

The Career Woman and the Princess; Fashioning Black-American Female identity in ‘Scandal’ (2012-17).

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ABSTRACT

Fashioning is critical to explorations of television identities and American melodrama-thriller series *Scandal* (2012-17) provides opportunities to explore representations of ethnicity together with depictions of interracial romance and intercourse. Utilising semiotics I explore the contribution of costume designer Lyn Paolo to the construction of the Black-American heroine of the series, Olivia Pope, successful career woman and lover of a white, male President. Arguing for the potential of female spectacle and soft-core pornography as progressive I consider Paolo’s influences, suggesting that Olivia’s fashioning transformations illustrate her as dandy-flâneuse, one controlling the visualisation of her identity.

KEYWORDS

Television, Race, Semiotics, Fashion, Identity

Introduction

Scandal is a political thriller and romantic melodrama focusing on Olivia Pope, an affluent Black-American woman, in her mid- 30s heading a crisis management firm. The series follows her role in the Presidential election of white Republican Fitz(Gerald) Grant III and subsequent problems with his tenure. Interpersonal plotting and intrigue are complicated through the central melodrama, a passionate love affair and sexual obsession conducted between Olivia and Fitz, (affectionately named *Olitz* by television viewers). Olivia’s concealed interracial affair, her management of corrupt, dangerous colleagues and clientele provide the salacious characteristics of this drama.

Olivia’s identity is produced within two related, ground-breaking aspects of the series. The first of these is the portrait of the successful black career woman wherein fashioning personifies the heroine as both creative dandy and confident flâneuse, working successfully in the political centre of Washington. The second linked area reflects the *Olitz* affair, relayed through visual motifs of soft-core pornography. Female corporeality, that is the body itself together with the more traditional elements of fashioning such as lingerie, general apparel, outerwear and makeup all contribute to the fantastical, ‘porn-tastic’ sex.

I situate self-fashioning within the context of ‘stagings’ considering these as spaces for Olivia’s visual transformations from career woman into two permutations of the princess, the traditional romantic-princess and the porn-princess. Olivia’s stylings throughout are explored as looks that co-opt and subvert the concept of luxury as the preserve of white identity whilst her fashion transformations are considered as narratives that reveal her agency. Of interest are the ways in which the show’s costume designer Lyn Paolo utilises a series of visual ‘looks’ to communicate these themes and I explore in particular two design genres she deploys, the cape-coat and the ballroom gown. Whilst conscious of the double-risk that women of colour carry in relation to fetishisation, (as women and as black), I suggest that Paolo’s costuming helps produce, through her realisations of career woman and these two princesses, feminist aspects both of spectacle and pornography.

Touching on terminology first; ‘costume’, ‘fashion’, ‘dressage’, ‘corporeality’, ‘dandy-flâneuse’, ‘black’, ‘African-American’, ‘Black-American’, ‘sexing’, ‘erotica’, ‘soft-core pornography’, *Olitz*. Costume and fashion are expressions used interchangeably to analyse the connotative power of apparel and accessory (Barthes 1985). In relation to dressage I refer to the ways in which Olivia authors herself as a spectacular performance, exemplified in my discussion of her ball room gowns. The theme of corporeality emphasises the Foucauldian sense of the body itself as a site of fashioning. The dandy (Lewis 2015) and flâneur (Jermyn 2004; Feigel 2016) are merged into a single expression, the dandy-flâneuse, to demonstrate how traditional markers of intelligent fashion performance are critical to Paolo’s creation of Olivia. Black is a phrase which reflects its positioning within American scholarship and media as an expression of self-identification. I do not dispute its problematic reductionism but adopt the journal’s position of the term as one describing the biological aspect of skin colour, so enabling discussion of *Scandal*’s sexing as a repudiation of popular U.S. television’s fear of so-called ‘miscegenation’. Similarly, the term is used in the periodical to communicate the wider context of ethnicity incorporating the idiom of African-American. Black-American is therefore a contraction coined to express black African-American identity within the context of American television. Erotica and soft-core pornography are expressions used reciprocally in the discussion of sexuality and sex, whilst sexing and *Olitz* both signify that a romantic interlude is about to, is taking, or has just taken place between the lovers.

