THE WHITE HOUSE IN TECHNICOLOR:  
RACE AND REPRESENTATION IN TELEVISUAL POLITICAL DRAMAS  

A Thesis  
submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
of Georgetown University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of  
Master of Arts  
in Communication, Culture & Technology  

By  

Anupam Chakravarty, B.S.  

Washington, DC  
December 10, 2014
THE WHITE HOUSE IN TECHNICOLOR: 
RACE AND REPRESENTATION IN TELEVISUAL POLITICAL DRAMAS

Anupam Chakravarty, B.S.
Thesis Advisor: Leticia Bode, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This study seeks to understand how the state of race relations in America is interpreted, imagined and portrayed through modern American televisual political dramas. The recent marked increase in the number of prime-time fictional programs set in or around the White House reflects, in part, a search for meaning among audiences disillusioned with American politics, as well as an eagerness among producers and writers to explain Washington's inner-workings. The emergence of this genre coincides with a period of unprecedented developments in bringing racial diversity to the American political process, most notably in the 2008 election of President Barack Obama; this landmark moment for the American presidency has also highlighted the challenges the nation still faces in confronting its racial history. Televisual political dramas are uniquely positioned to incorporate race themes into their characters and their dialogue to comment, explicitly and implicitly, on what progress on race issues can look like. This study assesses the extent to which dominant narratives on race issues in American politics are represented in four popular televisual political dramas: The West Wing, 24, Scandal and House of Cards. The case studies incorporate not only the story told on screen, but the real-life political and creative contexts that shape their storytelling as it relates to race issues. The study uses a combination of literary criticism, contextual research and data visualization through design thinking to identify storytelling patterns and feedback mechanisms that inform how race
issues are addressed. The analysis illustrates that these dramas, despite their freedom to imagine, are ultimately cultural artifacts of their time that exhibit many of the same limitations that constrain meaningful dialogue on racial inequality and the sources of racism embedded in American politics.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project was the result of a number of personal explorations—on race, on design, on politics, and on pop culture—that came together over my time in the Georgetown University Communication, Culture & Technology (CCT) program. I am incredibly grateful to the talented and dedicated faculty that encouraged me over the years to explore my passions and gave me the intellectual support to pursue this challenging topic.

I am particularly thankful that Dr. Leticia Bode agreed to be my thesis advisor and spent many months working with me on the project, making me a significantly better scholar through the process. I am also appreciative of the insights and encouragement I received from my readers, Dr. Garrison LeMasters and Dr. Kimberly Meltzer.

Thank you to the friends, classmates (new and old) and colleagues that shared their ideas, challenged my perceptions, helped me refine my pitch and generally gave me the confidence to pursue this research topic. Your genuine interest in my project made it all the more worth all of the effort I put into it.

My family—my mother Sumita, father Prasun and sister Aditi—have always inspired me to follow my passions. Thank you for your encouragement, your knowledge, and your love throughout this process.

And last but not least, thank you to my fiancée Connie, whose unconditional love and support throughout all of my all-nighters, freak-outs and moments of self-doubt helped keep my eyes on the prize. A massive project like this is easier to build when you feel like you’re building something together.

Now more than ever, it is an important time to talk honestly and meaningfully about race in this country, and this is my first contribution in what I hope to be a long career of scholarship and critical thinking. Thank you to everyone who has helped me find a voice in this dialogue.

Anupam Chakravarty
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**INTRODUCTION** ................................................................................................................................. 1

**LITERATURE REVIEW** .......................................................................................................................... 4
  - Dominant Narratives in American Politics on Race Issues .............................................................. 5
  - Televisual Imagination of American Government ............................................................................ 13
  - On the Popularity of Televisual Political Dramas ............................................................................ 20
  - Foundations of Design Research ...................................................................................................... 27

**METHODOLOGY** .................................................................................................................................. 31
  - Identifying Case Studies ..................................................................................................................... 31
  - Watching Television Critically ........................................................................................................... 34
  - Design Research Methods of Television Analysis ................................................................................ 35

**CASE STUDY: THE WEST WING** ........................................................................................................ 39
  - Secretary O’Leary and “The Cost of Doing Business” ................................................................. 44
  - Charlie Young, “Cosmetic Problems” and the White Supremacist Plot ........................................... 50
  - On Competing Allegiances: Race in the Military and Congress ...................................................... 55
  - Matthew Santos and Imagining a Post-Racial Presidency ............................................................... 64

**CASE STUDY: 24** .................................................................................................................................. 74
  - Senator Palmer: The Promise and Peril of A Black Presidential Candidate .................................. 78
  - President Palmer: Racial Politics as the Healer-In-Chief ............................................................... 82
  - The Palmer Effect? The Myth of Pop Culture Predestination .......................................................... 85
  - Ticking Time-bombs, Split Screens and Audience Interactivity ....................................................... 88

**CASE STUDY: SCANDAL** .................................................................................................................... 91
  - Polysemic Popes: Parental Disapproval and Racial Dialogue ......................................................... 96
  - Feedback Loops and Design Thinking Applications ........................................................................... 99

**CASE STUDY: HOUSE OF CARDS** ....................................................................................................... 102

**PATTERNS AND CONCLUSIONS** ........................................................................................................ 109

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** ..................................................................................................................................... 116
INTRODUCTION

“Though this nation has proudly thought of itself as an ethnic melting pot, in things racial we have always been and continue to be, in too many ways, essentially a nation of cowards.”

Attorney General Eric Holder, February 18, 2009

CLAIRE UNDERWOOD: I’m sorry. There were political realities we couldn't ignore.
MEGAN HENNESSY: Do you ever wonder why so many people hate Washington? It's because of people like you using phrases like that.

*House of Cards* (“Chapter 24”, Season 2, Episode 11)

*The New Republic*’s cover in December 2013 displayed a powerful image of American political power, without having any actual political figures in the frame: instead, familiar fictional heroes and heroines, from Claire Danes’s Carrie Mathison in *Homeland* to Tony Goldwyn’s President Fitzgerald Grant from *Sandal*, packed the cover. The images of the characters surrounded the big block letters of T.A. Frank’s cover story title, “The Hate-Watching of Washington.” It was certainly a provocative title, one meant to sell on newsstands, and the choice of the term “hate-watching” was one that was loaded with meaning: it referred to an embittered outlook toward America’s political elites following a two-week government shutdown during the months preceding it, just the latest disappointment to come in a series of partisan disagreements and personal rivalries that have characterized modern politics and come at the expense of governing. Indeed, “hate” was a term thrown around frequently in the District of Columbia during those weeks in which federal employees were furloughed and the American capital city appeared impotent, emblematic of a nation divided.

Thus, one might argue that “hate-watching” was not only employed to describe the fascination among television audiences with dramatic portrayals of American dysfunction, but
also described just how much animosity had taken hold of the political process following the election of America’s first Black president in 2008. A moment that was once hailed as a watershed moment for the state of race relations in America, a symbolic confrontation with its slave-holding past and a signal of how far it had come, can also be remembered as the moment that galvanized conservatives in America to form the Tea Party—a hardline faction of the Republican Party. Political commentators would soon use coded rhetoric such as “the welfare king” and “the food-stamp president” to forge and activate mental associations between the president’s race with the social programs anathema to their political worldview (Washington Times, 2012).

As T.A. Frank went on to explain in his cover story, this is a fascinating time for this particular genre of televisual dramas, one engaged in depicting the American political establishment and so-called “Washington culture,” to emerge as such a dominant force in broadcast schedules. In the year since his article was published, viewers have continued to invite new casts of fictional American presidents and impassioned Washington politicos into their living rooms, including President Constance Payton (played by Alfre Woodard) in NBC’s State of Affairs and Secretary of State Elizabeth McCord (played by Téa Leoni) in CBS’s Madam Secretary. Explaining the popularity of the genre merely as entertainment and escapism, as is often done with television, feels particularly incomplete from the perspective of a student living in Washington, DC such as myself, sensitive to the depictions of a city that is all too frequently understood as a metonym.

Time and again, stories that are set in or around the White House use this fictional environment to provide an artistic social commentary on issues that are at the forefront of the American political agenda, whether it be domestic legislative issues like gun control, as seen in
Scandal’s most recent season, or national security issues like international terrorism, a topic explored by Homeland.

My study into this genre of televisual political dramas was thus motivated by a sense that the rise of these programs coincides with a period in which the racial dimensions of American nationalism and power are the subject of particularly intense negotiation, dialogue and confrontation in the political sphere.

My research sets out to understand how televisual political dramas use their positioning—as sites of political socialization and “soft” exposure to politics—to explore issues of race and racial representation, explicitly and implicitly. Analyzing case studies of popular examples from the genre, I am concerned with how televisual fictional storytelling about the White House incorporates or deviates from dominant narratives from the modern political discourse around race in America. Through this study, I discuss whether the programs’ various methods for conceptualizing and interpreting these difficult questions can provide insights into the opportunities and pitfalls that exist within America’s broader political discussion on race issues.
This study of televisual political dramas—specifically, programs set in or around the White House—begins at the intersection of American politics and popular culture. While political and social context has historically influenced themes in televisual storytelling of many genres, the choice to simulate and dramatize the actions of American leaders in Washington allows these programs to comment directly on issues on the national agenda. Several programs set in the American capital discuss national security priorities by imagining its defense and military decision-makers, while other programs depict the world of Washington lobbyists to comment on corporate influence in American legislative outcomes. This study is focused on how race issues in America—including racism, racial discrimination, and inequalities across America’s racial identities—are discussed by popular instances of politically themed fiction. As the characters in this genre of dramas exercise varying levels of power and influence, this study also discusses the extent to which the characters’ racial or ethnic backgrounds may or may not influence their political standing in the show’s fictional government structure. This inquiry into the ideas communicated through these programs embraces an interdisciplinary approach and connects concepts from literature across several academic fields, including political science, sociology, anthropology and communications, to discuss modern pop cultural imaginations of America’s political discourse around race.

The concept of “imagination” is intellectually connected to “race” in a number of ways: for one, race is a social construct in which characteristics such as skin color, physical appearance and ethnic background have been used to categorize groups of people, generally for the purposes of allocating and distributing power and resources (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997; Omi & Winant,
1989). The study of televisual imaginations of the White House also brings to mind Benedict Anderson’s definition of nations as “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991), so as to suggest that these dramas contribute to the imagination of what it means to be American, a concept that is influenced and complicated by racial identity. To provide foundations around the commentary these television programs make on race, it is important to discuss in broad strokes the primary ways in which their real-life counterparts—politicians, leaders, military personnel, staffers and commentators—discuss America’s race issues.

**Dominant Narratives in American Political Discourse on Race Issues**

Through my research on political rhetoric related to race issues, I identified five broad categories in which perspectives on these matters consistently fall. First, there are explanations that attribute racial inequality to a unique **pathology**, in the form of genetic deficiencies or a lack of cultural values among minority (usually, Black) communities. Charles Murray, author of the book *The Bell Curve* (1994) with Richard Herrnstein, is considered a central figure in white nationalist social theories by the Southern Poverty Law Center for publishing a study arguing that intelligence is based on ancestral heritage, and that lower socioeconomic outcomes are determined through genetic predisposition. In an article for the *National Review* in 2000, Murray implied that political correctness prevented many from confronting the truth his study attributing social circumstances entirely on genes:

“Try to imagine a … presidential candidate saying in front of the cameras, ‘One reason that we still have poverty in the United States is that a lot of poor people are born lazy.’ You cannot imagine it because that kind of thing cannot be said. And yet this unimaginable statement merely implies that when we know the complete genetic story, it will turn out that the population below
the poverty line in the United States has a configuration of the relevant genetic makeup that is significantly different from the configuration of the population above the poverty line. This is not unimaginable. It is almost certainly true.” (Murray, 2000)

Though Murray’s arguments mirror antiquated and discredited perspectives that had been used throughout history to justify discrimination and mistreatment, Wisconsin congressman and former vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan (R-WI) nonetheless cited him to preface his own comments on the deficiencies of culture of the “inner cities”—long understood as a coded reference to African-Americans (Blow, 2014; López, 2014). “We have got this tailspin of culture, in our inner cities in particular, of men not working and just generations of men not even thinking about working or learning the value and the culture of work,” he said in a March 2014 radio interview, “So there is a real culture problem here that has to be dealt with.” As Cornel West writes in 1994’s Race Matters, these explanations cite behavior, morality, culture, personal responsibility and work ethic as the chief factors affecting Black prospects in a free market system, which may explain their popularity among conservative politicians (West, 1994: 18).

These explanations are also connected to a second dominant narrative in political dialogue around race: respectability politics, or the belief that racial inequality experienced by Black Americans can be remedied through hard work and virtuous behavior, essentially earning the respect of white elites. The rhetoric of respectability thus overlaps with cultural pathology, although it is rooted in doctrines espoused by Black scholars, activists and influencers: the concept is attributed to the tenets of Booker T. Washington, an educator who argued that the situation for African-Americans in the wake of slavery would improve through incremental change driven by economic empowerment and labor:
“We shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labour and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life; shall prosper in proportion as we learn to draw the line between the superficial and the substantial, the ornamental gewgaws of life and the useful. No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top.” (Washington, 1895)

In more recent contexts, the rhetoric of respectability is used to describe criticisms led by Black thinkers and influencers of the habits within their own racial community: following Congressman Ryan’s “tailspin of culture” comments in 2014, journalist and scholar Ta-nehisi Coates wrote a piece in *The Atlantic* suggesting that the liberal hand-wringing around the conservative congressman’s remarks were hypocritical. Coates asserted that liberal, Black public intellectuals tended to avoid talk of race unless they were sharing a lesson about individual agency and better behavior among members of the Black community. In particular, Coates cited President Barack Obama’s commencement address to Morehouse College in 2013, in which the president said, “too many young men in our community continue to make bad choices” and that “nobody is going to give you anything that you have not earned.” (Obama, 2013)

Jonathan Chait of *New York Magazine* responded to Coates by saying that as a Black leader, President Obama was merely using his unique position and popular support to set a good example for those in his community. Chait, through an analogy about an officiating bias in a basketball game, describes the approach as “a sensible practice of encouraging people to concentrate on the things they can control” (Chait, 2014). Through the five-article debate between the two journalists, Coates ultimately maintained that President Obama’s rhetoric signaled a resignation to the “officiating bias” that exists across racial lines, and that invoking respectability is a matter of political convenience:
“Accepting the premise that ‘black culture’ and ‘a culture of poverty’ are interchangeable also has the benefit of making the president's rhetoric much more understandable. One begins to get why the president would address a group of graduates from an elite black college on the tendency of young men in the black community to make ‘bad choices.’ Or why the president goes before black audiences and laments the fact that the proportion of single-parent households has doubled, and carry no such message to white audiences—despite the fact that single parenthood is growing fastest among whites. And you can understand how an initiative that began with the killing of a black boy who was not poor, and who had a loving father, becomes fuel for the assertion that ‘nothing keeps a young man out of trouble like a father.’” (Coates, March 30, 2014)

Claims that President Obama’s statements on issues facing African-Americans evince respectability politics are often coupled with a belief that he puts forward a colorblind, post-racial outlook on inequality, a third dominant narrative in race politics. Tim Wise (2010) describes post-racial liberalism as a conceptual by-product of four decades of scholarship and public intellectualism that has advocated the de-emphasis of race-specific strategies to address inequality. He traces its beginnings to the late 1970s in books by sociologist William Julius Wilson, and highlights recent examples of colorblind rhetoric—commenting on class as opposed to race—used by progressives garner popular support structural interventions to address economic disparities. As a presidential candidate, Barack Obama employed the rhetoric of racial transcendence so as to strengthen his popular appeal (Wise, 2010).

The post-racial narrative can also allow political actors to criticize the existence of race-based identity politics, a perspective outlined in a 2013 POLITICO op-ed penned by Louisiana governor and prominent Indian-American politician Bobby Jindal. In his essay entitled, “The End of Race,” Jindal asserts that the greatest obstacles to improved race relations in America are caused by racial communities themselves that fixate on their differences:
“Yet we still place far too much emphasis on our ‘separateness,’ our heritage, ethnic background, skin color, etc. We live in the age of hyphenated Americans: Asian-Americans, Italian-Americans, African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans, Indian-Americans, and Native Americans, to name just a few. Here’s an idea: How about just “Americans?” That has a nice ring to it, if you ask me. Placing undue emphasis on our ‘separateness’ is a step backward. Bring back the melting pot. There is nothing wrong with people being proud of their different heritages. We have a long tradition of folks from all different backgrounds incorporating their traditions into the American experience, but we must resist the politically correct trend of changing the melting pot into a salad bowl. E pluribus Unum.” (Jindal, 2013)

Jindal’s choice to describe racial identification as a “politically correct trend,” along with his invocation of a singular, transcendent notion of Americanness, suggests that discussions on race in America are potentially divisive, dangerous and manipulative. Post-racial perspectives like Jindal’s do not suggest that racism does not exist at all, but rather that race and racism are not critical factors to determining life chances in America; racism is instead viewed as individual bigotries and personal animosities that are held by people of all identities (López, 2011). I identify this narrow conception of racism—one that takes all onus of addressing racial inequalities off of systems, society and policies—as the fourth dominant narrative around race issues in America because of its frequency in modern discourse. By viewing racism primarily as an individual’s character flaw, the analysis of racism is reduced to racist acts and finding the hateful intent behind them. In turn, avoiding the appearance of racism becomes a matter of individual etiquette (Kim, 2013) as opposed to a question of the larger historical prejudices that are activated by racist statements and actions.

The criticisms of these four dominant narratives used to discuss race and racism—cultural pathology, respectability, post-racism and individualized bigotry—is then a final
perspective on race that looks to **structural, systemic** explanations and takes into account America’s history of racism as embedded in policy. From the painful legacy of slavery, to Jim Crow laws, to residential discrimination known as “redlining”, structuralists like the aforementioned Ta-nehisi Coates, Tim Wise, Cornel West and others advocate for a discussion about race and racism that acknowledges historical injustices perpetuated through American policy. As *New York Times* columnist Charles M. Blow succinctly articulated the deficiencies of non-structural dominant narratives in saying that, “when we insinuate that poverty is the outgrowth of stunted culture, that it is almost always invited and never inflicted, we avert the gaze from the structural features that help maintain and perpetuate poverty—discrimination, mass incarceration, low wages, educational inequities—while simultaneously degrading and dehumanizing those who find themselves trapped by it” (Blow, 2014).

The dominant narratives in the national discussion on race have typically adhered to a partisan dichotomy since the Lyndon B. Johnson presidency in the 1960s, pitting “Great Society Democrats” and their concern for structure against “self-help Republicans” and their concern for culture. (West, 1994: 4) Tying one’s perspective on race to political partisanship creates liberal and conservative positions on America’s race issues that risk deficient and at times detrimental policy prescriptions: liberal structuralists neglect the lasting psychocultural impacts that institutions and economics have on “battered” Black identity in America, while conservative behaviorists overemphasize individual agency and reject the consideration of historical injustice as vindicating victimhood. (West, 1994: 20 - 22) West summarizes these partisan perspectives through the rhetoric often associated with them:
“Hence, for liberals, black people are to be ‘included’ and ‘integrated’ into ‘our’ society and culture, while for conservatives they are to be ‘well behaved’ and ‘worthy of acceptance’ by ‘our’ way of life. Both fail to see that the presence and predicaments of Black people are neither additions to nor defections from American life, but rather constitutive elements of that life.” (West, 6)

The reluctance to talk about race and the historical roots of racism may also be related to a fear of provoking racial anger, a concept that in America has associations with a history of race riots and violence. There is no shortage of examples of racially-motivated anger directed towards America’s first Black president. (Daniel, 2009: 56) However, an opportunity for more nuanced inquiry is President Obama’s role in explaining the racial anger of the Black community to the wider American public while himself not outwardly exhibiting racial anger. This narrative was carefully woven throughout then-candidate Obama’s famous “More Perfect Union” speech on March 18, 2008, in which he situated inflammatory remarks by his former pastor Reverend Jeremiah Wright within their historical context while simultaneously distancing himself from their pessimistic implications about race relations in America today. (Daniel, 2009: 51)

In Sue J. Kim’s book on race, cognition and narrative, racial anger operates at the crossroads of cognitive and political processes, descriptive of both an internal reaction to systemic injustices and externally imposed by a society that pathologizes and fears it. (Kim, 2013: 49) Kim references Audre Lorde, one of the first feminists of color to specifically discuss anger and reactions to it as political forces, to help elaborate her definitions of racial anger. Lorde explains that “anger is loaded with information and energy,” and that recognizing and using anger can be productive, even though we run the risk of incorrect agency attribution.
The error [Lorde] describes is not only that we blame the wrong external agents, but also that, even before we find a target, we think in terms of a person to blame, rather than a system. Seeking an external agent to blame suggests that anger is individual, but as Lorde points out, political anger is systemic—and the lack of ability to think and feel systemically masks and exacerbates the conditions that make people angry.” (Kim, 2013: 51)

The issue of agency attribution becomes important in the discussion of post-racial liberalism as we look at literary, cinematic and televisual narratives about race and the ways in which characters become both individual and representational agents. Kim uses the 2004 film Crash as an illustrative example in which each character’s racial anger is portrayed as a justifiable reaction to another character’s racist or unjust actions. A character will represent his racial perspective or institutional bias, and his relationships with other characters underscores the personal and individualized nature of race-driven animosities with institutional structures as mere setting. (Kim, 2013: 70-83) These narrative devices evince creative choices to have the audience empathize with certain expressions of racial anger over others.

