HOW TO GET AWAY WITH WHITEWASHING: EVALUATING THE EFFECTS OF THE BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL MOVEMENT ON BEAUTY STANDARDS THROUGH BEING MARY JANE AND HOW TO GET AWAY WITH MURDER

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ABSTRACT

Beauty standards permeate American society and influence the ways women dress, style their hair, eat, and wear their makeup. African American women, however, have historically been excluded from the traditional beauty standard. The 1960s Black is Beautiful Movement attempted to expand the beauty standard to include African American women and celebrate their natural beauty, specifically their natural hair, darker skin, and various body types. This thesis examines what the differences and similarities in the representation of black female beauty in Being Mary Jane and How To Get Away With Murder reveal about how far reaching and effective the 1960s Black is Beautiful Movement was.

Using historical accounts, interviews, photographs, and statistics, the Miss America pageant was used to determine the beauty standard that the Black is Beautiful Movement sought to change. After determining body type, hairstyle, and skin color to be the main determinants of beauty and the main aspects the movement fought against, a coding system was created to quantitatively and qualitatively analyze The Beulah Show from 1950 along with Being Mary Jane and How to Get Away with Murder from 2014 for their portrayals of these beauty aspects. As seen through Being Mary Jane and How to Get Away with Murder, the Black is Beautiful Movement was only effective in beautifying African American skin colors, not natural hair or larger body types, because African American women are depicted conforming to the standards of
straight hair and thin body types instead of challenging the beauty standard. The majority of African American women in both shows have straight hair and average body types. Women with natural hair and overweight body types are associated with immorality and unhappiness. African American female characters with medium skin colors are beautified, while those with darker skin colors are similarly negatively portrayed, showing that the Black is Beautiful was minimally successful at expanding beauty standards.
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INTRODUCTION

In Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is a dark skinned African American girl with a difficult life who sees herself as ugly. Set in 1941, part of Pecola’s troubles stem from being so dark skinned. In one poignant scene, she buys Mary Jane candies at the store. Staring down at the picture of the girl on the wrapper, Pecola wishes she had blue eyes like Mary Jane in order to be beautiful and happy. As Toni Morrison describes:

> Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane.¹

Today, Gabrielle Union stars as a beautiful news reporter in her own television show, “Being Mary Jane.” How did we get from Pecola wishing she were Mary Jane to Gabrielle Union playing her? Does Union’s character show true progress in the elevation of African American beauty or just limited progress?

The Black is Beautiful Movement from the late 1960s-early 1970s attempted to attack the ugliness that Pecola felt simply because she was African American. By challenging traditional beauty standards, for example those set forth by the Miss America pageant, this movement aimed to change the beauty standard to include African American women. The Miss America pageant started in 1921 and became televised in 1954 and known throughout the US.² Within the pageant bylaws, however, were rules outlawing the participation of African American women. In Henry


Pang’s article "Miss America: An American Ideal, 1921-1969" he includes a table of physical attributes of Miss America pageant winners from the creation in 1921 to 1968 when the article was written. Overall, waist size has decreased as the pageant continues, and the majority of winners have had blue eyes and brown hair. The pageant attempts to reflect ideal (typical) beauty, however a PBS documentary on the Miss America pageant declares that most actual American women do not fit this ideal regardless of race.

In popular American culture before the 1960s, African American women were portrayed as ugly and outside the realm of beauty. The dominant beauty standards were Eurocentric and excluded dark skin and short, tightly curled hair, making ‘beautiful’ a term largely reserved for white women. The “most common image of the black woman was the domestic servant, usually portrayed as a fat, dark-skinned woman wearing a head wrap” and because this stereotype existed, African American women were barred from the Miss America pageant until 1970. Before the ‘Black is Beautiful’ campaign made strides in showing that black women are beautiful, one widespread stereotypical depiction of African American women was the ‘mammy.’ The mammy is traditionally portrayed as “an obese African American woman, of dark

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4 *Miss America*, Directed by Lisa Ades, (PBS: American Experience, 2002), DVD.

complexion, with extremely large breasts and buttocks and shining white teeth visibly displayed in a grin” and normally wearing the uniform of a domestic servant.⁶

The first American sitcom to star an African American woman aired in the 1950s and was called *The Beulah Show*. In this show, Beulah reinforces the mammy stereotype through her actions and appearance. Beulah’s comical personality is shown through various actions, for example in ‘Beulah Goes Gardening” when she cannot stop the lawnmower or the moment when she does not understand why others find her to be wonderful for doing their chores. While these actions are funny, they also underline Beulah’s more limited cognitive abilities and one laughs at the stupidity of her actions. Although this show gave some African Americans a chance to see someone more relatable on television, Beulah was not a figure for children or adults to aspire to become.

Thus, the exclusion of African American women from beauty definitions and media along with the preferences for light skin were factors that opened the door for alternative definitions of beauty to emerge. The Black is Beautiful Movement occurred during the late 1960s-early 1970s as an effort to celebrate natural African American female beauty and heritage since these women were largely excluded from traditional outlets of beauty, especially in the media. During the Black is Beautiful Movement, more African American women wore their hair natural and embraced their darker skin by using ad campaigns and leading by example. In addition, a Miss Black America pageant was created in 1968 in an effort to show how beautiful African American

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women are and to push back against the idea that only white is beautiful.\textsuperscript{7} This movement specifically challenged the notion that black women were not beautiful by celebrating their curly hair, brown skin, and facial features- key signs of racial identity that marked them as deviating from the traditional standards of Eurocentric beauty.\textsuperscript{8}

This thesis provides an analysis of the lasting effects of the Black is Beautiful Movement. Through a historical analysis of beauty standards via the Miss American Pageant, the Black is Beautiful Movement, \textit{The Beulah Show},\textsuperscript{9} and a contemporary analysis of the television series \textit{Being Mary Jane} and \textit{How to Get Away with Murder}, this thesis demonstrates the similarities and differences in the representation of black beauty. Moreover, this thesis seeks to address how far reaching and effective the 1960s Black is Beautiful Movement was.

My thesis statement is as seen through \textit{Being Mary Jane} and \textit{How to Get Away with Murder}, the Black is Beautiful Movement was only effective in beautifying African American skin colors, not natural hair or larger body types, because African American women are depicted conforming to the standards of straight hair and thin body types instead of challenging the beauty standard. Although beauty standards in the United States have progressed from girls like Pecola wishing they had blue eyes in order to be beautiful, the achievements of the Black is Beautiful Movement have not lasted to today. Both \textit{Being Mary Jane} and \textit{How to Get Away with Murder}

\textsuperscript{7} Craig, \textit{Ain't I a Beauty Queen?}.


\textsuperscript{9} This show was on the air from 1950-1953.
do portray beautiful black women yet they often do so through a lens of white beauty stereotypes.

**Literature Review**

Although there are many sources, both contemporary and historical, about black female beauty standards in the United States, few scholarly works trace the development of these standards. The Black is Beautiful Movement of the 1960s was a catalyst for promoting black female beauty, especially within the black female community. Despite this movement, black female beauty has not been widely recognized. Kate Mulvey and Melissa Richards’ book *Decades of Beauty* used images of advertisements, famous women, and fashion shoots to show what has been considered “beautiful” throughout the 20th century. Black women were almost never included in this description. Phyllis Klotman’s article “Dick-and-Jane and the Shirley Temple Sensibility in the Bluest Eye” explores how characters in Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* were excluded from being beautiful because of traditional ideas of black beauty.

Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* discusses how the myth of the beauty ideal has arisen to subjugate women, since the ideal is unobtainable. However, Wolf fails to distinguish between women of different races. Therefore, my thesis focuses on how Eurocentric beauty myths have affected black women specifically. My project does this by putting Patricia Hill Collins’s plea to embrace black beauty from her book *Black Feminist Thought, Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* to work. Both Maxine Leeds Craig’s *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?* and her “Black is beautiful: Personal transformation and political change” explore the roots of the Black is Beautiful Movement. Craig uses the history of black beauty pageants in her book and uses the widespread disparagement of
black features such as hair and skin in her dissertation to present why the Black is Beautiful Movement was so appealing to black women. These works will set some background for my thesis, but my work will then tie in contemporary sources to track the changes and development of beauty standards.

Jennifer Richardson’s study, “Image slavery and mass media pollution: Examining the sociopolitical context of beauty and self image in the lives of Black women,” found that black women find media to be a powerful tool in enforcing and disseminating black beauty standards. This notion provides validation for my choice to focus on the ways in which contemporary television shows portray black female beauty. My thesis applies this idea to two contemporary television shows and ties the beauty portrayals back to the Black is Beautiful Movement in a way that has not been done before. Satoshi Kanazawa’s 2011 “scientific” study, “A Look at the Hard Truths About Human Nature, claimed that black women are less beautiful presents one such powerful media event surrounding black beauty. My research will tie his study into the longer history of black beauty standards and explore the contemporary backlash through television shows surrounding African American women.

Methodology

In order to analyze the changes in beauty standards, I read a variety of articles and books on the Miss America pageant, the Black is Beautiful Movement, and beauty standards. I also watched The Beulah Show from the early 1950s along with Being Mary Jane and How to Get Away with Murder from contemporary times, 2014. My research question was what do the differences and similarities in the representation of black female beauty in Being Mary Jane, a
cable show, and *How To Get Away With Murder*, a network show, reveal about how far reaching and effective the 1960s Black is Beautiful Movement was?

I started by broadly researching beauty standards and the Black is Beautiful Movement and then narrowed my research to beauty standards expressed through the Miss America pageant. The Miss America pageant was held up as a beauty ideal; therefore I used related sources to define the beauty standard. One pushback during the Black is Beautiful Movement was against the exclusion of African American women from the Miss America pageant; leading to the creation of a Miss Black America pageant was created in 1968. This Miss Black America pageant created a space for African American women to show their beauty and was tied in to many of the sources I read regarding the Black is Beautiful Movement.

I used library search databases such as *America: History and Life* to find articles and books on the Miss America pageant and historic American beauty standards. In analyzing these sources I focused on what physical features were noted when discussing beauty and how race played into these standards. Some of the sources I read did not mention race but implicitly discussed white beauty standards since the Miss America pageant outlawed participation of non-white women until 1970. It was more difficult to find sources explicitly about the Black is Beautiful Movement since many authors tie it to either the Civil Rights or Black Power movements. I was able to find enough sources about the Black is Beautiful Movement in relation to the Miss America pageant, however, to analyze beauty standards that the movement pushed back against.

After analyzing my sources individually for features that constitute the beauty standard, I analyzed all my research as a whole to see what features were most prominent in deeming
someone beautiful. These proved to be hair, skin color, and body shape, all of which largely excluded African American women from the traditional white beauty standard of straight hair, fair skin, and thin. My research also revealed that these were main areas of focus for the Black is Beautiful Movement in changing perceptions of black beauty. I then used this research to create a coding system for analyzing television shows, which was the main part of my research question [Figures 1 and 2]. My coding system was both qualitative and quantitative in that I recorded the number of times that different hair styles, skin colors, and body types appeared along with what was said about these features and what type of character had different attributes. By “type of character” I noted facts and behaviors about the characters along with their physical appearance in order to later analyze if a certain type of character was most often depicted with certain physical attributes.

