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How to Get Away with Colour: Colour-Blindness and the Myth of a Postracial America in American Television Series

Emiel Martens and Débora Povoa

Abstract: *The popular American television series* How to Get Away with Murder *(2014) seems to challenge the long history of stereotypical roles assigned to racial minorities in American media by choosing a multiracial cast to impersonate characters that, while having different racial backgrounds, share a similar socio-economic status and have multidimensional personalities that distance them from the common stereotypes. However, although it has been praised for its portrayal of racial diversity, the series operates within a problematic logic of racial colour-blindness, disconnecting the main characters from any sign of racial specificity and creating a fictional world in which racism is no longer part of American society. This case study aims to demonstrate to which extent the "colour-blind approach" of the TV show reinforces the postracial illusion in the United States, i.e. the idea that the country has overcome its past of racial segregation and now offers the same opportunities for everyone, regardless of colour and race. Through a narrative analysis of the first season of the series, this chapter will argue that the depiction of race in* How to Get Away with Murder *is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, the show does not completely ignore race by inserting topics such as racism in the plot, giving these issues at least some visibility. On the other hand, its more general panorama reveals an intent to deracialise its main characters in a colour-blind manner. This is problematic since it overshadows racial issues that still have a big impact on the lives of racial minorities.*

Throughout the history of American film and television, racial minorities have long been under- and misrepresented. From its origins up until the present day, US screen media have systematically excluded and marginalised non-White actors. In fact, although the United States is an increasingly diverse society, African Americans, Hispanics and Asian Americans (the three largest non-White groups in the US) still appear on film and television screens in numbers that "far from reflect their actual prevalence among the US population" (*National Post*; see also Smith, Choueti, and Pieper). And when they do appear on screen (or on stage, for that matter), they are often reduced to stereotypes in supporting roles. As Barnes recently observed, there is still "a distinct lack of ethnic representation on creative teams and characters are often written within a narrow set of stereotypes, with few leading roles written for non-White actors" (142).

However, over the past ten years or so, it seems that commercial American television networks have slowly begun to challenge the prevailing inequality in representation by showing African Americans and other racial minorities in more extensive and sensitive ways (Ashe and Bonilla-Silva; Doane; Mask; Nama). Most noticeably, prime-time cable television drama series have started to feature racially diverse casts and non-White actors in leading roles. Popular TV

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series such as *Scandal* (2012), *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014) and *Empire* (2015) are among the most prominent examples of this recent turn of commercial American cable networks toward "diversity casting" (Nilsen and Turner 5). Besides responding to the growing size and purchasing power of racial minorities, which makes these groups appealing target markets, these hit series also coincide with the rise of the idea of the United States as a "colour-blind" or "postracial" nation after the election of Barack Obama as president in 2008 (Bonilla-Silva; Doane; Baker and Simmons). The series illustrate how, as argued by Nilsen and Turner, "the dominant mode of televisual racialization has shifted to a colorblind ideology"—an ideology that is highly problematic as it denies "the social, economic, and political realities and inequalities that continue to define race relations today" (4).

This article takes a closer look at one of the most recent and popular "new generation television series" (Arcimowics 105), namely, the universally acclaimed *How to Get Away with Murder* (*HTGAWM*), and examines how race and racial diversity are portrayed in the series. Does *HTGAWM* subscribe to the colour-blind ideology or acknowledge the existence of "racial specificity and racist exclusivity" (Goldberg 2)? To answer this question, we have conducted a narrative analysis of the series' first season, which consists of fifteen episodes of about forty-three minutes each. In addition, we have looked at several interviews with the cast and crew of *HTGAWM* in American news media, in order to trace the series' racial ideology from a maker's perspective. We argue that the series is problematic in its depiction of race and racial diversity. While containing progressive moments, *HTGAWM* ultimately adopts a colour-blind ideology that perpetuates racial stereotypes and largely ignores the realities of ongoing institutional racism and racial inequality in America's "so-called 'post-racial' nation" (Bonilla-Silva, "Structure" 7).

