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Add Women and Stir: Female Presidents in Pop Culture, 2012-2016

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Abstract

In this article, we argue that there was a representational shift in popular culture representations of female presidents following Hillary Clinton's 2008 primary run, from earlier representations that were entirely preoccupied with gender to more recent depictions that tried to set aside "the gender question." We explore three representations of female presidents produced since 2012 that can illuminate popular understandings of gender and the presidency between the 2008 and 2016 elections: *Veep*, *State of Affairs*, and *Scandal*. While all three texts attempt to normalize images of female presidents and break from earlier representations by treating a female presidency as an ordinary course of events, only *Scandal* normalizes female political power without also minimizing either the significance of gender as a cultural force or the value of the presidency as a feminist goal. These representations continue to offer a limited vision of female presidents and the social changes needed to create the conditions that would clear a path to the American presidency, which remains, in Clinton's words, "that highest, hardest glass ceiling."

Keywords

female president, television, popular culture, 2008 election, representation, women and politics

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ADD WOMEN AND STIR: FEMALE PRESIDENTS IN POP CULTURE, 2012-2016

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In 1964, the film *Kisses for My President* played for laughs the idea of a female president. Leslie McCloud, portrayed by Polly Bergen, is elected president when all the women of America support her based solely on her gender. The real star of the film is Leslie's husband, Thad, played by Fred MacMurray, who is thrust into the role of "First Lady." The film focuses on the havoc wreaked in both domestic and public realms by this breakdown in the "natural" gender order, implying that McCloud's election represents Thad's failure to properly contain her, as well as American men's failure to contain American women as a whole. Order is only restored when Thad manages to impregnate Leslie; pregnancy renders Leslie unable to perform her presidential duties, and she concedes that for the "benefit" of her unborn child she must resign. Thad jokes to Leslie in the final scene: "Do you realize it took 40 million women to get you into the White House..." with Leslie finishing "...and just one man to get me out."

In retrospect, this film clearly expresses deep-seated anxieties about shifting gender norms and marital relationships during the sexual revolution. But it also reveals angst over a question that has haunted American society from the time of the suffrage movement: what would happen if American women used their franchise to vote as a bloc? Ever since Victoria Woodhull's historic 1870 run, Americans have speculated—with a mixture of hopefulness and anxiety—that women would vote as a bloc to elect the first female president. And the dream

persisted, even after a sex scandal lost Woodhull the support of suffragists. Yet, as Arica Coleman has discussed, the threat of the “women’s vote” is a myth—it did not materialize for the first female Congresswoman, Jeannette Rankin, in 1916; not for Vice Presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro, in 1984; and not for Hillary Clinton’s primary or Presidential campaigns, in 2008 and 2016 (Coleman). Indeed, the 2016 election showed that women neither voted as a bloc for a female candidate nor against an expressed misogynist. More than 50 percent of white women voters cast votes for Donald Trump, and the myth of the “women’s vote” explains why this oft-cited statistic is particularly disappointing for those on the left.

The undeniable fact that American women have not voted—and, from all appearances, will not vote—as a bloc to elect a woman to the highest office is an opening for feminist inquiry. This fact suggests that American women do not believe that a female president would necessarily improve their lives or speak to their priorities. On the one hand, this may indicate social progress, an awareness on the part of voters that one woman does not speak for all women, that “woman” is not a monolith.¹ On the other hand, women’s voting patterns may also illuminate the failure of feminism to unite women across race, class, and ideology.²

Still, despite the elusive promise of the “women’s vote,” Hillary Clinton’s 2008 and 2016 campaigns demonstrated that American women are closer to the U.S. presidency than ever before. A 2014 Pew Research Center survey found that the majority of Americans believe women are as capable of political leadership as men and find women indistinguishable from men on key leadership traits such as intelligence

¹ Naomi Klein expressed this argument following the 2016 election in her *New York Times* editorial “Trump Defeated Clinton, Not Women.”

² See, for example, LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant’s “Open Letter to White Liberal Feminists” in which she suggests that “white liberal feminists” have failed to “interrogate racism, imperialism, capitalism, and sexism because they benefit from it and are too busy being protected by it” and expresses her “delight” that following Trump’s election “you have received the potential awakening of a lifetime.”

and capacity for innovation, with many viewing women leaders as more compassionate and organized (“Women and Leadership”). Of course, the best indication that public attitudes toward a female president have warmed is Hillary Clinton’s significant victory in the popular vote in the 2016 election, which she won by 2.8 million votes despite an Electoral College loss. In this climate, rhetoric of gender neutrality has become commonplace, as illustrated in the oft-heard maxim: “Voters shouldn’t consider a candidate’s gender.” This rhetoric suggests that gender equality has been achieved, implying that sexism and misogyny are irrelevant to the fact that America has yet to elect a female president.