Conversely, when racial anger is given a less generic voice through narrative to acknowledge its “information and energy,” a more productive conversation around its sources can take shape to make sense of race issues. For example, the perception that President Obama masks his racial anger has inspired a popular televisual interpretation that underscores the traction of this narrative: comedians Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, themselves biracial creatives who thrive at race’s most awkward intersections, produce a recurring sketch in Key and Peele featuring President Obama (played by Peele) and Luther, the president’s official “anger translator” (played by Key). This illustration of the Oval Office, with a calm and collected Obama seated while his volatile counterpart Luther berates viewers with the president’s
expletive-filled internal monologue, has been very well-received; even the real-life President Obama has positively referenced the sketch on multiple occasions, claiming he, too, “need[s] a Luther.” (Huffington Post, June 4, 2012) 

Key and Peele’s “anger translator” narrative has taken on a life of its own, used by political commentators as an analogy for Obama’s relationship with his trusted advisor and Attorney-General Eric Holder and specifically, for the unique role Holder plays in directly and unapologetically discussing race issues in ways Obama cannot. (Bouie, May 19, 2014; Thrasher, September 25, 2014) The “anger translator” meme shows how televisual texts can employ narrative devices to make a social commentary on complex concepts within racial politics.

*Television Imaginations of American Government*

To delve further into how fictional televisual narratives comment on race issues, it is worth keeping the project scope limited to a certain political setting. I focus on the fictional White House, and for reasons beyond the inherent attraction of discussing the Obama presidency as it is mediated through fictional depictions of black presidents. As Jeff Smith (2009) describes, the American presidency factors heavily into the national political imagination, as contested narratives of past presidents contribute to America’s national mythology, with meanings derived specific to their cultural context. But the act of imagining the American presidency, Smith asserts, is in itself a significant political act worthy of scholarly inquiry:

> “Imaginings of presidents, like imaginings of the nation itself, are not just significant artifacts of America’s cultural history, and not just reflections of the conflicting fears, hopes and beliefs of its people(s)—though they are very importantly those things too. But
Beyond reflecting, they also participate in the on-going ‘fiction’ that is America.” (Smith 2009: 9)

Examining the characters and plot devices at work in modern depictions of the fictional, televisually-imagined White House is therefore a focused inquiry into how race issues factor into the writing of the American national narrative. To comprehensively address the ability of televisual political dramas to address race themes, we must first consult literature that describes two critical convergences in modern televisual media: a) the intersection of television fiction and politics and b) the symbiosis of television and the Internet.

In unpacking this first convergence, several studies discuss the role of televisual programs that explicitly discuss real political issues through the lens of entertainment. Matthew Baum’s 2005 paper about the impact of soft news programming finds that daytime talk shows and nightly comedies are among contributors to an increased public awareness about foreign affairs among an otherwise politically-disengaged audience. (Baum 2005) In acknowledging that even viewers’ “accidental attention” to political information matters, Baum attributes this growth of foreign policy awareness to soft news media’s emphasis on the human drama at play in foreign crises; these programs illustrate the universality of victims in conflicts that are otherwise removed from audiences’ political radar. Books like Jeffrey Jones’s Entertaining Politics, meanwhile, describe the role of satirical or faux-news programs that have becoming increasingly significant in informing public opinion about political issues. While conceding that political humor shows are said to contribute to cynicism and misinformation among younger voters, Jones argues that programs like The Daily Show with Jon Stewart serve a critical function by problematizing mainstream news coverage, thus encouraging viewers to in fact become more engaged citizens that are more knowledgeable about political issues. (Jones 2010) In treating
entertainment television viewing as a potential gateway to political participation, Baum and Jones lay down an important plank in this study’s foundations.

There is then the role of fictional programs that do not explicitly discuss political headlines, but that instead deal with social and cultural issues that are inherently political and anchored in real-world context. In Social Issues in Television Fiction (2007), Lesley Henderson discusses the choices television production teams make when they incorporate real social issues into serial dramas and soap operas, and the role of the imagined audience in informing these choices at critical junctures of story development. The decision to address a particularly controversial or politically sensitive social issue is the result of complex negotiations between various interests and agendas within a large and layered organization. There are factors at the producer level, a hierarchy at work influencing the language and tone of the big-budget prime-time programs that “represent a key ratings strategy and contribute to the overall image (and economics) of the channel” (Henderson, 2007: 168). A narrative discussion of social issues therefore navigates the drama’s own sense of self-censorship to reach target audience segments.

Henderson argues through her study that such commercial factors are less influential at the writers’ level, where they tend draw from their personal experiences and bring their own biases by serving as the program’s surrogate audience to develop the narrative. In this way, specific social issues are positioned differently within stories to reflect different writers’ motivations set against larger organizational priorities: a social issue addressed by a major character is an intentional move by writers to drive the drama in a certain direction—perhaps at the behest of senior decision-makers interested in reaching a certain audience demographic—while other social issues might be “tried out” on a new character whose plot can be jettisoned if
discussion of the issue is not well-received by audiences or higher-ranked voices within the production organization (Henderson, 2007: 169).

Negotiations across levels—each motivated by the interests of a number of imagined audiences—impact the prioritization of social issues in the narrative, from explicit presence as a form of social education (i.e. taking a direct stance on an issue and informing audiences of this position) to implicit presence to primarily serve a narrative function (i.e. creating a plot twist for a more compelling backstory for a character) (Henderson 2007: 170). Why and how certain social and cultural issues are given attention in televisual fiction is a reflection of the power relations within a program’s creative network. Certain causes and campaigns have greater access to media and can influence their representation. That being said, the power of external agents is low relative to that of the production team in televisual dramas; social issues will only be fruitfully addressed if the internal personnel are invested. (Henderson, 171) Power dynamics within the production team are less clear cut: while major programming decisions will tip in favor of senior management, Henderson finds, writers nonetheless have significant autonomy and creative freedom in their storytelling around social issues. By controlling the narrative juxtaposition of characters, writers frame the interaction between the ideas, values and backgrounds that each character represents:

“Thus, groups of people can be brought together in a television drama who would never have shared screen space in news or documentary programs (for example, ‘terrorists’ and members of security forces). The fictional format can thus enable discussion of the philosophy and motivations of groups, a discussion which may be absent from other media.” (Henderson 2007: 174)
This finding is certainly true for televisual political dramas, which often create fictional shared spaces for parties that do not publicly interact in the real world. As I will point out in the analysis of the case studies, this juxtaposition can be a cynical representation of politics, such as when high-ranking political characters plot schemes with criminals, or when direct confrontations between consequential political figures reveal how petty and personal their contests are. But this can also allow programs to depict an optimistic vision of how political decision-making ought to be, a site of cooperation and shared humanity, such as when opposing partisans come together to forge solutions or when top legislators interact with low-ranked staff, military personnel or citizens. Many of the most meaningful conversations on race issues within political dramas happen through these unlikely screen combinations, from candidate David Palmer’s interaction with a car thief in 24 to Frank Underwood’s special, quasi-secret friendship with barbecue cook Freddy in House of Cards. In discussing the visual and narrative arrangement of characters of different races in constructed shared spaces, this study aims to provide insight on the creative decisions made and the narrative affect such decisions were meant to achieve.

Henderson’s study discusses the televisual depiction of social issues that have inherently political overtones, whereas when it comes to the incorporation of what are often referred to as politics “with a capital ‘P’”—addressing issues that fall specifically within the realm of governmental and civic actors—a unique and particularly helpful perspective is offered by Liesbet van Zoonen in Entertaining the Citizen, a study of the multichannel interactions between politics and popular culture. (Van Zoonen, 2005) Her book discusses a variety of forms of this convergence, from politicians’ use of popular music and soap operas to advance their campaign needs to the role of citizens as “fans” of civic actors. Van Zoonen’s most valuable contribution to
this project is in her chapters on dramatization and political stories, in which she describes how fictional plots map to and reinforce dominant narratives in politics.

The first dominant narrative is “the quest,” used most often to frame a character’s election story as a journey. The quest incorporates images of the character traveling around the country while campaigning, thereby symbolically connecting its definition of politics to the country’s vast cultural geography. In these narratives, “the people” validate the quest of the protagonist as a Washington outsider who can bring true American cultural values from the heartland to fix political dysfunction. (Van Zoonen, 2005: 110-111) On the campaign trail in programs like *The West Wing*, *24* and *Scandal*, we get a sense of political figures as they were before the formality and pained pragmatism that comes with their elected office has set in—as common citizens working for the common good. Plane cabins, bus seats and hotel rooms filled with campaign staffers and journalists are recurring images throughout the political drama genre, small spaces that flatten—even if temporarily—the political hierarchy that normally structures characters’ interactions.

If the quest is an optimistic portrayal of politics, then its cynical counterpoint is “the bureaucracy,” the frame that depicts a dysfunctional political process mired in incompetence, redundancy and territoriality. (Van Zoonen, 2005: 113) Characters in political dramas confront burdensome regulation and expose government waste to discuss a political system particularly positioned to be ineffective. The quest of the protagonist to improve the status quo is invariably set against a bureaucracy that is impersonal, in that there are no specific agents to hold responsible for the fate of the other characters. (Van Zoonen, 2005: 114)

When there are specific responsible agents, the narrative shifts from the bureaucracy to a third frame: “the conspiracy.” These influential actors that control the American government
possess a strong, albeit vague, form of power; often in these narratives, characters use subterfuge to retell history to the avail of power holders, and the act of spinning is depicted as both an elegant art form and a deplorable governmental tactic. (Van Zoonen, 2005: 115) In these dramas, journalists like Danny Concannon in *The West Wing* or Zoe Barnes in *House of Cards* are often entrusted to pull the curtain back to reveal the true puppet masters that keep that despicable Washington afloat; the conspiracy perspective, ever unstable, will often then question the allegiances and motives of the journalists.

The appeal of the conspiracy frame is its ability to justify audiences that have felt lied to and misled as citizens (e.g. through the narrative of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in 2003). As Jerrold Post (1997) explains, such breaches of trust have engendered a form of *adaptive paranoia* among citizens, making them more willing to substitute alternative narratives in their reading of current events, concluding that more powerful interests are being served than their own. T. A. Frank recalls Post and pejoratively suggests, “When you’re paranoid, you aren’t just inclined to disbelieve truths; you’re also inclined to believe nonsense.”

Ultimately, televizual political dramas work within a final dominant narrative frame, “the soap,” which deals with the emotions and relationships of the characters, treating them as a collective with entangled interests in ways the quest narrative does not. (Van Zoonen, 2005: 118) The way attention is focused across the televizual political drama genre speaks to a shared sense that characters’ fates are interconnected; some programs are framed by the dynamics of a tightknit team, such as the President’s Cabinet or a campaign staff, while others are framed by far-reaching consequences that ripple across the storylines of seemingly disconnected characters.

Through my analysis of racial representation in televizual political dramas, I will discuss the impact of framing along these four dominant narratives—the quest, the bureaucracy, the
conspiracy, and the soap—on creating an accessible narrative about America’s race relations. I will discuss commonalities between the rhetoric of the quest narrative frame and rhetoric around racial inequality, as well as analyze whether systemic racism is discussed through the lens of bureaucracy or conspiracy. To what extent are the quests of minority characters within these dramas unique to their racial identities? How are racial barriers acknowledged, if at all, and can they be overcome? How are characters’ relationships patterned across color lines? Delving into these questions is significant to expanding the work done by Henderson, Van Zoonen and others to incorporate race where it exists at the intersection of politics.

**On the Popularity of Televisual Political Dramas**

It is no coincidence that this study of televisual political dramas and their impact is taking place when the genre is experiencing a major rise in popularity and air-time—a period described by some commentators as a “golden age for Washington-centric programming.” (Gavin in *Politico*, April 2013) Understanding this narrow genre’s wide public appeal is critical to explaining its role communicating and educating around political issues like race. Often asked to explain this phenomenon, the creators and performers of televisual political narratives provide a number of common-sense justifications. Armando Iannucci, co-creator of the hit HBO comedy *Veep*, attributes the trend to a greater availability of politicians to their constituencies than ever before, leading to a sustained interest in the personalities of our political leaders and the rise of characters written to explore their humanity:

“I think it’s because that veneer, the charisma or the aura of politicians being far removed from us is gone. Politicians feel more human now. We see all the cracks and the flaws, and therefore, I think there’s something more dramatically interesting.” (Gavin in *Politico*, April 2013)
Others attribute the appeal of compelling and complex characters in fictional political settings to the public viewership’s need for an explanation of Washington’s (real and perceived) dysfunction. (Frank in *The New Republic*, November 2013) Logjams in the legislative branch become more “dramatically interesting”—to borrow Iannucci’s phrase—when explained through a competition of egos or a revenge plot. Notions of greed and corruption, consistent themes in political rhetoric, are drawn out further in these televisual dramas to give Washington’s capitulations to financial interests a human face. The heightened interest in televisual political dramas is therefore a search for meaning in a political system that inspires as often as it disappoints, informs just as it misleads, induces paranoia whenever it summons confidence. (Frank in *The New Republic*, November 2013) By offering alternative explanations and convincingly imagined behind-the-scenes glimpses, these televisual programs embrace the *unresolved contradictions* of the world they portray.

Media scholar John Fiske described this feature of unresolved contradictions as central to his theory on popular televisual texts as *polysemic*. (Fiske, 1986) A narrative’s polysemy refers to its having multiple meanings; Fiske, building on Stuart Hall’s preferred meaning theory and David Morley’s landmark 1980 study of BBC’s *Nationwide* audience, takes the polysemy concept further by taking into account both how a televisual text is written—from the lines in the script to the technical codes that shape their delivery—and how it is “read” or understood by the audience. He argues that a popular television program must allow various subcultures—along race, class, gender or other lines—to generate their own meanings from the text to fit the needs of their own subcultural identities. (Fiske, 1986: 392)
Polysemy in popular television is accomplished through a degree of openness within the text, where certain narrative devices such as irony or metaphor represent “fissures” or “gaps” that invite multiple interpretations of meaning. (Fiske, 1986: 394) The primary interpretation intended by the show’s creators and actors will be the “preferred reading” of the text, one that aligns with the ideology of the culturally dominant, hegemonic views within American society. (Fiske, 1986: 403) But within open, polysemic televisual narratives there is also the *semiotic excess*, the meaning that escapes the control of the dominant and is used in a *resistant reading* of the scene. (Fiske, 1986: 403) In this way, popular television programs are representational texts, reflecting the fissures within the societies in which they are broadcast:

> “Meaning is as much a site of struggle as is economics or party politics, and television attempts (but fails) to control its meaning in the same way that social authority attempts (but fails) to stifle voices of opposition. It is the polysemy of television that makes the struggle for meaning possible, and its popularity in class structured societies that makes it necessary.” (Fiske, 1986: 294)

Political dramas are uniquely structured to possess polysemy, as many of the narrative devices that drive their plots exist along these fissures to invite multiple readings. For one, the political actors portrayed are typically representative of a partisan ideology familiar to the audience, and though characters will often be written closer to the center to ensure wide appeal, their fictional political affiliation will generate resistant readings from audience members of opposing political affiliations.

Furthermore, tackling issues affecting the operation of the state while focusing on the perspective of an individual character is, at its core, an unresolved contradiction, one that mirrors a wider societal friction between individual versus systemic accountability that frequently arises
in race debates, as discussed previously. This study will delve into the polysemic nature of the televisual political drama genre as it pertains to the depiction of race issues, unpacking where possible the dominant ideology about race that guides the preferred reading of a scene and subcultural view that partakes in its resistant reading.¹

The meanings that audiences derive from televisual political dramas are viewed in clearer terms than other fictional programs due to their *realistic* portrayal of the White House and its inner-workings. While the extent to which each program accurately represents the American political system is debatable—and a point of discussion and comparison in this paper’s findings—there is a shared emphasis on realism in the programs. (Frank in *The New Republic*) Through a combination of factors—from carefully constructed sets to the incorporation of real political events into the televisual narrative—audiences are made to believe that they are being given a behind-the-scenes look at how the real White House works.

First, on a micro-level, these programs illustrate the attention paid to technical details that sharpen audiences’ mental imagery of the guarded sites that define presidential power in America, such as the Oval Office, the Situation Room, and Air Force One. The high production value of fictional White House sets in popular dramas of this genre helps engender the expectation that the spaces audiences are seeing on televisual closely mirror reality. (Henderson, 2007) Viewers are given an in-depth look at spaces they have otherwise only experienced

¹ It is worth noting here that there is debate over the existence of a preferred meaning versus the existence of multiple meanings, as is explored by Henderson (2007). She references John Corner’s 1991 opinion that the an overemphasis by academics to focus on audiences interpretative ability to conduct resistant readings has limited the ability to effectively study the role of the narrative’s influence. (Henderson 2007: 176, Corner 1991: 267). These arguments assert that there are not different meanings within the televisual text, but rather different viewer interpretations of the *same* meaning. My approach will borrow from both camps and work through the preferred meaning alongside resistant readings to look for patterns in the audience reactions.
through the heavily mediated lens of White House photography, bolstering a sense of privileged access to America’s real political system and filling the gaps left by official political media.

The proclivity for realistic or mimetic portrayal is then reflected in narrative elements of these political dramas, often simply by virtue of being modeled after real personalities, events and institutions in American political history. The choice to give a character a real political party affiliation, usually Democrat or Republican, or to occupy a real position within the president’s cabinet is to use the audience’s knowledge of current events and actors to imbue these characters with a sense of real-life significance. The substantive role of the televisual political dramas in communicating political information is carefully constructed to convincingly advance a preferred meaning of a political issue, both directly and allegorically. (Fiske 1986, Henderson 2007) A program’s head of research describes the secret at work in this persuasion as “mak[ing] sure that the drama is recognizably real, while subtly redefining reality in such a way as to alter perceptions of what is normal and good.” (Carlin 2003, Henderson 2007: 18-19)

By creating White House sets that appear authentic and by grounding the story in real political discourse, audiences are in turn asked to willingly suspend their disbelief and accept the fundamental premises of the program’s storyworld. (Pintér 2011) The more that characters and their relationships are designed to speak to political realities, the more viewers are able to view their political choices and values as empirical reality. Simultaneously, in speaking to their constituencies, real politicians and campaigners will refer to these narratives in making analogies between political realities and the fictional plotlines citizens are familiar with (Van Zoonen 2005).

What develops over time is a relationship between viewers and characters, where the level of *audience involvement* (Liebes and Katz 1986) increases and viewers treat the characters
as if they existed in real life. Media scholars describe the sense of friendship or intimacy felt by viewers towards characters on television—real and fictional—as parasocial interaction. (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Levy, 1979; Parry-Giles 2002) Televisual characters are designed to encourage parasocial interaction through a number of narrative and technical choices, including, a) creating believable characters who speak in a similar voice and conversational pattern as viewers, b) using face-to-face positioning and close-up shots to invite interactive responses and promote a sense of intimacy, and c) giving the character a recurring, consistent and predictable role. (Rubin et. al 1985: 156)

Discussing and identifying the role of parasocial interaction is crucial to our understanding of televisual political dramas as sources of civic engagement and “sense-making” around race. It is important to evaluate the patterns at work that allow fictional characters on television to take on “lives” outside the confines of their program to influence viewer’s perception of real political issues. I will discuss how creators and performers, acting as surrogate audiences of their programs, also develop unique parasocial interactions with their characters, and will delve into the ways they treat fictional politics as representative reflections of real politics.

Parasocial interaction may not only be the result of factors intrinsic to the program narrative, but also related to the ways in which its audience chooses to engage with the text and the exogenous factors that impact its interactivity. A 1985 study by Alan Rubin, Elizabeth Perse and Robert Powell on the impact of loneliness on parasocial interaction suggests that patterns of audience involvement should take into account the setting of the viewing experience. Discussing loneliness is particularly interesting given contemporary realities of televisual engagement that have developed in the three decades since that study; I will later argue that television viewing is
a more private and individualized viewing experience now in certain respects thanks to on-demand services, the proliferation of personal viewing devices, and batch releases of episodes, among other factors that encourage independent television viewing. At the same time, however, audiences engage with television fiction through digital communications with other viewers and more immediate access to creators than ever before, representing a new frontier in the notion of a collective viewing experience (Williams, 2014). Thus I view the advent of the Internet and its symbiotic relationship with television as a second critical convergence that guides my focus on televisual fiction’s commentary on politics.