The Rise of Colour-Blindness and the Myth of Postracial America in US Television

Probably the most significant phase in America's postwar racial history was the era of the Civil Rights Movement, also in terms of the representation of African Americans and other racial minorities in US screen media. Beginning in the early 1950s, at the same time that television made its way into most American homes, this was a major movement of civil resistance in the United States intended to end racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans and to secure equal rights and opportunities for all US citizens, irrespective of race, colour or sex. The Civil Rights Movement won its greatest legal triumphs in the mid-1960s with the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, prohibiting, at least on paper, discrimination in public spaces, employment and voting. Although the effects of the movement were not immediately apparent in Hollywood cinema, "the coming of television pushed the film industry, which was competing with the new medium in the era of the baby boom, towards greater revelation, controversy, and maturity, including in the realm of race" (Scott 10). It could be argued that television became the main medium of the Civil Rights Movement, first by showing racial segregation and protest marches in the news, and later also by producing more positive portrayals of African Americans and integration stories in sitcoms (Boyd; Torres).

Of course, the end of the Jim Crow Era—i.e. the outlawing of racial segregation in the mid-1960s—by no means signalled the end of institutional racism in America. As Bonilla-Silva

argues, by the late 1960s, "slowly but surely a new system emerged" in the United States, i.e. a system of "new racism" in which "racial inequality is still produced in a systematic way …, but … the dominant practices that produce it are no longer overt, seem almost invisible, and are seemingly non-racial" ("Structure" 5–6). Within this hard-to-detect new racism, Bonilla-Silva continues, "Blacks and Whites remain mostly separate and unequal in many areas of social life", such as health, housing, education and work ("Structure" 5). Indeed, although the post-Civil Rights era has witnessed the growth of the African-American and Latino middle class and the rise of racial minorities in "positions of leadership and influence in almost every sphere of American life" (Dreier 50), the majority of non-White Americans "have not advanced much" (Bonilla-Silva, "Structure" 6) and still live with systemic racism; this is notably—and increasingly—visible in double standards, racial profiling, White vigilantism and police brutality (Mask).

According to Bonilla-Silva ("Structure" 6), in the 1970s and 1980s, "a new dominant racial ideology" arose alongside the system of new racism. This ideology, which he labelled "color-blind racism" (*Racism*), was "based on the superficial extension of the principles of liberalism to racial matters that results in 'raceless' explanations for all sorts of race-related affairs" ("Structure" 7). In other words, according to the logic of colour-blind racism, systemic racism and racial inequality are relics of the past, with all Americans now having the same opportunities to achieve prosperity, regardless of colour or race (Gallagher). Or, as Doane explains, the logic claims that "racism is no longer embedded in the U.S. social structure and no longer serves as an obstacle to success" (15). As a result, racism becomes seen as the sum of "isolated acts of 'ignorant' individuals or extremist 'hate groups' on the fringes of society", unconnected to any institutional or social arrangement (20). In effect, the logic of colour-blind racism sustains White power and privilege by rendering latent racial issues invisible and dismissing the necessity of (affirmative) actions to repair racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva, "Structure").

American popular television adopted the logic of colour-blindness in due time. According to Nilsen and Turner, television producers started to employ "a variety of colorblind strategies in order to counter charges of racism and racial insensitivity" (5). One of the most dominant trends became "diversity casting, which showcases a multicultural cast without acknowledging or addressing cultural and social differences" (Nilsen and Turner 5). *Julia* (1968–1971) and *The Cosby Show* (1984–1992), two early sitcoms featuring African Americans in leading roles, heralded the beginning of the era of colour-blind television. Both situation comedies depicted its African-American lead characters in a multicultural assimilationist fashion. In *Julia*, widowed single mother Julia Baker (Diahann Carroll) was distanced from any reference to Black American culture (Kretsedemas); while in the hugely popular *The Cosby Show*, the Huxtables, led by father Cliff (Bill Cosby) and mother Clair (Phylicia Rashād), were "an upper-middle class family, who just happened to be African American", virtually untouched by any financial difficulty or racial prejudice (Coleman 199).