In relation to theory the first section concerning Olivia as career woman develops the model of the dandy-flâneuse and its central conceit of posing. These are themselves attached to themes of distinction and taste (Bourdieu 1984), considered as reflections of creative intellect. Fashioning as agency via the act of posing also arguably links her to the status of fetishized object and Mulvey’s work on the gaze is implicated as is literature looking directly at problems of raced bodies in ‘Scandal’ (Bogle 2016; Erigha 2015). I argue however for the progressive-ness of Olivia’s fashion performativity and so utilise optimistic accounts of fashioning, the corporeal and explorations of spectacle within television.

Stage 1. The career woman as dandy-flâneuse

Many of the identifiable fashion ‘looks’ that Olivia wears in *Scandal* are produced by luxury brands, predominantly ‘white’ European, for example, *Escada*, *Ralph Lauren*, *Max Mara*, *Prada*. The absence of black female designers here is problematic, supporting arguments that Olivia’s power is legitimated through her compliance with the discourses of white culture. This issue of the socio-economic production of costume attaches to questions of the heroine’s agency for Lewis argues that to be a black dandy is to incorporate the definably European with “African diaspora aesthetic and sensibilities.” (Lewis 2015, 55). Whilst acknowledging such perspectives, an alternative way of interpreting these costuming decisions however is that they express her as a figure working successfully within commerce and immersing herself in tropes typically designated as signifiers of elite white identity. Olivia thus embodies the mythological connotations afforded luxury brands such as wealth, good taste, and so forth. Exploring these themes of embodying and / or surpassing white, Paolo links the poseur (flâneuse) and the urbane character that owns the city through the sartorial (dandy). The star of *Scandal* is consequently a composite of the confident flâneuse discussed by Feigel (2016 cited in Scholes, 2016) and the flamboyant “signature method” of the dandy (Miller 2009, 5). In *The Last Supper* (2014) we watch Olivia exit the lift to the Pope and Associates office (figs.1 & 2).



Figure 1 Screen frame of *The Last Supper* (2014) © ABC Studios

She wears a wide trouser suit but the points of focus are on her outerwear, a white cape-coat, vertiginous stilettos and a huge handbag, again white. The ensemble produces the pleasure of watching what we might call the ‘wealth of personality’ played out by Olivia in her role as corporate professional. A brief internet ‘search’ locates its provenance, the *Ralph Lauren* Collection, illustrating the intertextual aspects of such

shows where known designers collaborate with the series costume team, embedding a ‘fashion-forward’ sensibility (Warner 2009, 181). Here, it is the *Marielle* drape-panel coat. We can only conjecture as to the composition of the fabric, (although *Ralph Lauren*’s website confirms the garment combines the luxury yarn cashmere with wool). With viewer access to this element denied Paolo necessarily directs our eye to pattern-cutting. It is an asymmetric panel design with a section extending as a scarf over the left shoulder. This voluminous section crosses over the front creating a spectacular aspect which itself covers the primary coat, partially hidden by the folds of the magnificent cape. The garment utilises a system of soft concentric circles around the throat, the hem stops at the knee and the entire ensemble dispenses with buttons.



Figure 2 Screen frame of *The Last Supper* (2014) © ABC Studios

All these details contribute to the garment’s relaxed silhouette. It’s batwing sleeves create gaps between the upper body and the garment, negating the strictures of outerwear in which the traditionally close-fitting coat maximises heat retention, highlighting thereby the rejection of the utilitarian within Olivia’s luxury wardrobe. Whilst the repeated circular ‘enclosures’ of fabric arguably produce those practical aspects of warmth the cape bespeaks functionality through indexical associations with regulatory uniforms such as militarism. These combined sartorial conversions of spectacle and institution illustrate the protagonist’s ingenious experimentation with signifiers of white power.

Paolo develops these twin themes of artifice and flâneuseism in the colour of the cape which is blindingly white. Illustrating the impact of costume and lighting as combined techniques, Olivia is made more luminous as she moves along a dark corridor to the office, where a shaft of natural light strikes the apparel. Of the other numerous impacts in this colour choice I discuss here two. First, the colour contrast between Olivia’s

flawlessly made-up facial skin (itself a product of careful cosmetic attention) and the whiteness which envelops her body imitating the narration of the ways by which a woman of colour negotiates her way in the socio-economic environment of white (supposedly post) colonial power. These images of white clothing show us that fashion is defined, consumed and owned by black women thereby disrupting the traditions of the television genre which fixates on whiteness not only as beauty but as the unspoken organising framework of seeing (Dyer 2017, 3). Secondly, they produce melodrama, for being shrouded in whiteness viscerally connects the heroine to Fitz, reflecting her obsessive, taboo affair and building the emotional aspect of Olivia's persona.