I applied this coding system to women in the shows mentioned above specifically because these shows had with an African American female lead. Men were not analyzed nor included in the beauty standard I used in this thesis. This allowed me to more accurately assess beauty standards. I chose The Beulah Show because it was the first television show to star an African American woman and took place before the Black is Beautiful Movement occurred. This show therefore provided a point of contrast for beauty depictions in contemporary shows, Being Mary Jane and How to Get Away with Murder. I chose these specific shows since Being Mary Jane is the number one scripted cable drama among black women viewers and How to Get Away
with Murder is the third most watched network show among black viewers.\textsuperscript{10} Although “Empire” and “Scandal” are the most watched network shows among black viewers, the foci of “Empire” is not the black female lead but the “empire” itself and “Scandal” does not openly portray beauty struggles in the way the other two shows do. After choosing the shows and applying my coding system to them, I condensed the coded data from both shows to reveal what beauty standards were depicted overall. This allowed me to compare the television shows to each other and to the goals of the Black is Beautiful Movement.

**Television Show Background**

Before the Black is Beautiful Movement occurred, *The Beulah Show* was the first American sitcom to star an African American woman. The depiction of Beulah was very conservative, however, in that it fit traditional stereotypes and media depictions of black women. This show was produced by Ronald Reed Productions on ABC and ran from 1950-1953, however only four episodes remain today.\textsuperscript{11} The rest of the episodes have been destroyed or have yet to be discovered because of backlash against the stereotypes represented in the show.\textsuperscript{12} Two different women played Beulah during the show’s run time, but both were overweight African American women with dark skin. Beulah wears her hair straight back in a ponytail at all times, since straight hair was the beauty standard of the time. She stands in stark contrast to her

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{12} *The Beulah Show*, directed by Richard Bare, aired 1950-1953, on ABC, Alpha Home Entertainment, 2007.
\end{itemize}
employer Alice, who is a thin white woman with naturally straight hair. While Beulah always wears an oversized dress and apron as a maid’s uniform, her employer is shown in more form fitting yet still appropriate and nice dresses. Beulah and her friend Oriole are the only black women portrayed. Although Beulah’s friend Oriole has lighter skin than Beulah, she is also overweight and has a child-like laugh that prevents viewers from finding her to be responsible or intelligent. Beulah acts as a form of comedic relief as well through her misunderstanding of directions and situations. Beulah stand outside the realm of 1950s beauty while Alice perfectly fits the definition. Within this thesis, The Beulah Show is analyzed to provide a point of comparison for the portrayal of African American women on television before and after the Black is Beautiful Movement.

I also analyze the television shows Being Mary Jane and How to Get Away with Murder to see the lasting effects of the Black is Beautiful Movement. Both television shows debuted in 2014, however I only coded the first season of each show for equality since the first season sets the stage for viewers and introduces major characters. Each show stars an African American woman who is highly successful in her professional life, but less so in her personal life.

Being Mary Jane follows the personal and professional life of Gabrielle Union who plays the main character Mary Jane, who stars on her own television news show called “Talk Back with Mary Jane Paul” in Atlanta. This show first aired on July 2, 2013 and is produced by Mara Brock Akil and Salim Akil. Mary Jane is a medium-skinned African American woman with straight hair and an average body type [Figure 3]. While she is successful professionally, the

light-skinned African American man she was dating turns out to be married. His wife, Avery, is a
dark-skinned African American woman with straight hair and an average body type who is a
successful lawyer [Figure 4]. Her mother, Helen, has a similar skin tone, wears a wig, and is
underweight because she has Lupus [Figure 5]. Mary Jane’s coworker, producer, and friend is
Kara, and Latina woman with straight hair and an average body type [Figure 6]. Mary Jane’s
niece is name Niecy, and is dark-skinned and overweight with straight hair [Figure 7]. She is a
teenage mother and pregnant with her second child in the premiere of Being Mary Jane. Niecy
lives at her grandparent’s house with her son, father, and father’s girlfriend, Tracy. Tracy is an
overweight white woman who met Mary Jane’s brother in a treatment center for drug addicts.
Neither Tracy nor Niecy has a job. One of Mary Jane’s childhood friends is named Lisa, who is
also African American with light skin, curly hair, and an average body type [Figure 8]. Lisa is a
doctor, however she suffers from depression and has overdosed on pain medications before.
Mary Jane has other friends, all of whom are African American women with various skin tones
yet straight hair and average to underweight body types. Mary Jane’s ex-lover’s wife is named
Avery, who is a dark-skinned lawyer of average weight with straight hair. The majority of female
guests on “Talk Back” are white, as are most of her female coworkers.

How to Get Away with Murder, follows the professional and personal life of Annalise
Keating, played by Viola Davis, an African American defense attorney and law professor in
Philadelphia. This show first aired on September 25, 2014 and is produced by Shonda Rhimes.14
Annalise has dark skin, wears a wig, and has an average body type [Figure 9]. While she is very
successful in her career, she often makes morally compromising decisions to help her clients and

14 “How to Get Away with Murder,” Wikipedia, last modified April 15, 2016, accessed March 30, 2016,
students. She is married to a white man, however she has an affair with a married African American man. Her mother, Ophelia, is an elderly dark-skinned African American woman who is underweight and wears a wig [Figure 10]. One of her students, Michaela, is a dark-skinned African American woman with straight hair and an average body type [Figure 10]. Michaela is engaged, however her fiancé’s mother, Mary, looks down on Michaela because of Michaela’s background and darker skin compared to her own [Figure 11]. Michaela and her peer Laurel, a Latina woman, work in Annalise’s office and assists on cases. One of her male student’s neighbor, Rebecca, is a white underweight woman with straight black hair. Together, a group of Annalise’s students who work for her, along with Rebecca, murder Annalise’s husband, Sam, and then Annalise helps them cover up the murder. Sam had an affair with one of his students, Lila, who was murdered and happened to be pregnant with Sam’s child. Lila was a white woman with straight red hair and an average body type. Annalise’s associate, Bonny, is another underweight white woman with blond hair. She was sexually abused as a child and now has a crush on Sam, leading to a strained relationship with Annalise. How to Get Away with Murder has a greater diversity of women in terms of race, however there are few recurrent African American characters.

Interestingly, both Mary Jane and Annalise changed their names as older women. Mary Jane did so in order to protect her family from any backlash from her professional career as a news reporter. She was originally named Pauletta, and some of her family members still refer to her by that name. Annalise was originally named Anna May, but changed it to appear more

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professional.\textsuperscript{16} Although Gabrielle Union now plays the woman the Pecola wished she could be and is beautiful in doing so, perhaps we have not come as far as we would like to think.

**Coding System**

The major recurring beauty issues that the Black is Beautiful Movement attempted to alter were hairstyle, body type, and skin color. These were main aspects of beauty that were stereotyped to fit white women, through straight hair, thin-to-average body types, and white skin. These were the main beauty aspects I quantitatively recorded during the television shows. Each television show was coded on separate coding sheets. The first episode of each show was coded on one sheet, but afterwards two shows were coded per sheet but marked for which episode the comments/tallies were.

Within hair, I differentiated between straight, natural, curly, and wigs. A wig was noted if a woman was shown putting on or taking off her wig, or if it was evident she had been wearing one due to a drastic switch from straight to natural hair. Natural hair was noted if an African American woman had not done anything to alter her hair. Grouped with this was when an African American woman was wearing dreads, but a note was made that the mark was for dreads. Curly hair was noted when it was an African American woman with naturally tightly curled hair, not when straight hair had been artificially curled. Any comments made on hair were noted as well.

Skin color was differentiated between white, Asian, Hispanic, and different shades of black—light, medium, or dark. The variations of skin color for African American women were

harder to differentiate; therefore these categorizations were made relative to other characters. For example, Mary Jane was categorized as black with medium skin, and characters were compared to her to determine their skin color. For body type, women were categorized as underweight, average weight, curvy, or overweight. These categorizations were made relative to other characters as well. Most women were average weight, but if a woman was significantly over or under this they were categorized accordingly. Women who were categorized as curvy meant they were above average weight but not extremely overweight. Any comments about skin color or body type were recorded as well, along with any comments on outright beauty or anything that seemed to pertain to beauty standards. Any comments on names were also recorded because of the connection between Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Gabrielle Union’s character.

Women on these shows were classified as beautiful if others seemed to regard them as so, meaning their friends and love interests thought they were beautiful. All of the love interests of the women in these shows were attractive based off of strong physical appearance, tall height, and appealing facial features. Since humans tend to date and be friends with those who are a similar level of attractiveness to one’s self (referred to in psychology as the matching phenomenon) the women that these men are attracted to are beautiful as well.17 For the women without love interests, their attractiveness is determined by their friendships with other women.

**Overview**

This thesis is a traditional written thesis with three chapters. I explore how the Black is Beautiful Movement pushed back against traditional beauty standard set forth by the Miss America pageant and what the immediate success of this movement was. I analyze my three

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main aspects of beauty, hair, skin color, and body type, as they relate to the movement’s efforts as depicted and discussed in *The Beulah Show* from the 1950s and the contemporary television shows *Being Mary Jane* and *How to Get Away with Murder*.

The first chapter focuses on body type within the television shows, again comparing and contrasting the different shows for their quantitative and qualitative depictions of various hairstyles. Body type standards have changed the least since the Black is Beautiful Movement and I explore why this beauty standard has been so difficult to change. I also explore how Beulah fit the mammy stereotype especially with her weight and how this may contribute to the avoidance of depicting overweight African American women.

The second chapter focuses on hairstyle within the television shows in the same manner as the previous chapter. I look at how the Black is Beautiful Movement effectively changed hairstyle during the 1970s and explore why this change has not lasted. I use first-hand accounts of how the Black is Beautiful Movement freed many women with the change to natural hair and explore the depictions of natural hair within the shows.

The third chapter focuses on skin color in the three television shows. I compare and contrast *The Beulah Show* to the contemporary show to see the effects that the Black is Beautiful Movement had on beautifying different skin colors. I use my coding of the television shows to look at the quantitative depictions of various skin colors as well as what is said about skin color. In this chapter I also discuss why skin color was something that the Black is Beautiful Movement could effectively change compared to other beauty standards.
CHAPTER I

Body Type
The average waist size for Miss America pageant winners before 1968 was twenty-four inches, reinforcing the beauty standard that average to thin body types are most desirable.\(^{18}\) Traditionally, those who are curvy or overweight are not considered beautiful.\(^{19}\) Women of all races try to fit their body types into this average standard to be considered beautiful, but this standard stems from white culture. Within the African American community there has been a different beauty standard that values women for being larger. In multiple studies of body type preference, African American men and women preferred larger body types over white men and women.\(^{20}\) Although this beauty standard exists within the African American community, it is not widely held by society and the white standard of thinness remains. The Black is Beautiful Movement tried to beautify African American women of all body types, but these efforts have not made lasting changes. On both *Being Mary Jane* and *How to Get Away with Murder* the majority of African American women portrayed have average to thin body types to fit the beauty standard. Those who are curvy or overweight are shown struggling with their confidence and internal sense of beauty because of the external pressures from a beauty standard to which they do not conform.

Much of this body type beauty standard has been perpetuated in the Miss America pageant. Winners of the Miss America pageant have traditionally had small waist sizes and been

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\(^{18}\) Pang, "Miss America: An American Ideal, 1921-1969."