In the 1990s, various Black sitcoms tried to repeat the popularity of *The Cosby Show*, including *Family Matters* (1989–1998), *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990–1996), *In Living Color* (1990–1994) and *Living Single* (1993–1998). However, instead of being merely "'assimilationist' programs" denying racial difference, most of these sitcoms were "'separate but equal' programs" presenting "a self-sufficient ethno-racial world" that ran parallel to the White

world (Brook 85; see also Gray 84–91). By the late 1990s and into the new millennium, when the trend of Black sitcoms started to wane, a group of minority media advocacy institutions demanded more racial diversity in the programming of major networks. In the face of this pressure, these networks included more people of colour in their casts (Nama). In doing so, they established a new mode of racial representation that Entman and Rojecki have called "utopian reversal" (152). Twisting the traditional hierarchy of White superiors and Black subordinates, drama series such as *ER* (1994–2009) and *NYPD Blue* (1993–2005) featured many Black characters in professional and managerial positions.

The era of colour-blind television, and "the rise of post-racial politics" (Wise) more generally, may be said to have truly started in 2008, when Barack Obama, "the first Black candidate" (Zeleny), ran for US president and won. Following in the footsteps of Bill Cosby and other Black celebrities, Obama became the ultimate embodiment of the America's postracial ideals:

> If Michael Jackson can become the bestselling pop artist of all time, if Oprah Winfrey can become the most powerful woman on television, if Beyoncé can become a global pop star, and if Barack Obama can become the first African-American president of the United States of America, then racism is no longer an obstacle to individual achievement and social-economic success (Kooijman 164).

Over the past eight years or so, coinciding with Obama's presidency (2009–2017), many scholars and other commentators have argued that, with his election, the "sentiment of post-racial achievement" (Richomme 1) became increasingly widespread throughout the United States, creating a strong perception of "a new era in our society—one in which race no longer matters" (Esposito 95). While some of them claimed that this sentiment only lasted until Obama's inauguration in 2009 or quickly vanished in the face of racialised police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement in 2014, the myth of a postracial America continued throughout Obama's entire eight-year presidency. It has been argued that the myth ended abruptly with the election of Donald Trump in November 2016, "finally putting to rest the illusion that we live in a post-racial world" (Paradkar).

During this period the postracial ideology became more evident than ever in American television drama series. In 2012, the initial success of *Scandal* (2012–), featuring African-American actress Kerry Washington in the lead role of crisis manager Olivia Pope, prompted discussion about whether this prime-time political thriller series represented "a new era of post-racial television, in which cast members are ethnically diverse but are not defined by their race or ethnicity" (Vega). According to Murphy,

> *Scandal* was marked as a significant series when it premiered in 2012, in part because it was the first broadcast network series to feature an African-American actress in a leading role since *Get Christie Love!* (ABC, 1974–1975). Although popular press coverage placed an emphasis on the decision to cast Kerry Washington as the lead, reviewers and commentators simultaneously claimed that the series was 'post-racial' because it avoided overt discussions of race.

By then, Shonda Rhimes, the creator behind *Scandal*, was already known (and often praised) for "her 'colorblind' approach to storytelling" (Murphy). Previously, she had been utilising this approach in her first television production, *Grey's Anatomy* (2005–). According to Warner, this medical drama series became "a runaway success because it exemplified the notion of a multicultural, yet, paradoxically, post-racial society" through its "investment in normalizing non-racialized characters" (636–7). Following the "crossover phenomena" *Grey's Anatomy*, its spin-off *Private Practice* (2007–2013), and *Scandal*, the next pilot script ABC ordered from ShondaLand, the television production company founded by Rhimes in 2005, was *HTGAWM*, which debuted on the network in September 2014 (Erigha 10).