As real women engage in the close-but-not-quite struggle for the presidency, popular culture representations of female presidents have proliferated. Since 2000, 18 female presidents have appeared in films and television shows (see Table 1). Popular culture provides visualizations of a female presidency in a country that has yet to elect a female president, suggesting a complex interplay between representations and reality. In this article, we articulate a representational shift following Clinton’s 2008 primary run, from earlier representations substantially preoccupied with gender to more recent depictions attempting to set aside “the gender question.” By presenting a woman’s gender as essentially irrelevant to her political leadership, these depictions correlate with what Lauren Berlant has termed America’s “intimate public sphere.” In this conceptual space, what cannot be realized in everyday life is seen as possible, viable, and normalized through popular culture representations. As Berlant succinctly states, “to be American, in this view, is to inhabit a secure space liberated from identities and structures that seem to constrain what a person can do in history” (4).

Table 1

Female Presidents in Film and Television Since 2000

Date	Actress	President	Title
2000	Yardley Smith	President Lisa Simpson	<i>The Simpsons</i>
2001	Sally Champlain	President	<i>Perfect Lover</i>
2001	Cherry Jones	President Allison Taylor	<i>24</i>
2004	Mary McDonnell	President Laura Roslin	<i>Battlestar Gallactica</i>
2005	Geena Davis	President Mackenzie Allen	<i>Commander-in- Chief</i>
2005	Patricia Wettig	President Caroline Reynolds	<i>Prison Break</i>
2008	Mimi Kuzyk	President Sally Sheridan	<i>XIII: The Conspiracy</i>
2012	Stephanie Paul	President	<i>Iron Sky</i>
2012	Kate Burton	Acting President Sally Langston	<i>Scandal</i>
2014	Tea Leoni	Acting President Elizabeth McCord	<i>Madam Secretary</i>
2014	Alfre Woodard	President Constance Payton	<i>State of Affairs</i>
2015	Penny Johnson Jerald	President Amanda Waller	<i>Justice League: Gods and Monsters</i>
2015	Lynda Carter	President Olivia Marsdin	<i>Supergirl</i>
2015	Sharon Stone	Acting President Natalie Maccabee	<i>Agent X</i>
2016	Sela Ward	President Elizabeth Lanford	<i>Independence Day: Resurgence</i>
2016	Julia Louise- Dreyfus	Acting President Selina Meyer	<i>Veep</i>
2016	Andrea Savage	Acting President Laura Montez	<i>Veep</i>
2017	Bellamy Young	President Mellie Grant	<i>Scandal</i>

This article explores three cultural representations of female presidents produced since 2012 that can illuminate popular understandings of gender and the presidency between the 2008 and 2016 elections: *Veep*, *State of Affairs*, and *Scandal*. We examine how these shows attempt to normalize the notion of a female president and create a more diverse image of American politics. But we also explore each text for how it explains the anomaly of a woman in such a high office. In other words, do the texts genuinely address the changes required to make a successful female presidency possible, or do they simply insert women into the presidency without acknowledging the gendered construction of the office? Do these representations embrace a gender neutrality that, rather than forwarding feminist goals, instead functions, in Berlant's words, "as a distraction from the discussion of citizenship's material contexts" (263, note 14)? Ignoring or denying the continuity of gendered politics contributes to the "add women and stir" representational phenomenon, in which representations of women in roles historically gendered masculine serve to distract from the relative stability in how those roles are defined and understood. As Susan Douglas cautions, feminists must be wary of popular culture representations that "overstate women's gains and accomplishments" and thus, ironically, "render feminism obsolete" (15).

In the wake of the 2016 election, which saw, in Mary Hunt's words, "a woman candidate [lose] to someone who is manifestly not as able and who has treated women badly" (qtd. in Salgado), Barbara Kingsolver asks that we consider "why so many people just couldn't see a 69-year-old woman in our nation's leading role, and why they might choose instead a hero who dispatches opponents with glib cruelty." Popular culture *has* allowed us to see women in a leading political role. Thus, our analysis suggests that simply depicting a female president is not enough. Indeed, most of these depictions do not acknowledge the social changes needed to create the conditions that would clear a path to the American presidency, which remains, in Clinton's words, "that highest, hardest glass ceiling."