Peter Dahlgren’s work on new media, political communication and democracy is helpful in describing this critical convergence of televisual and the digital in several key ways. First, Dahlgren adapts Jürgen Habermas’s scholarship on the public sphere to highlight democracy’s three communication spaces—structural, representational and interactional; each dimension has its own important considerations about how race issue narratives are formulated, transmitted and processed by citizens, respectively. (Dahlgren, 149) While Dahlgren recalls Habermas’s definition in saying that “atomized individuals, consuming media in their homes, do not comprise a public,” the ensuing discursive interactional process between said individuals, who then take to new media to process what they have seen and deliberate its political implications, is its own form of democratic participation. (Dahlgren, 150) Our discussion of television viewers as political actors will need to incorporate this interactional component of online public spheres, especially as reactions publicly shared on the Internet will serve as qualitative data points in describing the nature of audience interactions with the programs.
Foundations of Design Research

The literature that I have so far consulted lays the groundwork for delving into televisual representation of race issues primarily through understanding the role of narrative. As we have discussed (through Kim, Van Zoonen et. al.), narrative serves as a powerful means of explaining and making sense of politics, on and off screen. However, describing America’s race issues through a televisual lens is incomplete when we limit our analysis to narrative and the confines of a program’s storyworld. A television series, like the political dramas described here, is not only the narrative, and not even only the visual representation of the narrative, but also a designed product that synthesizes social, political, and technological forces at work during its creation. The insufficiencies of narrative explanations thus led to an exploration of an emerging set of analytical tools pioneered by designers, whose unique creative process has been missing from the discussion.

It was a similar realization about designers and their work that served as the foundations of design research, a field whose evolution Nigel Cross details in his seminal 2006 work on the subject, Designerly Ways of Knowing. Cross synthesizes decades of scholarship and debate about design as a mode of knowledge production to make the case for its unique value as an academic research method. As Cross describes, Bruce Archer and others at the Royal College of Art began to define design in 1979 as the act of planning, modeling, and other forms of creation and action to produce knowledge, a “third culture” that distinguishes itself from humanities and sciences. (Cross, 1-3)

What are the characteristics of design and the design process that make its practitioners worth identifying as academic contributors? Cross cites designers’ problem-solving behavior, including their tendency to iterate towards a solution (Lawson, 1980) or their ability to change
ill-defined problems to make them more solvable (Jones, 1970). I would argue that the most significant role design research can play in decoding the impact of creative media like televisual political dramas is identifying *patterns* where they are not readily apparent. Pattern construction is therefore a core “designerly” ability:

> “Designing is a process of pattern synthesis, rather than pattern recognition. The solution is not simply lying there among the data, […] it has to be actively constructed by the designer’s own efforts.” (Cross, 8)

Cross goes on to describe designers’ pattern-constructing activity as a means of translating abstract needs of an individual into a concrete feature. (Cross, 8) A common example of this pattern language at work in the product design world could be the abstraction of product user’s needs mapped onto the product’s control buttons. The product in this study is the depiction of racial politics in televisual dramas, and those, too, follow a pattern. It is evident that multiple needs, values and interests, from viewers to creators alike, are abstracted into distinct narrative features to produce the final result that appears on screen. (Henderson, 2007: 177) These patterns work for designers like “codes”, comprising of structured sets of *rules* that facilitate an abstraction across unlike domains. (Cross, 12) Because these patterns are tacit, deeply embedded in a skill like television production, design research is concerned with externalizing the code and revealing rules.

This thesis therefore benefits from a designerly study uncovering and explaining these rules. Broadly, the study engages with the code at work when depicting the White House on television for entertainment purposes, and asks what the patterns are maintained, if any, when dramas use casting and position to draw metaphorical color lines around the fictional Oval
Office. An audience study that could follow this one might be based on designerly principles to uncover the patterns across audience involvement experiences, and how they relate to different subcultures’ readings of the same text.

One can look for answers in an explanation by a program’s creators of their design choices in an interview or memoir, as I often did, but these articulated justifications are limited in speaking to the creators’ intent, biases and effectiveness in executing their vision. Design research enables a pattern-construction around what has not been directly articulated, instead drawing connections between creators, viewers, characters and their real-life counterparts.

Using design processes to uncover patterns in television also better enables us to account for the roles of non-narrative or quasi-narrative influences on the viewing experience, including but not limited to the televisual interface, episode format and production methods. For many Americans, watching a television program represents a multi-platform experience: if tomorrow, a friend were to ask you if you caught the mid-season finale of Scandal, you could respond that, yes, you had watched the episode, and suggest any number of activities in your answer. You could have viewed Scandal on a television set in your living room, dedicating the hour allotted in ABC’s Thursday night schedule to the adventures of Pope & Associates; while watching, you might have reacted to one of its many plot twists with a post to your social networks. You may have instead watched the episode on-demand later that weekend, perhaps on your mobile phone’s screen while riding the bus. As designers and scholars concerned with the future of television are discovering (Nurun, 2013), changing televisual interfaces may be shrinking the perceived distance between viewers and characters they observe, which I will argue can give the fictional White House a more prominent role in the political socialization process. A television series’ format may heighten or diminish levels of parasocial interaction that occur when
audiences react to characters’ politics. As was discussed in the preceding section on the convergence of the television and the Internet, the collective public viewing experience of a prime-time drama changes when all of its episodes are released at once (the so-called “Netflix model”), or if there is an active effort to react on social media. Many of these questions about the changing nature of viewership are being already being explored in meaningful ways by designers.
**Methodology**

The literature that I consulted in my study of race and representation in televisual political dramas highlighted the existence of a number of *patterns* embedded in the scope of the genre. My research sets out to evaluate the hypothesis that, contained within the consistencies in the writing, production and viewing of this genre, there are certain patterns that illustrate an ongoing *coded* conversation about race politics in America. It is coded in the sense that the race-related themes discussed by these television programs are often not directly articulated, yet their use of narrative and technical devices generate a transmedial flow of communication—one that transcends multiple media environments—about race issues. Given that the White House is increasingly a site of convergence for social and political discourse about race, even beyond the specific context of the Obama administration and a minority president, the current “golden age” of a television genre so focused on the executive branch is particularly worth analyzing and understanding.

Identifying and exploring patterns in televisual storytelling requires collecting data and then constructing the varied forms of data into workable forms that produce knowledge. I will conduct my research by a) critically analyzing four televisual texts from the genre, b) gathering contextual research about factors impacting the texts’ creation and reception, and c) using graphic design methods to visually arrange the data to uncover and explain patterns at work.

**Identifying Case Studies**

The four case studies I chose to focus my analysis on were *The West Wing* (1999 to 2006), *24* (2001 to 2010), *Scandal* (2012 to 2014), and *House of Cards* (2013 to 2014). These
programs were chosen because they meet certain criteria to provide a representative sample about the role of modern political dramas in describing race in America:

First, the series needs to have demonstrated *popularity* and *longevity*. To make any reasonable deduction about the relationship between televisual political dramas and public opinion, the case studies need to have had a reasonably large and dedicated audience watching them. These four case studies are seemingly obvious choices in meeting the popularity criterion, garnering critical acclaim and significant levels of fan activity, though what denotes popularity for *House of Cards*, the one case study not broadcast to viewers through basic cable channels, is significantly different from the others and speaks more to the “buzz” around the program than exact viewership numbers (Thompson, 2014). A series that has aired for at least twenty episodes held over multiple seasons, as the case studies have, confirms the existence of a sizable and dedicated viewership that made renewing the program for more episodes a viable business decision by producers. More importantly, a larger sample size of episodes enables a study of how each character’s narrative endures and changes over time. Longevity gives more opportunities to test what I call the program’s *responsive design*, or the features of the program that determine how well its narrative adapts to, reacts to or even foreshadows real political events. These criteria count out some short-lived programs like USA Network’s six-episode miniseries *Political Animals* (2012) as well as more recent examples like *Madam Secretary* on CBS (2014), which provide too limited of a sample for thorough analysis of race-related themes and discussion.

Secondly, I chose to study political *dramas* and to exclude popular comedies that are set in the American political arena. Dramas and comedies alike endeavor to entertain the audience, but as was discussed in the literature on the impact of realistic narrative, dramas’ serious tone and narrative devices imply a more factual and truth-grounded narrative to the audience,
providing a glimpse into how the nation’s capital actually operates. While each program certainly occasionally wades into the overtly fictional (and, at times, the conspicuously fantastical), their dramatic character confers upon them a legitimacy as a form of sociopolitical commentary. Comedies like HBO’s Veep (2012) that discuss the inner workings of the executive branch in a humorous manner may too endeavor to realistically portray White House culture, but the extent to which this depiction creates a reasonable expectation among audiences of their veracity is limited at best. Furthermore, keeping the scope limited to dramas allows the study of patterns across programs with similar narrative aims and technical means of conveying their stories.

Third, I chose a combination of programs as case studies that reflected a variety of perspectives of the White House to illustrate different roles of the American president and various stages of his presidency. Each of the programs addresses a wide range of presidential roles, from pushing through domestic legislation to commanding over national security; all of the programs also cover the path to the presidency to describe the presidents as candidates. As the analysis will discuss, the difference of narrative scope among the case studies The West Wing and House of Cards are concerned with the internal complexities of White House operations, how staff interacted with the president and handled their duties daily. They also focus more on the role of domestic policy and the president’s role in the legislative process. 24 and Scandal both operate primarily in crisis situations that were most often relate to national security, viewing the presidency through its commander-in-chief responsibility.

Using these criteria to limit the field of analysis to four case studies may decrease the breadth of this study, it enables a level of depth in scholarly inquiry to help me draw overarching conclusions about this large and varied genre on a whole.
Watching Television Critically

To review the case studies, I watched all of the television programs from start to finish, over a period from April to November 2014. This totaled to approximately 315 hours of television programming, broken down as such:

a. *The West Wing*: 113 hours
b. *24*: 141 hours
c. *Scandal*: 36 hours
d. *House of Cards*: 24 hours

The programs were typically viewed in a continuous fashion and in rapid succession, where whole seasons would be reviewed within three to five days and groups of episodes would be viewed in one sitting. Because the majority of episodes in this study were watched on a laptop computer, either through a Netflix stream (*West Wing, Scandal, House of Cards*) or through a DVD set (*24*), there were also no commercial breaks. This setting is a key difference worth noting between my role as a researcher compared to a program’s typical viewer, especially in that it allowed me to control the program’s narrative flow in ways that commercials and a weekly schedule had done when the programs originally aired (except in the case of *House of Cards*, which was arguably designed for this kind of batch viewing, as I will discuss in the case study). Furthermore, my laptop screen I watched these programs on was significantly smaller than a television set, the screen for which these programs were originally created.

As I watched the four programs (and re-watched *The West Wing, Scandal* and *House of Cards*), I took notes to keep track of topics, themes, character dialogue, production choices and questions that arose, primarily when it came to race themes or minority characters’ decisions and actions. I had the episode transcripts available and subtitles enabled to ensure close reading of
the televisual texts, paying close attention to what was said by characters. Watching these programs on a laptop computer also allowed me to take screenshots to mark how certain scenes were staged and characters arranged, enabling a more design-based form of inquiry around a program’s use of visual imagery to create symbolic meanings.

To help organize 315 hours worth of televisual data, I also employed the use of the blogging platform Tumblr to record lengthier reactions to what I was watching. As the research effort went on, however, the Tumblr blog (located at http://thesis.anupamchakravarty.com) became less a destination to park data from the watching experience and more a means of curating content related to the themes and aims of the project. In particular, it helped me collect articles, interviews and other non-primary source material in which the producers, writers and actors of the television programs were quoted with their reactions to the programs; these articles would prove critical in establishing context around the creation of the programs, an issue that was important to my study. Finally, using a blogging platform allowed me to track various iterations of the design research efforts undertaken in conducting my analysis of the case studies.

**Design Research Methods of Television Analysis**

The value of *design research* methods in examining the various forces I wanted to highlight in the televisual communication process became apparent early on in efforts to track the flow of information across various sites of interaction. Design research is the term I use to describe designerly ways of knowledge production (Cross 2001) and critical making through visual communication design (Hitchcock 2013), as discussed in the review of the literature. As a graphic designer by training, my approach to organizing the information in this study was to use
diagrams, models and other forms of graphics that illustrated the relationships at work through an abstract lens.

Like any academic research process, my design research method was influenced by my preferences and biases: as a designer, I tend to favor a certain aesthetic, certain design tools and make choices reflective of a personal design style, just as I am more persuaded by certain explanations I find in my research than others. As a hallmark of traditional academic research and scholarly inquiry is to account for the impact of such biases on research findings, it is worth briefly describing the technical affordances available and the design choices made in carrying out this study.

The conceptual models I developed over the course of the critical watching process and analysis were designed using tools from Adobe Creative Suite, including Photoshop and Illustrator, that enabled prototyping and iterating to reflect new findings in the research. Mapping my research out on a digital plane took away some of the constraints of traditional graphs, charts and other more quantitative forms of data visualization: I was able to lay out recurring concepts in the abstract, like power dynamics between characters or relationships between producers, with a more open interpretation of space, size and distance. Thus my designs are less concerned with communicating through the exact pixel dimensions of the objects, instead using the objects’ relative sizes, distances and weights to communicate more broad notions of power and interaction.

This technical affordance of having an essentially unlimited digital canvas has also made me a designer that prefers a clean and clear aesthetic, embracing the use of white space to achieve visual balance and to help objects in the data visualization be more clearly understood. In the same vein, my decision to use Avenir, the geometric sans-serif typeface developed by
Adrian Frutiger in 1988, in laying out text on the designs places value on clarity, openness and ease of comprehension. In this way, I designed data visualizations and conceptual models to be more accessible, adding more value for non-designers studying communications patterns at work in television production. Cleaner design methods lower the level of visual literacy required by those outside the visual communication design field.

The emphasis on clean and logical approaches to design research and pattern construction does come with its own set of creative constraints, however, particularly when it comes to visually illustrating racial representation. Understandably, the use of a color palette by a designer has political and historical implications when used to discuss skin color and race. An example of this problematic encounter arose in simplifying the display of cast composition, where certain races are represented in an abstract form and expressed through assigned Pantone colors. A choice needed to be made between using a random color palette that distanced itself from racial representation, such as blue and green, or using a color palette that had some basis in the races being discussed. An on-going digital project by designer Angélica Dass entitled “Humanæ;” which layers photography with design to “deploy a chromatic range of the different human skin colors,” was critical in resolving this tension. In order to talk unambiguously about patterns in racial representation, a conscious decision was made to use a set of recurring colors that visually approximated the skin color associated with a character’s race or actor’s cultural background.

The diagrams and designs that follow in the analysis of the televisual political drama genre and the four chosen case studies recall a rich tradition within the academic discussion around communication of using figures and illustrations to visually arrange complex ideas and

---

2 Using Avenir has a further benefit as a recognizable and familiar typeface given its use in Apple’s flat design user interface designs in 2012, particularly fitting given the role of user interface in modern televisual consumption.
iterating upon the designs themselves to advance the explanations. Diagramming and modeling has been a valuable form of knowledge production as early as David Shannon’s 1948 model of communications processes, which arranges a series of shapes and arrows to represent different actors involved; the model has since been adapted to incorporate cybernetic feedback (Wiener, 1948) and the two-step flow of communication (Katz, 1957). Social network analysis is, too, aided dramatically by the use of diagrams that cluster objects in deliberate ways that correspond to the relative strength of their ties. By using design research methods, I am able to dismantle, update, rework and reassemble existing communications and network models to better describe the complex interplay of television, technology, race and politics.
CASE STUDY: *THE WEST WING*

To understand the romantic portrayal of the American presidency that emanated from the crowded hallways of President Josiah “Jed” Bartlet’s White House in *The West Wing*, it is important to consider the political backdrop the program was set against when it first aired in the fall of 1999. This was two years before America would embark on a global war on terrorism following the September 11th terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington; it was also one year before the country’s presidential electoral system, indeed its participatory democracy, was put under considerable stress as the choice between Democratic candidate Vice President Al Gore and Republican candidate Texas Governor George W. Bush unfolded dramatically in a courtroom. Even with these landmark moments in American political history ahead, *The West Wing* just months after President Bill Clinton had been acquitted of impeachment articles in the Senate. At a time when the legitimacy of the American presidency was put into question by the high-profile drama of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, Aaron Sorkin’s vision of the White House imbued the executive branch with a sense of seriousness, moral conviction and purpose.

The politics of the Bartlet administration were identifiably progressive, even as the decisions made in the Oval Office frequently broke out of the characters’ Democratic platform. Government, while possessing its flaws, was portrayed as the site of inclusive conversations around America’s national identity and ambitions, convening domestic representatives and military advisors alike to empower the vulnerable at home and abroad. The program’s progressive worldview is poignantly articulated in “He Shall From Time to Time…” (Season 1, Episode 12) by White House Communications Director Toby Ziegler (played by Richard Schiff)
as he questions the value of a passage with conservative-leaning rhetoric within the State of the Union, included for the political popularity of the sentiment:

Toby: “The era of big government is over.”
Bartlet: You want to cut the line?
Toby: I want to change the sentiment. We're running away from ourselves, and I know we can score points that way. I was the principle architect in that campaign strategy, right along with you, Josh. But we're here now. Tomorrow night, we do an immense thing. We have to say what we feel. That government, no matter what its failures are in the past, and in times to come, for that matter, the government can be a place where people come together and where no one gets left behind. No one... gets left behind, an instrument of... good. I have no trouble understanding why the line tested well, Josh, but I don't think that means we should say it. I think that means we should... change it.
Bartlet: I think so, too.

Toby is acknowledging that even when tapping into public frustration with “big government” is politically expedient, rejecting this popular notion and asserting government as a unifying force among the White House’s diverse constituencies is essential to Bartlet’s particular brand of nationalism. President Barlet’s hands-on form of liberalism is reinforced throughout the series by his Chief of Staff Leo McGarry (played by John Spencer), who makes frequent practice of giving marginalized voices in the political process an audience with the White House senior staff. In “Let Bartlet Be Bartlet” (Season 1, Episode 19) Leo chastises the president for handcuffing himself to the center of the political spectrum on a host of issues, giving Bartlet the green light to use the power of the presidency to champion his ideals and shift away from the safe zone of broad appeal. It is through exhortations like these that The West Wing challenges its characters and its viewers alike to push against a cynical view of American politics as a series of concessions to a diluted middle ground.
It is therefore worth unpacking how and why *The West Wing*’s optimistic tenor around the White House’s assertive progressive position retreats into cautious pragmatism when the Bartlet administration confronts America’s race issues. Even as the characters in the drama frequently discuss instances of racial discrimination embedded in American policy and institutions, their inability to advance policy and dialogue on race beyond the confines of their own consciences demonstrates where race issues fall among White House priorities. This uncharacteristic capitulation to the status quo when it comes to race is further reflected in the lack of racial diversity among the senior decision makers cast in *The West Wing*, assigning any meaningful contribution to improvement or advancement in American race relations to the few minority characters on screen. As *The West Wing* transitions from President Bartlet to President Matthew Santos, experiencing major changes in the writers’ room and among the cast throughout its seven seasons, the program’s discussion of race mirrors existing tropes and shortcomings in the liberal conversation on race.

*The West Wing*’s progressive self-image is coupled with a mission to elevate the level of our country’s political discourse, a lofty goal considering the preceding year of media saturation around the Clinton scandal. In his film and television writing, Aaron Sorkin’s style is characterized by his ability to bring smart, impassioned people together to do the right thing (Downing, 2005). As such, the dialogue among Bartlet’s staff is a familiar staccato of exposition, facts and political information, with the occasional breaks for a stirring speech. Spencer Downing (2005) describes how conversation speed and erudition in Sorkin’s scripts are essential to the program’s realism:
“[Sorkin] peppers his scripts with details that imply his omniscience about the material; and the more arcane the item, the better. […] Sorkin’s characters often deliver information in an off-hand manner, as if everyone ought to know such things already. A fact is briefly noted, rapidly absorbed, and the subject changes quickly. The casual exchanges between Sorkin’s characters give them an aura of intrinsic experience. Their comprehension is so quick that only a few words are necessary. Conversation frequently resembles a haiku in which mundane lines are interspersed with succinct declarations carrying significant meaning. A change in subject tells the characters, and the audience, as much as an answered question.” (Downing, 2005: 139)

The use of information-loaded dialogue as a narrative style manifested itself in a White House that refused to mask its erudition as well. Frequently, in diatribes directed at no one in particular, a member of Bartlet’s staff will rehearse both sides of an argument to educate the audience of the Republican and Democratic sides of an issue. President Bartlet, being a Nobel Laureate in Economics, will interpolate a forgotten legal ordinance, a buried Biblical passage, or another bit of trivia in an otherwise accessible explanation of his governing theory, depicting in this way a form of citizenship predicated on knowledgeable engagement with politics. In “Manchester (Part 2)” (Season 3, Episode 3), Bartlet sets his rhetorical standard for his constituents, his electorate, his staff and, by extension, the viewing audience:

BARTLET: It's not our job to appeal to the lowest common denominator, Doug. It's our job to raise it. If you're going to be the "Education President," it'd be nice not to hide that you have an education.
By embracing the technical complexity of American politics in its dialogue, *The West Wing* was uniquely equipped to discuss race with sophistication and depth. To that end, its characters on White House staff frequently identify certain issues, laws and policies that disproportionately impact minorities or are otherwise of particular concern to minority communities. When it comes to America’s drug policy, for example, President Bartlet and his staff are quick to point out that the focus on enforcement is emblematic of systemic racism: “Mandatory minimums are racist” becomes a refrain that moves up the chain of command, introduced by Deputy Communications Director Sam Seaborn (played by Rob Lowe), reinforced by Congresswoman Andrea Wyatt (played by Kathleen York) and eventually reaching the president’s ear after the refrain is embraced by Toby (“Mandatory Minimums,” Season 1, Episode 20). The timing of this exchange around mandatory minimums, placed in the episode immediately following “Let Bartlet Be Bartlet,” advances a preferred meaning that the president’s newly realized assertive progressivism prioritizes action on race issues. A polysemic reading of this conversation, however, invites viewers to question the use of the mandatory minimums issue primarily as a narrative bridge between white protagonists who, by the episode’s conclusion, do not provide any meaningful resolution or pledge a specific course of action to the issue. The lack of resolution on mandatory minimums leaves the televisual narrative open (Fiske, 1986), asking the viewer to assume that the issue is being addressed in the Oval Office without holding any of the characters accountable to act.

