

# The Hell, the High Water, and the Funk of It All: Sounding Power in Scandal

**Regina N. Bradley**

Blog post published February 16, 2015 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/qc89p-v0b22>

## Abstract

**Editor's Note:** Here's installment #3 of *Sounding Out!* 's blog forum on gender and voice! Last week I talked about what it meant to have people call me, a woman of color, "loud." The week before that we hosted **Christine Ehrick** 's selections from her forthcoming book;

## Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Black Studies, Gender, Gendered Voices Forum

## Recommended citation

Bradley, R. N. (2015, February 16). The Hell, the High Water, and the Funk of It All: Sounding Power in Scandal. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/qc89p-v0b22>

## Copyright

Copyright © Regina N. Bradley 2015. Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



**Editor's Note:** Here's installment #3 of *Sounding Out!*'s blog forum on gender and voice! Last week [I talked](#) about what it meant to have people call me, a woman of color, "loud." The week before that we hosted [Christine Ehrick's selections](#) from her forthcoming book; she introduced us to the idea of the gendered soundscape, which she uses in her analysis on women's radio speech from the 1930s to the 1950s. In the next few weeks we'll have **A.O. Roberts** with synthesized voices and gender, **Art Blake** with his reflections on how his experience shifting his voice from feminine to masculine as a transgender man intersects with his work on John Cage, and lastly **Robin James** with an analysis of how ideas of what women should sound like have roots in Greek philosophy.

This week regular writer **Regina Bradley** puts the soundtrack of *Scandal* in conversation with the agency of the show's protagonist, a black woman in manages crises for a living. So, lean in and close your eyes, but keep your ears open for any spies creeping in. –**Liana M. Silva, Managing Editor**

---

**9:00 pm (Eastern).** The quick shutter of an invisible camera calls the attention of the viewers to *Scandal*. The clicking re-emphasizes the show's title, bringing to mind paparazzi and their capturing of scandalous behavior. The shuttering also signifies the literal and sonic fast paced timing of Shonda Rhimes' most popular ABC prime time show: quickened plots, fast talks, and blink-and-you'll-miss-something-important visual details. *Scandal*'s central character, Washington D.C. crisis manager Olivia Pope (portrayed by Kerry Washington), is known mostly for her sharp professional outfits and no-nonsense approach to work. In Olivia, Rhimes has created a black female character that is perfectly flawed, a symbol of both the potential power and victimization of black women. Olivia Pope is neither just the savior nor is she solely a victim.



*Scandal* evokes intense debate about race and power because of its visual politics, but rarely is *Scandal*'s scoring prominent in those discussions. The soundtrack acts as an indicator of contemporary black women's agency in popular culture. [As both Rhimes and Scandal music director Alexandra Patsavas reveal, Scandal's 'vintage' soundtrack](#)

is an opportunity to buoy the plot and add a unique alternative perspective to the action taking place on the show. The soundtrack's nods to yesteryear artists – including Stevie Wonder, The Ohio Players, The O'Jays, Sam Cooke, Earth, Wind, and Fire, and Nina Simone sonically narrate additional layers of agency and identity on the show. Are these tracks giving Olivia a voice? What does *Scandal's* scoring suggest about race, place, and power scripts for black women in contemporary popular culture?



*"Inauguration Day – White House" by Flickr user Justin Brown, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0*

*Scandal* takes place in Washington D.C., a location full of physical and sonic significance in national lore and the black popular imagination. In a national narrative D.C. is the epicenter of political agency, power, and the visibility of whiteness as a form of power. It is America's city. Yet D.C. in the black imagination is the Chocolate City, a space that serves as a living archive of black folks' attempts to intervene into a national narrative that would rather overlook the contributions of black bodies and culture. Washington, D.C. is the home of the [Moorland-Springarn Research Center](#) and multiple black cultural archives, [Howard University and its place as the black mecca of Black Greek Letter Organizations](#), [GoGo Music](#), and (embattled) social-political policies and endeavors for black people. It is a site of black identity that goes much farther than the place where everyone saw how a certain somebody had an American Dream. On the other hand, [the increasing gentrification of the city raises questions of whether or not the nickname "Chocolate City" is applicable](#). Thus, Washington, D.C. exists at the crux of the romanticization of Americanness as a form of worldly power and the reality that (white) Americanness does not include all Americans.