GENDER, POLITICS, AND THE U.S. PRESIDENCY

Women have long aspired to the presidency and recognized it as an important symbolic achievement. For example, a 1920 suffrage cartoon depicts the office as the final rung on a ladder depicting women's progress from "Slavery," "House Drudgery," and "Shop Work" to "Equal Suffrage," "Wage Equity," and "Presidency" (see Fig. 1). Since Woodhull's 1872 campaign, fourteen women have run for president: three garnered support at a major party national convention, five were nominated as third-party candidates, and two were eventually chosen as major-party candidates for vice president. 2016 marked the first nomination of a woman for president by a major party.

The political climate of the United States has never been welcoming to women, and this remains true today. In the 115th Congress, there are 21 women in the Senate and 83 women in the House, 38 of whom are women of color (Cohn). Thus, women comprise about 19 percent of Congress overall, about double the share from 20 years ago. In December 2016, the Inter-Parliamentary Union compiled figures that ranked the U.S. 101st out of 193 countries in terms of women's representation, far behind Rwanda, Bolivia, and Cuba, which rank first, second, and third, respectively, and which use gender quotas to ensure a gender balance ("Women in National Parliaments"). Moreover, in the last half-century, 59 countries have had female heads of state, the majority of which were elected during the past 20 years, while the purportedly progressive United States remains a glaring exception (Abrams and Tweeten).

The barriers to female participation in politics are well understood, and countries that have taken steps to ensure equal participation demonstrate strategies to overcome these barriers. Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox list the most significant factors in the persistent "gender gap" in U.S. politics in "Why Are Women Still Not Running for Public Office?":

Women are less likely than men to be willing to endure the rigors of a political campaign. They are less likely than men



Figure 1: Bushnell, Elmer Andrews. *The Sky is Now Her Limit*. 1920, Photomechanical print, The Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Reading Room. The Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002716769/>

to have the freedom to reconcile work and family obligations with a political career. They are less likely than men to think they are “qualified” to run for office. And they are less likely than men to perceive a fair political environment. (1-2)

They conclude that real structural changes are needed to foster female candidates and help women see politics as a viable path. We propose that such changes begin with transforming gendered understandings of leadership and power as well.

There is a problematic association between leadership, power, and masculinity in the United States. As Douglas explains, Americans perceive

a deep, unyielding contradiction between and discomfort with ‘female’ and ‘power.’ Forty years after the women’s movement, ‘female’ is still equated with being nice, supportive, nurturing, accommodating, and domestic—not compatible with anything that might involve leadership. ‘Power’ is equated with domination, superiority, being tough, even ruthless. These two categories simply are not supposed to go together. (272)

Would-be politicians need to demonstrate both their ability to wield power and their personal authenticity. In a society that has traditionally defined “authentic womanhood” in opposition to public displays of power and leadership, female politicians are “forced to overcome additional authenticity obstacles that male candidates typically have not had to endure” (Parry-Giles 23). One strategy for overcoming these hurdles is the “Iron Lady” persona, which perpetuates “patriarchal constructions of leadership” and rhetorically conceals women’s entrance into politics (Richards 139). Yet, even when female politicians adopt this strategy, the binary view of women leaders as either “nice, warm but incompetent” or “competent but unpleasant” persists (Richards 153). As numerous studies have shown, “women have a narrower band of acceptable behavior in leadership roles, particularly ones that are usually occupied by men;”

the behaviors considered desirable in male leaders, such as assertiveness and ambition, mark women as “too aggressive” and “hostile” (Ross).

The U.S. presidency has its own unique gender connotations as well. Linda Horwitz and Holly Swyers note that “American history is still told as a story of ‘founding fathers,’ and the idea of a patriarch as president has a firm hold in the American imagination;” thus, “the notion of what a president should look like, of what is presidential, is fundamentally masculine” (119). The president is a synecdoche for the nation, a nation that has historically perceived itself in masculine terms. In Dana Nelson’s configuration, “presidentialism” is “the concrete correlative for national manhood” (333). Thus, the election of a female president would have consequences for not only the masculinity of her (presumably male) opponent, but the masculinity of all American men and the nation-state itself. A *New York Times* headline in November 2016 declared that “Trump Defeated Clinton, Not Women,” but the gendered construction of the American presidency suggests that, had Clinton won, she would have defeated not only Trump but also American manhood writ large. Indeed, as Rebecca Richards argues, “While the body of a white, heterosexual male occupied the Oval Office, the U.S. citizenry could imagine the nation-state as unchanging and eternal... as if each president was a cut out or carbon copy of the presidents who came before him” (15). When it comes to the gender of the American president, what is at stake is not only the masculinity of the office, but the “appearance of uninterrupted continuity” in American national identity (Richards 15).