---

3 This explains, in part, the length of this case study analysis comparative to the other sections in my research project: the emphasis on explanatory rhetoric, dialogue and topics provides many more opportunities for critical reflection and exploration than the other programs studied. Politics is not the mere setting of the narrative, as it is in most dramas dedicated to White House affairs; politics is the narrative. As such, this study benefits from a close-read of the dialogue in *The West Wing*, while other case studies may offer less information on race dialogue and representation in the script.
While these characters are comfortable labeling a policy or platform as “racist” in private settings, the Bartlet administration typically eschews the practice of publicly calling out racism in *The West Wing*, viewing such statements as deviating from politically inclusive White House messaging. By focusing on rhetorical effects and public diplomacy, the Bartlet White House shows itself to be more concerned with the political costs of the racist label—on both the accuser and the accused—than the issue of racism itself. This hierarchy of interests is demonstrated most in one of the most race-focused episodes of the series—a chain reaction of events set off by Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Deborah O’Leary, the only Black member of President Bartlet’s Cabinet.

*Secretary O’Leary and “The Cost of Doing Business”*

In “Celestial Navigation” (Season 1, Episode 14), a Republican congressman’s diatribe against public housing’s efficacy brings Secretary O’Leary (played by CCH Pounder) to a boiling point. She counters: “Public housing has serious problems, Mr. Chairman, I don't deny that. But if you and your colleagues in the Republican party were as invested in solving the problems associated with poverty as you are in scoring political points on the backs of poor people and minorities, you might just see the value.” “Are you calling me a racist?” the congressman asks, and O’Leary responds, “If the shoe fits.”

From here, the audience learns that O’Leary’s “transgression” has quickly become a major news story and has infuriated President Bartlet, Leo and Toby. (Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman is the only member of the White House staff to come to her defense, albeit with measure: “She was baited and she was right.”) As President Bartlet takes the podium at a press conference,
the first question reduces the entire substance of the O’Leary-Wooden exchange to two particularly stark choices:

DANNY: “Mr. President, do you agree with Secretary O’Leary that Congressman Wooden is a racist, and if not, do you plan on asking for her resignation?”

The journalist’s implication is that the Cabinet secretary’s snide retort can be grounds for dismissal, and it is a powerful assertion: this line treats a moment of exasperation—a short but loaded quip—as behavior unbecoming of her office. After some deviations, President Bartlet ultimately responds that he believes O’Leary mischaracterized the congressman and the Republican Party, and that an apology from her would be “appropriate,” delegating her disciplinary action to his chief of staff. The tense interaction that follows between O’Leary and Leo further emphasizes the power dynamics that are activated when a Bartlet administration official goes off-message:

O’LEARY: The man's a racist.
LEO: Maybe so...
O’LEARY: Maybe!
LEO: Debbie.
O’LEARY: He's using his government authority to spit at poor people and minorities, which in his mind are the same thing. He's doing it because he can. He's doing it because he can score points with his narrow-minded constituents.
LEO: His narrow-minded constituents are also our narrow-minded constituents.
O’LEARY: Oh, for crying out loud, Leo. [yells] When are you guys gonna stop running for President?
Leo: When angels dance on pinheads, Debbie. We need their votes on any number of issues, including, by the way, the budget for the department of Housing and Urban Development.

Without disagreeing with the essence of O’Leary’s claim about Congressman Wooden, Leo counters that her statement offends the Republicans whose support is essential to the White House agenda, including that of her own department. In Leo’s view, she should have instead accepted the congressman’s criticisms, even with their racial implications, to maintain the White House’s bargaining position among conservatives. Her motives—taking offense to the congressman’s distortion of the problems facing minorities and the poor, her primary constituencies—are irrelevant to the larger mission of playing nice across the aisle.

O’Leary: Do you not think it is my role as the highest-ranking African-American woman in government to point out that...?

Leo: I think, Debbie, your role first and foremost is to serve the President—a task today at which you failed spectacularly.

O’Leary is making the case to Leo that her leadership as a member of the Cabinet moves beyond the duties of the office and into a form of cultural influence she has with African-Americans, a responsibility to represent their concerns at the highest levels of political discourse. Based on the cast composition of The West Wing at that stage in its first season, it is unsurprising that O’Leary is on the defensive, as she is the only Black female—the only “elected” or “confirmed” Black character, for that matter—on President Bartlet’s senior staff. But Leo sets the HUD Secretary straight by placing her loyalty to the President and to the White House’s race-neutral image above any cultural currency she holds: offending Republicans by implying that their policies can be racist is considered a bigger political sin than neglecting to represent the
concerns of the vulnerable and bringing race into the discussion in the first place. Leo makes the same threat introduced in the press room that O’Leary can lose her White House post if she stands by her convictions:

O’LEARY: Look, I called it like I saw it.
LEO: Well, now you’re gonna apologize for it.
O’LEARY: I can’t.
LEO: You can.
O’LEARY: I won’t.
LEO: [forcefully] You will.
O’LEARY: Is that an order?
LEO: You’re doing great work, Deb. The President’s nuts about you, always has been. He’ll cry for three minutes after he fires your ass and then he’ll say ‘What’s next?’
O’LEARY: Leo, if I’ve gotta go and ask Wooden for forgiveness, he's gonna lord it over me from now until the end of time.
LEO: It's the cost of doing business.
O’LEARY: [after a pause] Done.

O’Leary’s capitulation to Leo’s and President Bartlet’s demand for an apology in this exchange means that the issue is considered resolved, though it soon sparks a new public relations crisis around race for our protagonists. Judge Robert Mendoza (played by Edward James Olmos), the President’s nominee to be the first Hispanic justice on the Supreme Court, criticizes the President in a newspaper interview for making the embattled secretary apologize to Congressman Wooden, before himself being put in jail after being pulled over for, in Toby’s words, “driving while being Hispanic.” Mendoza is cast in the episode as a thorn in the White House’s side, bringing most of the trouble upon himself by straying from Toby’s talking points or stubbornly refusing a breathalyzer. Unlike O’Leary, however, Mendoza is vindicated for his
convictions when Toby and Sam invoke their White House credentials to save him from jail, and he earns an apology from the police officers who arrest him.

For a program as vocally progressive as *The West Wing*, a close-read of the O’Leary-Wooden-Mendoza storyline reveals a particularly cynical view of politics that casts honest reflections of racial anger in the public sphere as politically naïve, selfish and counterproductive. Appearing racist is politically toxic, *The West Wing* suggests, so a leader or official publicly identifying another’s racial prejudices is a form of slander. To borrow Leo’s phrase, the “cost of doing business” with America’s diverse public opinion is therefore to avoiding talk about race, to apologize for bringing race into the conversation, especially when it comes from the President’s non-white representatives.

Progressives might argue that this storyline in *The West Wing* is designed to be an implicit criticism of conservatives who are unwilling to introspect on their racial prejudices and hold up meaningful conversation around race issues, but this reading is too generous when we consider how this narrative pattern is repeated throughout the series regardless of political affiliation. In “The Midterms” (Season 2, Episode 3) audiences sympathize with Sam and his friend Tom Jordan, who quickly loses White House and Democratic support in his congressional election after his past racial prejudices, evidenced by his all-white fraternity membership and his tendency to choose white juries for Black defendants as a prosecutor, come to light (“He’s a racist! The White House just said so!” Sam exclaims angrily to Leo). By casting the race issues raised by minorities primarily as political liabilities to white politicians, *The West Wing* undermines their concerns as impractical and fears and pathologizes the racial anger at the core of these criticisms.
To its credit, *The West Wing* gives its minority characters opportunities to deconstruct America’s race problems, even if consistently juxtaposing them against hegemonic notions of what is practical in American political discourse. In “Six Meetings Before Lunch” (Season 1, Episode 18), Josh is assigned to the uncomfortable task of disciplining the Bartlet administration’s African-American nominee for Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, Jeff Breckenridge (played by Carl Lumbly). Breckenridge draws the ire of congressional Republicans when he publicly supports a book arguing that monetary reparations are owed to African-Americans for slavery. Josh, who initially scoffs at the idea of a monetary settlement and points to existing policy remedies (affirmative action, empowerment zones and civil rights acts are the examples he cites), is only able to concede to Breckenridge’s larger point that a national conversation around reparations is worth having after being reminded of historical injustices faced by his own Jewish grandparents in Nazi Germany. The symbolism of Josh’s offer to buy Breckenridge’s lunch as the episode fades to end credits is meant to assuage audiences that despite the open-ended resolution to the reparations issue itself, a new understanding about the role of money has been reached between characters representing different races. Just as in the apology police officers give Judge Mendoza four episodes prior, the human drama between the characters personalizes and individualizes the responsibility to move America forward on race issues, shifting focus away from the systemic, institutional and historical sources of racial discrimination and injustice embedded in policy.

---

4 “I'm a white guy from Connecticut,” Josh tells Leo, seeking an out from this conversation. “Isn't this kind of a delicate subject for me to get into with a black civil rights lawyer from Athens, Georgia?” Leo replies, “Remember, you're also Jewish.”
Charlie Young, “Cosmetic Problems” and the White Supremacist Plot

As Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn J. Parry-Giles discuss in The Prime-time Presidency (2006), The West Wing debuted in a television environment where NBC and the other major broadcast networks faced criticism over their predominantly white casting; the lack of racial representation and diversity in the 1999 prime-time lineup led some groups to convene hearings and threaten boycotts. The West Wing made efforts to diversify its cast in response to these concerns (Parry-Giles, 2006: 94), and in the third episode, introduced its primary and ultimately enduring main character of color in a way that reflected the writers’ outlook on the casting controversy. Charlie Young (played by Dulé Hill) is the personal aide to President Bartlet and quickly develops into the paragon of the special brand of loyalty that binds his White House together and is celebrated by The West Wing. But as Charlie was the only Black character in the main cast, the writers were undoubtedly aware of the optics of establishing him as a kind of butler, and made this clear through a conversation Josh has with Leo after first meeting Charlie in “A Proportional Response” (Season 1, Episode 3).

First, Josh summarizes Charlie’s attributes and personal history to establish him as young Black man of character, whose significant degree of struggle and tragedy is far outpaced by his potential, work ethic and sense of morality:

JOSH: I'm interviewing this kid for Ted Miller's job, and he's a real special kid. He's applied himself in school, I'm sure he'd be articulate if he wasn't terrified. He's postponing college until his sister gets out of high school.
LEO: Where are the parents?
JOSH: Father's long gone. His mother was a uniformed cop here in D.C.
LEO: Was?
JOSH: She was shot and killed in the line five months ago.
He is “a real special kid” in Josh’s eyes because of the disadvantages he has overcome, and establishing his character in this way communicates why he is deserving of this very rare opportunity to serve in the White House. But as Josh explains his concerns over how Charlie’s race matters to the task he is assigned, Leo invokes importance of their office to trump his reservations:

JOSH: I really like him, Leo. I want to hire him.
LEO: What's the problem?
JOSH: He's black.
LEO: So's the Attorney General\(^5\) and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs?
JOSH: They don't hold the door open for the President.
LEO: What are you worried...?
JOSH: I'm not wild about the visual. A young black man holding his overnight bag?
LEO: Josh, I hold the door open for the President, it's an honor. This is serious business Josh. This isn't casting. We get the guy for the job and we take it from there.

The message writers have sent through their characters acknowledges and quickly dismisses audience criticisms over racial representation, instead establishing service to the President as empirically superior to the “unserious” business of identity politics once again, consistent with Leo’s message in his admonishment of O’Leary four episodes later. *The West Wing* doubles down on this perspective by immediately bringing Admiral Percy Fitzwallace (played by John Amos), the aforementioned chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, into Leo’s

---

\(^{5}\) It is worth noting that while Leo identifies two other Black characters in President Bartlet’s administration, only the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Percy Fitzwallace (played by John Amos) is African-American. When the Attorney-General Dan Larson finally appears on screen in Episode 21 of the first season, he is a white character played by Sherry Houston. This is a rare but significant oversight by the writers, as the apparent diversity quotient in Bartlet’s cabinet shrinks further.
office to affirm his pronouncement about Charlie’s race and bring legitimacy to it as a fellow recurring Black character on the cast.

LEO: The President’s personal aide, they're looking at a kid. Do you have any problem with a young black man waiting on the President?

FITZWALLACE: I'm an old black man and I wait on the President.

LEO: The kid's gotta carry his bags...

FITZWALLACE: You gonna pay him a decent wage?

LEO: Yeah.

FITZWALLACE: You gonna treat him with respect in the workplace?

LEO: Yeah.

FITZWALLACE: Then why the hell should I care?

LEO: That's what I thought.

FITZWALLACE: I've got some real honest to God battles to fight Leo. I don't have time for the cosmetic ones.

Admiral Fitzwallace’s comments on Charlie’s hiring serve to further downplay the visible racial significance of the writers’ casting decision, imploring Leo and critical audiences alike to move past optics and allow The West Wing to tackle their “real honest to God battles” each week in prime-time. Where this sentiment becomes problematic, however, is in the drama’s use of Charlie’s race precisely for “cosmetic” purposes when his Blackness and proximity to the President provide for a thrilling end to the first season. Charlie’s romantic relationship with the President’s daughter Zoey Bartlet (played by Elisabeth Moss) is portrayed as a potential security threat to the White House from the very outset: hate mail expressing dissatisfaction with the president’s daughter dating a Black man escalates into heightened security protocols for Zoey and ultimately, an attempt on President Bartlet’s life by white supremacist gunmen.
The white supremacist subplot accomplishes several narrative goals, including ratcheting up dramatic tension to conclude the first season and introduce the next and give depth to the all of the characters affected by the trauma they have experienced. Yet in terms of the political discussion taking place in *The West Wing*, the racist intent behind the attack is obscured in its extremist form: the gunmen’s racial hatred is less significant when it is white characters, President Bartlet and Josh, who are injured while Charlie, the apparent target, is spared. The script processes the impact of the shooting through the anger and fear of the other staffers while Charlie keeps calm and collected, even fearless—true to form. In separate scenes in “The Midterms” (Season 2, Episode 3), a computer technician named Andrew Mackintosh and Zoey each point out a violent pattern in Charlie’s life since his childhood, but Charlie consistently, almost patriotically, looks ahead:

**ZOEY:** It's too much to happen to someone your age. Your father and your mother and then this...

I don't know, Charlie. I mean... what do you do?

**CHARLIE:** I was going to go vote.

Charlie’s model demeanor is contrasted against Toby’s post-traumatic political strategizing, as the communications director is eager to take advantage of public sympathy and the power of the White House to exact vengeance on the hate groups responsible for the attack. He argues with Sam about the protections afforded to these groups by the Bill of Rights, and later shouts angrily at press secretary C.J. Cregg (played by Allison Janney) while Charlie looks on quietly:

**C.J.:** I think you're Director of Communications and you've been ignoring operational responsibilities so you can behave like the Director of the FBI.
TOBY: Well, I'm waiting for the Director of FBI to behave that way. I'm waiting for the Justice department to behave that way. I'm waiting for Congress to behave that way. I'm waiting for the White House to behave that way!

C.J.: You want to lock up everybody with a white sheet?
TOBY: Yes, I do. Yes, I do. Who has a problem with that? Bring 'em to me, right now. YES I DO!

As with most episodes in The West Wing it is President Bartlet who is ultimately able to calm Toby by approaching the issue with the care and reinforcing White House policy to respect the right of hate groups:

TOBY: Why does it feel like this? I've seen shootings before.
BARTLET: It wasn't a shooting, Toby. It was a lynching. They tried to lynch Charlie right in front of our eyes, can you believe that? [hands a file to TOBY.]
TOBY: What's this?
BARTLET: Keyhole satellite photographs. It's the headquarters for West Virginia White Pride headquarters. It's a diner outside Blacksberg. Every night for the past 12 weeks, I've picked up the phone and called the Attorney General, fully prepared to say two words: “Take 'em.” And then I hang up the phone because I know it'll be better tomorrow and better the day after that. We saw a lynching, Toby. That's why it feels like this.
TOBY: I'm not sure I'm going to come out of the other side of this.
BARTLET: I'm not sure I can either. But until we are sure, I think we should keep coming into work every day.

It is understandable why Toby, President Bartlet and the rest of the staff in The West Wing are so attached to Charlie, as he is a magnificently crafted and performed character, a gifted and driven kid whose ambition and pride never tarnish his trustworthiness despite all the storms that face the White House throughout his presidency. But as an example of racial representation in a program with a predominantly white cast, Charlie’s near flawless character is
loaded with symbolism and meaning as the triumph of moral behavior and work ethic over extraordinarily difficult circumstances—a prime model of respectability politics. As a main character with little to no influence over White House policy, Charlie’s power as a Black man in the White House is tightly controlled and framed by respectability in his portrayal, limiting his reactions when it comes to race and racism. While Charlie’s appearances in *The West Wing* are not entirely unidimensional, his character is consistently invoked to provide a narrative vehicle for the emotional development of the white protagonists around him.

**On Competing Allegiances: Race in the Military and Congress**

The emphasis on trustworthiness is an important aspect of not only Charlie Young’s character, but that of several non-white, usually African-American, characters who play minor auxiliary roles in *The West Wing*. Andrew Mackintosh (played by Alfonso Freeman) mentioned previously is specifically requested by President Bartlet’s executive assistant Delores Ladingham (played by Kathryn Joosten) because he is “the only one she trusts” to work on the White House information system. Despite his fears of being “comparatively low-ranked”, Captain Morris Tolliver (played by Ruben Santiago-Hudson) is asked by Leo to stay on beyond as President Bartlet’s personal physician (“Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc,” Season 1, Episode 2). Morris puts the president at ease during his check-up with casual conversation and a good sense of humor; Bartlet is thus personally affected as he learns of Morris’s death when his Air Force transport is shot down by Syrian defense forces, and pledges to “blow them off the face of the earth with the fury of God’s own thunder” in response.

In his illustrative exploration of *The West Wing*, designer Jon White visualized one of President Bartlet’s circles of trust as described in “17 People” (Season 2, Episode 18)—the title
referring to the seventeen people that know about Bartlet’s secret multiple sclerosis diagnosis (White, 2014). Through White’s designerly deconstruction of the episode and inclusion of subsequent details, it appears that of the 17 people in the know, 7 are physicians and specialists, and the two of them identified by name in the script or on screen are of South Asian and East Asian descents. Admiral Percy Fitzwallace, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is one of only four staff members to know of Bartlet’s diagnosis (White, 2014), once again shown to be a trusted ally to the president on matters personal and political.

While Charlie does not possess meaningful political influence, Admiral Fitzwallace is a Black character that frequently showcases competent leadership and is entrusted with decision-making on major military and national security issues. Fitzwallace is noticeably absent from the Situation Room in the second season when actor John Amos took on a recurring role in another Washington-based series *The District* beginning from the fall of 2000 to the spring of 2001, although other characters still refer to him to maintain his presence. During this period, the role of Bartlet’s primary advisor on military and national security issues is filled with another strong and capable character of color—National Security Advisor Nancy McNally (played by Anna Deavere Smith). McNally and Fitzwallace, appearing in twenty and twenty-one episodes respectively, appear in six of those episodes together but otherwise trade off when it comes to advising the president on defense matters. Another African-American member of the National Security Council frequently seen and heard from in the Situation Room, though to a less prominent than McNally and Fitzwallace, is military advisor Robbie Mosley (played by Gregalan Williams), and he shares three episodes with McNally and does not overlap with Fitzwallace. In the spirit of Jon White’s study and in search of a pattern, I visualized the episode
appearances and shared screen-time between these prominent depictions of staffers of color heavily involved in *The West Wing*’s simulation of national security:

**Fitzwallace**
- A Proportional Response (5 October 1999)
- Lord John Marbury (9 January 2000)
- He Shall, from Time to Time... (9 January 2000)
- Let Bartlet Be Bartlet (26 April 2000)
- What Kind of Day Has It Been (17 May 2000)
- Enemies Foreign and Domestic (1 May 2002)
- The Black Veil Wang (8 May 2002)
- We Killed Yamamoto (15 May 2002)
- Praise Caesar (7 July 2003)
- 20 Hours in America: Part I (25 September 2002)
- College Kids (2 October 2002)
- Debate Camp (16 October 2002)
- Arctic Radar (27 November 2002)
- The California 41th (19 February 2003)
- Rod Haven’s on Fire (26 February 2003)
- Commencement (7 May 2003)
- Twenty Five (14 May 2003)
- 7A WF 83429 (24 September 2003)
- The Dogs of War (1 October 2003)
- Talking Points (21 April 2004)
- Gaza (12 May 2004)

**McNally**
- In the Shadow of Two Gunmen: Part I (4 October 2000)
- Somebody’s Going to Emergency... (28 February 2001)
- 18th and Potomac (9 May 2001)
- Two Cathedrals (16 May 2001)
- Manchester: Part 1 (10 October 2001)
- Manchester: Part 2 (17 October 2001)
- On the Day Before (31 October 2001)
- The Woman of Chamar (18 November 2001)
- Hartsfield’s Landing (27 February 2002)

**Mosley**
- No! (20 December 2000)
- Bartlet’s Third State of the Union (7 February 2001)
- The War at Home (14 February 2001)
- 18th and Potomac (9 May 2001)
- Two Cathedrals (16 May 2001)
- Manchester: Part 1 (10 October 2001)
- Manchester: Part 2 (10 October 2001)
- Gone Quiet (14 November 2001)
- Hartsfield’s Landing (27 February 2002)

Forty episodes, the body of work between John Amos, Anna Deveare Smith and Gregalan Williams, is roughly a quarter of the total number of *The West Wing* episodes, meaning at least one of these military advisors played a role in the decision-making sequence of the plot. Of these forty, nine (slightly less than a quarter) episodes give two of these advisors dialogue in the same episode. While using these ratios to quantify racial representation is incomplete and problematic on its own, “episode share” may serve to be a valuable metric in an expanded study on television and diversity. What these numbers signal, however, is that when *The West Wing* promotes positive images of Black political leadership in the White House, it reflects narrative preference to place these characters into military and national security settings.