\(^{19}\) See Coding System page 13 in Introduction for body size definitions.

average to underweight. Before 1968, the average weight was 122 pounds.21 As almost all of these women have been white, they have all fit into the same beauty standard for body type. This beauty standard is further reflected in popular media, such as television shows and advertisements. On television shows, therefore, women tend to be portrayed as fulfilling the stereotypical white body type standard of being average weight or thin. On television, thin characters are overrepresented and consistently rewarded, however they do not represent the actual female population.22 The constant exposure to this body type leads viewers to see this as normal and aim to achieve this skewed norm.23

Prior to the Black is Beautiful Movement that tried to beautify different body types, African American women were often portrayed as overweight, stemming from drawings of African American women even in the nineteenth century.24 For example, the main character on The Beulah Show from 1950, Beulah, is overweight.25 Her size is in direct contrast to that of her employer Alice, who is a thin white woman. Alice fits the beauty standard especially in terms of body size, and Beulah only makes their weight contrast starker. Beulah’s weight is reinforced

21 Pang, "Miss America: An American Ideal, 1921-1969."


through her complaints about her knees hurting, which can be attributed to both her extra weight and her manual labor. Beulah’s friend Oriole is also overweight, therefore the only portrayals of African American women show them as overweight. Because of the persistence of the thinner body type standard during the 1950s when the show was produced and the exclusion of African American women from the general beauty standard, white women in this show reinforce the idea that thin white women are beautiful. Despite being the first African American female star on television, Beulah’s body type was far from the beauty standard of a twenty-four inch waist of the time.

Historic stereotypes of African American women have shown them as ‘mammies,’ with a large part of that definition including being overweight. This stereotype also shows African American women with large breasts and buttocks, highlighting their sexuality and limiting their adherence to the beauty standard. One well-known portrayal of this stereotype is Aunt Jemima, who reinforces the idea of a subservient, overweight slave. During the Black is Beautiful Movement, African American women were encouraged to embrace their body types and celebrate their natural beauty. Melba Miller’s The ‘Black is Beautiful’ beauty book encourages young women to like their body type, whichever type that may be (78). Although she says, “Big

26 The Beulah Show.
27 Ibid.
28 Jewel, From Mammy to Miss America and beyond, 38.
can be beautiful, too” she encourages women to exercise and eat healthfully to avoid being fat.\(^{30}\) Although many in the Black is Beautiful Movement pushed for the beautification of all body types, many also pushed for women to be fit in order to avoid traditional stereotyping.

Within the Black is Beautiful Movement body type played a more limited role than natural hair and darker skin did. Since body type is not specific to African American women like natural hair and darker skin is, changes were more difficult to make. Body type was one instance in which African American women could fit the traditional beauty standard despite a different cultural standard within their community; therefore some within the movement tried to reinforce healthy eating and exercise to try to fit the standard.\(^{31}\) The changes in the acceptance of all body types that the Black is Beautiful Movement pushed for were not as effective because of the pervasiveness of the traditional beauty standard of thinness across racial lines. While these contemporary television shows no longer poke fun at overweight women like *The Beulah Show* did, they do not beautify all body types either. Instead, they reinforce traditional body type standards that the movement tried to change.

On *Being Mary Jane*, twenty-two women are portrayed with average body types, while only two overweight, two underweight, and five curvy women are shown.\(^{32}\) This limited portrayal reinforces the standard that being any weight above average is not as beautiful, while


\(^{31}\) Miller, *The ‘Black is Beautiful’ beauty book*, 78.

also conveying that being underweight is undesirable. Although over two-thirds of adults and seventy-five percent of African Americans are overweight in America, Being Mary Jane does not reflect this reality and instead reinforces traditional beauty standards for body type.\(^\text{33}\)

Within Being Mary Jane there are two overweight women with recurring roles. One is Mary Jane’s brother’s girlfriend, Tracy, and the other is her niece, Niecy. Tracy is a white woman who used to be a drug addict.\(^\text{34}\) Throughout the show she constantly butts heads with Mary Jane and her family. She lives in Mary Jane’s parents house and does not pay rent yet she and Mary Jane’s brother are always asking for money. Tracy is one of the only white women seen outside the realm of the news network, and the only one without a permanent job. This, in combination with her overweight body type, leads viewers to see overweight white women as unmotivated and always freelancing off of others.

Similarly, Niecy is a dark skinned African American teenager who is pregnant with her second child by a different man than the first. She lives with her grandparents as well, and does not have a job. She relies on her father, grandparents, and Mary Jane to support her and even set up her doctor’s appointments. She is referred to as lazy and Mary Jane cannot comprehend why she did not use birth control to avoid a second pregnancy.\(^\text{35}\) Niecy is associated with teenage pregnancy, laziness, and being overweight. Because Tracy and Niecy are the main examples of overweight women, viewers are given a close association between obesity and laziness. The few


\(^\text{35}\) Ibid.

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obese women all have many negative characteristics associated with them, again reinforcing traditional stereotypes regarding body type. This portrayal is problematic because it may alienate viewers who do not fit the body type standard and makes it even harder for overweight women to be seen as beautiful. Viewers again receive the message that being overweight is a negative thing instead of a message that all body types should be celebrated.

Besides external negative associations with being overweight within the show, Niecy struggles with her own body image. In season one episode eight, when talking about her unborn daughter, Niecy says that she just wants the baby to be beautiful unlike herself in order to have a better life. Niecy is unhappy with her appearance, and often comments on how beautiful Mary Jane is and how much better her life is because of it. Mary Jane tells her that “women would pay good money for your skin, your eyes, your smile” while Niecy responds that she knows what it means when she’s told she has a nice smile and eyes. Niecy says that she realized that “pretty was it,” and she is not beautiful. Similar to Pecola from The Bluest Eye, Niecy is outside the beauty standard and is unhappy because of it.

Niecy’s insecurities about her body are likely reinforced by her grandmother, Helen. Because Helen has Lupus and eats little, she is underweight. Despite her thin figure, she comments to Mary Jane that she is worried about gaining weight and feels fat because she is homebound, which exacerbates Niecy’s weight portrayal. Helen tells Mary Jane about how she used to love to go driving with her husband because he loved to watch her beautiful legs as she

36 Being Mary Jane, “Storm Advisory.”

37 Ibid.
stepped out of the car, but her age and illness have made her feel ugly. Helen is still a physically pretty woman, however she does not feel so because society has specific beauty standards that exclude the elderly, ill, and frail.

The other underweight woman portrayed in the show is a saleswoman with curly hair from whom Mary Jane buys shoes. As someone whose job it is to sell shoes to make women feel beautiful, she represents a symbol of beauty and desire. She is part of the network that is meant to sell sex and beauty and therefore has to look like the goal instead of the average. In connection with Helen, underweight women on Being Mary Jane are the exception, not the rule, and are portrayed as ill or working in an unobtainable beauty industry. Unlike most advertisements and models these days that portray a false reality of body type, the majority of women on this show are average weight. Mary Jane’s ex-boyfriend’s new girlfriend is a model, yet while she is very fit she does not appear to be underweight. Mary Jane refers to her as “toothpick Barbie” as an insult for being fit and blond since Mary Jane is jealous. When talking to her coworker, however, Mary Jane says that she would sell her soul for her legs as an effort at camaraderie. The effects of these various dialogues are both positive and negative. Showing

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that being underweight is not necessarily healthy helps to enforce normal eating habits and may
help deter eating disorders. This portrayal also demonstrates that there is a correct body type,
however, and upholds beauty as concrete and desirable. Obesity within the African American
community prevents many women from attaining this standard, however, since a combination of
genetics and limited access to nutritious foods leads to higher rates of obesity for African
Americans.42

There are a few women who appear between average and overweight, however, and these
women have been labeled curvy. These women all have minor roles, for example a white
newswoman, a Latina extra, a dark-skinned African American guard, and a light-skinned African
American filmmaker. Mary Jane’s aunt is also curvy, and is portrayed in a stereotypical manner
cooking fried food for her extended family.43 Mary Jane’s friend Sharice, a light-skinned African
American curvy woman, is married yet sleeps with Mary Jane’s younger brother Paul. While
these curvy women cannot be categorized as lazy and unhappy in the same way the overweight
women can, most of the curvy women are African American. This fits the stereotype of white
women fitting into the beauty standard along with the idea that African American women are
overweight and eat unhealthy food. Sharice’s affair, with her friend’s younger brother, gives
viewers a glimpse into her immoral actions.

Similarly, Mary Jane’s friend Nichelle is curvy and accused of revealing one of Mary
Jane’s secrets to her ex-boyfriend David. When confronted by Mary Jane, Nichelle says that she
knows she is “just a non-threatening big jolly girl you call to have a good time” but did not

42 “Overweight and Obesity Statistics.”
43 Being Mary Jane, “The Huxtables Have Fallen.”
reveal her secret.\textsuperscript{44} Nichelle is stereotyped as a gossip and a party girl because of her size and despite the fact that she is very successful professionally and has been Mary Jane’s friend for years.

In \textit{How to Get Away with Murder}, the majority of women portrayed are again average weight. There are slightly more underweight women (eight) and curvy women (twelve) portrayed, however there are no truly overweight women shown. This clear disjunction with the reality of obesity in the United States reinforces body type standards that overweight is not beautiful and should not be portrayed. Because \textit{How to Get Away with Murder} revolves so closely around the criminal justice system, the lack of overweight women could be seen as a comment that overweight women cannot be lawyers or judges nor do they commit crimes. From an external view, however, it is far more likely that overweight women are not seen as pretty enough to appear on a television show. The lack of overweight women ostracizes a large demographic of potential viewers who may be disinterested in the show because they cannot relate as easily to the characters.

There are more underweight women represented, although most are minor characters except for Rebecca and Bonny. Neither is portrayed as particularly smart or moral and both had difficult childhoods. Although Bonny is a lawyer, she repeatedly makes mistakes that Annalise is left to fix. Her crush on Annalise’s husband affects her judgment and creates uncomfortable situations for Annalise and others in the office. Rebecca is a friendless bartender who did not go to college and has many piercings. Bonny was abused as a child, and one gets the idea that

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Being Mary Jane}, “Uber Love.”
Rebecca’s childhood was not happy either. These depictions show underweight women as unhappy despite their ideal body type.

The curvy women are again minor characters, including teachers, jurors, and witnesses, along with Aiden’s mother and a few court workers. While most of these women do not have much of a presence, Aiden’s mother and the court workers are portrayed as mean spirited. Aiden’s mother asks Michaela to sign a prenuptial agreement, and sees Michaela as lesser because of her background. The court women are shown talking about how immoral Annalise is for selling out her husband to protect her client in season one episode ten, “Hello Raskolnikov.” One says that Annalise “is not a person like the rest of us,” to which the other asks what she is then. The response is “an animal,” while the other says that “even an animal isn’t that heartless” without realizing that Annalise was in the bathroom as well. These women are extremely judgmental of other women and see themselves as morally superior, however their actions do not indicate this as the truth. Because these women are the main portrayals of curvy women, viewers are left to associate any indication of being above average weight with meanness and judgment.


48 Ibid.
The majority of women on both television shows are average weight, spanning a range of morality and success. About seventy percent of women portrayed on each show are average weight, reinforcing body type standards instead of reflecting reality. The limited portrayal of curvy or overweight women leaves them easy to stereotype as mean, lazy, and unhappy. In one study on the intersection of television, body image, and race, black women had healthier body image after watching black-oriented television.49 Other studies have found that African American women have more positive body images even when they are overweight and white women are more likely to categorize themselves as overweight compared to African American women.50 These studies show that African American women may be less concerned with their body type than white women, therefore the beauty standard of average to thin weight is not as applicable or concerning to African American women.