POPULAR CULTURE REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE PRESIDENTS

Without any real-life counterparts, popular culture representations of female U.S. presidents bear the weight of visualizing a female presidency. Former Vermont governor Madeleine Kunin explains, “We have to visualize a woman president in office before we can have one.” Televisual representations, with the power to reach enormous

audiences, are one likely venue for this work. A cultural “mythmaker” (Horwitz and Swyers 117), television is “the realm in which we allow our monsters to come out and play, our dreams wrought in pictures, our fantasies transformed into plot structures” (Newcomb and Hirsch 564). When it comes to female presidents, television has traditionally helped audiences picture women in this role while simultaneously undermining the possibility of a real female presidency. Particularly in television depictions before 2008, representations of female presidents have socialized audiences to read female presidents as out of place and less capable than men.

As an example, President Mackenzie Allen (Geena Davis) is depicted in *Commander-in-Chief* (2005) as a strong military leader even as she is crucially undermined in several ways. First, her presidency is depicted as fundamentally “illegitimate” since she was not elected, but assumed the role upon the death of her predecessor (Horwitz and Swyers 124). This is a common trope: many of television’s female presidents assume the role in atypical circumstances. Second, Allen struggles to adequately nurture her children while running the country, and she is “held up simultaneously to feminine and feminist standards, and must fulfill both, but with a bias (still) toward the feminine” (Douglas 288). The show does acknowledge and visualize the role of sexism in preventing a woman president from succeeding, but it offers few solutions. Allen’s is a fish-out-of-water story, and *Commander-in-Chief* primarily mines the topic of a female president for drama based on the perceived difficulties a female president would have balancing motherhood and marriage with the presidency. The show ultimately suggests that, though women might make competent presidents, sexist political and social structures would hinder their success if, by some chance, they could attain the office in the first place.

Such problematic representations of female presidents have prompted calls for more gender-neutral images of the presidency—representations that do not make a female president’s gender her defining quality, that depict female presidents as human, first and

foremost (Carlin and Winfrey 340; Horwitz and Swyers 131; Conroy 64). The hope is that these gender-neutral representations might normalize images of women in the office. And televisual female presidents since the 2008 election show movement in this direction: *Veep*, *State of Affairs*, and *Scandal* all treat a female presidency more as an ordinary course of events than an unlikely, far-fetched occurrence. Still, as the following analyses illustrate, the gender neutrality embraced by these shows risks minimizing the very real gender-based obstacles women politicians face, as well as the social and structural changes needed to enable a successful female U.S. presidency. By masking the material contexts of political, especially presidential, power, the post-2008 turn to gender neutrality suggests that feminist political intervention is no longer necessary and that women's inability to achieve the presidency derives from the failings of individual candidates rather than systemic barriers and embedded sexism.

"Ovaries in the Oval Office": Veep

When HBO launched the political comedy *Veep* in spring 2012, critics immediately recognized the emergence of a new image of female politicians and political power. Salamishah Tillet described the show as "sexy, powerful, and fun," and it does foreground the sexuality of female political figures while also breaking from the tradition of uncritically celebrating female politicians simply for their presence. Focusing on the career of Selina Meyer (Julia Louis-Dreyfus), who occupies the role of vice president and then president, *Veep* breaks new ground in depicting female politicians as just as ineffective as men. As such, *Veep* questions the efficacy of simply adding women to politics as an antidote to corrupt and sexist policies and practices. Overall, *Veep*'s satirical skewering of women's political ambitions in the post-2008 period threatens to undercut real women's political participation and accomplishments.

Veep, which concluded its fifth season in 2016, follows the career of Vice President Meyer, who assumes the office of President when her predecessor resigns. Created by Armando Iannucci, *Veep* is

an adaptation of the British show *In the Thick of It*. Among other awards, the show has been nominated in five consecutive years for the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Comedy Series, winning for its fourth and fifth seasons, and Louis-Dreyfus has won five consecutive Emmy Awards for her performance. Iannucci has insisted that the choice to depict a female politician was pragmatic rather than intentionally feminist: “We don’t want people to think, oh, well this is Joe Biden or this is Dick Cheney or this is Al Gore.... We decided, let’s think forward rather than backward—if we made it a woman we are sort of saying, she’s her own person” (Bennett). Here, the post-2008 turn represents Meyer as independent of female politicians of the real and televisual past. Furthermore, *Veep*’s comedy showcases the dysfunction of Washington, particularly the inefficacy of the vice-presidential role. Gender is not a singular presence in the form of Meyer but a fluid component of Washington political life. For example, a running joke throughout season one was Meyer repeatedly and hopefully asking whether the president had called her, only to be told again and again that no, he had not. Vice presidents lack power and prestige as a rule, regardless of gender.