One possible explanation for this trend is simply that *The West Wing* was continuing to be inspired by real-life events and characters. Fitzwallace may have had a real-life counterpart in Colin Powell, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under President George H.W. Bush.
Nancy McNally appeared on screen alongside National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice; Deavere Smith explained in an interview that although she been following Rice for years when they were both professors at Stanford, Sorkin’s inspiration for the character was Secretary of State Madeleine Albright (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 29, 2006).

A cultural studies lens reveals a deeper explanation based on the military’s history as one of the first sites of racial integration and social change. The writers are undoubtedly familiar with this aspect of American race relations, as Fitzwallace himself recounts this history in “Let Bartlet Be Bartlet” (Season 1, Episode 19). He invokes his own progress as a Black man in the military to express solidarity when he assists Sam in a debate with military majors on the merits of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy:

MAJOR TATE: Sir, we're not prejudiced toward homosexuals.
FITZWALLACE: You just don't want to see them serving in the Armed Forces?
Major Tate: No sir, I don't.
FITZWALLACE: 'Cause they oppose a threat to unit discipline and cohesion.
Major Tate: Yes sir.
FITZWALLACE: That's what I think too. I also think the military wasn't designed to be an instrument of social change.
MAJOR TATE: Yes sir.
FITZWALLACE: The problem with that is that what they were saying to me 50 years ago. Blacks shouldn't serve with Whites. It would disrupt the unit. You know what? It did disrupt the unit. The unit got over it. The unit changed. I'm an admiral in the U.S. Navy and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff… Beat that with a stick.

As Fitzwallace conflates his own success to a kind of post-racial characteristic of America’s defense, viewing the military as an expression of social change needs to be coupled with an understanding of the military as a crystallized arrangement of power. Hierarchies and
structures within the military apparatus clearly define and codify an individual’s power and responsibility (Parry-Giles, 2006). In interactions in the White House between top military personnel and the president, the nation’s Commander-in-Chief ultimately holds the final decision-making power. Furthermore, personnel in military positions are unelected and arguably serve no voting constituency, but instead follow orders and make decisions calculated through security implications and not political risk. From this perspective, the military becomes a familiar and comfortable space for depicting a racially diverse set of characters in a positive light.

If trust and loyalty are the hallmarks of military characters of color in *The West Wing*, the depiction of non-white elected officials and political influencers marks the opposite outlook. Race-based constituencies are portrayed as self-interested and disloyal to a White House that is fighting for changes on its behalf, and the politicians that represent them use the issues impacting their communities to bargain for political power. This departure is most evident in “Ways and Means” (Season 3, Episode 3), in which the White House, weakened by Bartlet’s MS scandal breaking, needs to shore up allegiances with Hispanic and Black political heavyweights who may decide the fate of Bartlet’s reelection chances.

Sam and campaign staffer Connie Tate (played by Connie Britton) meet with Victor Campos (played by Miguel Sandoval), the head of a California chapter of the American Federation of Service Employees whose endorsement and support are critical to any Democrat who wishes to win the state. Sam and Campos trade shots at one another about what Bartlet has given the Hispanic constituency to deserve Campos’s support in California come election time:

**SAM:** We fought a war together. What the hell happened to loyalty?
CAMPOS: You tell me.
SAM: You know what? The President promised to ban permanent striker replacement workers, and he did it.
Campos: Thank you. So the jobs he isn't shipping overseas will be safe and secure.
SAM: Who else was talking about prenatal care for illegal immigrants in Davenport, Iowa?
CAMPOS: That isn't where it needs to be talked about.
SAM: He put an empowerment zone in Pacoima and no one has worked harder to raise the minimum wage.
CAMPOS: _Mi gente ganan más que el mínimo sueldo!_ [My people earn more than the minimum wage!]
SAM: _Te subió al podio en la maldita convención, Victor!_ [You were up on the podium at the damn convention, Victor!]
CAMPOS: _Porque necesitaban una cara morena!_ [Because they needed a brown face!]
SAM: _Estas equivocado!_ [You're wrong!]
CAMPOS: _No lo estoy._ [No, I'm not.]
SAM: The lowest Latino unemployment in history, more small business loans for Hispanic entrepreneurs, and the biggest drop in Latino poverty in two decades!
CAMPOS: That's what I got in the last election. What do I get in this one?

The impassioned turn from English to Spanish and back during their debate is consistent with _The West Wing_’s central message about how knowledgeable their characters are, and helps reestablish Sam and the White House as genuinely concerned and active when it comes to Hispanic interests. Campos, on the other hand, is painted as particularly ungrateful, ambitious and self-serving in his demands, using the concerns of the poorest in his constituency as political leverage. After offering up White House actions on the Hispanic high school dropout rate and the health of Hispanic children of welfare, Sam is only able to bring Campos back to their side by pledging to bring the option of legal amnesty for undocumented immigrants (specifically from Latin American countries, per Campos’s demand) to the president. Their discussion’s theme around loyalty treats politicians like Campos as fickle lobbyists who use race issues to divide
Americans and to bully a weakened White House into acting on matters only pertinent to their own interests.

In the very next scene, Josh and Toby meet with Congressman Mark Richardson (played by Thom Barry), the Democratic leader of the Congressional Black Caucus, to convince his constituency not to support the repeal of the Estate Tax. Earlier, in explaining why the Black Caucus would break with the White House on this issue primarily affecting the richest Americans, Leo offers cynically, “First generation of black millionaires is about to die.” This sets the tone for the conversation with Richardson, as the White House staffers strongly imply that the Black members of Congress have abandoned their political roots by being disloyal to the Democratic White House and undermining their efforts to help the poor:

RICHARDSON: Josh, you think the Black Caucus votes as a block, and that they only care about the cities.

JOSH: Surely, Congressman, the African-American community can think of better ways to spend twenty-eight billion dollars than a tax break that'll benefit fewer than a thousand African-American families.

RICHARDSON: You're doing it again. The African-American community doesn't think one way about anything. We're talking about a few members of the Caucus […] who feel that African-American homeownership is at it's highest level ever. That more African-Americans are opening small businesses than ever before. And if they can't pass it on, how will they build up power and clout and self-sufficiency as a community?

JOSH: You think a few black millionaires justifies a multi-billion-dollar boondoggle?

RICHARDSON: Well, as long as there's a Congress, there are going to be multi-billion-dollar boondoggles. We'd just like to share in them a little bit, please.

Richardson is suggesting that the face of Black America is changing and, as such, wealthy members of the community who have achieved economic success are owed an
opportunity to advocate for their interests. Yet Toby, like Sam, invokes the issue of loyalty and barks out a track record of the administration’s policies designed to help poor African-Americans, essentially negating Richardson’s premise:

Toby: We're bleeding here, Mark.
Richardson: What?
Toby: We're bleeding here, for God's sake. You can work with us or you can be ignored by a Republican President, but those are your choices.
Richardson: How bad is it?
Toby: Buckland's coming after us. He's been meeting with Victor Campos.
Richardson: And while you guys are defending yourselves against special prosecutors and Jack Buckland, what happens to the people who got you here?
Toby: Who are you talking to, Mark? We're not gonna forget about failing schools in central cities. We're not gonna forget about after-school care, health care for uninsured kids. We're not gonna forget about drug treatment, or urban redevelopment, or community policing!
Richardson: Yeah?
Toby: You gotta not forget that we're bleeding!

Through their discussion on loyalty, Toby and Josh liken a move by Richardson and the Black Caucus away from the White House as a move against serving their true constituents in the African-American community: the poor, the uninsured, the drug-addicted in the inner-city. Richardson maintains his first point—that the Black Caucus “doesn’t vote as one mind”—at the end of this heated exchange, suggesting that he and his congressional counterparts are more concerned with their own political wins than with supporting a White House progressive agenda that desperately needs their support.

The quid pro quo nature of both of these exchanges with Hispanic and Black political leadership in The West Wing is in sharp contrast to the portrayal of minority leadership within the
military establishment, and represents a larger divide between depictions of voter-elected or Congress-confirmed minority characters and hand-selected or directly-appointed minority characters. Though the circumstances are different in the scenes with Deborah O’Leary, Victor Campos and Mark Richardson, a narrative pattern emerges that problematizes these characters’ allegiances to their constituencies and to the executive branch. These characters are portrayed as myopic in their tactical decisions and volatile in their commitment, undermining their own ability to advocate on behalf of their racial communities. While minority elected officials are hardly the only politicians depicted in *The West Wing* as acting primarily in self-interested, these characters’ use of race as a political lens creates an added layer of complexity in their representation and inherently pits them against national priorities at-large.

Given this context and the narrative patterns around racial representation, it follows logically that when *The West Wing* was tasked with imagining a non-white president, the writers crafted a character whose outlook on race more closely mirrors that of the unelected minority characters than that of the elected characters. That said, the abrupt departure of Aaron Sorkin and Thomas Schlamme at the end of the fourth season left a number of unanswered questions about the characters’ original fates and the trajectory of President Bartlet’s progressive agenda; even with John Wells at the helm for the last three seasons and many of the actors staying on, the series had lost some of its focus and energy, particularly when it came to making political

---

6 One of the few positive portrayals of a non-white congress member is in “Mr. Willis of Ohio” (Season 1, Episode 6), though a closer look reveals how it still reinforces this pattern. Humble African-American schoolteacher Joe Willis assumes a role in Congress after his wife, Janice, passes away weeks earlier. Mr. Willis is placed in an important position as the swing vote in the Commerce committee. Naïve about politics but not about American history, he is persuaded by Toby’s “very strong argument” — that an article of the constitution is arcane because of its slavery-era reference to free persons — to drop a census amendment that prohibits sampling and allow the Appropriations Bill to go through as is. Here it is Mr. Willis’s separation from the political behavior of Washington that allows his simple and fair logic to go untainted.
commentary. The decision to introduce Congressman Matt Santos (played by Jimmy Smits), a rising star in the Democratic party bound for the Oval Office, in Season 6 was thus as much a means of shaking up a series in decline as it was an opportunity to express racially diverse visions of the American presidency.

\textit{Matthew Santos and Imagining a Post-Racial Presidency}

In a recent interview, Scott Sassa, who was president of NBC Entertainment, West Coast during \textit{The West Wing}'s beginnings, recounts the program’s casting issues at the outset: “It was one of the first shows greenlighted that season but the last one cast. One of the things we got crap for was not having enough minorities, but what people didn't realize is we had offered Sidney Poitier the president role.” (\textit{The Hollywood Reporter}, May 13, 2014) As Sorkin points out in the same interview, however, those talks with Poitier as the president of the series did not progress very far.

Through his personal history, depicted in “Two Cathedrals” (Season 2, Episode 22) and detailed through his conversations throughout the series, President Josiah Bartlet represents a “mythology of whiteness” (Parry-Giles, 2006) that imbues his presidency and his character with American political history. Shaping this mythology are his devout Catholicism\textsuperscript{7}, his knowledge of Latin, his New England upbringing, his University of Notre Dame football fandom and, most importantly, a direct ancestral link to the Founding Fathers (McCabe, 2012). He details his profoundly American heritage in closing the speech that precedes the shooting in “What Kind of Day Has It Been?” (Season 1, Episode 22):

\textsuperscript{7} While President Bartlet’s command of the Bible lends him legitimacy among the religious typically across the political aisle, it is worth noting that there has one been one Catholic president of the United States.
BARTLET: My great-grandfather’s great-grandfather was Dr. Josiah Bartlet, who was the New Hampshire delegate to the second Continental Congress, the one that sat in session in Philadelphia in the summer of 1776 and announced to the world that we were no longer subjects of King George III, but rather a self-governing people. We hold these truths to be self-evident, they said, that all men are created equal. Strange as it may seem, that was the first time in history that anyone had bothered to write that down. Decisions are made by those who show up. Class dismissed. Thank you, everyone. God bless you. And God bless America.

President Bartlet’s white American heritage is tailored to the layered political figure he represents, allowing him to access a wide spectrum of knowledge and experience—some insight intrinsic to his genes (Parry-Giles, 2006). Matt Santos, while crafted by different writers, also embodies a certain political mythology that relates to his Hispanic-American heritage and experience. The Latino congressman from Texas grew up in an old Mexican-American neighborhood in Houston, Texas before joining the Marines. He returned to Houston and would become a councilman and mayor of the city before joining Congress. This cultural history fuels his political ambitions, as he explains to his campaign manager and former White House staffer Josh Lyman in “La Palabra” (Season 6, Episode 18), reflecting fondly on the young Hispanic children in his neighborhood:

SANTOS: I am running for president in that Texas primary and those kids are gonna see me do that. That's the only statement about my skin color I intend to make in this campaign.

---

8 As Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn Parry-Giles (2006) note, it might be interesting to consider Bartlet’s personal history in relation to the layered cultural background of the actor that performs his role, born to a Spanish immigrant father and named Ramón Estevez before adopting Martin Sheen as a stage name.
The “La Palabra” episode marks an important shift in the role of Matt Santos’s character within the series as his win in the California primary makes him, for the first time, a true contender in the race for the post-Bartlet presidency. The first half of season six shared the spotlight between the familiar President Bartlet and candidate Santos, while “La Palabra” was focused entirely on the presidential campaign storylines; Bartlet never makes an appearance. This episode provides a closer look into how Matt Santos incorporates his racial identity into his political understanding and decision-making. It centers on an anti-immigrant bill in California, in which Santos must decide whether or not to publicly denounce it, a choice between inviting attacks from his opponents if he does and potentially losing a prominent Latino political community’s endorsement. When long-time supporter and “familiar face” Ed Garcia, head of La Palabra, discusses his fears with the congressman about the bill, he is rebuffed by Santos, focused on the campaign ramification of making such a statement:

GARCIA: Matt, we're concerned about this driver's license bill. It could be the beginning of a new wave of anti-immigrant legislation. We need you to denounce it in your speech to La Palabra.
SANTOS: I don't think I could do that, Eddie. It would define my whole campaign. I don't want voters to see me as just the brown candidate.
GARCIA: I hope some of them have black-and-white TVs. The governor wants to veto this, but he's scared. Doesn't wanna be accused of torpedoing the Democrats' chances. He needs cover.
SANTOS: The governor's endorsed Hoynes.
GARCIA: This is a moral issue. Telling immigrants they can't drive, make a living?
SANTOS: Nothing I say tomorrow will make a difference. We need to focus on electing a progressive candidate. Then we can take on all the tough causes.
GARCIA: Now all we need is a progressive candidate. Maybe you don't see more friendly faces because your friends have trouble recognizing you.

In his criticism of Santos’s loaded statement—“I don't want voters to see me as just the brown candidate”—Garcia points out that the candidates credentials as a progressive Latino are put into question if Santos does not take a stand when it matters. In his subsequent conversation with Josh, Garcia elaborates on why taking the stand on an issue speaks to the congressman’s sense of morality:

JOSH: Santos is the first viable Latino to even enter a presidential. We both know you're endorsing him.

GARCIA: Not unless he takes a stand in his speech to La Palabra. The governor needs cover to veto this. If Hoynes provides it, we'll endorse him.

JOSH: Having a Latino president doesn't advance the Latino cause?

GARCIA: If he doesn't stand up for Latinos? You have taught him how to live by the polls but when you're off on the next campaign he's the one who's gotta live with himself.

Though it recalls familiar themes in The West Wing around race and loyalty, Garcia’s portrayal as an influential representative of California’s Latino community reeks less of political self-interest than Victor Campos, who played a similar role in the third season. Without the flaring temper characteristic of Sorkin’s characters, Garcia expresses his frustration respectfully and logically by invoking the moral dimensions of the issue, even when political victories are at stake. Josh considers the negative ramifications of taking the Latino community’s support for granted and is persuaded by Garcia’s perspective on the issue, but Santos makes clear that the racial component to his campaign is within his personal purview alone:

SANTOS: If I denounce it, it's a seven-second sound bite. "Latino comes out for Latinos."

JOSH: Better than "Latino ignores Latinos."

SANTOS: It would play into the Republicans' hands. You said it yourself. Plus, no one would hear anything else I would have to say.

JOSH: It's a bad bill. You should be who you are. I was wrong to push the politics on this.
SANTOS: I'm not taking a position.

JOSH: Garcia's serious about going with Hoynes.

SANTOS: Maybe he should be. And not for nothing, Josh, Garcia can tell me if he thinks I'm not Latino enough. You can't, okay?

If a viewer hopes, as Josh and Garcia do, to see Santos recognize the value of voicing his concerns as a rising Hispanic political star and decide to directly address the moral questions at stake in this bill, that viewer would be disappointed. Instead, Santos brokers a public relations maneuver with California governor Gabriel Tillman, asking to stand silently behind the governor when he announces his intention to veto the bill. Santos justifies his decision to only criticize the bill privately—in effect, avoiding any public racial cognition around the issue—by saying that his voice on this issue does not matter as much as the governor’s because more is said, in effect, by a white leader addressing the Latino community’s concerns than a fellow Latino:

SANTOS: I think the bill is an abomination. We need to toughen our immigration laws make our borders 50 times more secure. But if we're not really willing to do that it's wrong to punish the people we bring here to pick our avocados.

TILLMAN: But why don't you just come out and say that?

SANTOS: Because people don't need to hear it from someone who looks like me. They need to hear it from someone who looks like you.

The campaign strategy that Santos uses to provide resolution in “La Palabra” is especially significant because it is not merely a work of fiction drawn in The West Wing’s writers room: it represents a real political strategy that would have real implications on racial dialogue in America. Eli Attie, a long-time writer for The West Wing that had previously served as chief speechwriter for Vice President Al Gore during his 2000 bid for the presidency, was crafting the Matt Santos character just as a young Senate candidate from Illinois named Barack Obama was
emerging on the national stage (The Guardian, February 21, 2008). Obama’s keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention had certainly made an impression, eloquently and passionately presenting his vision of a nation united. Attie put in a call to Obama advisor David Axelrod to learn more about this ascendant Democratic star; with his fictional Latino candidate in mind, Attie was particularly interested in Axelrod’s insights on how Obama approached his racial identity: “Some of Santos's insistence on not being defined by his race—his pride in it even as he rises above it—came from that.” (The Guardian, February 21, 2008). What Attie is describing is a political strategy predicated on the rhetoric of racial transcendence (Wise, 2010), the same strategy attributed to Barack Obama’s success as a candidate (Clayton, 2010). However, as was discussed earlier in the review of the literature, scholars on race issues including Cornel West, bell hooks, Michael Eric Dyson, Tim Wise and Ta-nehisi Coates argue that the transcendent or post-racial perspective that made Obama a compelling candidate in an election has limited him from effectively leading on race issues, as president.

---

9 As actor Jimmy Smits prepared to embody the Santos character, he drew inspiration not only from Obama but other contemporary political figures including Hillary Clinton, Xavier Becerra and Antonio Villaraigosa. Smits confirmed, however, that Attie’s conversations with Axelrod were instrumental in guiding the narrative development of the Matt Santos campaign. (Politico, November 1, 2008)
Fictional candidate Matt Santos’s roots in the racial and political narratives of real candidate Barack Obama represents a complex relationship between real and televisual imagined politics, mediated through politically significant interactions between advisors, writers, producers, actors and national audiences.

In Fig. 1, I used graphic design to visually and conceptually model these various actors as nodes in a communication network (Turner, 1991), with vectors—or lines of communication—connecting them and expressing their direction of influence (Wark, 2012). It quickly became evident that there were formal relationships between the four primary nodes but also feedback loops between some of the other nodes, as shown in Fig. 2. Feedback is a significant vector at work in a series like The West Wing because the drama is also a designed product; viewer feedback in the form of ratings and sales represents a flow of capital from creator to consumer and back, with an actor like Jimmy Smits receiving capital for his part in the network. In the political system, feedback in the form of public opinion polling data
represents its own political currency to campaign strategists like Axelrod. In Fig. 3, I added
directionality to the vectors to indicate influence and power dynamics. I iterate on this model
further in other case studies before drawing conclusions about what this model means in the
larger context of this genre’s political communication on race issues.