Racial Diversity and Character Complexity in *How to Get Away with Murder*

HTGAWM marked a fifth ABC drama series produced by ShondaLand. After creating and writing the first three successful series, this time Rhimes only took up the post of executive producer. The creator of *HTGAWM* became Peter Nowalk, "one of her protégés" who previously worked with Rhimes as a cowriter on *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scandal* (Kay). Having Rhimes as his creative mentor, he developed the same commitment to racial diversity (and arguably a greater commitment to sexual diversity), and, as we will argue, a similar postracial approach to race.

As with previous ShondaLand productions, *HTGAWM* featured a racially diverse cast. African-American actress Viola Davis played the lead role of defence lawyer and law professor Annalise Keating. This was an achievement in itself, as Davis became only the second Black actress (after Washington in *Scandal*) to star in a prime-time American network series in almost forty years (Nilsen and Turner)—and the first African-American actress to win an Emmy for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series. When looking at the standard representation of Black women in US television, her selection for the leading role was even regarded as more progressive than Washington's. As Davis stated herself in an interview for *The Hollywood Reporter*, she has a darker skin colour than most other Black actresses in Hollywood and was almost fifty years of age when she started working on the series, which is usually considered "too old" and "not sexy enough" for Hollywood:

> I had no precedent for this role. I've never seen anyone, 49-year old, dark-skinned, woman, who is not a size 2, be [in] a sexualized role on TV, film, anywhere, ever. And then suddenly this role came to me. But to say it was fear would be an understatement; it was bigger than fear. … And then my big "a-ha" moment was: "this is your moment to not typecast yourself."

In a similar fashion, Alessandra Stanley, in her review of *HTGAWM* for *The New York Times*, argued that Davis did not "look at all like the typical star of a network drama." According to the TV critic, "Rhimes chose a performer who is older, darker-skinned and less classically beautiful than Ms. Washington, or for that matter Halle Berry," with that "ignoring the narrow beauty standards some African-American women are held to." Although Stanley's review did not remain uncontroversial (Damico and Quay 79–80), it once more shows that Davis' role broke barriers for Black women in American TV series.

The rest of the main cast filled out the ranks of student trainees, employees, husband and lover of the female lead character. In the series, Annalise picks five of her most promising students ("the Keating 5") to work for her at her law firm, which she runs from her home together with two assistants, Frank Delfino (Charlie Weber) and Bonnie Winterbottom (Liza Weil). While both assistants are White, the group of student trainees consists of a racially diverse ensemble. Two of them, Connor Walsh (Jack Falahee) and Asher Millstone (Matt McGorry), are White Americans; two are Black Americans—namely, Haitian-American Wesley Gibbins (Alfred Enoch) and African-American Michaela Pratt (Aja Naomi King); and one, Laurel Castillo (Karla Souza), is Latino. While Annalise's husband, Sam Keating, is a White psychology professor (Tom Verica), her lover Nate Lahey is a Black police officer (Billy Brown). In addition, one of the most recurrent characters in the first season is Oliver Hampton (Conrad Ricamora), a Filipino-American I.T. specialist and "gay lover" (and later boyfriend) of Connor. Considering this "rainbow cast", it could be argued that *HTGAWM* shows higher levels of racial diversity than most of its predecessors, especially since these casts "typically remain supporting players for the … White leads who continue to dominate television programming" (Nilsen and Turner 5).

Still, the question remains as to *how* race and racial diversity are portrayed in *HTGAWM*. Moving beyond the numbers, and focusing on the series' narrative, notably its characters and themes, we will examine to what extent racial sensitivity and cultural specificity are progressively included. To start with, the three main settings in which the characters appear and the story unfolds are worth mentioning: the university, the court, and Annalise's home office. While these settings could be described as elitist environments, throughout the series they are largely portrayed as diverse, equitable and inclusive environments. In the first episode ("Pilot"), the series opens with Wesley cycling on the campus of Middleton University in Philadelphia, on his way to the lecture hall for his first class of the introductory criminal law course taught by Annalise. Upon arrival, the lecture hall of the law school is filled with students who appear to be from a wide variety of racial backgrounds—just like the five student trainees Annalise would select from this freshmen group. The same largely applies to the people working in the court system, with Annalise being a mentor and role model for "the Keating 5" for her outstanding qualities as a lawyer—race does not seem to be a factor in any way. In addition, in the mixed marriage between her and Sam, as well as in the other interracial relationships and affairs happening in the series, race hardly plays any role, being virtually invisible and irrelevant.