Veep reflects a form of feminism that Andrea Stuart has described as combining feminist values and rhetoric with anti-feminist aims and representations. “Popular feminism” relies upon feminism primarily as a way to “inoculate” against charges of sexism, creating confusion about what the term really means in contemporary media culture. Feminist critique of programs with these tendencies is challenging because, as Rosalind Gill explain, they “suture” together feminist and anti-feminist ideas (270). Thus, *Veep* depicts Meyer as an active, sexually desiring agent even as she is also subject to gender-based objectification, discrimination, and harassment. An episode about abortion during Meyer’s third season presidential campaign illustrates this point. In the episode, Meyer is forced to articulate her position without the guidance of polling numbers (since the majority of respondents “aren’t sure” how late is too late for an abortion). Meyer’s team urges her to “play the ovaries

card” by situating her answer in the context of her experience as a woman, but she resists, explaining, “I can’t identify myself as a woman. People can’t know that. Men hate that. And women who hate women hate that—which, I believe, is most women.” In this episode, *Veep* gives voice to multiple forms of sexism, including horizontal sexism coming from other women and the more expected male-identified sexism and depicts Meyer’s resistance to this sexism as futile. In fact, the humor derives from Meyer’s capitulation to sexism when she does resort to her gender, prefacing a nonsensical answer about abortion limitations with the undesirable phrase, “As a woman...” Identifying herself as representing a woman’s point of view is ultimately unavoidable, despite Meyer’s best efforts. Judith Williamson calls this type of representation “sexism with an alibi: it appears at once past and present, ‘innocent’ and knowing” (1). And Rosalind Gill notes that, in this context, “[feminist] critique becomes much more difficult—and this, it would seem, is precisely what is intended” (268). Certainly, *Veep*’s reviewers and critics are divided over how to interpret the show’s depiction of gender.³ Despite the fact that *Veep*’s characters express and are subject to explicitly sexist language and stereotypes, commentary tends to focus less on whether the show is sexist and more on whether it might be understood as feminist.

Veep takes representations of female presidents in a new direction by offering an example of a woman who struggles, and frequently fails, to traverse the shifting, dangerous landscape of presidential politics. However, Meyer’s failings are no more or less than those of other characters in the show. In this way, *Veep* contributes to normalizing images of women in power and resists falsely idealizing women. Moreover, the show makes visible some of the real obstacles and double standards that women in politics face.

³ Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to list every review and article that has discussed the issue of feminism as related to *Veep*, the following sources represent the diversity of responses that reviewers and critics have had to the show: Bennett, Khilnani, Wessels, and “Ma’am Up.”

However, the show is ultimately a send-up of the status quo of insider gridlock politics, not a call for social or structural change. As Emanuelle Wessels concludes: “*Veep* reassures viewers that a woman can hold power if she is rendered nonthreatening by ineffectuality and a hyper-feminine aesthetic.” Even in a politically powerful role, Meyer exhibits stereotypically feminine attitudes and behaviors regarding fashion, consumption, and vanity. For scholars of gender and the presidency, the show’s real value may lie in illustrating that merely inserting women into politics, without a concomitant transformation of the political process or structure, is meaningless. Indeed, *Veep*’s political satire questions the presidency as a meaningful goal for feminism or a means to improve women’s lives. As a result, we question the value of *Veep*’s approach for helping audiences visualize a female president. Though it is important to recognize that female politicians are not inherently superior to men, the popular feminism embraced by *Veep* representationally undercuts the value of female participation in politics before real women have even achieved equal representation.

“*There is a Warrior That Has Emerged in You*”: State of Affairs

During 2014, as the third season of *Veep* found Selina Meyer unexpectedly assuming the presidency upon her predecessor’s resignation, NBC introduced its own female president in *State of Affairs*, an espionage thriller series developed by Alexi Hawley. *State of Affairs* is noteworthy both for featuring the first televisual representation of a black female president and for stubbornly ignoring that fact. More than any other representation, *State of Affairs* aspires to absolute blindness with regard to gender and race, effectively de-gendering the office of president. In contrast to the success of *Veep* and *Scandal*, *State of Affairs* failed to garner an audience of viewers, was canceled after one season, and has largely been overlooked by critics as well. Nevertheless, it deserves critical consideration as a text that follows the logic of gender and race blindness further than any other televisual representation of female presidential leadership. *State of Affairs* demonstrates the limitations

of imaginatively de-gendering the presidency without acknowledging how a female president would challenge the masculine association of the role.

