges that she struggled with every day to make it to where she now is. She struggled and had to climb her way to the top facing her own fears and insecurities that many women can relate to. She took an idea and a dream that many would scoff at and made it a reality, refusing to give up and give in to what everyone else was telling her she should do. Even though she had numerous other opportunities available to her she refused to stop chasing her dreams and eventually she made it to the top. Once she did she gave us characters that the modern Black woman could relate to. She did not hold back on her characters portraying strong Black woman that still had real life issues in a highly racialized society. Her success gave her and Black women a voice in a society in which many women might not have had a chance to see or hear their stories.

## CHAPTER 6

### LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Of course, with a topic like this there is so much more to explore. There were several avenues that I wanted to explore that were not accessible to me. There was no direct access to my subjects and no chances to interview them and ask more in-depth questions about their experiences, what they felt they did to reach success and how they would describe it themselves as opposed to how it is perceived by an audience. Using numerous biographies, particularly of Oprah, only paints a picture of what that author chooses to show and explore and does not fully engage with the subjects that are of interest to this author. Rhimes on the other hand was another situation to tackle overall. There is no official biography, only an unauthorized one, about her life and the only a book she wrote herself that does not necessarily explore her childhood, making her process more difficult to explore. There was no success in trying to get in contact with her publishers and a few scattered biographies, so this thesis only painted a broad picture of her life. Interviews with the subjects would have been an extensive and plentiful addition. As many of the biographies are not current (as of 2017), interviews could provide more current information about what they are doing now, and how they would encourage others besides what is already suggested. Information that may not have been previously shared would be available as well, at the interviewees discretion. Given that opportunity this could have been more personal as well as more productive. There were a

lot of factors left out, such as Oprah's acting roles. There are a few African American women that do not just focus on production like Shonda Rhimes. Exploration into that and how it helps or hinders into the production arena. Further research that could be explored includes several up and coming producers

Exploring women that grew up in different times, dating before Oprah and even after Shonda would also enhance this study including how their experiences differed and who or what helped them become successful. This study could also include the highs and lows and different battles of dealing with the industry through different time periods. Exploring the education of these women, any mentors, teachers, job history, family background, personal background, and struggles will further this analysis of the Black woman's experience in the entertainment industry. There is still a good deal of research that can be continued and hopefully will in future studies.

As we see here, there is much value in having someone to encourage and believe in students, to let them know that they can and will succeed. Again, this is something that is sorely lacking for many Black girls as they don't always have that kind of relationships with their teachers or teachers respond to stereotypes and do not believe in their students, especially in the overpopulated schools that many Black girls in inner cities attend. By having this faith and support Rhimes and Winfrey were able to believe in themselves and create stories that can inspire other Black girls to follow their dreams.

## CHAPTER 7

### ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

Examining the lives of Winfrey and Rhimes one sees situations that other African American women have faced and will continue to face throughout their personal and professional lives. There are some experiences that many minorities share, whether it is based upon their gender, economic status, educational opportunities, or social circles.

The lives of Rhimes and Winfrey show the need of having mentors and role models or leaders to look up to. Their success encourages others and can make a difference in the lives of African American women working towards getting an education. Organizations are recognizing the need for this for young Black women entering all fields.

If you haven't heard of or attended The Root's Young, Fabulous and Female event, you've missed out. With its aim to bring hundreds of young African American women together to discuss career challenges and offer practical advice from prominent women in business, the event gives aspiring professionals the resources they need to achieve straight from their role models. (Cain, 2012, p. 1)

With opportunities like this, women are more likely to be successful by having guidance, vision, networking opportunities and a viable support system. Not impossible, but not as fortuitous.

As discussed earlier and a constant issue when talking about the success of Black people, especially women, it is important to note that having these role models and mentors give Black women belief that they can succeed. It is important that Black women see

themselves succeeding in fields so that they believe that they can make it. If they see more women that look like them they will aim for fields that they previously believe that they were barred from. Of course, there is also the possibility that Rhimes and Winfrey will also provide opportunities to other women of color hopefully changing who is involved in the entertainment industry.