On the one hand, it could be argued that the series' main characters, regardless of their racial background, take up the position of ordinariness, which is, as Richard Dyer has shown, the most powerful position people can inhabit, one that in Western representation has usually been reserved for White people:

> At the level of racial representation, … Whites are not of a certain race; they are just the human race… There is no more powerful position than that of "just" being human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that—they can only speak for their race. (2–3)

In *HTGAWM*, all characters, White and non-White, are represented as ordinary but unique individuals having diverse characteristics and behaviours, irrespective of their race. In

fact, each character is emotionally complex, multilayered and morally ambiguous. As such, the series seems to disregard what Albert Memmi once called the "mark of the plural", which projects racial minorities as "all the same", and shows all its characters as "'naturally' diverse, examples of the ungeneralizable variety of life itself" (Shohat and Stam 183).

However, while the rendering of racial diversity and equality as the norm is refreshing to see on American prime-time television, the series' naturalisation of racial egalitarianism among the main characters ultimately endorses the idea of the United States as a postracial society. By portraying the university and the court as diverse and inclusive environments, *HTGAWM* pays little attention to the persistence—and the persistent naturalisation—of structural racial inequality within these two institutions. The student populations of most US universities, and particularly selective ones, are still disproportionately White (Supiano). While US law schools are slowly becoming more racially diverse, at present 70–90 percent of law students are White (Torres-Spelliscy, Chase, and Greenman). Although universities in California, like the University of Southern California where the series was shot, have among the most diverse student populations in the country, the racial diversity in Annalise's classroom by far does not correspond to the reality of American law schools (and American elite universities more generally). As such, the series largely disregards the continuing racial disparities in the US higher education system. Similarly, White people, and White males particularly, are also overrepresented in the US court system, taking up most judicial seats and legal professions (Torres-Spelliscy, Chase and Greenman). Again, by showing a "naturally" diverse work force and (the promise of) equal opportunities for all, *HTGAWM* gives the impression to uncritically embrace the postracial illusion and runs the risk of being complicit with the logic of colour-blind racism.



Figure 1: Quantitatively, *How to Get Away with Murder* depicts more diversity on screen than most of previous TV shows. However, by treating all the characters as equals, the series corroborates the postracial discourse. *How to Get Away with Murder*, Season 1, Episode 3, "Smile or go to Jail". ShondaLand / ABC 2014. Screenshot.

Some might argue that the post-racial (over)representation of racial minorities in the series is done on purpose, as a deliberate idealisation and strategy of "'progressive realism' to unmask and combat hegemonic representations" (Shohat and Stam 180). However, from various interviews with Rhimes it becomes clear that this is not the case. On the contrary, she often emphasises that all her series mirror the real (racial) world. In a public speech she gave in 2015, Rhimes confirmed her belief in America as a postracial nation:

> In ShondaLand our shows look like the world does … To me, that was not some difficult, brave, special decision I made. It was a human one, because I am a human … This is not the Jim Crow's south, we're not ignorant, so why wouldn't we do that? I still can't believe I get asked about it [the racial diversity in her casts] all the time, as if being normal, TV looking like the normal world, is an innovation. (Enlow)