State of Affairs clearly prioritized normalizing images of women and people of color in positions of power. In this rare instance, the show's black female president has been elected outright. The show stars Katherine Heigl as Charleston Tucker, a high-level CIA operative responsible for providing daily intelligence briefings to President Constance Payton (Alfre Woodard). Each episode finds Tucker, Payton, and their teams navigating the treacherous terrain of international politics with "ripped from the headlines" plots such as the kidnapping of a group of Nigerian school girls by Boko Haram, among others.

President Payton brings a new kind of female president to the small screen. A pantsuits-clad veteran of the Iraq War and former Senator, Payton holds her own with the masculine (even macho) characters who surround her, is consummately rational and tough, and occupies the position of head of household in her family (literally sitting at the head of the table during family dinners). Like other television depictions, the show includes domestic conflict between Payton and her husband, who complains, "There is a warrior that has emerged in you since you took this office, and I don't know if she's going away anytime soon." Still, by this point in the season, Payton is in conflict with nearly every other character as well, so the marital discord does not particularly stand out. In fact, if anything, it highlights Payton's decisiveness, as she encourages her husband to leave if he can't be strong enough to support her, an offer she repeats to her male chief of staff. Payton is a woman who does not *need* men. Unlike most other representations of female presidents, Payton earned the office on her own merits; she did not gain it by virtue of her relationship with a powerful man, and she does not require men to function in the presidential role.

However, if Payton doesn't need men, it is because she has adopted a masculine persona herself; of the three female presidents

considered here, Payton is the clearest depiction of an “Iron Lady.” In Payton’s presidency, the office itself and presidential power are still masculine. In this way, *State of Affairs* gives the lie to “de-gendered” representations of the presidency. The presidency is already gendered male; pretending otherwise and inserting a female character into the role doesn’t alter that fact, and thus Payton must assume masculine characteristics. This becomes particularly clear in one of the season’s major plot arcs, the mysterious circumstances surrounding the death of Payton’s son, Aaron, who was killed in an ambush in Afghanistan during a campaign visit. Payton is still grieving a year later, but she is less interested in mourning Aaron’s death than in avenging it. By depicting Payton as a mother who uses the resources of her office to avenge her son’s death, *State of Affairs* masculinizes even the role of mother, while at the same time suggesting that a woman president might be emotionally motivated in a way that, presumably, a man might not.

Because of the ostensible gender- and color-blindness of the show, it cannot consider real obstacles that women in politics face and offers no strategies for achieving its vision of racial and gender equality. Instead, *State of Affairs* offers an idealized vision of the U.S. that contrasts with the international locales that form the backdrop for CIA interventions in every episode. In this United States, every job is open to every individual (as long as he or she is willing to adopt strongly masculine qualities), sexual violence does not exist (women actually more commonly assault men than the reverse), and only religion persists as a meaningful identity category (Muslims, whether U.S. citizens or abroad, are consistently depicted as potentially dangerous terrorists). In contrast, whether in Nigeria, Yemen, or Panama, characters in the developing world are resolutely gendered and raced. The U.S. depicted in the show is one in which a person’s success is determined solely by her individual choices and achievements. *State of Affairs* completely overlooks the systemic obstacles that currently limit the success of women and people of

color and circumvents the widespread social change necessary to produce the diverse political power structure depicted in the show.

“You Have to be Twice as Good as Them”: Scandal

Both *Veep* and *State of Affairs* illustrate the difficulty of depicting a female presidency while embracing gender neutrality. In trying to normalize female leaders, whether by giving them human failings or by pretending that gender and race aren't determining forces in their lives, they minimize the symbolic importance of the presidency for women and the obstacles that have prevented real women from attaining the office. In contrast, *Scandal*, which debuted on ABC in April 2012, seeks to normalize images of women in positions of power by multiplying these images. As numerous women in *Scandal* seek the presidency and other political offices, the show acknowledges the challenges that women face and recognizes that these challenges are not distributed equally among women; race and class also impact women's opportunities. Among post-2008 popular culture representations of female presidential power, *Scandal* is most successful in seriously considering women's presidential aspirations and the impossibility of simply inserting women into the role of the president. The show also goes further in recognizing the barriers to political participation that disproportionately impact women of different races.