Extending analysis from apparel to include accessories the theme of economic prosperity together with motifs of melodrama are persuasively communicated by Paolo. There is the dizzying height of those pointed stilettos added to which is the detectable wobble which star of the show Kerry Washington constructs in Olivia's deportment, hinting at external discomfort and internal fragility. She carries a large white *Prada* double-handbag (fig.1). The object produces the sense of Olivia as the fashion linguist, a woman who appreciates the ability of an accessory to complement and intensify the connotations of the cape-coat by echoing the colour and flair of apparel. Its pale hue also underlines a sense of bricolage in relation to Olivia's overall fashioning here given the inevitability of white materials passing quickly and inevitably from the phase of cleanliness to discolouration. It equally symbolises the stages of sexual undressing of the heroine wherein apparel and accessorising signify precision-purity which, in keeping with themes of female spectacle, will inevitably be soiled. The size of the bag also indents melodrama for it overwhelms Olivia's stature, illustrating a working woman's version of the man's empty briefcase, a repository of artificial power 'full of sound and fury signifying nothing'. These exemplify Paolo's deliberate use of power-dressing as a paradox, a space of self-expression yet one in which the subject is herself controlled through the discourses of economy. Here, the woman's wardrobe whilst a rich space of authority and play is also an emotional vacuum, a hollow substitute for Olivia's alienation. They testify that her sphere of influence within that whitest of houses is one of perpetual oscillation between impact and vulnerability. Paolo visualises thereby the frictions within the public and private axis of *Scandal* essential to melodrama, reflecting the heroine's anxiety that relationships whether commercial or intimate are temporary if not illusory.

In contrast to such a reading is the series' undeniable integration of consumption as pleasure. Washington's red-carpet appearances and media interviews help to fuse this relationship between on/off-screen female fashions. Paolo assists in this process of stardom by carefully subjugating the status of her own role in a collaboration with Washington and Elliott Staples on a commercial capsule interpretation of the show's fashions, the *Scandal* collection for fashion company, *The Limited*, of which Staples is senior VC. Indeed, media articles suggest that the wardrobe is composed of Washington's designs. This role of the black female star as designer and her contribution to high-street fashion helps to bond star and character into those spaces of

‘conspicuous consumption’ of which Veblen speaks, functioning as points of “access to canons of taste and fashion” (Dyer, 1992, 42-3). It can be argued that in so doing Washington substitutes for the absence of black designers on the show. These aspects of intertextuality also assist in producing the heroine as dandy-flâneuse. Within (fashion) habitus Olivia inscribes and classifies as a lexicographer, creating glossaries which symbolise her creativity and self-expression. She can also stipulate what fashion taste itself is, her patterns of ostentatious consumption and display position her as a poseur of distinction (Bourdieu 1984, xxix). Modernity, eclecticism, a laissez faire attitude to expense, suggested through those teeteringly high carpet to car shoes and the white onetime wear, dry clean only vestments challenge suggestions of fashion as repression instead articulating that black female power has not only arrived but is ‘running the show.’



Figure 3 Screen frame of *Whiskey, Tango, Foxtrot* (2013) © ABC Studios

The serial aspect of *Scandal* means that the characteristics of items such as the cape can be developed in ways that allow the reader to read this motif as a part of Olivia’s fashioning sensibility, thereby flattering audience intelligence and encouraging commitment to and interaction with the series, as we comb through the episodes tracking similarities, distinctions, improvements and so on. Paolo thereby situates the distinctive-ness of experiencing fashion in television, that is, costuming constructed as narratology through the serial nature of the show, and designs reflecting its generic corpus of melodrama-thriller. Olivia’s identity is constructed through the remit of Paolo’s ever-changing designs, creating a drama that is also a fashion show. Fashion on television is thereby shown to be a system distinct from the “gendered nature of spectacle/narrative dichotomy” of fashion on film where the appearance of the spectacle of the female star ‘stops’ the narrative trajectory (Warner 2012, 126).