While Rhimes asserts that her productions portray American society *as it is*, it could be argued that they mainly show society *as it is for her*. Coming from a Black upper-class family, she was raised without much racial exclusion and with the idea of equal opportunities for all. In an interview for *The Hollywood Reporter*, Rhimes shares that "I was raised by parents who were professors and my father used to always say to me, even when I was very little, 'the only limit to your success is your own imagination.'... The idea that anything is possible really does seem true to me, and always has" (Giardina). Here, and in other instances, Rhimes implicitly shows that she is part of the "African-American intelligentsia" (Kilson) for whom the United States may indeed feel colour-blind. According to Baker and Simmons, the idea of America as a postracial nation should be seen as "a pleasurable entitlement for a Black elite," whose "own salaries and celebrity" provide evidence of the "victory over America's longstanding codes of racial exclusion and racist violence." This, Baker and Simmons continue, enables them to "reject the ethics and urgency of improving the well-being of the Black majority" who are still mired in the American underclass. Indeed, the idea of "Black transcendentalist individualism" is well represented in *HTGAWM*, largely at the expense of the recognition of racial inequality as a structural issue and the Black underclass as a social problem in the United States (Baker and Simmons).

In addition, while the characters in *HTGAWM* are shown in a postracial fashion, this does not mean that they have escaped the process of racial stereotyping. As Tillotson argues, the postracial ideology is largely a new attempt of the same "aggressive assimilation strategies" that maintains traditional stereotypes along the lines of the "universal" ideal of American Whiteness (78). While the colour-blindness thus "requires marginalized people to relinquish their [racial] identity … it does not seek to dismantle the universal that is European that is American that is white" (78) In other words, even when racial minorities are represented in a colour-blind setting, they are rooted in stereotypes upheld by the White cultural majority. Gammage argues that recent American television dramas with a Black female protagonist illustrate "a national acceptance of a Black jezebel/sapphire"—and that *HTGAWM* is no exception (122). On the contrary, Gammage highlights Annalise as a Black woman living out "the combined stereotypes of the jezebel and sapphire", being portrayed as "unfit for motherhood", "uncontrollably sex-crazed" and "lacking all moral grounding" (118). Thus, although Davis did perhaps not look like "the typical star of a network drama" (Stanley) and, as such, broke barriers for Black women in

American TV series, her character adopted popular "stereotyped notions of Black woman" that undermined the "racial dynamics" that have structured American society throughout its historical development (Gammage). In the same manner, the other non-White characters in *HTGAWM* are depicted within the confines of the mythical construction of the multicultural and postracial American nation.

Racial (In)Sensitivity and Cultural (Non-)Specificity in *How to Get Away with Murder*

In an interview for *Variety*, *HTGAWM* creator Nowalk conveys that race constitutes one of the most important themes in the series: "Themes I want to play with … are race and class, especially in an elite university. We're not colorblind to who these people are; their identities … and everything about them will become potential story." Interestingly, Nowalk considers "a law school at an elite university" as a "freaking diverse" environment, which almost suggests that he assumes that racial diversity logically had to end up in the series. Although Nowalk here seemingly overestimates the racial diversity at American law schools, he does express a commitment to dealing with racial issues. Undoubtedly, *HTGAWM* pays attention to racial sensitivities and cultural specificities, certainly more than most of its predecessors. However, it largely does so as "plays" (to stay close to Nowalk's idea) within the hegemonic confines of the multicultural and post-racial American nation.

The first instance within the series that race comes into play in the dialogues is in the second episode ("It's All Her Fault"), when Connor and Asher question Wesley's selection for the Keating 5. Connor argues that "we all earned our spot here" except for Wes, who he calls "Waitlist", referring to Wes' "secondary" position on the student waitlist before being accepted to law school. Asher agrees and somewhat jokingly insinuates that Wes got into Annalise's team for different reasons than quality considerations: "Maybe he is her secret baby and she gave him up for adoption and he doesn't even know?" Michaela instantly responds with disapproval to Asher's question: "Because all Black people are related?" The scene shows, in a nuanced way, the presence of Black prejudice among White Americans, particularly the perception that all Black people are the same and one big family. While the dialogue brings the dynamics of racial prejudice explicitly to the fore, it remains only a brief interplay in the group's conversation, one that immediately comes to an end when Michaela expresses her discontent. Asher denies that he intended to be prejudiced, after which the conversation continues in a different direction. In the entire first season, Wes' racial background is mentioned just once. In episode 7 ("He Deserved to Die"), Wes tells his girlfriend Rebecca (Katie Findlay) that he was born in Haiti and moved to Ohio with his mother when he was one, where he grew up as "the only Black kid in… town." It is the only time that Wes gets racially marked; his Afro-Caribbean ties are not emphasised in any of the other episodes, making his cultural specificity virtually nonexistent.