Competing studies, however, have found correlations between body type standards on television and body concerns among women.51 Given these contrasting studies, television shows should promote body positivity for all body types in order to avoid causing distorted body images among viewers. While some of this unhappiness stems from being outside the realm of traditional beauty standards, the misconception given to viewers is that average weight women


51 Grabe, Hyde, and Ward, “The Role of Media in Body Image Concerns Among Women.”
are therefore happy. Underweight women portrayed are often unhappy as well, however this unhappiness is more connected to the personalities and values of the women.

Part of the limited portrayal of overweight African American women in television shows today may stem from an over conscious avoidance of reproducing the mammy stereotype that traditionally depicted overweight women. This stereotype was multifaceted, however, and included other imagery such as domestic servitude and limited education that do not have to correspond to overweight African American women today. By avoiding showing overweight African American women in an effort to avoid this stereotype, an entire demographic of women is excluded and under-represented on television. This lack of representation gives the few available depictions more bearing, and in the examples from these television shows is a negative portrayal. Body types of all sizes should be represented as they are in real life and celebrated to promote body positivity and a healthy self-image. Body type is thought of as something that women are accountable for and can change, since genetics and access to adequate nutrition are often ignored in discussions of body type. The Black is Beautiful Movement had limited success at changing the body type standard because of the limited discussion that occurs around body type, the idea that it can easily be changed, and the long-standing history of portraying overweight African American women.

52 See Introduction page 2 for a complete description of the mammy stereotype.
CHAPTER II
Hairstyle

Another part of the beauty standard for women in America has traditionally been straight hair. Most white women are born with straight hair, and since white has been historically considered beautiful they have set the standard. The Miss America pageant has reinforced this standard through its contestants, while the Black is Beautiful Movement from the 1970s pushed back against this standard. Through it’s own pageant and the acceptance of different skin colors and hairstyles that was adopted by younger generations, this movement made natural hair popular and beautiful. While the Black is Beautiful Movement did beautify natural hair during the 1970s, this change did not last. African American women on the television series Being Mary Jane and How to Get Away with Murder most often have straight hair. When women are shown with natural hair, it is only in the private sphere of their homes and most often in times of vulnerability. The limited portrayals of women wearing natural hair on these television shows demonstrate a reversal in the beautification of natural hair that the Black is Beautiful Movement pushed for and a regression to the traditional standard of straight hair.

One of the main goals of the Black is Beautiful Movement was to change attitudes towards African American hairstyles because of how repressed many women felt when straightening their hair. In describing the freeing effects of natural hair from the Black is Beautiful Movement, one African American woman says it gave her “the realization that we...


54 Craig, Ain't I a Beauty Queen?.

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could be who we were and be beautiful. It provided me with a level of confidence that I’d never
known in my life before.” Before the Black is Beautiful Movement, African American girls
were taught that in order to look proper and clean they must straighten their hair. Many African
American women from older generations straightened their hair in an effort to use “personal
appearance as a way to assert some control over how they would be perceived.” In Maxine
Leeds Craig’s book, Ain’t I a Beauty Queen? she interviewed African American women about
beauty standards before, during, and after the Black is Beautiful Movement. Growing up before
the movement, many of the women interviewed had “no beauties with whom they could
identify” because beauty images in the media “reinforced the message that beauty was found in
light skin, straight long hair, thin lips, and a narrow nose.” African American mothers and
grandmothers passed on the idea that one represents all black people in public, and therefore
good grooming was key. This good grooming included straightening hair to look well kept and
presentable, a notion that would be challenged during the Black is Beautiful Movement.

This professional image through straight hair was reinforced in The Beulah Show, which
was the first American television show to star an African American woman and was produced in

55 Craig, Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?, 92.
56 Ibid., 36.
57 Ibid., 30.
58 Ibid., 30.
the 1950s. In this show, Beulah is always portrayed with straight hair in a ponytail.59 Alice, her white female employer, also has straight hair, however she has more varied hairstyles and is meant to have prettier hair than Beulah.60 Beulah’s hair looks oiled back, whereas Alice’s hair is bouncy and full. Beulah was adhering to the beauty standard of her time and perpetuating this standard for African American women viewers. Since The Beulah Show show aired before the Black is Beautiful Movement, Beulah reflected the hairstyle and beauty standards of her time. It can be concluded that as the first African American woman starring in her own television show, network producers wanted a character that fit the social constructs of the time and would be acceptable to a wide audience. The mammy stereotype was a prevailing image of African American women during this era and Beulah fit the stereotype, in part because she wears her hair straight and slicked back into a ponytail, as was common in the 1950s.61

This beauty standard of straight hair to which Beulah was conforming was reinforced through the Miss America pageant. In this pageant, promoted as a contest to determine who most embodies the beauty and brains that typify American society, all pageant winners and contestants have had straight hair.62 Not only have all women had straight hair, thirty-three of the thirty-eight


60 The Beulah Show.

61 See Introduction page 2 for a complete description of the mammy stereotype.

winners by 1968 were either blond or brunette.\textsuperscript{63} To counter the exclusion of African American women in the Miss America pageant, the Miss Black America pageant was created in 1968. This pageant featured solely African American women, whose various attributes like skin color and hairstyle directly contrasted the white women with straight hair in the traditional pageant. The first winner was an African American woman with an Afro whose talent was a traditional African dance. The 1957 Miss Africa pageant in New York City had a similar winner who wore an Afro and embraced her African heritage. This contest was not popular or covered by media, however, because it occurred in the early stages of the Black is Beautiful Movement. Not until the late 1960s were natural hair styles widely accepted and seen as beautiful, creating a space for Miss Black America to be widely accepted as beautiful with her afro.\textsuperscript{64} The Miss Black America contest also gained media attention because of the protest against the Miss America pageant, which was mainstream and widely watched. A few interviewed women in \textit{Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?} expressed their desires to compete in Miss America because of the opportunities and wide audience. One woman expressed the contradiction between wanting to compete in Miss America and adhering to the white standards of beauty: “I wanted to be a winner. But I didn’t want to look like anybody in that pageant.”\textsuperscript{65} Although still not allowed to compete in the Miss America pageant, having the winner of the Miss Black America pageant sport an Afro started the pushback against the standard of straight hair.

\textsuperscript{63} Pang, “Miss America: An American Ideal, 1921-1969.”

\textsuperscript{64} Craig, \textit{Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?}.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 66.
This pushback continued in the 1970s with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements’ message of racial pride that led to new ways of expressing African American identity. College-aged African Americans began to set new standards of beauty that moved away from imitating white beauty standards and began to create new standards. These new standards were taken from African roots and focused on embracing natural hair. Natural hair was first popularized within the Civil Rights movement culture. As Civil Rights efforts moved away from integration to differentiation, activists and entertainers supporting the movement wore their hair natural to support their African American identity. Many women wore their hair natural to show their political activism, while others wore their hair natural because it was considered beautiful “according to the standards of the movement culture.” The Black is Beautiful Movement created a sense of pride and acceptance in African American women since they could now be considered beautiful for everything the former white beauty standard had dismissed.

Wearing natural hair created a sense of community for African American women that they were beautiful and belonged to a beautiful race. One woman interviewed described the relief that came from being able to be one’s self and not feeling shame for having unstraightened hair, a feeling that many women sporting natural hair felt as youths. This change was liberating for many women. Before the movement, one African American women said, “We were ashamed that our hair was kinky,” but the changes the movement brought gave her “relief that this was me.” George Williams conducted a study on beauty preferences among African Americans in

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66 Ibid., 87.

67 Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?*, 95.
the early 1970s and found that natural hairstyles were largely preferred, showing that the ‘Black is Beautiful’ campaign had made real strides in changing beauty ideals. Since many men and women had previously preferred straight hair on African American women, this reported attitude change shows that the Black is Beautiful Movement made an impact during the 1970s.

Despite the acceptance of natural hair in the 1970s, the strides made during the Black is Beautiful Movement have not lasted today. The women in Being Mary Jane and How to Get Away with Murder do not reflect the same acceptance of natural hair that Williams’s study reported in the 1970s. Mary Jane, the main character in Being Mary Jane, is introduced to viewers in season one episode one wearing a headscarf as she prepares for bed. Shortly thereafter her lover knocks on her door and she immediately takes off the scarf because it is not appropriate to wear in front of guests. The only other times she is shown wearing a headscarf involve similar situations, with Mary Jane getting ready for bed or eating dinner alone at home. Whenever Mary Jane is in public, she is shown with straight hair, never with her natural hair. Overall in the first season of Being Mary Jane, twenty-five women are shown with straight hair, two with curly hair, two with natural hair, and one with a wig. These raw statistics of hairstyle depictions show a bias towards straight hair. Looking more closely, not only are the majority of characters portrayed with straight hair, most of them have blond hair as well. Even one of the two women with natural hair (a minor security guard character) dyed her natural hair blond.

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68 George W. Williams, Do Negroes Really Believe Black is Beautiful?: By George W. Williams, (Vantage Press, 1974).

69 Being Mary Jane, “Pilot.”
In looking at other minor characters with whom Mary Jane interacts, the majority are white women with straight hair. Everyone with whom she works is a white woman, and many of her television show guests are white women. Towards the end of the first season she interviews an African American filmmaker who has dreads and this is the only woman on her show without straight hair. Despite the high rates of blond hair within the show, most white women in the United States do not actually have blond hair.\textsuperscript{70} Portraying so many white women with blond hair reinforces the stereotype that blond is beautiful. This is a reiteration of the heavy representation of blond winners of the Miss American Pageant.\textsuperscript{71} One judge from the Miss America pageant said that it was almost guaranteed that the woman who was the most blond would be in the top two final contestants.\textsuperscript{72} Many of these blond women only have minor roles, however within the show they are all successful.

Despite the predominance of white women, with the exception of her producer and best friend, Kara who is Latina, most of Mary Jane’s friends are African American women. Only one of her friends, Lisa, has curly hair, and the rest all have straight hair. All of the women have successful careers, whether in news, business or medicine. Lisa, however, suffers from depression and is the least stable in the group. While her hair alone does not signify her instability, it is notable that she is the only unstable woman and the only one with curly hair. The only other woman portrayed with curly hair is a saleswoman from whom Mary Jane buys shoes.


\textsuperscript{71} Pang, "Miss America: An American Ideal, 1921-1969."

The saleswoman gossips with Mary Jane and has a passion for high-end shoes, portraying her as a more simple, materialistic, and frivolous woman.

Since so few women on Being Mary Jane have curly hair, their character descriptions are that much more important when deciphering what curly hair is meant to convey. Kara and Mary Jane sometimes have slightly curled hair, but never the same natural tight curls that Lisa and the saleswoman do. Although Lisa is a successful gynecologist, her depression and mental instability convey her as a weaker character than others. In season one episode two, Lisa overdoses on pills, and Mary Jane has to revive her. Other characters mimic Lisa’s skin color and body type, leaving her hair as her only physical difference. The curly-haired saleswoman is the only woman from whom Mary Jane buys clothes, and again her body type and skin color are reproduced in other characters. Viewers are left to associate curly hair with either extreme unhappiness and instability or mindless talk about trivial subjects such as shoes. These women are not strong female role models, and reproduce the stereotype that straight hair is necessary for success and happiness.

Helen, Mary Jane’s mother, wears a wig since she is from the older generation that believed that straight hair was key in maintaining personal appearance. She is the only woman portrayed wearing a wig and is one of the few older women portrayed, along with her friend Catherine. Both have straight hair and presumably wear a wig, but Helen is shown taking off her wig during episode three of the first season. Helen is talking about how beautiful she used to be when she was younger and reminiscing on how her husband used to love watching her legs as

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73 Being Mary Jane, “Storm Advisory.”