In addressing political themes with real world relevance, *The West Wing*’s plot lines
would sometimes appear to foreshadow real events. Alongside the allusions to Obama written
into Santos’s character, events that occurred during the fictional Santos-Vinick race were
mirrored in the Obama-McCain race: among other similarities, in both settings a young, non-
white political outsider was defeating established Democrats in a lengthy primary battle to take
on a significantly older Republican opponent. Axelrod joked that Obama’s 2008 campaign, of
which he was chief strategist, was “living in” Attie’s scripts (*The Guardian*, February 21, 2008).

Whether art imitates life or life imitates art, as Oscar Wilde famously posited, is certainly
more complex question when accounting for the off-screen relationship between Santos creators
and Obama strategists. Yet part of the foreshadowing that occurs in *The West Wing*’s depiction
of its minority candidate is less reflective of some prophetic insight on the part of the writers and
more indicative of the cyclical nature of history, allowing the series to comment on recurring
race-based tensions in America and the significant leadership challenges they pose. In its final
season, *The West Wing* placed Santos against a fictional but familiar context in “Undecideds”
(Season 7, Episode 8) when he is tasked with making a public statement to a community enraged
after a Latino police officer shoots and kills a Black child. Santos gives voice to the ambiguity
that comes with non-white political leadership and the burden of addressing the competing
obligations—to people of color, to local authorities, to an impressionable (and predominantly
white) American constituency—that come with his position:
SANTOS: You all think that there is something I can get up there and say that's going to bridge the divide? Well, there isn't.
HELEN: I don't think that's true.
SANTOS: Well, the staff doesn't either, so maybe you should get together and talk about it.
HELEN: You don't have to say the right thing, which, conveniently, doesn't exist, but you do have to say something from your heart.
SANTOS: I do, huh?
HELEN: Yeah.
SANTOS: Nobody wants to hear that, Helen. They want to hear what I have to say as the representative for every Latino man, woman, and child in the 50 United States. And let me tell you something: I'm frankly getting very tired of being responsible for every Jose Miguel Rodrigo Garcia Martinez de Lopez in America. I'm exhausted!
HELEN: Nobody expects that.
SANTOS: Of course, they do! They want me to make sense out of all of this. And you know what, Helen, I've got nothing. Why the hell do they shoot a kid who is trying to surrender?! There's some guy on the scene that says the kid was trying to put his hands up in the air. The cop couldn't have waited, like, a half a second more before he fired? And who walks around South Central with a plastic M-16?! Where did this kid think he was living, Martha's Vineyard? Nobody figured out that when you live in the ghetto, you carry around something else if you don't want to get your ass blown away? That's what I've got right now. You think that's going to make anyone feel better?

In his frustration, Santos highlights the dilemmas that represent real demands and criticisms faced by Barack Obama as both a candidate and as the president of a nation divided on race issues. This episode aired three years before Obama’s “More Perfect Union” speech in 2008 addressing controversial comments by Reverend Jeremiah Wright; it aired four years before his close advisor and attorney-general called the US a “nation of cowards” when it came to confronting its racist past. (Daniel, 2009; Coates, 2012) When Santos spoke “from the heart” about a Latino cop’s violence against a Black child on The West Wing, he did so eight years
before Obama sought to comfort a nation reeling from an unarmed black teen’s killing by a white and Hispanic neighborhood watchman when he said, “If I had a son, he would look like Trayvon.” (Coates, 2012)

It is important to conclude here, however, that being in a fictional environment provides Santos with affordances that Obama does not have: Santos’s speech at the episode’s resolution is met with agreement and a standing ovation from his Black congregation audience, as if to say that he has succeeded in articulating a way forward on race issues through his emphasis on compassion. President Obama does not have the advantage of a narrative closure, even as a myriad of scholars, critics and constituents continue to frame his presidency in terms of his legacy.
When Aaron Sorkin left *The West Wing* after the fourth season, at a time when the series was experiencing lower ratings after its initial critical acclaim, executives who had worked closely with him offered an explanation tied to the series’s political context. President Bartlet’s popularity as a liberal Democrat could in part be attributed to the popular Clinton presidency in which he was first designed. By 2003, his juxtaposition to the conservative Republican administration of George W. Bush—engaged in a global war on terrorism that dominated the public discourse in the aftermath of September 11th—Bartlet’s political vision as constructed by Sorkin appeared disconnected from the audience’s lived experiences with politics. In the words of one executive that worked closely with Sorkin:

“No show on television was more affected by the changes wrought by 9/11. It's been a challenge for Aaron to work with the changed zeitgeist. He's a brilliant guy and incredibly gifted, but he's also very sensitive. The falling ratings did upset him. He's been under a tremendous amount of stress. This move makes a lot of sense for him.” (*The New York Times*, May 2, 2003)

If Sorkin’s shortcoming was his inability to grapple with the “zeitgeist” of post-9/11 politics, then Joel Surnow, executive producer of the action series *24* (*Fox, 2001 - 2010*), was his prime-time foil. In an in-depth 2007 interview with Jane Mayer for *The New Yorker*, Surnow explained how *24*’s characters, pace and storylines actively contributed to cultural imaginations of how an America under siege would emerge victorious against the ubiquitous threat of terrorism. “*24* is] ripped out of the Zeitgeist of what people’s fears are—their paranoia that
we’re going to be attacked,” he explained. “There are not a lot of measures short of extreme measures that will get it done,” Surnow said adding, “America wants the war on terror fought by Jack Bauer. He’s a patriot.” (The New Yorker, February 19, 2003)

As Mayer’s profile on Surnow—aptly entitled, “Whatever It Takes”—details at great length, the political vision articulated by 24 is shaped by Surnow’s neoconservative ideals and his close ties to the Bush administration to inform Bauer’s particular brand of patriotism. Throughout the series, counter-terrorism special agent Bauer (played by Kiefer Sutherland) saves the nation from assured destruction by circumventing civil liberties, due process and international human rights conventions, frequently making the tough decisions and personal sacrifices necessary when America’s national security needs were at odds with the law or public perception. The action-packed drama glorifies Bauer’s violent, often extralegal, counter-terrorist tactics to satiate an audience’s appetite for vengeance. Given Surnow’s politics, it is no coincidence that 24’s visual onslaught aired at a time when the political right was making the case that American national security strategy was, as Michael Chertoff (the Bush administration’s second Secretary of Homeland Security, in office from 2005-2009) would describe, “trying to make the best choice with a series of bad options.” (The New Yorker, February 19, 2003) The program’s verisimilitude and subsequent spillover effect into national security policy is especially apparent in 24’s depiction of torture; the problematic impact of the program in normalizing and justifying the use of illegal torture in interrogation procedures has been discussed in detail by many cultural studies scholars, including John Downing (2007), Douglas Howard (2007), Magnus Nissel (2010) and Trevor Parry-Giles (2014). Citing numerous examples of how torture scenes in 24 had been used to advance real political objectives, these scholars bolster the criticisms made by television journalists in the program’s prime and cast
doubt on assurances from Surnow and lead writer Howard Gordon that audiences effectively differentiate between fact and fiction around torture.

Packaged within 24’s neoconservative political worldview, one that deviates greatly from the previous case study, is a complex narrative around the American presidency and White House leadership in the face of terrorism. Over the first four seasons, Bauer develops a strong personal relationship with President David Palmer (played by Dennis Haysbert), giving him a (often literal) direct line to the commander-in-chief to receive his blessing before making an ethically uncomfortable decision. Palmer, a president who faces increasingly dangerous terrorist threats all while family turmoil and staff disloyalty undermine him at every turn, is on the whole a powerful representation of a strong and moral leader. In the storyworld of 24, Palmer is also America’s first Black president, and as such, is imbued with explicit and implicit significance as one accomplishing this historical milestone.

While it may appear that 24’s choice to place an African-American president at the helm was particularly forward-looking, the tendency to cast a Black president in a thrilling, fantastical crisis-themed, doomsday narrative is relatively high and well-recognized. As Justin Vaughn (2012) describes at length, the “Black presidential apocalypse” theme is so prevalent in Hollywood that some had even joked when Barack Obama was elected to the presidency that, surely, an asteroid was on its way to Earth (Vaughn, 2012: 56). Although 24’s dramatization of American counter-terrorism operations had real-world relevance when the series first aired a month after September 11th, the casting, writing and filming of the series began in 2000: in other words, a Black president was not cast in 24 with the political and military realities of 9/11 in mind. Therefore, Dennis Haysbert’s casting as David Palmer may have been a continuation of the trend in the films Deep Impact (1998) with Morgan Freeman and 2012 (2009) with Danny
Glover, using the Black president to signal that the storyworld is indeed an alternate reality. A common characteristic of these three characters is that they are valued in their narratives for the poise they exude to a nation in panic (Vaughn, 2012: 56). In a 2006 interview, Dennis Haysbert agreed that his calm and composed character was uniquely suited to 24’s chaotic tempo and worldview when he reported that David Palmer beat out The West Wing’s Josiah Bartlet for favorite fictional president in a USA Today poll that year: “I guess I’m the better crisis president.” (New York Magazine, March 6, 2006)

It is useful here to note the existence of a certain kind of selective memory on the part of commentators who discussed how Palmer’s race factors into his portrayal as the nation began to seriously consider its own Black candidate for president. Eager to draw parallels between fictional Black presidency and the real candidate they had in front of them, Barack Obama, writers in 2007-2008 seemed to recall a 24 in which Palmer’s race was never addressed. Maureen Callahan, for example, wrote:

“No one talks about what, until very recently, seemed the show’s most fantastical element: its depiction of David Palmer, a noble, beloved, judicious man who also happened to be, in 2001, America’s first black president – and whose race was never, ever mentioned. By anyone. Ever.” (New York Post, February 24, 2008)

Similar views were offered by Lucia Bozzola (2007), who says that Palmer “does not see race.” Downing writes that 24’s depiction of Black characters posits a post-racial world in which anti-Black racism has “vanished.” (Downing, 2007: 74) While it is certainly true that Palmer’s character is developed with a post-racial sensibility, to say that his race is never mentioned by others or acknowledged by himself is not only factually inaccurate but denies that the character has a racial history, including the racialized view of history or meaning the audience member
projects onto the character. I again argue that by building dialogue and scenes around race issues, the show’s creators are expressing a political viewpoint on race either intentionally or subconsciously. The commentary related to race and racism comes up less frequently in 24 than in a program more devoted to the intellectual meaning-making of politics like The West Wing; still, these few moments are worth unpacking in their social and political contexts. In the following examples from the first season, Palmer’s “Blackness” is interpreted as a reason he will have a place in history, the same reason he will perpetually be in danger.

*Senator Palmer: The Promise and Peril of A Black Presidential Candidate*

As a leading candidate for the White House, Senator David Palmer is immediately thrust into crisis when CTU (Counter Terrorist Unit) Los Angeles learns that he may be the target of an assassination plot. In Bauer’s characteristic pragmatism and sense of urgency, he shrugs off concerns around racial profiling brought forward by fellow CTU agent Tony Almeida (played by Carlos Bernard):

**BAUER:** Tony, I need detailed background on everyone on David Palmer's staff, now.
**ALMEIDA:** Why?
**BAUER:** 'Cause I think this is about him. I want us to be prepared.
**ALMEIDA:** Bad time to play a hunch. If it leaks out that we're screening him, people might think it's because he's Black.
**BAUER:** It *is* because he's Black. It makes him the most likely target.
**ALMEIDA:** It might not be interpreted that way on the outside.
**BAUER:** I don't care how it's interpreted. I just gave you an order and I'd like you to follow it, please. (“12:00 AM - 1:00 AM” Season 1, Episode 1)
Even in such a short exchange, in which Bauer barks an order without concern for public perception as he is known to do, the scene acknowledges a basic national security reality for anyone in Palmer’s position: America has extremists who use violence to act based on racial hatred. David Palmer’s wife Sherry (played by Penny Johnson) seems resigned to the risk they are constantly under, saying, “We've been getting death threats ever since my husband announced his candidacy.” (“1:00 AM - 2:00 AM” Season 1, Episode 2) To make the case that this particular assassination plot is serious and convince Bauer to help identify the threat, regional district manager of CTU Richard Walsh (played by Michael O’Neill) explains the far-reaching ramifications of his death:

Bauer: If there's a conspiracy in the Agency to kill Palmer, I'll never get near it.
Walsh: Well, you'll have to, Jack 'cause you're the only guy that I can trust. If Palmer gets hit—the first African-American with a real shot at the White House—it'll tear this country apart.

(“12:00 AM - 1:00 AM” Season 1, Episode 1)

Walsh’s short statement is loaded with social commentary about race: in acknowledging the historical significance of Palmer’s candidacy, it also evokes images of race riots, mass violence and civil unrest should this rare opportunity end in an assassination. Sherry Palmer, who develops into a primary villain in 24 with a “Lady Macbeth” role, also evokes the meaning of this moment as she pressures Senator Palmer to avoid a scandal and preserve their shot at the presidency. “You're the most important presidential candidate this country's had in a long time,” she says. “Like it or not, fair or not, you're making history.” (“5:00 AM - 6:00 AM”, Season 1, Episode 6) Later, to justify her sending a campaign aide to make advances on her husband (which David Palmer quickly rejects—differentiating him from President Clinton’s
improprieties), reinforces this message of history’s calling: “Whether you're willing to accept it or not, we serve a higher purpose.” (“10:00 PM-11:00 PM”, Season 1, Episode 11)

David Palmer is certainly aware that he is making history as the country’s first Black president and that he has many people to still convince, as is memorably presented in Palmer’s conversation with a young African-American boy during a campaign visit to an elementary school (“9:00 AM - 10:00 AM” Season 1, Episode 10):

BOY: Is it true you played basketball?
PALMER: Sure did. Georgetown.10
BOY: My daddy says Georgetown sucks.
PALMER: I think I need to have a little talk with your daddy.
BOY: He also says there will never be a Black president in this country. Ever.
PALMER: Would you give your daddy a message for me? Tell him I understand where he's coming from, but he's wrong. And I'm gonna prove it. Tell him that, okay?
BOY: Okay.

Here, Palmer is able to symbolically speak to both the future (the boy) and the past (the boy’s referenced father) of the African-American community. The script is acknowledging that among all the other difficulties Palmer is facing—including a brewing scandal involving his son’s alleged murder of his daughter’s rapist and an assassination plot involving foreign operatives—his biggest battle to fight is to change the perception that America is not ready for a

10 Georgetown University is frequently used as a fictional alma mater in televisial political dramas; Charlie Young and Zoey Bartlet in The West Wing and Olivia Pope in Scandal are among many Hoyas on television. As a prestigious university in Washington, DC with the reputation of political studies, Georgetown lends itself to be easily incorporated into characters’ stories in this genre. While this character trait was likely an easy way to incorporate Dennis Haysbert’s height into his character, Palmer’s connection to the Georgetown as a former basketball player also incorporates the university’s well-known place in African-American history of the seventies and eighties, particularly due to its basketball program. The team he would have played on would have likely been all Black with the first Black coach to win the NCAA championship, who confronted racism in collegiate athletics with his outspoken stances on issues impacting Black collegiate players (Debonis, 2007).
Black president. These reflections on race, brief and infrequent as they are, nonetheless help frame Palmer’s noble presidentialism (Parry-Giles, 2014) in the face of adversity and create subtext to his narrative.

By acknowledging Palmer’s racial identity in ways that scholars and commentators alike have typically neglected, one can key in on other scenes in the series that represent how Palmer embodies social dialogue on race and espouses the political perspectives of the writers that develop him. In a scene in the third episode, for example, Palmer lectures two carjackers who recognize him as a presidential candidate about their life choices and employs a message of rugged individualism anchored in respectability politics:

CARJACKER: So what you gonna do for me, Mr. President?
PALER: See, that's your problem. You want everyone else to do the work. What are you gonna do for yourselves?
CARJACKER: See, man? All y'all, y'all got the same rap.
PALER: Keep going like this and you'll be dead in five years.
CARJACKER: Man, like you know my life.
PALER: More than you think.

Palmer’s didactic, if not patronizing response is quite different from what one might expect in The West Wing, where a character would likely list out a full docket of legislation and reforms relevant to providing economic opportunities for urban youth. Instead, by attributing the young Black man’s difficulties solely to his own decisions and work ethic, Palmer’s lines reflect the politics of respectability associated historically with Booker T. Washington (Harris, 2012), while also mirroring the conservative, anti-“handout” politics of 24’s creator Surnow (The New Yorker, February 19, 2003). The scene, in which Palmer stops the carjacker’s baseball bat from striking him with his bare hands, is created in recognition and approval of Palmer’s embodiment.
of Blackness in contrast to the carjacker’s representation of Blackness; the scene would not have been written if Palmer was a white senator, as it would not accomplish anything to further develop the character as a model leader the way it intends to here. For all of Palmer’s hailed virtuousness, the glaring hypocrisy in his dialogue with the carjackers is that it directly precedes Palmer’s secret meeting with Carl Webb, a long-time associate of his that personifies “dirty politics” by engineering cover-ups and coercing cooperation.

**President Palmer: Racial Politics as the “Healer-In-Chief”**

Given the national security-focused nature of the plotlines in 24 and the political views of its creators, it is unsurprising that the President David Palmer we see in Seasons 2 and 3 is primarily shown in his commander-in-chief role and never as a legislator on domestic issues. In viewing his presidential actions and concerns develop, I see his role in crafting a national security strategy significantly diminished, especially as the real decision-making voice during counter-terrorist operations is Jack Bauer’s. He is undermined often by Pentagon officials and military hawks within his Cabinet, while it is his trust in Bauer that helps prevent an all-out war in Season 2.

Palmer’s main strength as president in the national security context, independent of Bauer, is his keen understanding of public relations. While familiar and popular with journalists during his press statements, Palmer is also willing to personally make demands of a journalist to contain a potentially harmful story. Palmer is disproportionately concerned with crafting the right public image of a threat or situation, arguably as the representative of the government best suited to assure the public that it will be safe and to prevent mass hysteria. His viewpoint on public relations is best articulated by Wayne Palmer (played by D.B. Woodside), President
Palmer’s brother, his chief of staff and eventual 24 president (“5:00 AM - 6:00 AM,” Season 3, Episode 17):

O’LAUGHLIN (HOMELAND SECURITY): We’re talking about security issues, Mr. President, not public relations.
WAYNE PALMER: How the public relates to this is a security issue.

While Wayne’s statement is in this case referring to the spread of a biological threat, this same strategy applies to how Palmer addresses a wave of anti-Middle Eastern sentiment and riots in Season 2. A dominant storyline in Season 2 is that three “Middle Eastern” countries—never identified specifically but, given the context and names used, should be considered Arab and Muslim countries—are being incorrectly identified as the perpetrators of a terrorist attack, and Bauer and Palmer set out to prove that these countries were innocent to prevent a global war. The misappropriation of blame goes further when racially-motivated civil unrest spreads throughout the East Coast and protesters begin forming ad hoc militias, focusing their attention on towns with Middle Eastern communities (“1:00 AM - 2:00 AM,” Season 2, Episode 3). Palmer and his staff watch a news interview with a white protester who explains why the mobs have gathered, echoing much of the anti-Muslim sentiment heard in post-9/11 America:

PROTESTOR: We want Washington to know that we consider ourselves in a war situation, and we want these people interned. And if they won't do it, we will.
REPORTER: Who do you want interned? I’m told the majority of this neighborhood consists of US citizens.
PROTESTOR: Naturalized! They weren't born here. Some of them don't even know how to speak English. They memorize answers to 50 questions, take the test, and then we let them vote.
REPORTER: Sir, how do you respond to the Governor’s claim that these people have no more to do with the bomb in California than you or I?

PROTESTOR: If we'd locked down our borders 20 years ago like we should’ve, none of this would have happened.

Palmer is very hands-on and decisive in coordinating a federal response to quell the anti-Middle Eastern riots, particularly because of his proclivity to manage crises from a public relations standpoint. Dealing with resource constraints among law enforcement and the National Guard as the protests gain traction, Palmer uses his executive power to coordinate a powerful media message about race—and how his presidency will not tolerate racism:

PALMER: Where's the media heading right now?

KRESGE: Well apparently it's happening all up and down the East Coast. But this city, Marietta in Atlanta, seems to have the most traction with the press.

PALMER: All right. This is what we're gonna do. We may be short on manpower, but it doesn't have to appear that way. Send all the Eastern Georgia National Guard to Marietta. And tell the media that this is where something's going to happen.

NOVICK: What's going to happen, sir?

PALMER: If this is what the people are going to be watching, let's show them how we're going to respond. I want them to see how we protect our citizens. We will not put up with racism or xenophobia. If this is where it's gonna start, this is where it's gonna stop!

This scene is significant in identifying Palmer as uniquely positioned, as an African-American president, to speak with credibility and authority on addressing racism. Sending the National Guard to Atlanta, Georgia to combat racist behavior in invokes images of President Eisenhower federalizing the Arkansas National Guard to protect Black students in newly-integrated schools; a Black president’s use of this tactic to protect Arab-American citizens
symbolizes a historical progression in American race relations, indicating a time in which anti-
Black racism is less significant and new frontiers of intolerance must be addressed. Peter Morey
(2010) and John Downing (2007) reflect extensively on 24′s portrayal of Arabs and Muslims and
describe how the “Othering” of the Middle East as a source of international terrorism contributes
to a post-racial depiction of America’s existing identity issues.