Figure 4 Screen frame of *Whiskey, Tango, Foxtrot* (2013) © ABC Studios

Here fashioning *is* storytelling and speech, replacing the repressed or “the text of muteness” (Gledhill, 1987, 30). In ‘*Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*’ (2013), a stunning cape-coat by Italian fashion house *MaxMara* hugs the contours of Olivia’s frame, outerwear guiding us to the corporeal (figs. 3 & 4). It’s muted camel-coloured tones draw attention back and forth between garment and accessories, (another) large pale *Prada* handbag and long white gloves which disappear beneath the elbow-length construction of the apparel. The wrinkled construction of these and the relaxed form of the weighty handbag carried on her gloved arm help intimate that the luxury material used for both is leather. Olfactory associations of the object’s desirably pungent aroma are thereby visualised and the construction of the ‘fifth sense’ is matched by the lingering effect of the gloves, their length draws the eye from the fingertips along the arm and up towards the hidden upper body. This sense of outerwear as intimate innerwear is deepened by the apparent softness of the item’s material, reflected through those relaxed folds.

Languorous sensations of smell, touch and vision link the ensemble with the mythology of luxury brands, synonymous with apparel utilising indulgent fabrics, fastidious detail, ‘classic’ or fashion-forward innovation. Such companies frequently connote their items as commensurate with the work of the atelier, a role replete with associations of traditional, exquisite decorative craft skills. These links signify the character’s garment and accessories as special, unique. In relation to the gloves, this is reinforced, should we click onto the website of its maker Dorothy Gaspar, who asserts her atelier credentials by emphasising her genealogy as a 3rd generation designer (LinkedIn 2018). There is also Olivia’s contribution, wearing these incongruous gloves which belong to the sub-genre of ballroom and opera only more firmly states her confident individuation. Paolo thereby depicts the symbolic power of seemingly trivial pieces such as a handbag and gloves, products projecting Olivia as the flâneuse of the public sphere of Washington

politics whilst absorbing the traits of the dandy who experiments with iconic and fashion-forward pieces.

Highlighting once more the intertextual relationship between luxury brands and television productions, in *'It's Handled'* (2013) Olivia wears a stunning interpretation of the cape-coat, referenced on websites as the *Burberry Prorsum White Cotton Duchesse Satin Cape Trench Coat* (figs. 5 & 6).



Figure 5 Screen frame of *It's Handled* (2013) © ABC Studios

The pleasure and skills associated with conspicuous consumption of 'real' a la mode items are thereby stitched into the 'costume' garment and the character of the wearer. It also embodies the narrative development for at the beginning of series 3 Olivia has rejected Fitz's offer of marriage and role of First Lady, abandoning her roles as White House advisor and mistress. In this first episode of the series and following the public disclosure of their affair Olivia forces Fitz to meet her in the presidential bunker (!), the lovers adopting adversarial positions as they remonstrate about revelation of their 'scandalous' affair. The rigid costume condenses mise-en-scene and characterisation for Olivia is depicted through the theme of fashion-as-armour, her white outerwear lit, in contrast to the glow of the *Lauren* cape, through a spectrum of cool blues and so markedly contrasting with the grey concrete of the underground shelter itself. These facets of costume lighting and set design construct Olivia's internalising of the docile body together with its strictures of sub/conscious self-disciplining and panoptical self/surveillance (Foucault 1984, 179-187). Here, the apparel is a structured form-fitting white trench coat, tied tightly at the waist, reaching just below the knee, all elements signifying this is both coat and dress.



Figure 6 Screen frame of *It's Handled* (2013) © ABC Studios

The trench-dress-coat reimagines the first and second iterations of the cape discussed earlier, reconstituting its military origins by referencing two potential denotations of the costume, as an abbreviated ‘cape-let’ and by contrast extension-through-ornamentation, the epaulette. This component, the capelet-epaulette, working as a double-signifier, crosses over the top of the bust, is split in the middle and is buttoned underneath the collar. These aspects converge to symbolise an image of the medieval, aristocratic courtly knight’s breast plate, interlacing romantic pictorial associations of chivalry and of nobility, onto the female body. Such dynamic pattern-cutting also serves to limit the possibilities of yarn composition. The strident white sheen of the trench-coat is suggestive of satin but it is exceptional cut and contour which guide us to read the material’s construction as the iconic luxury fabric, that is, pure satin (this despite being a weave that can in fact be composed of varying degrees of silk, acetate and so forth). Like the pattern-cutting of the capelet/ epaulettes such thread denotes the otherworldliness of the garment and intensifies the contrasts between set and costume design, the blue-grey background of the former contrasting against Olivia’s body which radiates white-ness. Paolo’s skilful costuming decisions here are used to signify once more the ease with which Olivia innovates with fashion design, here post-modern pastiche whilst reinforcing the sequence’s theme of female self-determination. For Rhimes meanwhile Paolo’s production of this blazing armour-plated gladiator generates visual bricolage useful for the sexual suspense of the melodrama-thriller, as we anticipate these facets of ultra-white regimented self-discipline will, via *Olitz*, inevitably be obliterated.

