

Policing and race

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [June 10, 2015](#) issue



PROFILING: Lamorne Morris, who plays Winston Bishop on *New Girl*, tackles the issue of police brutality. Photo by Ray Mickshaw. © 2015 Fox Broadcasting COMPANY. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

It isn't easy for network television to be prophetic. The medium demands that advertisements for deodorant, cars, cleaning products, and beer punctuate the narrative at regular intervals. But at a moment when the national conversation about race and police violence is intensifying, two network television shows have stepped into the discussion. Although these shows are not ordinarily "about" race and even avoid it at times, they've each raised in their own way the question about the relationship between policing and race.

In the ABC political drama *Scandal*, Kerry Washington plays Olivia Pope, a high-powered "fixer" who works to save the reputations of wealthy or powerful clients when sexual or moral scandals get in their way. Although Olivia's clients tend to be unsavory, the series presents Olivia and her colleagues as moral heroes. They're self-consciously the good guys even though they torture, lie, destroy evidence, and make threats. They justify their bad-guy actions as necessary to their work as "gladiators in suits" fighting for what's right.

In a recent episode Olivia and her team are called in to consult with the police after a white officer shoots and kills a black teenager. In one scene, the dead boy's grandfather stands over his grandson's body with a shotgun, threatening the police and demanding answers. Olivia convinces the police not to shoot the grieving man,

since shooting him would do additional damage to the reputation of the police.

The story allows no moral ambiguity—the dead boy is innocent, and the police officer is a racist, lying murderer. This fits the good guys/bad buys dichotomy that keeps fans rooting for Olivia and her team. Commercial television doesn't have room for the moral complexity of a world in which we are sinners, every one, and in which justice can't require absolute innocence because none of us is innocent.

As a black woman, Olivia is able to stand in the gap between the people and the authorities in a way that bears some similarities to what Baltimore mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake and state's attorney Marilyn Mosby are trying to do. While the plot is melodramatic, the episode's depiction of race is a radical departure from the norm.

The quirky Fox comedy *New Girl* has been quietly smashing racial conventions by featuring two complex black characters in an ensemble cast. In a recent episode, one of those characters, Winston Bishop (played by Lamorne Morris, who also cowrote the episode), summons the courage to talk to a pretty woman he meets in a restaurant. When the woman invites Winston to join her at a rally protesting police violence, he doesn't tell her that he's a police officer. Winston's efforts to avoid an increasingly awkward situation are funny: when some uniformed officers greet him in the restaurant, he tells the woman that they're strippers dressed as police officers.

Later Winston has a conversation with his friend Nick about race. "I love you," he says, "but you are white. I'm black. I understand where she's coming from. When I was a kid we used to run from the police. Even if we did nothing wrong, it was just out of habit." This awkward moment, acknowledging difference, spotlights what the characters usually ignore. Winston tries to articulate the complexity of his situation. The episode highlights something that gets lost in our current conversations about race and police: Winston is a police officer. While there is a race gap that exists between police officers and the people they serve, the lines between black police and black civilians are not as easily drawn.

Both of these episodes are inadequate. *Scandal* falls flat in its desperate earnestness and improbable resolution, while *New Girl*, as a comedy, can only dance around the seriousness of the conversation. But both shows chose not to ignore a moment of national reckoning. Witnesses don't have to be perfect in order to matter.