Scandal, which concluded its sixth season in 2017, follows Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington), a political crisis manager with her own firm, Pope & Associates. In its earlier seasons, *Scandal* focused on Olivia's on-again-off-again affair with then-President Fitzgerald Grant III (Fitz), on whose presidential campaign she worked as a media relations consultant. However, the show evolved to focus less on Fitz's political career and more on his wife, Mellie Grant (Bellamy Young), who divorced Fitz in the season five premiere and launched her own political career. Season six concluded with Mellie's election as president. As Mellie's and Fitz's roles on *Scandal* have evolved, Olivia, too, has shifted from supporting Fitz's presidency to propelling Mellie into the presidency.

The triangular relationship between Fitz, Mellie, and Olivia drives the drama of *Scandal* and positions Olivia, a black woman, as the most powerful, behind-the-scenes player in Washington D.C. The fact that Olivia's power derives as much from her sexuality as from her skills in solving public relations and legal problems for political elites allows the show to, in Nina Cartier's words, "probe questions of just how far black female sexuality has moved from the stereotypes of 'unrapeability' and lasciviousness, if it has indeed moved at all" (154). *Scandal* emphasizes the difficulty that black women face in negotiating sexual politics due to longstanding stereotypes about black female promiscuity. Olivia is at once empowered by her ability to control her own sexuality and exert sexual control over the male President Grant, even as this power is depicted as illegitimate within the traditional Washington power structure. In this way, the show highlights the continuing challenges that black women confront in accessing sexual and political power.

If *Veep* minimizes the value of the presidency for women, *Scandal* keeps the presidency very much in view as a coveted prize. Presidential power is the envy of all the characters in *Scandal*, but arguably its female characters most of all. During the show's first season, for example, three women in Fitz's life employed a variety of tactics to access and shape that power: Vice President Sally Langston, First Lady Mellie Grant, and, of course, presidential mistress Olivia Pope. As *Scandal* has progressed, presidential power has shifted steadily from Fitz to these, and other, women. During season two, Vice President Langston assumed the role of acting president when Fitz had a medical emergency. Mellie's dramatic transformation from a proper southern First Lady to President is particularly noteworthy, as both Mellie and Olivia have transitioned from propping up Fitz's presidency to fighting for Mellie's.

Among shows featuring women with presidential aspirations, *Scandal* stands out for emphasizing how gender and racial biases encoded in the presidency hinder women's access. During her presidential campaign in season six, Mellie struggles to garner public

support for her candidacy and step out of her husband's shadow to create her own public identity. Despite her divorce from Fitz, Mellie is still expected to parrot his positions and policies. During one presidential debate, for example, Mellie is attacked based on a policy that Fitz enacted and must explain to the audience that she is her own woman, not a puppet for her ex-husband. This topic is particularly salient given how candidate Hillary Clinton was consistently pushed to answer for the policies and behaviors of Bill Clinton during his presidency.

For her part, Olivia feels that, due to the combined power of racial and gender bias, she can only participate in politics so long as she remains invisible. Her father reminds her of their "family motto" in the third season premiere: "You have to be twice as good as them to get half of what they have." Through Olivia, *Scandal* highlights that the obstacles women face in pursuing political power are not distributed evenly but diverge along the axes of race and class. For example, in a widely celebrated episode from season five, the show highlighted how the media promotes sexist and racist micro-aggressions against black women by using what one character describes as "language so coded that the only person it's targeting is insulted by it like a dog whistle." In the episode, the revelation of her affair with Fitz prompts intense media scrutiny of Olivia's past sexual and professional life; for the first time, she becomes highly visible in the public eye. Media portrayals undermine Olivia's character, using sexist and racist language so subtle that it goes unnoticed by the general public, such as "articulate," "well-spoken," and "ambitious." Instead of discussing the affair, Olivia's team of PR operatives goes on the offensive to attack the media's treatment of her. Additionally, during the episode, *Scandal's* creator Shonda Rhimes tweeted out a longer list of coded, "dog whistle" words used to insult black women: "Lucky, sassy, ambitious, well-spoken, well-mannered, articulate, calculating, secretive, urban, hot, arrogant, siren, thug." As one of Olivia's representatives explains during the episode: "Words like these mean nothing to the general public which

is why the media... can get away with using them. But when women of color, like Ms. Pope, hear that kind of code language, they know exactly what you're getting at." Although *Scandal* offers a vision of American politics in which women have attained a greater level of participation than in reality, the show also visualizes obstacles that confront women in leadership roles; it does not imaginatively erase the roadblocks that limit black women's full participation.