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she stepped out of his car. Now she refuses to go driving with her husband because her age and Lupus has taken away some of her former beauty. After telling this story she removes her wig, and with it her traditionally beautiful appearance. Mary Jane sits behind her starts to brush her mother’s hair for a few minutes until Helen tells her to stop and goes to bed. Mary Jane goes to put the wig in the closet and looks around as the rows of other wigs her mother has. This scene shows viewers how important wigs are to Helen in helping her maintain some of her beauty and how hard she tries through all of her wigs.

All other main female characters regardless of race have straight hair. These women range from white to dark skinned African American to Latino and have various body types. Helen’s friend Catherine and Mary Jane’s aunt are both part of an older African American generation that wears straight hair. These women would have likely been in their mid-twenties to thirties when the Black is Beautiful Movement came about; therefore this movement seems to only have affected a limited age range of women, specifically those in college or SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) members. According to Douglas Kellner’s critical theory of television, television networks are caught between conservative and progressive pressures, and this contradiction is replicated within Mary Jane’s family members and their various histories and beliefs. Television in part reflects current progressive movements and ideas while

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74 Being Mary Jane, “Girls Night In.”

75 Chapter I: Body Type and Chapter III: Skin Color explore these beauty aspects further.

76 Craig, Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?, 124.

simultaneously supporting “hegemonic-legitimating images,” in this case showing the older generation’s conservative stance on hair while still offering images of natural hair among younger women.\textsuperscript{78} Although these women are all in the middle or upper-middle class and therefore likely well educated, they probably did not attend very radical or feminist schools where SNCC was most active and celebrated natural hair.\textsuperscript{79}

As fairly traditional women, Helen and her peers likely raised their children to have similar beliefs about professional appearance. As discussed earlier, many older women believed that having straight hair was necessary for appearing dignified as part of the politics of respectability. The politics of respectability is the idea that marginalized groups attempt to show their social values as mainstream in order to be more widely accepted, which in this case translates to fitting the standard of straight hair.\textsuperscript{80} She refuses to go in the rain in episode two in order to protect her edges, and she is repeatedly shown with her hair in a cover during the shower, in a head wrap while at home, or in curlers before work.\textsuperscript{81}

Similar hair representations are shown in \textit{How to Get Away with Murder}. There are sixty-two women shown with straight hair, three with natural hair, seven with curly hair, and one in a wig. There is not the same bias towards white women with blond hair as in \textit{Being Mary Jane},

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\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 45.

\textsuperscript{79} Craig, \textit{Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?}, 124.


\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Being Mary Jane}, “Storm Advisory.”
since there are many white, Asian, and African American women represented. The white women have more varied hair colors, portraying every color from blond to brunette to black to red. The limited depictions of natural hair reinforce the standard of straight hair and the reversal of the progress made during the Black is Beautiful Movement.

A teacher, two jurors, and another minor character all have curly hair. These women are all African American, with either dark or medium skin color. These women all have minor roles in the show and only appear in one episode. Because of their limited role and interactions with other characters, curly hair is shown as simply a hairstyle choice and is not associated with the same unhappiness or frivolity as in *Being Mary Jane*. Although there is not the same negative connection between curly hair and negative personal characteristics, there is also no positive introduction to curly hair. It is simply background and therefore not promoted in the same way that the Black is Beautiful Movement promoted it. Since no recurring characters have curly hair, there is no bias towards or away from this hairstyle.

Another limited hairstyle is wigs, however the characters that wear wigs, Annalise Keating and her mother, are seen recurrently. In one of the most poignant moments, Annalise sits in front of a mirror and takes off her wig, her fake eyelashes, and all of her makeup to reveal her natural self. She is in the comfort of her own home before bedtime, and this scene reveals how much emphasis is put on beauty in everyday life. A sole lamp that illuminates her face lights her bedroom, and the camera narrows in on the back of her head where her hands reach back to pull her wig forward and off. She then slowly pulls off one set of fake eyelashes then the other, and

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82 See Chapter III: Skin Color for further analysis.

83 *How to Get Away with Murder*, “Let’s Go Snooping.”
then spends thirty seconds using a makeup removing wipe to scourge her face of her eye, lip, and face makeup. She seems to be trying to wipe away the hardships of the day along with her makeup. When she is finished and sitting makeup-less in her natural hair, her husband comes in and she asks him for the first time about his affair. Within this scene Annalise is strong for confronting her husband yet vulnerable to his answer and her openness with her appearance. This scene shows viewers the distinction between wigs and natural hair and with it the pressure to conform to beauty standards. Annalise consciously puts on her wig in the morning and takes it off at night to conform to the beauty standard.

In later episodes, Annalise is shown with her natural hair only in her own home in times of vulnerability as well. These other times of vulnerability include finding out that her husband’s dead mistress was pregnant, when calling the police about her missing husband, and when drinking alone in a hotel over the holidays. She is also shown is a head wrap at home like Mary Jane, but less often and more so just with natural hair. Although Annalise is somewhat older than Mary Jane, she is no more than ten years older and therefore still part of a similar generation.

When Ophelia, Annalise’s mother, visits, she brushes Annalise’s natural hair in a reverse situation to Mary Jane and Helen. In this instance, Annalise is vulnerable because her husband was murdered, she covered up the crime for her students, and framed her lover for the crime. She has been in bed crying and drinking for days in a deep depression, and her mother is trying to help her. Ophelia tells Annalise to “let me at your hair, your kitchen is tight” as a show of motherly care. Her distress is deeper than these recent occurrences, however, as she reveals

84 How to Get Away with Murder, “Mama’s Here Now.”

85 Ibid.
when she asked her mother why she didn’t protect her from her uncle as a child. Viewers learn that her uncle sexually abused Annalise, and her mother burned down the house with him inside when she found out.

This same connection between vulnerability and natural hair is not as concrete in other characters with natural hair, since they are all minor characters. The other women who are shown with natural hair include a police officer, seamstress, and another minor character with dreads. These women are all either dark or medium skinned African Americans with minimal impact or descriptions. Alone, natural hair again only seems like a hairstyle choice a minority of African American women chooses, like curly hair. Annalise’s portrayal with natural hair, however, lends complexity to the hairstyle. Because Annalise only shows her natural hair in the comfort of her own home or in times of vulnerability, viewers are left to assume that other African American women may be wearing wigs as well.

Annalise is a very successful woman, but some of her choices are morally questionable. She protects her clients and students, but sometimes at the cost of others or her own morality, as shown by everything she was distressed about in the aforementioned scene. Her natural hair is shown after all the questionable choices have been made, often when she is drinking alone at home in contemplation. Perhaps, therefore, her wig that conforms to the stereotype of straight hair is sinister in its coexistence with her immoral choices, while her natural hair exists when she is truly alone and has to internally digest her actions.

All of the other main characters have straight hair as well and are all morally questionable. Her students killed someone and covered it up, her clients are all charged with committing a felony of some sort, Lila slept with a married man, and Rebecca’s spying led to
Sam’s murder. These women have all different body types and skin colors, but their one common trait is straight hair. While *How to Get Away with Murder* may not be making strides in beautifying natural hair, it may be subtly vilifying straight hair. While judges and prosecutors alike are meant to uphold the justice system, within the show they make some divisive judgment calls, for example the prosecutor’s adamant efforts to prove Annalise’s guilt in her husband’s murder. These judgment calls group them into the same category as all the other women with straight hair, showing that they are all similar. About eighty-five percent of hairstyles shown are straight hair, positing that straight hair is the most widely accepted hairstyle choice across all racial boundaries. Because these women all exhibit some questionable moral actions, there may be a correlation between straight hair and immorality, however characters that wear other hairstyles are too few to accurately measure morality in the same way.

Although straight, curly, and natural hairstyles along with wigs are all portrayed in both *Being Mary Jane* and *How to Get Away with Murder*, straight hair is predominant in both shows. According to the marketing agency Mintel, about seventy percent of African American women had worn or were wearing natural hair, statistics that are underrepresented in both television shows. The limited exposure to other hairstyles, however, reinforces the stereotype that straight hair is better than other hairstyles, especially natural hair. Although television has come a long way from *The Beulah Show* in terms of portraying various hairstyles, it has become more conservative than the Black is Beautiful Movement pushed for.

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Characters with straight hair in both *Being Mary Jane* and *How to Get Away with Murder* express a range of utility, from protagonists to antagonists to minor characters. They seem to show the breadth of human nature and are not easily categorized. On *Being Mary Jane* the majority of characters with straight hair are blond white women, however many African American women of all skin colors have straight hair as well. These women are not easily categorized based on their hairstyle, since they range in jobs, kindness, and morality. The women with straight hair in *How to Get Away with Murder*, however, tend to exhibit at least moderate levels of immorality, especially when worn by main characters. On both shows most minor characters have straight hair, as do almost all major characters. The dominance of straight hair on these television shows with many African American female viewers reflects the pre- Black is Beautiful Movement beauty standards regarding hairstyle. Television walks a line between reflecting society and pushing for changes. 87 These shows do not push boundaries in terms of beautifying different hairstyles and only expose viewers to minor characters with hairstyles other than straight. Television generally portrays social change after it has occurred, however, so natural hair may be more often portrayed in the future. 88

The women with curly hair are more easily labeled than those with straight hair. In *Being Mary Jane* curly haired women struggle to find meaning in their lives, and they are only minor characters in *How to Get Away with Murder*. Lisa and the salesgirl are the only women with curly hair in *Being Mary Jane*, and their close association with depression and frivolity imply that curly hair is a physical characteristic negatively related to personality. Although women with


88 Ibid., 43.
curly hair in *How to Get Away with Murder* are only minor characters and therefore do not have the same negative associations, they are only exposed minimally to viewers and all have darker skin. The association with darker skin may imply that curly hair is not as beautiful as straight hair as well (see chapter on skin color).

The portrayal of wigs occurs among mothers and Annalise in these shows, skewing the usage towards older women. Wigs are usually shown either at home or in times of vulnerability, correlating the two very closely. Annalise’s use of wigs especially is noticed in times of vulnerability when she takes off her wig to reveal her natural hair. Although these instances surround vulnerable situations, they seem to culminate after her immoral actions when she is most reflective.

Although *Being Mary Jane* shows more African American women, it does not show more instances of hairstyles other than straight. The portrayal of natural hair is most dominant and moving in *How to Get Away with Murder*, although neither television show truly accepts natural hair outside the home. The portrayal of and comments on hairstyles in these television shows reveal a reversal in acceptance from the Black is Beautiful Movement when these hairstyles were accepted and promoted to today when they are hidden in the home. Beautifying natural hair was a key change the Black is Beautiful Movement pushed for, however on these television shows it is only shown in the private sphere. Mary Jane and her mother always cover their hair in a head wrap when at home, and the only other women with natural hair are minor characters. Since one of the women died her natural hair blond, the idea that white hair is better is still underlying. The portrayal of head wraps reflects home life for many African American women, however the women who always wear natural hair are excluded from vision.