Yet Washington D.C. as a site of complex and rich black experiences does not alone buoy *Scandal's* use of Washington, D.C. as a site where a black woman "handles" the hustle and bustle of American power and its upheaval. This type of work takes place in the

scoring, particularly because the show is not culturally recognizable as a “black show.” Its inherent blackness is sonic, using black music to revisit tropes of power and racial politics.

One possible and albeit slightly heavy handed approach for thinking through *Scandal*’s leaning on funk and soul music is to point out how the show uses black cultural forms to invoke power. For example, soul songs like Otis Redding’s “[Mr. Pitiful](#),” Edwin Starr’s “[War](#),” and Sly and the Family Stone’s “[Everyday People](#)” are not only used to accentuate the action in a scene but the possibility of Olivia as a power figure. The use of black men’s voices as they yell, scream, and moan sonically allude to power as a masculine concept. Yet Olivia’s connection to these songs signifies her potential to wield power in unorthodox ways not associated with black women. For example, the crescendo of music before Olivia delivers a demand to her team sets up her agency as a political figure. Her blackness is amplified and earmarked by the music. This pairing amplifies the question of race and power in a useful way. The dominantly black musical script offers the critique and engagement with Olivia Pope’s blackness that many viewers and critics complain are lacking. (See [the brilliant synopsis](#) presented by Dr. Jessica Marie Johnson about Shonda Rhimes’ portrayal of black women and popular culture that [took place at Duke University](#) last month.)

*Scandal* serves vintage musical scoring as a double entendre: the sound of black music from previous eras evokes ‘vintage’ scripts of race, gender, and power from that era that seep into this present moment. *Scandal*’s use of soul, funk, and disco sonically allude to larger questions lingering from the Civil Rights Movement: integration as an equalizer of power and privilege, the hypermasculinity of the Civil Rights Era, its cultural producers, and the immediate aftermath of these scripts on (black) American society in the late 1960s and 1970s. We frequently annotate black agency through the men creating (singing?) the music. This is equally true for the black cultural productions of the era, as they aesthetically supplemented the understanding that black folks mattering connected to the uplift and healthy presence of black men. Even with soul and funk music, which stand as antithetical responses to the problematic expectations of classist respectability politics, black women’s agency was associated with the sexual, emotional, or physical agency of black men.

The blackness and “maleness” of the funk and soul used in *Scandal*’s score subverts the power that Olivia Pope exerts in her dealings with her clients, her lovers, and team. For example, in season two Olivia and President Fitz’s sex tape is threatened to be leaked to the public. It is important to note that the tape is an audio tape, suggestively alluding the absence of physical and visual rhetoric to address the interracial relationship. As Olivia gives the word to leak the sex tape, The Ohio Players’ track “Love Rollercoaster” begins to play. It sonically stabilizes Olivia’s decision to “leak” her sexuality as a power move while also leaving room to question the deeper implications of how the viewer navigates her blackness and womanhood using physical, aural, and cultural markers of sexuality. Using male funk and soul artists allows Pope to ‘codeswitch’ between cultural scripts of power as masculine and womanhood as opposite power. It amplifies her authority and agency while signifying that her physical appearance and voice may not have the ability to confer her worth to the audience.

<https://youtu.be/etebeZDt7Eo>

This tug-and-pull of power and agency is most amplified in Olivia Pope's dealings with her father Rowan Pope, played by Joe Morton (who plays the HELL out of this role, by the way). Rowan Pope is a literal and figurative double agent: He is Elijah Pope, a curator of antiquities at the Smithsonian, and Rowan Pope, head of the top secret and lethal U.S. organization called B613. His fragmented life speaks to the constant negotiation of "safe" black masculinity. He also embodies the anxieties about black men as violent and bloodthirsty. Rowan/Elijah encapsulates all of the swagger and vitriol associated with conceptualizations of black power and black men from the Black Liberation Era. He is cold and calculating, and he complicates the rhetoric of racial uplift and expected from the Civil Rights/Black Power movements. He speaks in hardened, hushed tones with conviction, while snarling his words with spite for white authority. Not to mention, his is the character that brings up race overtly in the show.

