FEATURES

Why don't women of color get to be mentally ill on TV?

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The golden age of television has created dynamic and unflinching portrayals of women with mental illness. We praise shows as different as the hilarious yet poignant *You're The Worst*, the noir-tinged *Jessica Jones*, the surreal *Lady Dynamite*, and the breezy musical comedy *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* for the care they put into crafting female leads living with mental illness. But a closer look at these series and others reveals that as they find interiority in their white female leads, television is unwilling or forgetting to do so for women of color. Nowadays, white women are allowed to be messy and flawed, yet respected as they struggle with but are not wholly defined by mental illness.

In a world where *Orange Is the New Black*'s Crazy Eyes is considered an important step forward and *Scandal*'s Olivia Pope manages to downplay her post-traumatic stress week after week, where is this mental health sea change for women of color? Part of this is a byproduct of the dismal number of women of color behind the scenes in television even as there is a noticeable uptick in diversity in front of the camera. But perhaps more importantly, the lack of well-rounded portrayals is a direct reflection of American culture itself.

My quest for more thoughtful representation is deeply personal. My adolescence is marked by mental hospital visits, medication changes and more breakdowns than I care to count. In my family, my struggles became a disease without any name, even as I was diagnosed with bipolar type II. I could seek care from professionals but not from the people in my life. This created an atmosphere of shame and loneliness that I've heard echoed from other black and Latina women online. So pop culture became a salve.

But the history of film and television provides few examples of women of color coping with mental illness that acknowledges the full scope of their humanity. The lack of diversity on-screen is a reflection of how mental illness is stigmatized and rarely spoken about in communities of color, how mental health professionals are distrusted, and how disorders often go untreated. But this isn't only a problem for Afro-Latinas like myself.

Suicide rates among black children are on the rise. Mixed-race people are at greater risk of suffering from mental health issues and receiving inadequate care. Only 20% of Latinos with symptoms of psychological problems actually talk to a doctor about their concerns. Even with the statistics available about black, Latino, Asian, and Native Americans with mental illness it's important to remember how very often people from these communities rarely seek help.

For white female characters to stand out in the crowded television landscape of 2016, they require a degree of emotional messiness and even anti-hero qualities. But for female characters of color, the opposite is true; they're burdened with a sense of respectability politics. They have to be nearly invincible, with perfect jobs and manicured lives, reflecting how in real life women of color are held to higher standards. See: Olivia Pope.

The most recent season of *Scandal* shows Olivia refusing to face the emotional aftermath of being kidnapped, tortured, and nearly sold at auction. She self-medicates with copious amounts of red wine, buries herself in her work, and barely speaks of how all this affects her, even with her closest friends. This could have been the moment for *Scandal* to delve into how 60% percent of black people see depression as a weakness and only 7% of black women suffering from depression seek treatment.

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But the show lacks the ability for such storytelling. Instead *Scandal* primarily treats Olivia's post-traumatic stress as a plot point. All drama, no emotional resonance. That is, until the late season five episode "Thwack!"—the title alone should tell you how badly *Scandal* mishandles the storyline. The writers treat Olivia's mental issues with all the grace of a sledgehammer. We see Olivia not only plagued by flashbacks but also erupt in a violent rage beating the man responsible for her kidnapping with a metal chair in a gruesome scene. It relies on the heinous stereotype that all mentally ill people are inherently violent. Here, mental illness is just another sensationalist topic to be mined for melodrama.

It should be noted that the other Shondaland staple, *Grey's Anatomy*, has at times had decent nods to black women handling post-traumatic stress and anxiety (Dr. Miranda Bailey and Dr. Maggie Pierce, respectively). But much of that may be due to the show being set in a hospital where the characters would be more receptive to intervention. So have there been any examples of women of color on television with mental illness done right? Look no further than *Being Mary Jane*, the BET show starring Gabrielle Union, which has proven to be a thoughtful portrait on how black women handle trauma.

Being Mary Jane, which had previously tackled mental illness in smaller storylines, finds its most powerful portrayal in the season three episode "Sparrow," when Mary Jane's childhood friend Lisa Hudson (Latarsha Rose) commits suicide. *Being Mary Jane* doesn't shy away from how silence and misinformation in the black community added to Lisa's inability to cope with her illness.