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Natural hairstyles and Afros started to grow out of style for African American women in the 1980s, therefore the limited portrayal on television is unsurprising. As men started wearing and masculinizing Afros, traditional white beauty standards returned for African American women.\(^{89}\) Natural hair was no longer considered feminine and thus fell out of use, especially within the beauty pageant community where beauty and femininity are considered vital. Despite William’s claim that the Black is Beautiful Movement main strides in changing hairstyle preferences, Rita Freedman claims that white beauty continues to overshadow black beauty ideals now. Today, some African American women such as Lupita Nyong’o proudly wear their natural hair, whereas some elementary, high, and business schools requires still outlaw Afros and dreads in class.\(^{90}\)

The Black is Beautiful Movement could be considered successful in terms of hair because at least natural hair is being shown on television today, but the aim of the movement was to make it widely accepted outside of the home. Natural hair within these shows is shown only inside the home, however.

Craig summarizes the progression of natural hair with the following: “In 1952, a black woman proudly wearing “nappy” hair was unfathomable. In 1960, she was a curiosity, in 1965 a militant, and in 1968 stylish. In 1970, she might have been arrested for too closely resembling

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\(^{89}\) Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?,* 125.

Angela Davis. By 1977, she was an anachronism.”91 The success of the Black is Beautiful Movement in beautifying natural hair was short lived, especially as seen through the television shows analyzed above. Although seventy percent of African American women reported wearing natural hair at some point, natural hair on these shows is portrayed only in times of vulnerability in the private sphere. While the television depictions may not accurately represent real-world appearance rates of different hairstyles, those shown on television are the most dominant and widely accepted. The limited depiction of natural hair on these shows reinforces the standard of straight hair for viewers, many of who are young African American women. Reinforcing this standard that is obtainable but unnatural for African American women may lead to negative self-image and low self-esteem among these women who often feel pressured to conform to the white beauty standard.92 The contemporary television shows analyzed above have progressed from the hairstyle shown in The Beulah Show since more hairstyles are portrayed, however straight hair still dominates.

91 Craig, Ain't I a Beauty Queen?, 78.

CHAPTER III
Skin Color

One of the biggest focus points for the Black is Beautiful Movement was skin color. White women comprised the majority of advertisements and media before the 1960s, and African American women were largely excluded from these platforms. Rule Seven of the Miss America pageant rules excluded African American women from participating in the pageant. This rule stated that contestants “must be of good health and of the white race.” The Miss America pageant set the beauty standard for American women since the pageant “became a national ritual celebrating beauty as woman’s noblest achievement.” Before the 1970s, many African American women used skin bleaches and brighteners, however these products could not change their skin color to fit the white beauty standard. This beauty standard consisted of white skin, straight hair, and an average-to-thin body type, as shown through the Miss America pageant winners who were meant to be the most beautiful women in America. By their race alone, African American women were excluded from this traditional standard.

The Black is Beautiful Movement celebrated the skin colors of all African American women not only light skinned women. This movement allowed African American women entry into stereotypical ideals of beauty that went beyond white skin, and this beautification has partially lasted until today. For instance, on both Being Mary Jane and How to Get Away with

93 Craig, Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?.


Murder, African American women that have medium skin are always portrayed as beautiful. Darker skinned women are sometimes, but not always, portrayed as beautiful. The limitation on darker skinned African American women being beautiful on these television shows that the Black is Beautiful Movement has had a lasting impact on beautifying some, not all, African American women.

Before the Black is Beautiful Movement, African American women were on the outside of beauty and excluded from the Miss America pageant specifically because of their skin color. Although there were beauty contests were for African American women, as one production assistant explained, “They all would liked to have gone into Miss America because they felt that, Miss America offered more opportunities. I think most of your local black contests made them feel like they were second class.”96 There was a difference between desiring to participate in the Miss America pageant and accepting white beauty standards, however. As one Howard University student explained, “I used to cry when they sang Miss America. I wanted to experience that. I wanted to be a winner. But I didn’t want to look like anybody in that pageant.”97 This contradiction shows how meaningful the Miss America pageant was to many despite the fact that it did not represent all women. Maxine Leeds Craig interviewed African American women who grew up before and during the Black is Beautiful Movement about their feelings of beauty. Many of the women who grew up before the movement said, “there were no

96 Craig, Ain’t I a Beauty Queen? 66.

97 Ibid.
famous beauties with whom they could identify” and named light skinned African American women with European facial features when they did identify someone.98

The lack of beautiful African American women in the media was reinforced through *The Beulah Show*, which aired in the 1950s. Within this show, Beulah has very dark skin in direct contrast to her white female employer. Beulah’s dark skin stands to contrast Alice and shows her light skin as even more pure and beautiful. Beulah’s friend Oriole is an African American woman with somewhat lighter skin, however she is still overweight and portrayed as dumb. All the other women are white women with average body types, leaving viewers to associate darker skin with stupidity, obesity, and servitude. This portrayal of African American women reinforces traditional beauty standards surrounding white women and excluding African American women since light skin was preferred within the African American community.99

Around this same time, however, some members of the African American community tried to reinforce the idea that African American bodies and features were beautiful. *Ebony* magazine had shown beautiful African American women since its inception in 1945.100 Multiple African American newspapers ran beauty contests for black women since the 1930s.101 Despite these efforts to claim black beauty, light skinned African Americans were predominately those who were claimed as beautiful. Even on *Ebony Magazine*’s cover, a magazine for African

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98 Ibid., 30.

99 Camp, "Black Is Beautiful: An American History."


101 Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?*, 59.
American women, only light-skinned women were portrayed until the Black is Beautiful Movement pushed for change.  

Surveys conducted since the mid-1940s revealed a contradiction in attitudes and actions towards skin tones. In different studies done by Charles Johnson and Eli Marks, African American adults reported that light skin was not important or better than dark skin; however light skinned individuals were more likely to marry, be economically successful, and have more opportunities. This disparity between perception and actual opportunities reveals the reality in the 1940s that lighter skin was perceived as better. Similarly, Clark and Clark’s “The development of self and the emergence of racial identification in Negro pre-school children” study conducted in 1939 asked African American children which doll they preferred between a black doll and a white doll. This study found that African American children preferred the white doll, and later studies found that African American children attributed more positive characteristics to the white doll rather than the black doll. These children had received subliminal or outright messages that white skin was preferential, similar to Pecola’s internalization of her ugliness based on her skin color in The Bluest Eye.  

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102 Ibid.  
103 Williams, Do Negroes Really Believe Black is Beautiful.  
African American women had the chance to show their beauty on a nation-wide scale when they were allowed in the Miss America pageant in 1970 when Cheryl Brown became the first African American woman in the pageant. She said that while she did not feel personally changed by the pageant, she felt “that my presence expanded people’s minds and their acceptance.” In the 1970s, George W. Williams conducted a survey within the African American community regarding skin color perceptions. Despite efforts of the Black is Beautiful Movement, he found that dark skin was much less preferred. Interesting, he also found that light skin was less preferred than medium color skin, indicating at least a moderate shift in beautifying other skin colors resulting from the Black is Beautiful Movement.

The shift away from complete favoritism of white skin is represented through Vanessa Williams’s winning of the Miss America pageant in 1984 as the first African American woman. Her victory was seen as a huge win for African American women, and women saw this as a proud moment. As Dorothy Height, the president of the National Council of Negro Women at the time said, “to know they will be given equal opportunity, that has meaning to

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108 Williams, Do Negroes Really Believe Black is Beautiful.

everyone.” Despite this victory, Williams had to prove that the idea that black is beautiful could “correspond to an historically ‘white’ model of interior womanhood,” meaning that she expressed racial harmony and conformed to traditional standards of femininity. Williams also fit more outward ideals for white beauty through her straight hair and light skin. Ten months into her reign as Miss America, Playboy magazine leaked nude photos of her and she was forced to resign. Through this scandal Williams was viewed as a ‘jezebel,’ another racist stereotype of African American women who signifies sex and “affirmed mass-media representations of this identity.” The jezebel has traditionally been depicted as a fair skinned African American women with European features such as straight hair and a thin figure who seduces men. The depiction of Vanessa Williams in this light halted some of the progress that the ‘Black is Beautiful’ campaign had made through the media depictions of widespread historical negative stereotypes.

Despite the scandal surrounding Vanessa Williams, the Black is Beautiful Movement did make lasting impacts on beautifying darker skin colors. On Being Mary Jane, African American women show more variety in skin colors, however some of the same negative associations seen in The Beulah Show remain. Four women have light skin, eight have medium skin, and four have

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111 Banet-Weiser, The Most Beautiful Girl in the World, 129.

112 Ibid., 143.

113 Jewell, From Mammy to Miss America and beyond, 46.
dark skin. Mary Jane has a medium skin tone, and is beautiful.\textsuperscript{114} She has her own news show with many friends, and both men and women swoon over her for autographs.\textsuperscript{115} The men she dates are all successful light-skinned African American men who are physically fit and attractive. Mary Jane has achieved high material success as a result of her professional success. She has a beautiful house and can afford to lend money to her brother and niece. The show, which takes place in Atlanta, Georgia, does not accurately portray the actual black population, however. According to the 2010 census, fifty-four percent of the Atlanta population was black while only about thirty-eight percent was white.\textsuperscript{116} These statistics are inaccurately represented on Being Mary Jane. One possible explanation for this discrepancy may be that most women Mary Jane meets through work and news reporting are predominately white.

In the first episode of Being Mary Jane Mary Jane wants one of her news shows to focus on the psychology study by Satoshi Kanazawa reporting that black women are ugly. Despite her best efforts, her idea is turned down because it is old news and people do not care about the issue any more. Kanazawa published his article entitled “A Look at the Hard Truths About Human Nature” on Psychology Today’s blog, which has since been removed after much pushback against the article that claimed African American women are biologically uglier than white

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\textsuperscript{114} See Coding System page 13 in Introduction for definition of beauty. \\
\textsuperscript{115} Being Mary Jane, “Pilot.” \\
\end{flushright}
While doing research on the idea that black women are ugly, Mary Jane comes across a movie entitled “Dark Girls” in which African American women talk about growing up black and their feelings of ugliness and insecurity because of their skin color. This insecurity and sense of being ugly is replicated in darker skinned women on the show such as Avery and Niecy.

Avery is the dark-skinned wife of Mary Jane’s lover, Andre, and is a highly successful lawyer. Avery and Mary Jane both have professional success and personal problems, however Avery is the woman who is being cheated on while Mary Jane is being cheated with. Andre falls out of love with Avery and in love with Mary Jane, adding to the standard that lighter is better even in moderation. Avery is also portrayed as mean, unhappy, and “used up.” Much of this understandingly stems from her failing marriage, but these are the only images of her that viewers receive. Andre complains that part of their marital issues stem from her lack of spontaneity in the bedroom, which contrasts explicitly with images of him and Mary Jane in bed together.

In one episode Avery uses a pillow to prop her head up while giving her husband a blow job, and Andre refers to it as the “laziest head ever.” This complaint relates to the historic stereotype of the jezebel again—a lighter skinned African American woman with straight hair.

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118 *Being Mary Jane*, “Pilot.”

119 *Being Mary Jane*, “The Huxtables Have Fallen.”

120 *Being Mary Jane*, “The Huxtables Have Fallen.”

121 Ibid.
who is hyper sexualized.\textsuperscript{122} Mary Jane has lighter skin than Avery and is portrayed as more sexual.