At the same time, the scene frames American racism through the bigoted and violent
actions of protesters blinded by primarily from fear rather than ignorance, and it frames anti-
racism as a national security operation (the Governor’s initial call for calm having failed). Thus
the scene falls into a familiar narrative pattern seen in The West Wing’s handling of white
supremacist shooting, one that is primarily equipped to tackle racism as a set of individualized
racial prejudices—extremist violent reactions with national security consequences—and not a
more systemic, institutional and embedded aspect of the American national project.

The Palmer Effect? The Myth of Pop Culture Predestination

Looking at how David Palmer’s race is occasionally activated by the narrative provides a
more textured understanding of what 24 producer Evan Katz describes when he says the writers
“wanted [Palmer’s] character to transcend race” and thus approach his race similar to, if not
prescient of, “the way Barack Obama is approaching it.” (New York Post, February 24, 2008)
Just as in the case of Matthew Santos in The West Wing, there was a pattern among the creators
and actors of 24 of giving some level of credit to David Palmer in warming up audiences to the
idea of Barack Obama as president. D.B. Woodside, who played Wayne Palmer, agreed with
many who said that David Palmer “had a huge impact on the country being open to an African-
American president,” agreeing with Katz’s assertion that Palmer, similar to Obama, was popular through his avoidance of racial commentary.

Most notably, Dennis Haysbert himself believed that his character had an influence on America’s embrace of President Obama:

“If anything, my portrayal of David Palmer, I think, may have helped open the eyes of the American people. And I mean the American people from across the board — from the poorest to the richest, every color and creed, every religious base — to prove the possibility there could be an African-American president, a female president, any type of president that puts the people first.” (Salon, November 3, 2008)

Haysbert’s attachment to the David Palmer character and pride in his portrayal of the presidency also was also evident in his particularly vocal criticism of the writers’ decision to have his character killed at the beginning of Season 5. He initially refused to film the assassination scene, rejecting the notion that his character needed to be killed—a bold stance to have in a show that frequently jettisoned its familiar characters without warning:

“I didn’t think this character should be killed at all. I didn’t like the message that it sent. With all the nastiness in the world—in both real administrations and fake—why kill off a character that is so loved by everybody? You know, I’ve been asked to run. Half-kiddingly, of course. But literally every day. Now what people say to me is ‘Why? Why?’” (New York Magazine, March 6, 2006)

"I knew David Palmer had really run his gamut. He's done what he was going to do. [But] I thought they were just going to let me out to pasture, having speaking engagements but bring him back for a couple of episodes here and there. When they said they were going to kill him, I said, 'Why?' It didn't make sense. It was the first Black president on national television with a three dimensional role. So why are you going to kill him? It just left a bad taste in everybody's mouth." (CBS, March 7, 2006)
Haysbert’s concern with how his character will be remembered, what his assassination would mean symbolically, and what his character means to Barack Obama are all indications of the political life that Haysbert gave to his fictional presidency as David Palmer. Televisual political dramas often use certain dominant narratives and motifs to explain politics that are, in turn, given real-life political significance when political officials invoke them to assist in the meaning-making process (van Zoonen, 2004). However, the belief held by Haysbert and others on the social and political impact of fictional black presidents conflates this process of meaning-making to what Vaughn (2010) calls the myth of pop culture predestination. Given how emphatic 24 creators and viewers were in finding similarities between Obama and David Palmer as candidates, the critical narrative shifted early in Obama’s presidency when he appeared tentative and instead drew comparisons to apparently overwhelmed Wayne Palmer; 24 executive producer Howard Gordon described the Wayne Palmer character as a “prophetic” choice by the show. (Chicago Tribune, January 18, 2007)

Fictional presidencies are cultural artifacts that articulate specific creative interpretations of the office and its demands; as such, fictional Black presidencies carry with them certain prescriptive assumptions about the state of American race relations and the ways race should and should not factor into their leadership model. However, treating these constructions of fictional
Black presidents as somehow prophetic or prescient reinforces the use of limited narrative frames that confine and inhibit audience’s analysis of America’s only Black president.

That said, it is understandable that Haysbert felt uneasy about the portrayal of African-American presidents in *24* after his character was killed. As presidents, both Palmer brothers experience multiple assassination attempts and both succumb to their injuries; both presidents are undermined by the actions of their staff, and both are confronted with the 25th Amendment of Constitution when their ability to serve in the office is questioned. Given recent experiences of America’s real inaugural African-American president, who has dealt with uncharacteristically porous security detail\(^1\) and numerous threats of impeachment and removal from office\(^2\), the prospect of “life imitating art” in the Obama-Palmer case is particularly vexing.

**Ticking Time-bombs, Split Screens and Audience Interactivity**

Just as *The West Wing*’s narrative format and scene construction helped engender a certain sense of realism that drew audiences into its portrayal of the White House inner workings, *24*’s appeal as a form of televisual catharsis for audiences was in large part due to its innovative storytelling pattern. The most significant of these narrative devices is identified right in the name of the series: each season’s twenty-four episodes correspond to an hour of a particularly action-packed day for the protagonists. By portraying the events as occurring in real-

---

1\ As an internal review conducted by the Department of Homeland Security has noted, the incident in which a man jumped over the White House fence and made his way in, relatively undetected, on September 19, 2014, is the latest in a string of events that cast doubt on the ability of President Obama’s Secret Service detail to adequately protect him. (*National Public Radio*, November 14, 2014)

2\ Congressional Republicans have advanced often the case for impeaching President Obama and removing him from office, citing their disagreements with his policies. (*New York Times*, August 24, 2013) David Palmer was in a similar predicament during his Cabinet’s 25th Amendment proceedings against him, countering: “You don’t like one of my policy decisions; you do not have the right to reverse that policy under the pretense that I’m disabled.” (“4:00 AM - 5:00 AM”, Season 2, Episode 21)
time, punctuated by the chime of seconds ticking away on an LCD clock, audiences are drawn into the urgency of each crisis-laden moment. Through real-time storytelling, 24 uses pressure and anxiety built through the ticking device to impress upon viewers the seriousness of the life-and-death decisions being made, justifying our confidence in Bauer’s hurried and unilateral approach to counter-terrorism.

This is not to say, however, that 24 holds to a breakneck pace in every scene, as pauses in the story are just as necessary to develop characters and dramatic tension (where some of the social commentary on race is performed). 24 uses split screens in its storytelling to juxtapose various scenes and settings simultaneously while maintaining the real-time structure, allowing viewers a comprehensive perspective of the storyworld. As each season progresses, scene transitions through split screens allow the audience to absorb the interconnected nature of disjointed plotlines; the audience is positioned as omniscient, given a more interactive role in the program by drawing its own conclusions on how storylines are threaded together. The split screen format becomes especially useful in giving viewers a front seat to the characters’ deception: for example, the audience is the primary witness when a character is lies over the phone to another, giving viewers a role in assessing the morality behind the characters’ deception.

By heightening audience interactivity, 24’s storytelling format increases the level of parasocial interaction (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Levy, 1979; Giles 2002) that occurs between viewers and the characters. It is this kind of parasocial interaction that gives characters like President David Palmer their traction in American politics, and I have used graphic design to capture how actor statements and creator politics might map to the communications model I previously developed to better explain this traction (Fig. 4). Among the differences in this
iteration of my conceptual model, I rearranged nodes in the network to identify the salient actors that created the political context for 24. I also took note of the increased level of parasocial interaction aided by the program’s storytelling innovations, illustrating the relationship between the Palmer character and viewers as bidirectional. Design, being an iterative process, enables the communications model to better adapt and incorporate political and technological changes that accompany the program’s viewing context.
CASE STUDY: SCANDAL

Any conversation on race and racial representation on current entertainment television programming should inevitably find its way into “ShondaLand.” The playful name of the television production company run by Scandal creator Shonda Rhimes has come to represent more than the success earned by her four prime-time powerhouse dramas: it is also a brand identity that has become synonymous with diversity and inclusion, a kind of televisual safe space for underrepresented voices, even while safety is rarely guaranteed in her shows:

“ShondaLand is the most integrated and interesting geography in America: it’s a field inhabited by blacks, whites, women with power and vulnerable men, veterans with PTSD, queer folk, Asians without accents, Republicans, autistic savants, southerners, assassins, Hispanics, and interracial siblings. They all stab each other in the back; then they all have make-up sex.” (Williams, 2014)

Kerry Washington, who plays Scandal’s lead Olivia Pope, described Rhimes’s approach to character construction as “changing the culture of television in that more and more people can turn on the television and see themselves,” using the characters’ dramatic humanity to underscore “the sameness in the differences.” (The Hollywood Reporter, October 8, 2014) The characteristic diversity in her casts is most often attributed to Rhimes’s own accomplishments in pushing against Otherness in the television industry to make a name for herself as the most successful Black female showrunner. But Rhimes gets frustrated with the use of these modifiers that frame her success to her being a woman of color: "I find race and gender to be terribly important; they're terribly important to who I am,” Rhimes once explained, “but there's something about the need for everybody else to spend time talking about it that pisses me off." (The Hollywood Reporter, October 8, 2014)
Rhimes’s approach to race in *Scandal* and her other dramas illustrates her strong preference for *showing* rather than *telling* on these issues: Rhimes prefers to use powerful characters of color to indirectly talk about race as opposed to decoding racial undertones through direct social commentary—a distinction that contrasts her perspective from Aaron Sorkin’s heavily expository dialogue on race in *The West Wing.* Employing a culturally-diverse cast that operates without acknowledging, or needing to acknowledge, the role of race and racism in their storyworld is typically associated with *post-racial* storytelling. But Rhimes’s vantage point as a Black creative complicates what post-racial means in the context of televisual political dramas, as she considers visually arranging her non-white characters against themes of political power as a more authentic commentary on race in and of itself:

“When people who aren’t of color create a show and they have one character of color on their show, that character spends all their time talking about the world as ‘I’m a Black man blah, blah, blah.’ That’s not how the world works. I’m a Black woman every day, and I’m not confused about that. I’m not worried about that. I don’t need to have a discussion with you about how I feel as a Black woman, because I don’t feel disempowered as a Black woman.” (*New York Times*, May 12, 2013)

The reasoning she offers here, however, seems to be inconsistently applied in ShondaLand, especially if one considers the dialogue of other characters with “disempowered” identities. *Scandal* frequently devotes full scenes and storylines to impassioned conversations about gender inequality and sexual orientation in politics, from Olivia’s pep talks to female politicians about the perceptions they must overcome to Cyrus Beene’s (played by Jeff Perry) reflective moments on being an openly gay chief of staff to a Republican president. Rhimes may not feel disempowered as a Black woman, as she says, yet African-American women in the
political sphere undoubtedly confront unique challenges and barriers that could benefit from dialogue on screen. “I don’t think that we have to have a discussion about race when you’re watching a black woman who is having an affair with the white president of the United States,” Rhimes has explained. “The discussion is right in front of your face.” In response, I question the substance of the discussion in Scandal’s White House context and the efficacy of this approach given the political meaning audiences attach to these televisival representations of Washington.

Scandal’s exploration into race through its central character is complicated by the fact that Olivia Pope’s place in the White House establishment in constantly unclear and in flux: she begins as a media relations consultant in California Governor Fitzgerald “Fitz” Grant III’s presidential campaign, which leads to an extramarital affair between the two that continues, on and off, throughout the series as Fitz (played by Tony Goldwyn) ascends to the nation’s highest office. The script uses the flashback scenes in “Happy Birthday, Mr. President” (Season 2, Episode 8) as Fitz recovers from an assassination attempt to explain how affair between Olivia and Fitz eventually leads her to leaving her post as Director of White House Communications to start her own crisis management firm.

These flashbacks are also feature some of the rare commentary on how Olivia views the interracial character of the affair. Feeling the weight of the presidential office when she is alone with Fitz in the Oval Office, she expresses her discomfort by saying she feels “a little Sally Hemings/Thomas Jefferson about all of this.” Fitz takes umbrage with this particularly loaded comparison in a subsequent flashback:

OLIVIA: Did you need something?
FITZ: The Sally Hemings/Thomas Jefferson comment was below the belt.
OLIVIA: Because it’s so untrue?
FITZ: You're playing the race card on the fact that I'm in love with you? Come on. Don't belittle us. It's insulting and beneath you and designed to drive me away. I'm not going away.

OLIVIA: I don't have to drive you away. You're married, you have children, you're the leader of the free world. You are away. By definition, you're away. You're unavailable.

FITZ: So this is about Mellie?

OLIVIA: No-no! This is...I smile at her and I take off my clothes for you. I wait for you. I watch for you. My whole life is you.I can't breathe because I'm waiting for you. You own me. You control me. I-I belong to you.

FITZ: You own me! You control me. I belong to you. You think I don't want to be a better man? You think that I don't want to dedicate myself to my marriage? You don't think I want to be honorable, to be the man that you voted for? I love you. I'm in love with you. You're the love of my life. My every feeling is controlled by the look on your face. I can't breathe without you. I can't sleep without you. I wait for you. I watch for you. I exist for you. If I could escape all of this and run away with you? There's no Sally or Thomas here. You're nobody's victim, Liv. I belong to you. We're in this together.

It is bold, and perhaps unfortunate, of Olivia to invoke the story of Sally Hemings, an enslaved woman who had children with President Thomas Jefferson (Gordon-Reed, 1997), to describe her feelings of ownership and control when it comes to her lover; it cheapens the analogy and invites Fitz to convincingly suggest it is “beneath them,” rejecting the notion that there is any power imbalance at work in their relationship, especially one related to race.

Later in the second season (“Truth or Consequences,” Season 2, Episode 12), Cyrus makes the next explicit reference to Olivia’s race when he details how politically disastrous Fitz’s decision to divorce his wife Mellie (played by Bellamy Young) to marry his mistress would be:

CYRUS: Now, Liv is a lovely, smart woman. I can't get enough of her. But she is not exactly a hue that most of your Republican constituents would be happy about, even if they could get past the divorcing and the cheating and the abandoning of America's baby. It concerns me, sir, how big your delusion is.
Cyrus’s lecture to the president about practicality, with a most careful and vague reference to Olivia’s “hue,” reinforces his own white privilege in that he feels compelled to speak to the power of conservatives’ racial prejudices despite the Otherness he embodies as a gay man in a Republican administration. Luckily for Fitz, Olivia has come up with a political communications strategy that would allow him to successfully divorce the First Lady without much political blowback; the strategy is anchored in strategically using Olivia’s Blackness, touting her race as a political boon for Fitz while wielding the very association with racism as a weapon against Mellie’s own political ambitions. It is Fitz who triumphantly outlines this strategy directly to Mellie, with Cyrus present, in the final episode of the second season (“White Hat’s Back On,” Season 2, Episode 22):

FITZ: America will love [Olivia]. And let's be honest. My relationship with Olivia is going to spark a real dialogue about race in this country, and it is going to blow the Republican party wide open and let some light and air into places that haven't seen change in far too long. So the party will love her.

And you want to be on the right side of history here. Trust me, you do. Now if you don't want to play along, if you leak Olivia's name, if you refuse to go gently, well, it only takes a few whispers of the word "racist" before the feminist groups and the religious groups and even the Republican National Committee turn up their noses at your stink. But I don't want to do that, Mellie. I want to help you join me as a living, breathing monument to redemption and second chances and the America we all hope still exists.

This monologue is particularly problematic in the assumptions it makes about public sensitivity around race issues. For one, it assumes that Fitz’s interracial relationship will spark a positive, forward-looking public dialogue about race in America, and specifically within the
Republican party; while presenting an interracial couple in the White House could lead to some soul-searching about individual bigotries, it would likely have minimal impact on broader racial discrimination embedded in policy (especially given the severely limited political power conferred upon First Ladies historically to convene such conversations). Furthermore, Fitz, and Olivia by extension, are asserting that the mere suggestion that Mellie is racist will make her politically toxic to feminists and religious groups, which is quite the jump in logic; feminists and faith communities have their own race issues to examine and would not necessarily jettison a newly-divorced ex-First Lady on these grounds. In a similar vein to what Sue J. Kim (2013) noted in her analysis of Crash, this conversation among Scandal’s three leading white characters shifts the focus from race and racism to the costs of appearing racist, from an exercise in political reflection to an issue of political etiquette. The summative sentence that couches this strategy in soaring American rhetoric of inclusion, of redemption and hope, is being used to promote post-divorce reconciliation and, incidentally, racial harmony.

**Polysemic Popes: Parental Disapproval and Racial Dialogue**

This real, national dialogue about race never takes place, however, as Olivia returns to her own gang of misfits, the “gladiators in suits” that comprise her crisis management firm, Olivia Pope & Associates. While the Olivia-Fitz romantic storyline has continued to have its place in the narrative, the focus in the third and fourth seasons brings Scandal’s darker subplot to the fore. The sense of paranoia in Scandal’s storyworld is ratcheted up past 24’s level, showing that beneath the dysfunctional and often immoral Washington everyone can see is a dystopian America wherein every political decision is either enforced or exploited by a shadow government comprised of assassins and torture experts. Because this is ShondaLand, this
Orwellian nightmare army is controlled by none other than Olivia’s father Rowan Pope (played by Joe Morton) who is going after the world’s most dangerous terrorist, Olivia’s mother Maya Lewis (played by Khandi Alexander). The relationships between these three family members are interwoven in complex and often patently ridiculous ways, but their storylines are all ultimately characterized by deception and disapproval. In cutting down Olivia, Rowan and Maya employ rhetoric around disloyalty, servitude and sacrifice, speaking in “us” versus “them” terms that show flashes of the characters’ racial anger.

Despite his seemingly omnipotent role as Command, Rowan’s anger with Olivia is primarily a simmering resentment over the power that President Fitz Grant and his ilk have over his daughter. In a series that frequently invokes different abstract notions of patriotic duty, Rowan’s service to his country is through to raise up mediocre and privileged men like Fitz, dark and demeaning work he apparently undertook to provide for Olivia:

ROWAN: You do not disrespect me ever. Do you understand? Can I make that any clearer? I’m the one who protects the republic. I have spent a lifetime shining their shoes so that you might always see your reflection at every turn. […] You never choose one of them over me again. I won’t have it. (“Baby Made a Mess,” Season 4, Episode 7)

As a terrorist on the run, Maya does not invoke morality and duty in the way Rowan does, but instead questions Olivia’s subservient role in the White House. Though Maya does not get as much screen time as Rowan and does not have his powerful monologues, she lodges a seed in Olivia’s head, a similar theme to Rowan’s that plays out over two episodes in the third season:

OLIVIA: What I know…is that you are…a terrorist! A traitor to your own country.
MARIE: Maybe, but I’d rather be a traitor than what you are Livvy. Cleaning up those people’s messes. Fixing up their lives. You think you’re family, but you’re nothing but the help and you don’t even know it.
OLIVIA: You don’t know what you’re talking about.
MARIE: Oh, I do. I do. And if that’s all you want for your life, baby, then I guess it’s none of my business. So I’m gonna stay out of it. Just as long as you stay out of mine. (“Mama Said Knock You Out,” Season 3, Episode 15)

Being called “the help”—a term that had renewed significance in the zeitgeist due to 2011’s Hollywood drama about Black maids in the 1960s—is particularly upsetting to Olivia as she is tasked with managing Fitz’s family problems. “Tell me we're not the help,” she says to Cyrus privately, “that I am not some maid with a mop in my hand cleaning up messes whenever they ring the bell.” Cyrus affirms her fears and agrees with Maya’s assessment, but summons another abstraction of patriotic duty by telling her, “It's not just that family you're putting back together; it's the whole damn country.” (Cyrus rarely evokes The West Wing’s chief of staff Leo McGarry, but in line could have been delivered by either.) Olivia confronts Fitz on this theme of servitude in the next episode:

OLIVIA: What else do you need?
FITZ: What else do I need? What else do I need?
OLIVIA: What else do you need? What service can I render for you today? Am I here to stroke your ego? Am I your cheerleader? Am I here to wipe your tears? Am I your nanny? Am I here to fight the bullies? Am I your bodyguard today? Maybe I'm here to make you feel good. Maybe I'm your dealer. Or maybe I'm here to make you feel hot and manly and ready so you're not jealous of your wife's boyfriend. Is that it? Am I your fluffer today, Fitz? Is that what I am? What service am I billing you for today?
The problematic nature of Olivia Pope’s power and agency within the White House can certainly provide fruitful ground for a conversation on racial privilege when it comes to political leadership, but it may need more than these veiled metaphors to take shape. After all, this particular thread in the dialogue is rooted in the views of Olivia’s two homicidal parents and a plethora of entanglements that define her relationship with the presidency. If this, in Rhimes’s words, is putting “the discussion right in front of your face,” I question the depth of the conversation in a series that is so subtle when it comes to race issues while being particularly vocal about everything else.

**Feedback Loops and Design Thinking Applications**

Given that *Scandal* is set in a similar crisis mode as *24*, it is unsurprising that it too employs split screens to weave together interconnected storylines and unmask the characters’ deceptive acts. But the more significant split screen effect is occurring between the show on television and the vibrant online conversation that occurs simultaneously. *Scandal* has been dubbed “the show that Twitter built,” though it arguably has contributed to the development of Twitter in its own right by raising the standard for prime-time dramas eager to generate audience feedback. (*Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 2013) Rhimes, alongside Washington, Goldwyn and other actors in the series, collectively contribute to a powerful social media experience that willingly breaks the fourth wall through behind-the-scenes photos and real-time actor reactions to viewing the scenes they performed. Audiences reciprocate each week by tweeting out their favorite lines, asking the actors about their experiences filming certain scenes as they appear, or even simply the characters’ wardrobes. This integrated, digital media-infused television adds
immediacy and value to those who participate in the collective viewing experience, building the characters’ off-screen lives in the process.