The episode shows Lisa preparing to kill herself, making almost a ritual out of it —staring at herself naked in the mirror, carefully putting on a beautiful outfit. I felt like I was seeing the same rituals and mannerisms I had imbued in my own previous suicide attempts on television for the first time. *Being Mary Jane* avoids sensationalism by scripting multiple conversations with all black or Latino characters to openly discuss their varied beliefs on mental illness, suicide, and medication. In one episode, *Being Mary Jane* tackles how black women deal with loss and depression with more insight than almost anything else I've seen on television in the last decade. But Lisa can't stand in for every black experience.

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Of course, you can't discuss mental illness on TV without also bringing in Suzanne "Crazy Eyes" Warren, the Shakespeare-quoting loner with severe-yet-undefined psychological problems. Throughout the four seasons, Suzanne is taken advantage of, ignored, belittled, and worst of all, framed as a joke. (Any success in the storyline can be traced back to two-time Emmy winner Uzo Aduba's assured performance.) The writing on the show often pivots between overly comedic representations of mental illness or exploitative schlock. The show tries to comment on the ways Suzanne is manipulated because of her fragility and childlike nature, but the writers tellingly never give Suzanne a diagnosis, which lets the writers have free reign to pick and choose the ways her mental illness manifests.

The writers end up embodying the same issues of minimizing the experiences of mentally ill people of color that they set out to critique with her character. *Orange is the New Black* also does nothing to comment on how race and mental illness shapes Suzanne's ability to find proper care, particularly within the penal system. It shouldn't be surprising, then, to learn that the series has no black writers on its staff.

Typically, women of color on TV are relegated to helping others deal with these issues. Both *UnREAL* and *Mr. Robot* feature women of color as therapists. Samira Wiley from *Orange is the New Black* will be portraying Gretchen's therapist on the upcoming season of *You're the Worst*. If seeing women of color struggle with mental illness on television wasn't such a rarity, having these women (and it's always women) as therapists wouldn't be so unnerving. But as it stands, television is sending the message that women of color are good for handling the emotional labor of primarily white characters but don't deserve any care of their own.

One of the more frustrating examples of this is Claire Temple, the ER nurse played by Rosario Dawson on Marvel's Netflix shows *Daredevil* and *Jessica Jones*. Claire unwittingly finds herself bandaging up and providing emotional support for superpowered vigilantes populating New York. Given her career as an ER nurse, this isn't a problem by itself, but it often leads her into danger. During the first season of *Daredevil*, she's kidnapped and tortured by Russian mobsters trying to discover Daredevil's true identity. The show doesn't unpack what it means for an Afro-Latina to put her life on the line to help a white superhero. The most we get is a fleeting moment when she looks at her wounds in the mirror.

On the other hand, the show takes considerable pains in exploring the ways similar traumas affect the mental state of the white lead, Karen Paige (Deborah Ann Woll). This creates a sharp divide in the show's message about whose pain truly matters.

This continues on *Jessica Jones*, a show so interested in how sexual trauma, post-traumatic stress, and depression affect women that its villain is the embodiment of toxic masculinity. Like in *Daredevil*, Claire is again primarily used for emotional and physical labor at the behest of white characters (as well as a way to bridge the two universes). We don't need to see Claire on either show pop some Lexapro whenever she appears, but taking the time to delve into what these traumas mean to her go a long way to combat the narrow, frankly racist perspectives of those shows. Looking at Claire I am reminded of messages I've heard since my early teens in regards to my own struggles: Keep my problems to myself and show no weakness. Have characters like Claire Temple and Olivia Pope heard the same? Why don't we get to hear women of color talk about their pain openly without being defined by it like their white counterparts?

It's not that every woman of color needs to have a great therapist and be on a dedicated path of recovery. That wouldn't be realistic, and it doesn't make for great television. What we need for women of color is the same thing as their white counterparts: characters with a variety of experiences with mental illness. Imagine the impact of seeing many women of color characters dealing with diagnosed disorders that don't define them. Imagine how that chips away at the lie that the women of these communities must be endlessly strong and suffer in silence. This isn't just a good social move; it opens a variety of new stories for creators to delve into.

But the mental health sea change for women of color won't happen unless these showrunners and creators are willing to look at the culture of silence they feed into and acknowledge the humanity of these characters, not just the emotional labor they can provide. Until then, we should question how groundbreaking these shows really are when they continue to feed into the same culture they're trying to dismantle.

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