Niecy is another dark-skinned African American woman in this show who is also portrayed as lazy. As previously discussed, she lives with her grandparents for free and does not have a job. She is unhappy with her appearance both because of her size and her dark complexion. In contrast to Avery, however, Niecy says she is “really good at sex” and was thinking about doing porn.\textsuperscript{123} She is pregnant with a baby girl who will be half Filipino and half African American and therefore lighter. Niecy says that she wanted her baby to be mixed because she will have light skin, good hair, and an easier life, showing that the beauty standard of lighter skin still persists.\textsuperscript{124} She says that she wants her baby to have every opportunity, “and pretty is it,” reflecting this standard.\textsuperscript{125}

Despite Niecy’s perception that having lighter skin leads to happiness and an easier life, Lisa seems to disprove this standard. She has the highest educational and professional success as a doctor yet she suffers from depression. She had a troubled childhood and does not have a boyfriend, both of which contribute to her depression. Lisa is jealous of Mary Jane’s ex-boyfriend, David, and wishes she had dated him instead of Mary Jane. Mary Jane saved Lisa when she overdosed on prescription drugs, yet Lisa told David one of Mary Jane’s secrets in

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\textsuperscript{122} Jewell, \textit{From Mammy to Miss America and beyond}, 46.

\textsuperscript{123} \textit{Being Mary Jane}, “Pilot.”

\textsuperscript{124} \textit{Being Mary Jane}, “Blindsided.”

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
order to turn him against Mary Jane and towards herself.\textsuperscript{126} Despite Lisa’s light skin color and professional success, in her personal life she suffers from a lack of a significant partner, jealousy, and depression. Even though Mary Jane has darker skin, she is happier and attracts more men than Lisa, disproving Niecy’s notion that lighter equals better.

The majority of African American women portrayed on \textit{Being Mary Jane} have a medium-colored skin tone. This portrayal seems to be a compromise between traditional beauty standards that favor light skin and the push the Black is Beautiful Movement made to beautiful African American women of all shades. Within the show these medium-colored African American women are largely successful and portrayed as rather youthful and beautiful. These women still contrast their darker-colored counterparts, who voice their unhappiness with their appearance. \textit{Being Mary Jane} is making strides towards beautifying African American women, however it still has a ways to go to include darker women in this beautifying process. As a reflection of society, however, this shows informers viewers that dark-skinned African American women often still view themselves as outside the realm of beauty. This portrayal aligns with Douglas Kellner’s critical theory that television can act as a homogenizer enforcing ideas about race that exist in society.\textsuperscript{127} The Black is Beautiful Movement pushed for women with darker skin tones to be seen as beautiful, however those with the darkest skin colors are still not portrayed as beautiful today. This show also pushes back against the notion that lighter equals happier or easier through the character of Lisa. It is interesting to note that no Asian women are portrayed in the first season of \textit{Being Mary Jane}, although that is outside the realm of this thesis.

\textsuperscript{126} \textit{Being Mary Jane}, “Uber Love.”

\textsuperscript{127} Kellner, “Network Television and American Society,” 45.
On *How to Get Away with Murder*, there is more racial diversity of characters, however white women still make up the majority of characters. Overall in *How to Get Away with Murder* six African American women are shown with dark skin, seven with medium skin, and only two with light skin. Annalise is a dark-skinned African American woman, and as the main character she provides viewers with the majority of their information about darker skinned African American women. In comparing Annalise to Avery from *Being Mary Jane* as professional dark skinned African American women, both have much professional success but limited personal success. Both their husbands cheated on them, but Annalise also had an affair with a man more fit and attractive than her husband. Annalise is shown crying or in distress in multiple episodes, however her ability to win cases and problem solve show her as a strong woman. She acts immorally many times, and although there may be some correlation between the darkness of her skin and the darkness of her actions, she acts to protect her clients and students. Avery is shown more as a mother figure and seems desperate to save her marriage, unlike Annalise who puts work and others first.

Annalise takes control of her own beauty and sexuality through her affair with another, extremely fit, dark skinned African American man. Her husband is white, and her marriage to him reflects attainment of beauty through the eyes of a white man, however he dissatisfies her. Annalise confronts Sam about Lila’s death and both their affairs. She calls herself the “black

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woman on his arm so he could hide” and be seen as the good guy. Sam calls her a “disgusting slut” and says she was only ever a piece of ass. The racial component of their argument reflects the stereotype of the jezebel yet again in showing black women as hyper-sexualized.

One of the most moving scenes in *How to Get Away with Murder* is in season one, episode four “Let’s Get to Snooping,” when Annalise sits at her vanity and slowly removes her makeup and wig. She removes her wig, takes off her fake eyelashes one by one, and then wipes off her makeup. She wipes off the makeup from half of her face, leaving the stark contrast between her natural face and her made up face. This scene distinctly shows the beauty standard of wearing pretty makeup to cover any imperfections that spans all racial groups. Annalise is trying to fit the beauty standard by wearing makeup, but perhaps her dark skin color is a barrier to truly being beautiful. Annalise seems to accept herself for all her flaws and natural beauty in a way Avery cannot. Her natural state leaves Annalise vulnerable; however, especially as this is the first time she confronts her husband about his affair.

In season one episode ten, “Hello Raskolnikov,” Annalise offers her husband as a murderer to protect her client. She runs to the bathroom immediately afterwards to calm down, when two women from the court enter and start talking about her. One says that Annalise “is not a person like the rest of us,” to which the other asks what she is then. The response is “an

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129 *How to Get Away with Murder,* “Kill Me, Kill Me, Kill Me.”

130 Ibid.

131 See page 49 for a complete description of the jezebel stereotype.
animal,” while the other says, “even an animal isn’t that heartless.”

The comparison of Annalise to an animal because of her heartlessness and immorality harkens back to previously held stereotypes that African Americans were outsiders, for example through the mammy stereotype, showing this bias still remains.

Michaela is a dark skinned African American major female character in How to Get Away with Murder who owns her beauty. In season one she is engaged to a successful African American man from a prominent family and is extremely career-driven. The murder of Sam Keating, however, starts to unravel her. She cannot handle the burden of covering up their crime, making how put together she usually seems a front for her actual disheveled self. Her preppy look, combined with her straight hair, seems to resemble many white women. Despite her dark colored African American complexion, Michaela seems to fit into the white standard of female beauty, especially for East coast prep school women.

In comparison to her fiancé’s mother, Michaela has a darker complexion. Aiden’s mother looks down on Michaela because she is from the south and does not have the same respected family line as she does. Her desire to have Michaela sign a prenuptial agreement shows her distrust of Michaela, based solely off of Michaela’s background, including skin color, instead of her interactions with her fiancé’s family. This bias shows the racial hierarchy that exists even within the African American community.

Besides the major characters described above, the rest of the African American women have minor roles. Annalise’s mother has dark skin as well and is portrayed as an old yet strong

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132 How to Get Away with Murder, “Hello Raskolnikov.”

133 How to Get Away with Murder, “He Has a Wife.”
woman who worked hard throughout her life. In season one, episode thirteen, “Mama’s Here Now,” Annalise emotionally asks her mother why she didn’t protect her from being raped by her uncle. Her mother responds that being raped by men one knew was just a way of life and not something that needed to be talked about, but when she found out about Annalise she burned down her house with the uncle inside. This scene portrays the historical depiction of dark skinned African American women as objects to be easily used. Today Annalise is a successful lawyer, but she is not far removed from her mother’s time period and the associated perceptions of skin color.

The efforts that the Black is Beautiful Movement made in terms of beautifying darker skin colors was the most effective and lasting change of the movement. On both Being Mary Jane and How to Get Away with Murder African American women with a variety of skin tones are represented, and all are successful and pretty, to a degree. The class hierarchy that exists today within the African American community based largely on skin color is represented in the argument between Michaela and her fiancé’s mother. The self-perception of ugliness based on dark skin is shown by Niecy, yet the perception that light skin equates with happiness is thrown off by Lisa’s depression. Darker skin, especially in combination with obesity, excludes African American women from the traditional beauty standard.

Looking back at Johnson and Marks’s studies that found that lighter skinned African Americans more likely to marry and be economically successful, the women on both Being Mary Jane and How to Get Away with Murder show that this has changed. Mary Jane is highly professionally and economically successful yet has medium skin. Lisa has light skin and is professionally successful as well, yet neither woman is married and Lisa struggles with
depression. Annalise and Michaela have dark skin—Annalise is married and has a successful career as a lawyer and Michaela is a student on that same path. Since skin color is a fundamental, unchangeable difference between African American and white women, the Black is Beautiful Movement was most successful in beautifying African American skin colors. This success was still limited, however, as seen by the negative associations with dark-skinned African American women. The negative associations with light-skinned African American women dispel some notions that lighter skin equates with an easier life. A wider variety of characters with different skin colors all with different utilities are necessary to beautify all African American women and eliminate the racial hierarchy.

The multiple examples of African American women within these television shows could indicate that the Black is Beautiful Movement was largely successful at beautifying all skin colors. Despite the utility of the characters within the television shows, their presence alone indicates a substantial change from Beulah and Oriole on television. While this change is true, the negative characteristics associated with these women cannot be overlooked and needs to be taken into consideration. Alternately, one could consider the Black is Beautiful Movement unsuccessful in terms of beautifying various skin colors because of the negative utility that is still associated with these characters. Beulah was a dark-skinned African American woman who starred on her own sitcom and had many negative associations. She was used to contrast her white female employer, and dark-skinned African American women on these contemporary shows are still negatively portrayed. Despite the professional success of many of the characters, almost all of them have personal struggles and make morally questionable decisions. Although
this is a part of being human, the African American women are specifically focused on in these cases across skin tones.

In 2010, CNN replicated Clark’s doll study. In this recent study, white and African American children were asked questions relating to their perceptions of and attitudes towards different skin colors. The study found that all children have some preference for lighter skin and associate light skin with more positive characteristics, however white children exhibit more bias than African American children. While this study does show that some progress has been made in accepting and beautifying darker skin colors, this change has been minimal. Being Mary Jane and How to Get Away with Murder reflect the small changes in skin color preference that have occurred by beautifying medium colored skin yet still portray darker skin as undesirable. All but one Miss America has been white, “marrying light still means marrying up,” and more black women than white discuss “feeling downright ugly at some point in their lives,” showing that the Black is Beautiful Movement was minimally successful. The reinforcement of skin color preferences and the negative associations with darker skin colors on these shows may have negative effects on dark-skinned African American viewers and contribute to their ostracism by others. Despite the fact that a medium-skinned African American woman now plays a character named Mary Jane that Pecola in The Bluest Eye so desired to be, Pecola’s darker skin color may have excluded her from beauty even today.

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135 Freedman, Beauty Bound, 26.
CONCLUSION

Although the Black is Beautiful Movement was not entirely successful at changing beauty standards to include African American women, its efforts did result in some small lasting changes. The movement was most successful in beautifying women of different skin colors and largely unsuccessful at beautifying natural hair and curvy body types. This limited success is due to pervading ideas about beauty and professionalism reproduced across races through media and culture. Skin color is the only fundamental and unchangeable aspect of the beauty standard and therefore expanding the beauty standard to include African American women based on their skin color was the most necessary change. While natural hair is unique to African Americans, the combination of African American men wearing Afros and African American women being able to conform to the traditional standard of straight hair made the push to beautify natural hair fleeting. The average-to-thin body type standard is also something in which all women regardless of race “can” adhere to and pervades because of misogynistic social constructs and was therefore another unsuccessful change.

As Being Mary Jane and How to Get Away with Murder show, dark skin, overweight body types, and natural and curly hair are still associated with unhappiness, frivolity, and immorality. Natural hair and curly hair are minimally portrayed on both shows. Natural hair is largely shown in the comfort of one’s own home or times of distress, reinforcing today standard
about professionalism. Curly hair is associated with frivolity and depression through these limited portrayals.