The extent to which racial demographics on social networks have any influence on Scandal’s social media success is a valid research question that would require further exploration and data analysis. Beyond identifying crossover between demographics among those viewing and among those tweeting about Scandal, further research could be conducted by a firm like Nurun, a design and technology consultancy in Montreal: their researchers have been using design thinking methods to create “digital ethnographies” about viewer habits, measuring the content and context of social media conversations around television programs to help better understand consumption and interaction patterns.

In revisiting the model applied to Matthew Santos (The West Wing) and David Palmer (24), I would not only incorporate this engaged viewing audience but also the real-life inspiration that may inform the program’s political context. The character of Olivia Pope, leveraging a blend of legal and communication skills to become Washington’s “fixer,” is based on real-life crisis manager Judy Smith, who is experiencing something of a second act thanks to Scandal’s success. The DC-based strategic communications expert served in the White House as a Special Assistant and Deputy Press Secretary to President George H. W. Bush. She went on to build her crisis management practice, Smith & Co., and has worked with an impressive array of clients and cases, including DC Mayor Marion Barry, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, and former Clinton administration intern Monica Lewinsky. Smith’s connection to Scandal goes beyond being Olivia’s real-life inspiration, as she serves as a co-executive producer on the show and advises on crisis management techniques reflected in the script. (It is telling that in most recent
interviews since media attention for the otherwise tight-lipped fixer increased, Smith reminds readers that she never herself had an affair with any American president.)

When I incorporate Smith into the model I developed from the previous case studies (Fig. 5), I consider her status as a political influencer and strategist on behalf of elected officials, making her sensitive to, but not wholly accountable to, citizen feedback and voting. Other adaptations to the model include the strengthened and bidirectional nature of the feedback between Scandal’s digitally savvy creator, actors and viewers.
CASE STUDY: **House of Cards**

Over the summer of 2013, Kevin Spacey went on something of a victory lap after the successful debut of *House of Cards*, touting the new ground broken by Netflix in its experiment in television distribution. In detailing how Netflix won the producers of the series over and earned their partnership, Spacey would frequently point to the internet company’s faith in the story and the people behind it without needing to see a pilot. In his address to the Guardian’s Edinburgh Television Festival, Spacey described what makes pilots frustrating to the creative process:

“It wasn’t out of arrogance that David Fincher, Beau Willimon and I were not interested in having to audition the idea. It was that we wanted to start to tell a story that was going to take a long time to tell. We were creating a sophisticated multi-layer story with complex characters who would reveal themselves over time, and relationships that would need space to play out. And the obligation, of course, of doing a pilot from the writing perspective is that you have to spend about 45 minutes establishing all the characters and creating arbitrary cliffhangers and, basically, generally prove that what you’re going to do is going to work.” (*The Telegraph*, August 23, 2013)

The gradual reveal in *House of Cards* is essential to showing how an intricate revenge plot initiated by spurned congressman Francis “Frank” Underwood, Spacey’s character and primary vantage point of the series, unravels to take down President Garrett Walker’s (played by Michel Gill) administration from within. Over two seasons, Frank uses extortion and coercion to help shift various players into position, but is just as frequently able to use politicians’ own self-interest and opportunism to his benefit. *House of Cards*, like the *The West Wing*, does not dumb down the political process for its audience, using Washington jargon and making specific
references to policy details, provisions and idiosyncrasies to add realism and credibility to the
*House of Cards* storyworld (this fidelity to detail is aided by writer Beau Willimon’s years of
political campaign experience). The verisimilitude is bolstered by the sophisticated production of
the sets and cinematic look characteristic of a drama that unfolds more like an extended film than
a television series.

This slow burn effect of
Frank Underwoods’s path to power
also puts all characters, major and
minor, at risk as potential targets or
unintended recipients of his
deception. This is especially true
when it comes to persons of color,
who may be introduced holding
promise and influence as the series
begins but are eventually cast
aside. Particularly in Frank’s
crosshairs in the White House realm is Linda Vasquez, President Walker’s chief of staff who
must manage an administration in flux while Frank undermines her at every turn. Linda makes a
mistake in owing Frank a favor when he helps her son get accepted to Stanford, and Frank is able
to use such moments of weakness to create wedges between the president and his close advisor.
Growing tensions between Linda and Frank results in her tendering her resignation, losing
Walker one of the only main characters who was able to shield him from Frank’s plan. South-
Asian actress Sakina Jaffrey has said that she partly based her portrayal of her Latina character

**FIG. 6**
on Obama advisor Valerie Jarrett, earning the actress an invitation to the White House from Jarrett (Politico, February 27, 2013). I mapped this relationship to the model I had developed for the previous case studies (Fig. 6).

Outside of the White House but always nearby, African-American character Remy Danton (played by Mahershala Ali) is meant to embody the dark power of lobbyists in Washington, and how capable business interests are in shaping political decision-making. Having made partner at a prestigious law firm, Remy is young, smart and gifted but, in Frank’s view, a “waste of talent who chose money over power,” (Season 1, Episode 2) a theme that echoes throughout the series; Remy’s allegiance goes to the highest bidder, leading him to be less a lobbyist and more a kind of fixer like Scandal’s Olivia Pope in the first season, and more of a “henchman” with “marching orders” from Raymond Tusk (played by Gerald McRaney) in the second. But Remy, too, loses his footing when the Underwood-Tusk feud puts his loyalty into question and his search for the best “insurance” policy causes Tusk to sever their ties.

**Freddy’s BBQ Joint**

But one of the characters that falls hardest in Frank’s path to the presidency is one that did not have a great deal to begin with. Freddy Hayes (played by Reg E. Cathey) is introduced at the end of the first episode as the owner of a small, run-down barbecue place in a poorer, African-American neighborhood. Freddy’s BBQ Joint serves as Frank’s personal sanctuary, a place to enjoy succulent ribs—a throwback to Frank’s South Carolina roots—while savoring the little victories that pave his way to the White House. In a storyworld of uncertain alliances and political scheming, Frank’s friendship with Freddy develops as his most positive and pure. Freddy’s unadorned storefront and simple values make him a particularly valuable confidant to
Frank: “In a town where everyone's so carefully reinventing themselves,” Frank says in the second episode, “what I like about Freddy is that he doesn't even pretend to change.” Despite their vastly different stations in life, they share mutual respect and candid conversation, giving audiences a look at Frank when he is beyond the Hill’s dirty politics—an inherently good man who cherishes people of principle. Even after Frank becomes Vice President, Freddy never calls him anything other than his first name, preserving a comfortable, apolitical and non-judgemental environment.

Freddy benefits too from having a famous friend, having the opportunity to cater a gala for the Underwoods and cook a meal for the president from Frank’s kitchen. The presence of a Secret Service detail or vice presidential motorcade outside an urban barbecue joint is a particularly powerful image of the nation’s capital city, bridging the white and Black (perhaps powerful and impoverished) elements of Washington. As Frank’s political position rises, Freddy’s BBQ Joint begins to enjoy a special form of celebrity that DC restaurants are seen to experience when a notable political leader visits them, including press coverage, bigger crowds and opportunities for growth. In the ninth episode of the second season—one that the episode’s director Jodie Foster describes as the “personal” and “least political” of the series—Freddy’s story is brought to the foreground to show how Frank’s power plays can ruin anyone’s path to redemption.

As Tommy Devine (played by Albert Jones) details the franchise deal to open a Silver Spring location of Freddy’s BBQ Joint, Freddy proves himself to be acutely aware of the racial politics at play and the humble beginnings associated with his name:

FREDDY: So, what next?
TOMMY: You sign.
FREDDY: And I get my $95,000?
TOMMY: By the end of the week. Just have to wire it from our main account into the LLC, cut a
cashier's check for you. Oh. I want to show you this. It's a mockup of the bottle design. And
we already started on the concept layouts for the Silver Spring location.
FREDDY: Why's that linoleum peeling up?
TOMMY: To make it seem real.
FREDDY: Well, I wanted it to look nicer than this.
TOMMY: We can scratch the peeling linoleum, but we don't want it to look too nice.
FREDDY: You want them white folks to feel like they slummin' it.
TOMMY: No, to have an authentic atmosphere.
FREDDY: And I get to play the nigger.
TOMMY: Look, Freddy, you know how this works. They don't just want the ribs, they want the
experience, but without having to leave the suburbs for it. We're not selling candlelit dinners
here.

The $95,000 Freddy will receive for this commercial, suburban spin-off of his rib joint
enables him to buy a house for his son Darnell and his grandson DeShawn to live in. Their
conversation is tense and unwelcome, colored by the fact that Freddy never visited his son when
he was in jail. “I never had nothing to give you,” Freddy explains to his son, “I didn't have no
money, and you didn't want whatever I had. But we talking about a house. DeShawn deserves to
live better than in a place like this.” Their conversation has clearly struck a chord with Darnell,
as he arrives to Freddy’s BBQ Joint later on prepared to work and help his father manage the
long line of customers—a welcome sight to them both. When Darnell offers Freddy a gun to
protect his new earnings, Freddy sits him down and explains how all of their good fortune could
just as easily vanish if Darnell loses his parole: “We gotta follow the rules.” I do not read
respectability politics or moral grandstanding in Freddy’s exchanges with Darnell, but advice
conveyed by someone who is speaking from experience, having been incarcerated himself, and knowing what this shot at redemption can mean for them.

But Raymond Tusk, eager to hit Frank on a personal level, leaks Freddy’s criminal past to the press, and his chance to make amends soon fall apart. Frank considers putting out a statement supporting Freddy, but is advised against it. Freddy and Darnell are confronted by aggressive photographers following up on the story, and Darnell pulls his gun on one of them, visibly violating his parole. When Frank drops by Freddy’s apartment to let him know he will be distancing himself and will no longer be visiting Freddy’s BBQ Joint, he learns that Freddy is selling his storefront to pay for his son’s bail:

**FREDDY:** The franchise thing, with the sauce. My business partner's pullin' out. Say them white folks down in Silver Spring don't wanna go to no place run by thugs.
**FRANK:** Why do you have to sell yours?
**FREDDY:** Darnell's bail.
**FRANK:** Well, doesn't that guy have to give you a hundred grand, regardless?
**FREDDY:** I ain't getting shit. There's a morality clause in the contract. But he's gonna pay me 45 thou for the storefront. That, with what little I got saved, I can pay that bond.
**FRANK:** You can't sell Freddy's.
**FREDDY:** He's already drawin' up the papers.
**FRANK:** Let me help you with the money.
**FREDDY:** Nah, Frank.
**FRANK:** We'll make it a loan. You can pay me back.
**FREDDY:** Not gonna happen.
**FRANK:** Don't be prideful.
**FREDDY:** Frank.
**FRANK:** Please, let me help.
**FREDDY:** I ain't takin' your guilt money! [pause] When I was bangin', we used to clear 60 Gs a month. I seen guys shot down execution-style. I didn't give a shit. Then I got caught. Darnell was born my first year in. Never saw him once, not even a picture. I can't take back the bad I
done. All I can do is to make my own way, like I been doin'. You understand. It ain't pride, Frank.

FRANK: If you change your mind, you let me know.

FREDDY: You was a good customer, that's it. You ain't gotta pretend to be my friend.

The storyline around Freddy’s BBQ Joint is unique as it speaks to a power dynamic within wider Washington, DC culture: it is a small example of both the beneficial and the disruptive impacts that gentrification can have on historically Black neighborhoods in the District of Columbia, an issue rarely acknowledged by the political drama genre. The collision of the two DC experiences—Frank’s and Freddy’s—shows how a petty feud between the powerful can ruin any chances of the common man’s betterment. This was a noticeable departure from the other case studies in that its commentary on Washington did not treat it solely as a metonym for American politicking, but as a city whose race and class dynamics present their own challenges worth exploring and interpreting through drama.
My analysis of televisual political dramas and the ways they incorporated or avoided themes on racial politics was an interdisciplinary approach that encompasses literary criticism, political analysis and design research that extended far beyond the pages of the script and the actions on the screen. For each case study, I first situated the creators of the programs in their political, social or cultural contexts to get a clearer picture of what was shaping their televisual imagination of race in politics. This context is not just what their politics are according to their public statements, but also a creative context—the people around them, the relationships they have built, the constraints they face and the methods they employ. I then critically explored the storyworlds of the case studies, examining dialogue and relationships between characters to discuss how race informs power dynamics in and around the White House in these narratives. I used various characters’ perspectives and confrontations when it comes to race, as established explicitly through dialogue or implicitly through character positioning, to understand the political statements made by the programs on America’s race relations. Finally, I explored ways in which the changing television viewing experience, evolving through innovations in television production and distribution methods, could impact audience relationships with the political perspectives they encounter on-screen. This analysis was expanded and translated through process of critical making through graphic design, in which patterns were identified and explored visually.

Throughout my analysis of The West Wing, 24, Scandal and House of Cards, some of the most popular and successful programs of the televisual political drama genre, I was able to apply
a visual model I had created to join together four nodes in the televisual storytelling process, each representing a different set of communicators:

a) **the creators**—or the writers, directors, producers, showrunners, and others responsible for developing the content of the program;

b) **the characters**—both the major and minor players in the story that typically represent a political influencer in their fictionalized Washington;

c) **the public**—including the viewers who watch the program and those who are civically engaged through voting or other forms of particular participation, two groups which may overlap;

d) **the political influencers**—meaning the politicians, elected officials, military personnel and other staffers who embody government decision-making.

As I iterated on the model and developed the model further, I found that the actors and actresses in the programs play their own significant role in shaping their characters, communicating with audiences and even imbuing their fictional figures with sense of real-life political influence (as seen in Dennis Haysbert’s self-reflection on his fictional alterego President David Palmer). Where possible, I added other nodes to incorporate other potential influencers with the goal of “stressing” the model and upsetting its graphic balance—an exercise in critical making. I ultimately viewed these additional nodes as subordinate to the four major nodes in the model. Building loosely off of insights in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s model (2000) of creative networks, I then positioned them within the four settings where the major nodes existed, respectively:

a) **the studio**—referring more broadly to where the story is developed and performed;

b) **the storyworld**—or the fictional DC that constitutes the universe of the characters;
c) **the interface**—meaning the site or device where an audience member is watching the program;

d) **the government**—the real-life epicenter of American politics and governance.

Finally, I sought to illustrate the pathways of communication and information that existed between the nodes in the model, using solid lines to indicate direct or intentional communication and dashed lines to indicate feedback. To continue the practice of critical making, I “stressed” the model further by using the thickness of the lines to indicate relative strength or weakness of the feedback, as well as adding directionality to the lines.

Through additions and changes to the model in order to tailor each iteration to its case study, I found certain consistent patterns that I developed into a summative model (Fig. 7). The model ultimately suggests that the creative process behind televisual political dramas tends to map to an interconnected network of communication.

In each quadrant of the summative model there are relationships to unpack and explore further. In the top-right corner (creators and political influencers), the case studies show relationships that go beyond the oft-cited friendship of Hollywood and Washington for campaign
contributions: Eli Attie, Joel Surnow, Shonda Rhimes and Beau Willimon each had close ties to the government figures whose politics they sought to incorporate into their stories. A future research could involve interviews with the creators within this genre to speak directly to the relationships that influence their development of characters, particularly racially diverse characters.

As seen in the case studies, television actors and creators often expressed their belief that characters in these programs had a considerable impact on shaping progressive expectations regarding race and the White House, specifically around the first non-white president. These pronouncements were far more frequent during the post-racial candidacy of Barack Obama, in which the creators drew selective parallels to show their own post-racial narratives as somehow prophetic. This myth of pop culture predestination (Vaughn, 2010) unravels, however, when one compares the reality of the race issues that have been activated during the Obama presidency. The election of President Barack Obama as context anchoring the analysis of these dramas’ real-world influence is, undoubtedly, problematic: the only African-American president’s short time in office represents a very specific historical moment that makes fresh reactions to his presidency—journalistic, cinematic, or otherwise—as much about the individual man as they are about broader identity issues. Thus, while comparisons between real-world political events and their fictional harbingers were of interest throughout the study, assessing President Obama’s policies primarily in relation to those of his minority counterparts on television would be reductive and unproductive. Instead, the focus of the study was on evaluating how television has imagined this significant historical moment—the election of a non-white American president—and how that compares to the reality of American race relations in following Obama’s 2008 election.
In the bottom-left corner (characters and viewers), the case studies discussed how audiences were able to connect with fictional politicos to a greater degree than with the real-life political figures that inspired them. This evolving sense of kinship that viewers develop with fictional characters, what I identified as parasocial interaction, was bolstered by these programs’ verisimilitude and realism, often allowing fictional depictions of the White House to create shape public imaginations of real-life White House interactions that are usually hidden from public view. This model lays the groundwork for further exploration of how parasocial interaction influences political socialization, a question that would benefit from audience studies.

New forms of production, distribution and digital engagement impact the television viewing experience, as I discussed through the “ticking time-bomb” format of 24, the Twitter-infused Scandal viewing experience, and the Netflix-model of House of Cards. Digital media interfaces can individualize the viewing experience, as viewing devices get smaller and on-demand availability of episodes increases; technological advances can also facilitate community around the viewing experience by allowing far-reaching online conversations around the episodes that collectively process the storylines in real-time. Over time, changes can increase the levels of parasocial interaction audiences have with fictional political characters and, by extension, may strengthen their ability to communicate political messages. An audience study that looked into digital media behavior related to television viewing would provide greater clarity on the extent to which online engagement or personalized interfaces influence parasocial interaction.

In the top-right corner (creators and characters), the case studies looked at how racial diversity in cast composition illustrated how political influence was distributed and allocated among characters of color. A recurring trope among minority characters in these case studies is
an unelected and advisory role to prominent political decision-makers. From Charlie Young in *The West Wing* to Olivia Pope in *Scandal* to Remy Danton in *House of Cards*, all young, smart and talented advisors, the characters nonetheless lack direct political influence and instead shape the political developments in the stories through indirect, soft forms of influence. By avoiding giving these major non-white characters in the White House an elected official’s role, these programs avoid commentary on how race issues and personal reflections on race can inform political decision-making.

When the case studies do present characters that are elected officials of color—with the exception of 24’s President Palmer—their racial constituencies (i.e. the Congressional Black Caucus, Latino voting blocs) are often primarily concerned with maximizing their self-interest, inherently uninterested or even disloyal to American national unity. This is particularly evident in *The West Wing* and *House of Cards*, where elected officials of color The narratives tend to reward the elected officials like Palmer who can transcend concerns about race to talk about the issues that affect all Americans, reflecting once again a strong preference for post-racial storytelling in the genre. In this way, these programs advance a message that serving as part of or close to the White House is ultimately the highest calling of American duty and service, while representing the issues related the character’s own race is significantly lower priority. As seen in the example of Secretary O’Leary in *The West Wing*, these depictions reinforce the dominant narrative of colorblindness and post-racialism that pit identity politics against the larger American project and cast efforts to discuss race as divisive and impractical.

The case studies also incorporate another dominant narrative in race discussion on respectability politics to varying degrees, where *The West Wing* and *24* embrace this perspective while *Scandal* and *House of Cards* have moved away from it: the characters of Charlie Young
and David Palmer are quintessential embodiments of morality and work ethic to show that they have earned their positions in the White House, while Olivia Pope and Freddy Hayes are both flawed and show how virtuous behavior does not necessarily forge a pathway to advancement.

In terms of structural and systemic perspectives of America’s race issues, the genre appears to be just grazing the surface of these issues using codes and metaphors. The confrontation staged in *House of Cards* between Freddy’s Washington and Frank’s Washington discusses, however briefly, the race dynamics within the city itself and the double-standards applied to Black criminality. The reluctance of *Scandal* in particular to have its diverse array of characters speak directly to race issues—while still being vocal about gender, sexual orientation and other forms of identity politics—suggests that the genre is still searching for the right words to address race issues and their structural components.

But this may change, as weekly dramas like *Scandal* tend to respond and adapt to the issues at the forefront of national dialogue to remain relevant to viewers and in touch with the cultural zeitgeist. Audiences may not see Olivia Pope’s character take a direct stance on systemic racial discrimination, but she may be put in a position to advise President Fitzgerald Grant on healing the country when violent interactions between Black youth and law enforcement exacerbate racial tensions. It is unclear whether *Scandal* creator Shonda Rhimes would risk political controversy in sharing her perspective on the high-profile incidents that have taken place this fall through her characters. As the subsequent, on-going national conversation around race and society continues to gain momentum, televisual political dramas can ill-afford to ignore race issues while still discussing the many other political issues they typically confront on-screen: the genre would miss out on an important narrative challenge and opportunity, and could lose relevance to the audiences they have drawn in with their storytelling.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Hartsell, C. (2012, June 4). Obama Meets Key & Peele, Wants His Own Anger Translator 
Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/04/obama-meets-impersonators-key-and-peele_n_1568849.html