This balance between hushed tones and snarled words comes through in Rowan's early interaction with Olivia during *Scandal's* season three premiere. Olivia, on the run because her name is leaked as the President's mistress, is recovered by her father and told to flee the country. Rowan is not a doting and concerned father in this scene. Rather, he is disappointed by her lack of prowess and failure to aspire to higher forms of power and authority than "first lady." Rowan recognizes there is no power in being the wife of the President, especially as a black woman, and he criticizes her for not following the first rule of black folks' survival: "You need to be twice as good to get half of what they have." "They" is a collective noun for white folks, often spoken behind closed doors as a means to inspire young black folks to do better. Rowan demands she state out loud what they need to be twice of. Olivia's voice cracks and is breathless as she whispers "twice as good to get half of what they have." Rowan exaggerates a "yes" and dismisses Olivia as "mediocre." It is a painful and powerful scene where multiple dichotomies take place: a father scolding his daughter, a black man undermining black women's agency, and the fear/anxiety about black women's sexuality as a sign of weakness and lacking privilege. The wavering volume of Olivia's voice signifies her quickly plummeting ability to voice her power. Olivia's loss of words amplifies Rowan's own authority, embodied in his voice when he adamantly declares "I am the hell *and* the high water!" No soundtrack can save her here.



<https://youtu.be/zgpq2Rqjg4c>

However, Rowan does have human moments, reaching out to his estranged daughter Olivia with wine and music, specifically Stevie Wonder. Her record collection is filled with Stevie Wonder. It is important that she has a *record* collection instead of a collection of CDs or playlist. Not only does this detail speak to the trope of “vintage” that runs through the show but also gives credence to how Olivia establishes her power. Her major moments are annotated by Stevie Wonder: when her name is leaked “Higher Ground” plays in the background. When she is kidnapped at the end of the episode for past December’s Winter finale “Don’t You Worry Bout a Thing” takes center stage. Again, the sounds of a man, her father in this instance, are the soundtrack to her work. The choice of music subverts the gender balance of power. Through male artists, the show gives Olivia her authority.

The most prominent sonic signifier is the instrumental accompaniment from the artist The Album Leaf titled “The Light.” Also known as Olivia and President Fitz’s “song,” the track plays each time the two characters interact and share intimacy (physical and otherwise).



[https://youtu.be/j5m-5jP\\_R\\_0](https://youtu.be/j5m-5jP_R_0)

Notes from what sounds like an electric piano playing a scale are short and sweet to the ear. The track lends its innocence and vulnerability to Olivia and Fitz’s affair and offers a possibility that their love for each other can be read as star-crossed instead of in bad taste.

Scott Poulson-Bryant offered an intriguing read on his Facebook page on “The Light” as an allusion to the Civil Rights’ theme song “[We Shall Overcome](#).” This reading of “The Light” as the context to Olivia and Fitz’s relationship makes room to complicate how Olivia’s agency as a black woman is historically and politically bound to women before—she alludes to her similarity to Sally Hemmings in one episode. Olivia’s Sally Hemmings reference uses Hemmings as the genesis point for understanding the complexity of Olivia’s sexual encounters as well as how to navigate black women’s sexual agency – and pleasure – in popular spaces. Sally Hemmings’ relationship to President Thomas Jefferson lends historical credence to Olivia and Fitz’s *Scandal* but also signifies the gray area of historical memory, cultural expectations, and consent as a form of power for

African American women. “The Light” instrumental is not only a sonic accompaniment of Olivia as she relates to Fitz but her own struggles to recognize and balance her public and personal agency.

The soundtrack of *Scandal* gives a voice to not just Olivia’s authority in a place where race and power are intertwined but also a voice on national television to how whiteness and political power operate. *Scandal*’s controversial protagonist/anti-hero Olivia Pope is often central to recent discussions of [race](#), [gender](#), and [popular culture](#). But the soundtrack to the show asks viewers to not just watch closely but also listen closely. Tune out and you might miss something.

—

[Regina Bradley](#) recently completed her PhD at Florida State University in African American Literature. Her dissertation is titled “Race to Post: White Hegemonic Capitalism and Black Empowerment in 21st Century Black Popular Culture and Literature.” She is a regular writer for Sounding Out!

—



**REWIND!...If you liked this post, you may also dig:**

**[SO! Reads: Shana Redmond’s Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora](#)—Ashon Crawley**

**[Freedom Back: Sounding Black Feminist History, Courtesy the Artists](#)—Tavia Nyong’o**

**[They Do Not All Sound Alike: Sampling Kathleen Cleaver, Assata Shakur, and Angela Davis](#)—Tara Betts**