Even more limited are portrayals of overweight and curvy women. The portrayals that are available show these women as either overweight jolly women or unhappy because of their weight. Neither of these images beautifies larger women and the majority of women on these shows are average or thin. A possible confound in this analysis, however, is the subjectivity inherent in coding for body type. Unlike skin color and hairstyle, body type has a slighter gradient for differences. Despite this subjectivity, larger women are still underrepresented on both show when compared to obesity statistics in the United States. This underrepresentation reinforces the standard that beauty (here shown through television success) is strongly linked to an average-to-thin body type.

The women on these shows do have a variety of skin colors, however, showing that this was the most lasting change of the Black is Beautiful Movement. The African American women on these shows are no longer only light skinned but also medium and dark skinned. Women of all skin colors obtain mixtures of professional and personal success. Characters like Lisa, through her depression and attempted overdose, subvert the idea that light skin equates to happiness, while characters like Annalise subvert the idea that dark skinned women are unloved and unhappy. The competing messages about beauty (unhappiness and immorality associated with overweight and underweight characters, light and dark-skinned characters, and those wearing

their hair straight and natural) show that no sole beauty trait makes women happy. Every character has her own struggles and successes. Beauty and happiness come from within and from being around loved ones, however one’s self-image and self-esteem come in part from external validation. This validation is often withheld from African American women on television, leading to low self-esteem and internal sense of worth.

The intersectionality of race and gender is portrayed within these shows as creating derogatory stereotypes especially for African American women. For example, Mary Jane is repeatedly referred to as either a crazy or angry black woman.\textsuperscript{137} Her friends, family, and lovers all use this phrase to describe her at some point during the first season of the show. Mary Jane says, “crazy is what men say when they want women to shut up,” pushing back against the usage.\textsuperscript{138} Niecy is on the outside of most of the beauty standards with her dark skin and overweight body type. She is also one of the most sexualized characters from either show since she has two children with different fathers and said she thought about making porn.\textsuperscript{139} Since she is not traditionally beautiful, she uses sex to attract men and make herself feel good. She seems to combine the stereotypes of the mammy and the jezebel in her depiction as an overweight, hyper-sexualized African American woman.\textsuperscript{140} While Lisa, who is remaining celibate until

\textsuperscript{137} Being Mary Jane, “Blindsided,” “Uber Love."

\textsuperscript{138} Being Mary Jane, “Uber Love.”

\textsuperscript{139} Being Mary Jane, “Blindsided.”

\textsuperscript{140} See Introduction page 2 for a complete description of the mammy stereotype.
marriage, contrasts this depiction, Mary Jane and Annalise similarly reinforces the idea that African American women are hypersexual.

The overall comments on the beauty of the women in these television shows reveal how important beauty is within our society. Some off-hand comment or mention of appearance occurs in almost every episode within the first season of these shows, for example calling a woman a “hot young piece of ass” or discussing how nicely a woman cleans up. Media representations like these reinforce the idea that it is acceptable to comment on a woman’s appearance without her asking one’s opinion. This idea trickles down into the every day harassment many women face, whether in the workplace, in public, or in the home. There needs to be more dialogue about the beauty standard and how it is used to repress women in order to make a change. More movements like the Black is Beautiful Movement are necessary to give women an outlet to express and celebrate their natural beauty. The exclusion of African American women from the beauty standard on television permeates into society and can prevent men and other women from seeing these women as beautiful. This can, in turn, inform the interpersonal interactions others have with African American women. Men in particular need to be educated about the pressures to conform to the standard and how they are reinforcing this idea through their actions. Diversity is often considered an asset in working and living situations, but not diversity of beauty.

One question that arises from this study is whether or not African American women are being included in the beauty standard overall or only when they have more Eurocentric features rather than African ones. The characters in these shows who fit the beauty standard all conform

to it except in terms of skin color, supporting the idea that the beauty standard is still Eurocentrically featured. Determining the beauty standard for women in Africa and then applying that to television shows there would provide a contrast for this research. Those findings could affirm or contradict the idea that African American women are mainly celebrated as beautiful when they have more Eurocentric features. As Jesse Williams, a half-white and half-black actor said, “European beauty standards give me access to things.” Applying beauty standards to African American men or mixed race individuals may expand on this idea of Eurocentric features being celebrated as well.

Part of the reason that the Black is Beautiful Movement experienced limited success may be in part related to the association of the movement with the Black Panther Party and the subsequent demonization of the party as radicals. Since the Black Panthers were seen for their intense black pride and utilization of the right to bear arms, they strongly pushed back against white standards and norms. Angela Davis was a prominent Black Panther member who was widely recognized for her Afro, and this association may have limited the spread and acceptance of natural hair and other beauty standard changes the Black is Beautiful Movement was fighting for. The idea of the fear of the black body that Ta-Nehisi Coates discusses in his novel *Between the World and Me* relates to the limited success as well in the idea that white people are afraid of and uncomfortable with black bodies and therefore beautify only those that appear more Eurocentric.

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Beauty standards pervade across racial lines and depend more on gender rather than race, however. American society uses beauty standards to sell products and keep men in positions of power. Through the media women are constantly told that they need to look differently: thinner, blonder, sexier. Because of the pressure to conform and change there is a huge market for beauty products, from make-up to hair dye to weight-loss drugs. The beauty standard keeps women repressed with low self-esteem and contributes to the pay gap and gender imbalances in corporate and political America. Adhering to the beauty standard is expensive because of all the products women are expected to buy and use to change their appearance. The relation between socioeconomic status and fitting into the beauty standard would be an interesting comparison for future research and may show that it is not just African American women overall who are outside the beauty standard but specifically those in low socioeconomic positions. Niecy may be an example of this—although her family is well off she herself is unemployed and has limited funds. Since African Americans in the United States have lower incomes on average than white Americans, this correlation with beauty should be further explored.

Varying messages about African American women’s beauty and roles are disseminated to different viewers based on socioeconomic status as well. Being Mary Jane, a cable show, and How to Get Away with Murder, a network show, reach different audiences since one needs to pay for cable to watch Being Mary Jane but not How to Get Away with Murder. The messages that viewers of Being Mary Jane receive are more nuanced in the association between beauty standards and happiness. For example, Lisa has light skin and is average weight yet suffers from depression. Straight hair is the overarching portrayal, however, limiting exposure to and acceptance of natural hair. Niecy exposes the biases towards average weight and light skin
through her self-image and hopes for her baby. As television has conflicting interests to reflect and progress society, Niecy can be seen as someone who does both. While she reveals the pressure to conform to standards that many feel, by discussing it to such a wide audience, perhaps viewers will think about their inherent biases and actions. *Being Mary Jane* airs on BET, the Black Entertainment Television channel. Since the viewership is aimed at African American women, one would expect this show to offer more positive images of all African American women and beauty features. As this is not the case, the show may aim more to reflect the conflicts that many African American women may face daily.

*How to Get Away with Murder* reaches a wider audience because it is on network television. Although this show is not aimed specifically at African American women, it is produced by one and may therefore reflect some of her personal experiences. Within this show natural hair is depicted more often, however only in times of vulnerability. This show does not portray any overweight women, and offers few African American women with natural hair. The homogenous depictions of characters vary almost solely in terms of skin color, offering few images to which viewers can relate and not truly celebrating diversity.

Further research could explore efforts at beautifying women of other races or explore the absence of Asian women in these and other television shows. Research could also explore other aspects of entertainment for the beautification of African American women, for example by exploring their portrayals in books intended for various demographics. Studying the portrayals of African American women in children’s television shows in relation to the self-confidence of African American girls would be another interesting research outlet to see what beauty and success standards are being reproduced in children today across racial lines. The portrayal of
African American women in reality television using this coding system would provide an interesting comparison to the results from this research. Reality television shows different aspects of life and different characters than fictional dramas and may therefore provide different insights into beauty representations and standards. Reproducing this study with television shows that aired during the Black is Beautiful Movement would compliment this research as well.

Despite the efforts of the Black is Beautiful Movement, there have been few lasting changes to the traditional beauty standard. African American women are more included, but mainly when they adhere to the standards of straight hair and average body type and only stray in skin color (and then only to a degree). As Toni Morrison describes from before the Black is Beautiful Movement:

She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition--the glazed separateness. She does not know what keeps his glance suspended. Perhaps because he is grown, or a man, and she a little girl. But she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes. Yet this vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes.¹⁴³

There has been an African American Miss America pageant winner and there are more African American women on television, but we are not as far from Morrison’s depiction as advocates in the Black is Beautiful Movement may have hoped. While medium African American skin colors are now more accepted, darker ones, natural hair, and overweight body types are still outside the beauty standard.

¹⁴³ Morrison, The Bluest Eye, 47.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


The Beulah Show, directed by Richard Bare, aired 1950-1953, on ABC, Alpha Home Entertainment, 2007.


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APPENDIX

Figure 1. The Coding System applied to *Being Mary Jane* and *How to Get Away with Murder*. This coding system has been modified from the original to accurately reflect its use and ease of understanding.

**Hair**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hair</th>
<th>Main Characters</th>
<th>Minor Characters</th>
<th>Utility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Straight</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wig</td>
<td></td>
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Comments on hair:

**Skin Color**

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<th>Utility</th>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black-dark skin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black-light skin</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black-medium</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments on skin color:

**Body Type**

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<th>Minor Characters</th>
<th>Utility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Underweight</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average weight</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Comments on body type:

Outright Mentions Overall Beauty/standards

Comments on names/changes:

Character descriptions and utility:
Figure 2. Notes on the original coding system from season 1, episode 1, “Pilot” of Being Mary Jane.
Outright Mentions Overall Beauty/standards
BMJ- Black women over 70, we're numbers 1 through 10 only one came up as 9 or 8.
HGAM- Mom didn't want them to come on stage you had on yesterday.

Names
BMJ- Pauline- Paul I'm not calling you by that stupid name you made up 20:30
HGAM- MJ by here, word June put when looking.

Comments on names/changes:
BMJ- HGAM-

42% of black women
have never been
amused
by
racial
jokes

Crazy spread will have
Crazy group through
Dance of Phony
Crazy- Fighting for cheap stuff
Freeze, sperm

LXXX
Figure 3. Gabrielle Union as Mary Jane in *Being Mary Jane*.

![Figure 3. Gabrielle Union as Mary Jane in *Being Mary Jane*.](image)


Figure 4. Robinne Lee as Avery in *Being Mary Jane*.

![Figure 4. Robinne Lee as Avery in *Being Mary Jane*.](image)


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Figure 5. Margaret Avery as Helen in *Being Mary Jane*.


Figure 6. Lisa Vidal as Kara in *Being Mary Jane*.

Figure 7. Raven Goodwin as Niecy in *Being Mary Jane*.

![Image of Raven Goodwin as Niecy in Being Mary Jane.](http://www.bet.com/shows/being-mary-jane/photos/2015/01/being-mary-jane-memes-what-would-niecy-s-instagram-say.html)


Figure 8. Latarsha Rose as Lisa in *Being Mary Jane*.


Figure 9. Viola Davis as Annalise in *How to Get Away with Murder*.


Figure 9. Aja Naomi King as Michaela in *How to Get Away with Murder*.

Figure 10. Cicely Tyson as Ophelia in *How to Get Away with Murder*.


Figure 11. Lynn Whitfield as Aiden’s mom, Mary, in *How to Get Away with Murder*. 