Through these configurations of the heroine Paolo also shapes a fantastical link between dramaturgy and actuality. Olivia’s entrepreneurship which includes working for the White House emulates the ultimate Black-American female icon of political power,

Michelle Obama. Michelle's verbal eloquence is matched by her (seeming) skill as an effective dandy-flâneuse, de-constructing the white conservative uniform of her predecessor, Laura Bush. Relaxed colourful fabrics including the bold appropriation of high-street looks (such as an Asos frock worn during the 2012 re-election campaign) emphasise pride and pleasure in the sartorial and such activity, seen through the prism of black female performativity, link these two women. In this first transformation the heroine acting as dandy-flâneuse through her very excessive-ness embodies the emancipatory project of autonomous black female aspiration, discourses espoused by the Obamas. Paolo's smart, successful career woman also creates the necessary contrasting visual precursor to the second stages of transformation of which there are two versions; the romantic-princess and the porn-princess to which I now turn.

Stage 2 version a. From dandy-flâneuse to romantic-princess

Olivia's career at the White House necessitates socialising at its black-tie events, providing Paolo with opportunities to dress her character / star in a range of stunning gowns and illustrating the romantic-princess. In *'Hell Hath No Fury'* (2012) following the presidential election of the Grants, Olivia attends the inaugural gala. Having ended the affair with Fitz we witness her solitary entrance into the frenetic ballroom, wearing a white sheath dress. The camera watches, initially from a high angle as Olivia walks over the threshold of the ball room and then tracks in a medium / medium long shot as she makes her way through a phalanx of black-tie, indistinguishable men along the red carpet (fig.7).



Figure 7 Screen Frame of *Hell Hath No Fury* (2012) © ABC Studios

Such theatrical performance inculcates associations with *Hollywood Award* parades and thus Olivia's choreographed catwalk dressage produces her as the body of panopticism

(Foucault, 1984, 206). A problematic link emerges here between the surveillance of black women on screen within the historical context of the ball room for as Olivia moves further into the room we notice the First Lady costumed in an evocation of the southern belle, a figure explicitly associated with the antebellum south, plantations, slavery. This then establishes the risk for African-American protagonists and the stars who play these characters in such 'heritage' settings. The question is whether fetish can be moulded in a way that disrupts such readings?

Noting her arrival Fitz is unable to look away, alerting us to follow his contemplation of Pope/Washington as amalgamated spectacle. The simple construction of the sheath shapes her but in contrast to the close-fitting *Burberry* cape coat analysed earlier, Olivia's frame together with sections of her body are emphasised not through constriction but by the ways in which the silken 'second skin' fabric hints at the undulations of the corporeal. We notice the fabric of the gown as both presence and absence. The cloth drapes softly over the breasts and posterior due as much to the lack of bra and VPL as to the weight and structure of the frock. Fabric falls close to floor length creating an illusion of greater height, particularly as, unable to view her shoes, we cannot perceive where her legs start and finish. The design draws attention to dressage as absence in the upper body, finishing in a triangle of fabric above the bust. It reveals décolletage together with part of the flesh of the upper bust, whilst the shoulders and arms are fully displayed. The flimsiness of the dress is intensified by finishing at the tip of the triangle which itself appears dependent for its very functionality on a separate piece of fabric, a gossamer-thin golden tie which requires we look closely to see, so adding to our replication of Fitz's intent gaze. This crosses over the front of the collarbone in an opposing triangle to the dress, emphasising the bone structure of the neck area.

Olivia's diminutive stature and the relatively subdued musculature of her arms link to the apparel where delicacy of material, tininess of fastenings and absence of the utilitarian codes of underwear produce fetishization. Mulvey's exploration of fetish and scopophilia as devices of phallogentric (cinematic) spectatorship (1973, 14-28) contrast with those of Steele (1997, 5-10), whose account privileges fashion apparel and objects as pleasures and methods by which to discuss identity and power and their contrasting perspectives are apposite here. Underwear in this scene is effectively re-imagined through the body of the sinuous, silky dress and as a chemise-like robe it reads as synonymous with lingerie, night wear, the boudoir and other erotica. The garment's delicate construction and colour, working within the genre of underwear, its binary gesticulations of presence /absence, the activation of narrative bricolage, (outwear becoming underwear and pure white as a colour that will be sullied) and so the promise of flesh revealed, produce Olivia as romantic- princess within the requirements of 'polite' spectacle, a characteristic of the heteronormative fairy-tale and one that underlines the theme of sexual masquerade (Steele 1997, 163).