The same largely applies to the other student trainees. They hardly show any cultural markers, and when they do, these markers merely function as brief inserts or "proofs of authenticity or 'realism'" within the overall narrative (Fisher 46). For example, the only time in the first season that Laurel's racial background comes to the surface is in episode 11 ("Best Christmas Ever"), when she celebrates Christmas with her wealthy family in West Palm Beach, Florida. While gathering at the dinner table, a sudden and short switch from English to Spanish

happens when the tensions between Laurel and her father come to a boil. Apart from this moment, Laurel is removed from any sign of cultural specificity, creating an almost "raceless" character whose Latin identity is all but invisible and remains unmentioned except in that single moment of family matters. Although actress Karla Souza, in an interview with *Red Carpet Report*, has indicated that she liked it that her "character was actually not thought of as Latin at all", the almost complete invisibility of her Latin identity suggests a postracial perspective that ignores racial classifications and concerns.

In the case of Annalise, inserts of racial reference and cultural specificity occur a few times, usually in emotionally charged moments. In one instance, in episode 9 ("Kill Me, Kill Me, Kill Me"), when Annalise is in an intense fight with her husband Sam, she accuses him of only wanting her as a Black trophy wife: "I've been the window dressing for you, the Black woman on your arm so that you can hide, so that people only saw the good guy." In another instance, in episode 13 ("Mama's Here Now"), when Annalise lies miserable in her bed, her mother Ophelia (Cicely Tyson) describes Sam as a "no-account, sorry-ass husband" who she said not to marry and now "went and slept with a White woman." Despite these two instances, in which the cause of the marriage failure is (at least partly) ascribed to race, in general the relationship between Annalise and Sam is portrayed as colour-blind. Until the ninth episode it seems that race plays no role in their marriage whatsoever. According to Gammage (121), *HTGWAM* even essentially perpetuates "the mythic reality that educated, established Black women must date outside of their race in order to find a good man" and as such promotes an anti-same-race marriage agenda. Indeed, when looking at the series' first season, almost all non-White characters in the series are involved in interracial relationships or affairs, mainly with White characters. Moreover, all seem to be detached from their racial background and communities, always finding themselves in assimilationist-multicultural environments.



Figure 2: The "wig scene" was praised for showing both Annalise's vulnerability and racial background, in spite of being one of the only moments of cultural specificity in the show. *How to Get Away with Murder*, Season 1, Episode 4, "Let's Get to Scooping." ShondaLand / ABC 2014. Screenshot.

The few instances in which Annalise shows cultural specificity revolve around Black hairstyling practices and the showing of natural hair. First, in episode 4 ("Let's Get to Scooping"), she takes off her wig and eyelashes in the bedroom after she just learned that her husband cheated on her with one of his students (and possibly even killed her). Davis, who apparently instigated the scene, has described the moment as both exemplary and symbolic:

> I pushed for that to happen … I said, she's not going to bed with her wig on. It could be powerful and liberating, but she's got to take her wig off. Because who Annalise is in public is a big fat lie, and we have to see her taking off the armour, which is so thick, it becomes all the more dramatic when she removes it, and you see all the pain. (Frost)

Then, in episode 13 ("Mama's Here Now"), there is a scene in which Annalise's mother is combing out her daughter's hair. Being again in the bedroom, Annalise sits down on the floor between her mother's knees, who is running a comb through her hair while talking about their complicated and painful past. For Black American women, watching these scenes could feel both familiar and revolutionary. For example, Danielle Henderson, culture editor at *Fusion*, argues that these scenes were "so familiar, and something I've never seen on TV before … *How to Get Away with Murder* is so good at showing these small slices of Black culture." Still, however innovative in terms of visibility, these culturally specific "slices" remain innocent and harmless moments embedded in an otherwise assimilationist-multicultural context; moments that Nowalk largely considers as random details of post-racial authenticity:

> It's not a conscious decision to say, 'What slice of culture are we going to show in this episode?' It's more just, 'This is what a Black mother and her Black daughter would do.' She would comb her hair. Then it was just like, 'All right, let's do that in the scene.' It's as simple as that. (Fellon)

Moreover, these "slices of culture"—as Nowalk apparently refers to Black American culture—do not challenge "the authority of the White West" (Dyer 3), but rather subscribe to the dominant multicultural and postracial discourse in the United States that only allows for "acceptable" and "enjoyable" cultural diversity (e.g. Annalise's natural hair is only shown in private (bedroom) situations, not in public and professional ones).

In one episode of *HTGAWM*'s first season, race becomes the core theme. In episode 6 ("Freakin' Whack-a-Mole"), racial inequality takes centre stage when Annalise files an appeal for David Allen, a Black man who has been convicted of murdering his White girlfriend, Trisha Stanley, and is now, twenty-one years later, a few weeks away from death-row execution. For Annalise, it is an important and personal case, as it marks, in her own words, "the first case that opened my eyes to the fact that the justice system doesn't always reward people who tell the truth, but those who have the power to create their own." She here refers to the existence of unjust power and privilege in American institutions and the wrongful convictions of innocent people resulting from it. Annalise's appeal relies on the suspicion that the murder was ordered by Art Trucco, a White state senator who saw a massive redevelopment housing project—and with that the displacement of thousands of low-income, often non-White households—being endangered by litigation led by Trisha. In a passionate speech in court, Annalise exposes the brutal force of gentrification and racial displacement illegally pushed by the senator:

> I am sorry, senator, if you do not have the time to answer for who bore the real cost of your development … Not just Trisha Stanley and her boyfriend, David Allen, who served 21 years in prison … but the thousands who were displaced in the name of lining your pockets … the majority of whom are poor, powerless, and didn't bear the color of skin desirable to your business interests. You tore a community apart! You tore families apart! You destroyed lives, senator!

Still, although the episode addresses gentrification and racial discrimination in the housing market, it does so in the context of an illegal incident, largely neglecting the issue of structural racism. At the same time, while hinting at racial bias in US court proceedings, race is never explicitly mentioned as an explanation for David's unjust conviction. This avoidance returns in episode 13 ("Mama's Here Now"), when Michaela suggests that Nate, who is mistakenly charged with the murder of her husband, runs the risk of being found guilty because of his colour. Annalise, however, dismisses Michaela's concern by stating that all people, regardless of their race or colour, can become a victim of America's postracial justice system: "Injustices happen in courtrooms every day in this country; you never bat an eye." Once more, racial inequality is largely made into something of the past, a reality that no longer matters in America's postracial myth.

Conclusion

HTGAWM is problematic in its depiction of race and racial diversity. Although the makers are seemingly committed to racial sensitivity and cultural specificity, the series ultimately adopts a celebratory postracial narrative. Despite the use of racialised characters and themes, the general panorama of the series reveals that it largely operates on a colour-blind logic in which its characters are deracialised and stripped of most racial markers and cultural distinctions. As such, the series could be seen as another investment of Shonda Rhimes's production company in "normalizing non-racialized characters [which] exemplifies the liberal individualist discourse of a post-racial America" (Warner 637). By and large, the show works as a visual articulation of today's colour-blind ideology that ignores institutional discrimination and advances the new racism. After *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scandal*, *HTGAWM* is ShondaLand's third successful prime-time TV series in ten years' time that presents non-White characters and racial themes in a nonthreatening way to its core Black female and crossover White audiences (Erigha 10). Although the series shows a greater awareness of racial differences and disparities than its predecessors, there is still a long way to go before popular American television series can get away with colour.

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