Beyond their educational experiences Rhimes and Oprah have had a lot of helping hands. Neither of them got through on their own. They needed help and to be given an opportunity to prove that they were worth the effort, such as Shonda Rhimes working with Denzel Washington and Oprah's professor, Professor William Cox, who encouraged and assisted her in starting to work in broadcast while she was still in school, despite her reluctance. No matter how excellent they were they were given a chance that not everyone has. Standing out was helpful in being noticed, but it does not always guarantee that you will make it to the top easily. Success was not won alone, but together with others that helped them pave the way. It shows that Black people will get ahead if they lift each other up and help, the same White people have helped each other.

Once they got their foot in the door and achieved one step, they still had to show that they were the best at what they could do. They had to be compelling and give their best before they got the chance. They did not just come through and win, they had to fail and fail and fail again before hitting the ground running and continue to run the marathon of success, never giving up, because one slip and it could easily diminish whatever success they previously held.

Rhimes and Winfrey show a good model of what hard work and success could do for a person. They show what it takes for Black women to reach levels of success. There is a lot of building that could be done upon this topic, more research to show similarities and differences amongst people in similar positions to them. Their contributions continue to reverberate across the mediascape with stories of other powerful Black women who want a seat at the table not just a chance to serve others who are seated there.

Oprah Winfrey and Shonda Rhimes have defied the odds when it comes to Black women succeeding in a White, straight, male dominated industry. They have proven themselves to have the ambition to strive for what they want and make a way for themselves in a world that fought them as they tried. They had highs and lows, pitfalls and moments of giving up, but never did.

Though they had different experiences, neither took an easy path to reach their goals. They proved the age-old adage that Black people, especially Black women, must go above and beyond just to get what it would take a White person an average amount of work to achieve. They had to deal with their race and their gender being a barrier that they could not easily overcome. They did not have access to powerful networks of peers to help them move forward in their careers.

Not only did they have to deal with the world outside, but each had to handle a different set of personal issues that also were factors in their struggles for success. Even coming from two vastly different homes and living environments, does not diminish the level of work and personal problems that they had to deal with. It could also be noted that their success is based on what they had access to. It has already been stated that they have had to

deal with their race and gender when dealing with professional achievement. Oprah ended up with the advantage that Shonda did not with her wealth and class that she amassed. It opens doors for Oprah that Shonda does not have access to, but also gives Shonda a pathway that she can follow to pursue different dreams. Oprah focuses well on the past while Shonda heads to the future showing their opportunities and the hope that is available in television for Black people.

They used absolutely every connection they could, taking every advantage and any edge that would help them stand out and get noticed. They refused to say no and give up even though they wanted to so many times. It was not easy and settling for less in life would have been the easier route. Of course, not every woman can take the risks that they did, but nothing is stopping them from taking chances. Sometimes it seems like just a leap of faith could be enough to lead a person to their dreams.

These women worked hard and chased a dream that many would and still say is impossible, a one in a million chance. As times change though and Black women break barriers and levels of success, impossible is becoming very possible.

Yet this is just the beginning. Even though Shonda Rhimes and Oprah Winfrey have begun paving the way to more successful options for Black women there is still a long way to go. As shown, by years of fighting and some successes, Black women are just now bringing their brilliance into the light. There is still much that needs to be done. There are still many first's that Black women must accomplish to approach the success of White people, especially in the world of Hollywood. Rhimes and Winfrey have shown that yes, it is possible and yes with hard work and constant pushing Black women can and will get ahead.

Each woman must deal with the color of her skin, her gender, her sexuality, and any other thing that makes her even more different from her White counterparts. There are no free rides and handouts, no yellow brick road to show them where to go. It will be a struggle and a lot of work just to get past all the disadvantages, but it is not impossible. There can be more women like Oprah and Shonda, who have become icons as well as role models and hopefully other Black women will surpass them both. With each generation it could possibly get easier and simpler if there are more women like them to pave the way and help overcome some of the barriers, yet there is a way for more Black women to be successful. If they can succeed, so can others.

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