This theme of the romantic princess is though imbricated with the skills of the dandy-flâneuse as Olivia's dressage is dependent on her own appreciation of her disciplined body. Muscle and body form permit the heroine to wear impossible attire, clothing which also fractures formality through its codes of underwear-as-outerwear. Female intelligence in the act of spectacle is also produced by Olivia's adept use of accessories. A small square silver-gold bag held in the right hand renders it classic, understated, subtle, themes echoed and contrasted through a modern silver ring worn on the left, all of which illustrates meticulous, reflective attention to detail.

The fashioning of the adult princess with her promise of eroticism continues in this scene. Following her stunning arrival Olivia congratulates the Fitzgeralds and then moves away to network. Her brilliant execution of self-fashioning thereby underscores dressage as a *de rigueur* performance, one reflecting the dexterity with which she carries out her job. Thus, whilst styling suggests deliberation on the part of the wearer and so intimates that the heroine acknowledges her role as spectacle and invites the gaze, she is in the actual moments of entering and socialising within the location of specularisation (the ballroom) unaware of her erotic impact. Only at the behest of the First Lady does Olivia hesitantly dance with Fitz and we focus here on the interplay of fashioning within the dynamics of a romantic courtship, as he woos Olivia with declarations of love and continuing the sexual deferral she demurs. As she dances we access the garment's side and back and so notice the tie disappears over the back where it alters to an interpretation of bra straps (fig.8).



Figure 8 Screen frame of *Hell Hath No Fury* (2012) © ABC Studios

Yet these miniscule bands do not sit at the mid-level as with the typical construction of such lingerie, finishing instead at her waist and so producing an unexpected thrill, the full exposition of the upper back. The side zip positioned below this area of skin on the 'skirt' of the apparel, rather than functioning as indices of discreet dressage is consequently shifted from its original meaning, adopting instead the signifying processes of female striptease. The dress follows Mulvey's narrative conceptualisation of fetish with the woman as the object of Fitz/our scopophilic gaze and it equally functions as an item of erotica displayed knowingly by Olivia and in this reflexive mode articulates Steele's perspective of agency and play.

This stage, in relation to fashion and spectacle, positions Olivia as Fitz's and our encapsulation of desirable yet unobtainable femininity. Such sequences signal the shift of Olivia from her status as the disciplined body of the independent working woman to the second stage of transformation in which the signifiers of work-as-autonomy merge within the role of romantic-princess. Visually outshining her (mainly) white colleagues and clientele through this cultivated interpretation of ballgown attire denotes Olivia as 'civilised' fetish with its disturbing inferences to imperialist ownership of black bodies. Yet this reading can be balanced against her pleasure in creative posing and narcissistic display. By recuperating 'white' fashionology as her own and in surpassing the purview of antebellum performance at the gala, Olivia feasibly owns the field of specularisation, subverting the risk of colonialist discourse and 'othering' white identity. I next look at an alternative transformation, to the role of the high performance, porn-princess.

Stage 2 version b. From dandy-flâneuse to porn -princess

Clothing and the corporeal form soft-core erotica display essential to Rhimes construction of *Olitz* coupling and the two versions of sex within its tenets of melodrama-thriller; good sex and suffering sex. Good sex narrativises denial and surrender to sexual passion and Rhimes produces abundant choreography ranging from glancing, gazing, stroking, through to cunnilingus and fellatio, vaginal and anal sex. Taboos of the marital and interracial these acts extend to illicit locations of sexing, including the White House: *Olitz* do it speedily in the lift, angrily in the communications cupboard, audaciously in the oval office. Deferred intimacy and suffering are equally essential, patternising the cycle of consummation, rejection, reconciliation. The cyclical features of melodrama and soft-core pornographic temporal address mirror one another and so exaggerate romance and sex acts. Are such scenes though conceivably feminist écriture and do they transcend the issue of Olivia 'crossing over'? To consider these areas I explore again couture dress augmenting this discussion of clothing by considering the corporeal, specifically the sexually active body as part of the process of self/fashioning within the production of the high-performance porn-princess (see Dirix and Kirkham 2017, 7-10 for a useful analysis of the relationship between clothing and pornography). The *Michael Kors* dress appears in '*Happy Birthday Mr President*' (2012) a title priming us for what will follow given its palpable link to the Kennedy-Monroe affair. The costume connotes femininity and sexuality and