Scandal avoids many of the pitfalls of other popular culture representations of female presidents by multiplying the female characters with political power and aspirations. In *Scandal's* Washington, a woman running for president and winning is normal—or, at least, not earth-shattering. In addition to Mellie, Senator Josie Marcus, former Vice President Sally Langston, and former Vice President Susan Ross all run for president at various times. By making women seeking the presidency seem commonplace, *Scandal* can consider the individual strengths and failings of its characters without maligning all women or questioning women's leadership in general. In this way, the show also illustrates how different positions relative to presidential power produce different potentials for agency. For example, *Scandal's* female characters are able to negotiate the perilous issue of "likability" differently depending on their positioning. Since Olivia's power operates behind the scenes, she is not subject to the same requirement to be likable as the women seeking public office. She can run her PR firm ruthlessly at times because she is not ultimately accountable to the public. In contrast, those (white) women seeking public office balance strength and likability in a variety of ways, whether through clothing hard-nosed ambition in conservative Christianity (as Vice President Langston does) or by recasting personal struggles like an ex-husband's affair as evidence that she can relate to Americans facing difficulties (in the case of Mellie Grant). Whatever their subject positioning, *Scandal* is attuned to the different strategies that women use to access and use presidential power.

More than other post-2008 representations of female presidents, *Scandal* resists the temptation to de-gender the presidency to allow a woman to occupy the role. Though it depicts its characters as deeply flawed, and in fact depends upon those flaws to drive the drama, it helps audiences visualize women in the office of president without minimizing the value of this goal for women or the difficulty women face in pursuing it. In addition, *Scandal* depicts the racial and gender biases that prevent black women from participating in politics as fully as white women. In the end, the sexual and political intrigues in which characters regularly find themselves are not the real “scandals” of the show; the true scandal is that the most competent, well-equipped character feels that her race and gender preclude her from ever pursuing the presidency.

CONCLUSIONS: PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS AS WOMEN’S WORK

Veep, *State of Affairs*, and *Scandal* each pursue new visions of female presidents that reflect the growing demand for such representations following the 2008 presidential election. While all three texts attempt to normalize images of female presidents and break from earlier representations by treating a female presidency as an ordinary course of events, only *Scandal* normalizes female political power without also minimizing either the significance of gender as a cultural force or the value of the presidency as a feminist goal. *Veep* and *State of Affairs* embrace a problematic gender neutrality, de-gendering the presidency in a way that undermines, rather than supports, substantive change in the political sphere. As scholars of women in politics have found, these imagined female presidents “reflect Western and masculinist leadership styles that privilege personal agency and leaders’ unique abilities above structural factors such as race, class, education, and ethnicity” (Dingo xi). As in rhetorics of women’s work that highlight women’s “personal choices” rather than the structural components that shape those choices, these *deus ex machina* depictions of female presidents distract from the real factors that undergird unequal political representation,

including the systemic barriers to women's participation discussed by Lawless and Fox and the ideological equation of presidential leadership with masculinity. As Douglas concludes, "this ersatz, 'can do' feminism substitutes our own individual efforts, and our own responsibility to succeed, for what used to be a more collective sensibility about pushing for changes that would help all women" (16). The social change necessary for meaningful political change begins with language and follows with institutional changes that strip race-, class-, gender- and sexuality-based barriers.

While *Veep* and *State of Affairs* de-gender the presidency, in a form of wishful thinking, they do not take the next step to re-gender the presidency. They refrain from addressing how a female president, by the fact of her existence and embodiment, would challenge the masculine identification of the presidency and its attending understandings of citizenship and nationhood. Until we can successfully imagine a female president, we will be dogged by what Richards has termed the paradox of the "woman leader" (17). While most (inter)national political leaders who are women will be called something like "woman leader," "there is never a need to additionally gender the term 'leader' when a male holds a leadership position" (16-17). We do not refer to someone as a "man leader" or hypothesize about a "male president." Those creating and viewing representations of "woman presidents" would do well to consider Richards' questions: "Does inserting the word 'woman' before 'leader' mean that this person will lead differently or provide a revolutionary or feminist model of leadership? Does 'woman leader' mitigate some of the negative connotations that one might associate with women? Or with leaders?" (17). As long as we retain the language of a "female president," our terminology reaffirms that the ideology of "president=man" still holds sway.

Scandal provides a stronger representation because it does not force a single female character to represent all women's political aspirations and abilities. This kind of representation has the power to inspire audiences with regard to female political participation,

whereas representations of women adopting masculinist leadership styles or fumbling through the presidency do not. We hope to see *Scandal* and other popular culture representations of women as presidents that go even further in exploring a model of leadership that embraces the idea that a female body in the role of president would re-gender both leadership and nationhood. We need representations that both normalize women in the role of president and explore how feminist leadership would inevitably change, and enrich, the office. Anything less is a failure of imagination.

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