



Color Conscious Casting: How the  
Producers of *Virtually Perfect* Designed a  
Realistic Black Female Protagonist

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Racial disparities have been an ongoing battle in every industry in the United States, and the TV and film industries are not exempt. While the industry has been moving towards a more diverse and inclusive space, it is still on a journey of creating equal representations and dispelling negative stereotypes. Many directors and producers have introduced this idea of "colorblind casting," where they cast actors regardless of their skin tone. While many have advocated that color not be considered, equal representation cannot be achieved if color is ignored rather than addressed and ignored. Rather, I argue that color should be a huge factor so that viewers can relate to characters who look like them. However, it is not just enough to cast Black actors or actors of color; instead, filmmakers need to be conscious of the stereotypes they push through those actors.

Using Shonda Rhimes and her lead Black actor shows, *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, this paper will critically reflect on how the relationship portrayed in these shows through the Black leads furthers certain stereotypes. The paper will also explain how this factored in *Virtually Perfect's* decision to portray our relationship differently.

In her essays "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images," and "Controlling images and Black Women's Oppression," Patricia Hill Collins examined five common stereotypes that the world uses that control African American women. Hill noted that portraying African American women as stereotypical Mammies, Matriarch, Welfare recipients, and Hot mommas has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering Black women's oppression" (Hill, 1997, p. 142). According to her, the Mammy is "a faithful, obedient, domestic servant who cares for the white master's children more than hers" and it symbolizes the dominant group's perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power." (Hill, 1997, p. 80)

The Jezebel is another category Hill examines, which is still very prevalent today. According to her, the jezebel is a stereotype that began during slavery and portrayed Black women

as overly sexually aggressive. However, their overly sexual nature is controlled and determined by white men (Hill, 1997, p. 271)

The Matriarch, on the other hand, is the opposite of the Mammy. The Matriarch presents an ideal image of Black motherhood for whites, but in turn, is very "uncaring, unloving, and uninvolved." (Hill, 1997, p. 133). Therefore, the Matriarch only presents this image to be accepted by whites. Although all these stereotypes are different, Hill notes that they are all in some way related to Black women's sexuality and rooted in oppression.

Taking all these negative stereotypical portrayals of Black women into account, I examine the work of famous director Shonda Rhimes. She is one of the many directors who has implemented color blinding casting. In *Scandal* and *How to get away with Murder*, she introduces Black lead actors, making her become the first director to have two shows with two Black leads in over forty years (AP, 2018). However, these leads are in very problematic relationships with white men. Olivia Pope, her lead actress in *Scandal*, is a fixer and is having an affair with the president. Annalise Keating, her lead actor in *How to Get Away with Murder*, is involved with murdering her white husband and has a relationship outside of her marriage. In both shows, the leads are portrayed as strong Black women but for the wrong reasons.

Olivia Pope conforms to Hill's stereotypes of the "Jezebel" and the "Matriarch." In their work, Chaney & Robertson (2016) agree with Hill and discuss the disturbing nature of a Black lead as a mistress to a powerful white man. Chaney and Robertson argue that portraying Olivia Pope in such a light not only furthers the matriarch stereotype, where her sole purpose in life is to cater to the needs of whites but that it also upholds white supremacy – "Rhimes, whether she intends to or not, promotes the belief that the values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of white people are superior to those of Blacks." (Chaney & Robertson, 2016, p. 144)

Chaney and Robertson also argue that the relationship between Olivia Pope and the white man "harkens a post-slavery time when the bodies of Black women, whether consensual or not, were the property of white men." (Chaney & Robertson, 2016, p. 147) A scene in the show showed the president saying, "I own you, and you will do as I say," while he undresses her when she (Olivia Pope) tries to break off the relationship.

On the other hand, Annalise Keating conforms to typical stereotypes of Black women such as the "Angry Black Woman" and the "Matriarch." Toms-Anthony (2018) argues that the stereotypical way that Analise's character is portrayed can lead to implicit biases about Black female attorneys. According to him, Annalise is portrayed more as a Mammy because she is all-knowing, all-seeing, and caring for everyone but herself (Toms-Anthony, 2018, p. 67). She is also portrayed as a Jezebel who slept her way into the elite circle. Her marriage, just like Pope's relationship, also mimics the way interracial relationships were portrayed post-slavery, where the Black women seduced white men and slept with them for some gain (Toms-Anthony, 2018, p. 69) Although both shows have used Black women as leads, the shows have also taken these stereotypes and constructed them to seem desirable in the modern-day.

Considering these two huge shows, *Virtually Perfect* decided to cast two Black leads for several reasons. *Virtually Perfect* is a short romantic film that explores the stress of dating in the modern day. As we developed the story, we wanted two things. First, we decided that the notion of interracial relationships on television is a bit overplayed and one-sided. The person of color involved in the relationship is predominantly the woman, and the man is often white. While there is nothing especially wrong with this, we decided to try to celebrate a bit of Black love and what that looks like on screen. Our main characters, Andrea and Jesse, met on a dating app and started to fall in love. They were two young Black professionals who were independent, and both

understood what they wanted. Andrea's friends described her as a person willing to help other people but not at the expense of herself, which is uncommon for Black women characters in film. As previously mentioned, we mostly see them helping everyone but themselves.

Second, although we added a twist where the Black male lead is married and wants a relationship outside of his marriage, we decided that the female lead would not accept this offer and not degrade herself to someone who can only be in love by having an affair with a married man. This element was particularly important for our short because we wanted to dispel the Jezebel stereotype and show that a Black woman's worth is not dependent on who she has a relationship with and that Black women are not always the "homewreckers" some TV/film shows portray them to be. We also tried to shift from the "white savior" complex, where women (Black women in particular) are damsels in distress that only white males can save and own.

Third, one of our most prominent elements was making sure that our lead female actor had agency, especially when deciding what to do with the relationship when she discovers that her desired romantic partner has a wife. We did not overcomplicate things by leaving her with little to no option if she had to choose between the man and something else, i.e., her career. Usually, films portray what I call "compulsory agency," where women are faced with impossible choices. So even when it looks like they have agency, it is always at the detriment of something else. We wanted it to be her choice and just hers alone to determine that the relationship with a married man was unfit for her regardless of how long she had been looking and yearning for love. We also wrote her character to be resilient. Immediately following her breaking things off with Jesse, she gets another match notification on the dating app, and while she's irritated by it, we can see that even merely still having notifications come in shows that she is still in some capacity determined to find the right type of love.

While we cannot dispute that Shonda Rhimes has paved the way to be more inclusive in the film/TV industry, we cannot overlook the stereotypes that she perpetuates through her films and shows. *Virtually Perfect* incorporates all these three bold elements to try to be not only inclusive but also be aware of harmful stereotypes.

### Bibliography

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