as with other apparel discussed it operates as bricolage, here adjusting its meanings according to environment and to *Olitz* activity. That process begins with a sequence in Olivia's apartment in the late evening where she sits on a sofa, working. She wears the *Kors* piece, a white wool sheath, we can just see that the hemline sits fractionally below the knee and that the torso of the garment is armless and high necked.

Such dresses bespeak traditional codes of feminine wear, they also communicate contained sexuality by intimating the 'hidden' 'underneath' of the sexual area above the knee. The cut of the dress however, contains the potential of the dress to signify excessive sexuality by articulating the familiar lexicography of classic European dress and its connotations of decorum. Further, the combination of decadent fabrics and the formality of its shape partly situate Olivia as the career woman outlined earlier.



Figure 9 Screen frame of *Happy Birthday Mr. President* (2012) © ABC Studios

After receiving a phone call, she smiles and action 'cuts to' her opening the door of the oval office and stepping inside, wearing the same garment (fig 9). We see a wide band of black lace inverted 'v's' corsets her waist, building associations of lingerie. The underwear-as-outerwear motif of the dress simultaneously establishes the trajectory of soft-core fantasy narrative in which transformation is projected through the promise of disrobing.

Echoing the white sheath ballroom dress previously discussed the outline of her breasts is revealed as is the flesh of her shoulder and neck whilst the high neckline draws our attention to her flawless facial skin and the waved hair style that frames it. Fitz enters from another doorway signalling the initiation of another infamous *Olitz* act in which the function of Olivia's clothing alters again explicating the visual symbiosis of the lovers. Dressed in her semi-formal black-on-white dress Olivia mirrors Fitz's black-tie

construction so that whilst on opposite sides of the circular room costume unifies the figures. Suggesting Olivia's greater power, it is Fitz who begins the process-proper of narrative striptease, removing his black jacket to reveal a white shirt. Both bodies are now displayed identically with white as the predominant colour and touches of black, her lace and his bow-tie, gendering performativity. The other pronounced dualism is skin colour and its intersection between fashion and the corporeal. Fitz turns up his shirt sleeves revealing the whiteness of hands and forearms, and signifying his binary connection to Olivia's black skin. Intensifying the link is the dyad of fashion and flesh with white fashion (Olivia) and white flesh (Fitz) being synthesised (fig.10). These features provide the momentum to what follows.



Figure 10 Screen frame of *Happy Birthday Mr. President* (2012) © ABC Studios

As the scene develops the dress imbibes connections between melodrama and factual discourse concerning female power as these relate to erotica, particularly the theme of strip-tease. First, it works in accordance with melodrama's narrative rules of desire as delay, the lovers spend time remonstrating about the immorality of making love in 'that' place before inevitably yielding to passion, allowing us time to 'clock' the entire dress and its binary of formal clothing/underwear. Second, it appropriates the factual discourses accorded to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal (Kleinbans, 2004, 71-72) thereby progressing a double-thrill, miscegenation takes place in the edifice of patriarchal colonial power. The sexual exploitation of Lewinsky by a powerful politician allows another twist as Olivia challenges this dynamic with 'her' President, controlling much of the foreplay and verbal repartee preluding *Olitz* intercourse. Thereby tropes we associate with soft-core settings are in play, again through the mediated paratext of the Clinton-Lewinsky sex-scenes and intratextually via the dress which integrates those paratexts into its own clothing-specific narration. Added to this, the combined connotations of uniform (the dress as business suit) and the suggestiveness of lingerie (the band of lace) combine to reinforce the fact that the dress is the focus. It narrativises

movement from Olivia's apartment to the Oval Office and undertakes the act of storytelling within the White House itself. From the moment that Olivia stands in that dress just inside the Oval Office she signifies the mini-storyline of erotica that will follow and so initiates her transfiguration into the role of porn-princess.

Demonstrating the corporeal and fashion as sites of exchange is the act of sex itself which plays through binaries of black and white in costume motifs as well as skin colour. Olivia sits down on the presidential desk, looks at Fitz, appears to partially take down her knickers to just below her groin, the suggestion of underwear commensurate with the "the thrill of exposure" (Steele 1997, 118). She slightly parts her legs and begins to lean back signalling female surrender typified in soft-core pornography *mise-en-scene*. Fitz moves closer to Olivia who is still fully clothed (minus those panties). The heroine does not take off her dress however and thus echoes the nudity implicit in the white sheath dress of the inaugural gala, dressed yet naked, without underwear. This binary of dressed/undressed heightens erotic pleasure, as Fitz/we imagine Olivia disrobing and revealed and thereby shifted through a second binary process, that is, from the role of powerful career woman to sexual porn-princess. This impact of the dress is balanced by the corporeal for it is Fitz who is initially vulnerable, as the camera in close-up moves down to Olivia's hands and we watch as she unbelt and unzips Fitz, the phallus literally in her hands. She then leans over her lover, kisses him passionately and we cut to a medium reverse shot which focuses on her seated on the desk and her legs wrapped around Fitz's buttocks. In this configuration Olivia is essentially astride in the coupling and so performs as dominatrix. As *bricolage* process the clothing is now exhausted and the completion of the porn-princess transformation subsequently takes place through visual and auditory interpretations of the sex act, with camerawork and editing emphasising that clothing is being subsumed by the corporeal, the sexually active body, which becomes the site of fetish. It is through the interplay between apparel and body that such sequences are narrativized, costume shifting the lovers and the extra-diegetic viewer from the public sphere of Olivia's work to the public/private spaces of foreplay and on into the intimate realms of fantastical sex. Rhimes and Paolo thereby use *mise-en-scene* to integrate and subvert the conventions of traditional heterosexual erotica which archetypally fixates on female uniform and power-dressing as motifs by which to produce narratives of feminine striptease-as-acquiescence.

The progressive-ness of such soft-core scenes, of which fashioning is an essential component, is that they position the perspective of the porn-princess as one of primary importance and both this figure and that of the romantic-princess challenge the patternisation of sexual pleasure and consummation as discourse owned by white identities. Moreover, the love scenes repeatedly confront the continuing taboo of interracial sex and this theme returns us to the other important aspect of fashioning, the corporeal black/white dynamic underscored through Paolo's binary use of the colour system in her costumes. This duality, presented in clothing and accessories, symbolises the relationship between the lovers as one of melodramatic friction as it relates to love

and desire, a narrative that inexorably culminates in the romantic and sexual merging of these colours, figuratively and literally collapsing colour and race lines.

Conclusion

The question remains as to whether Olivia's self-fashioning expresses femininity in prime-time American television drama as sanitised, white-legitimated "cross-over Blackness" (Erigha 2015, 14). Certainly, her transformations from career woman to spectacular romantic-princess and to high performance pornographic-princess infer that Olivia is potentially integrated into discourses of white post-feminist identity. Positioning her as self-reflexive fashion spectacle in her role as career woman and White House professional/lover underscores the heroine's responsibility to endlessly mutate. Similarly, glamorous depictions of Olivia within the *Olitz* sex scenes risk situating the heroine as a cipher of hypersexualised identity or through the axis of melodrama, the 'tragic mulatto', both mythologised fetishes of American slavery and colonialism (Bogle 2016). Yet the series arguably creates a progressive view. It produces firstly a Black-American woman controlling commodities and economies and in that setting Olivia expresses through fashion the quirky, aberrant features of the dandy-flâneuse, the woman whose body internalises and reflects her access to, if not ownership of, the external spaces of Washington and its 'corridors of power'. Secondly, interracial sex remains itself covert, a proscribed area for prime-time American television, situating her fashioned body and that of her white lover as spectacle within the setting of soft core pornography contests televisual taboos concerning hybridity. Third, in these contexts of work and sex it is black female perspective and experience that is central. As fashion auteur Olivia is re-writing the rules of fetishisation, communicating that narcissism and spectacle are aspects of self-pleasuring produced on her terms. These visual productions of the protagonist as career woman and princess produces a heroine who confronts the double weight of 'otherness' that burden black femininities within American television. Paolo thus helps to shape Olivia as a three-dimensional woman who 'speaks her mind' through the dynamic linguistics of her self-fashioning, illustrating intellect and curiosity whilst explicating the joy and suffering of sexual desire, with the final irony that her authenticity is produced principally through fashioning melodramatic excess.

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