Lessons from Litchfield: *Orange Is the New Black* as Netflix Feminist Intersectional Pedagogy

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"Sometimes I think this whole world/ Is one big prison yard/ Some of us are prisoners/ The rest of us are guards" - Bob Dylan

"I am here because I am no different from anybody else in here. I made bad choices. I committed a crime and being in here is no one's fault but my own" ("WAC Pac" 00:6:16-00:7:01); *Orange Is the New Black's* protagonist Piper Chapman says this to her mother when she visits Piper for the first time at Litchfield Penitentiary. White, middle-class privilege is made visible through Piper and used as a comedic narrative vehicle to critique, as bell hooks would put it, the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy that structures the prison-industrial-complex (PIC). *Orange Is the New Black* (*OITNB*) was one of Netflix's first original content productions to stream exclusively on the platform. The massively popular and sometimes contentious depictions of incarcerated women in the series do important cultural work by subverting the mainstream popular culture depictions of women in prison. Through hyper-visible and acerbically comic representation of white privilege, series creator Jenji Kohan employs a complex flashback structure to represent marginalized women often invisible in popular culture: women of color, poor and working-class women, queer women, older women, and women with disabilities.

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Piper's well-intentioned ownership of her situation when describing her experience of incarceration to her mother reveals a gaping omission: Piper is also the most privileged character we encounter at Litchfield. *Orange Is the New Black* is an imperfect show that makes large strides in rendering visible the faces of women bound up in mass incarceration. The series is also directly connected to the increasing visibility of the trans rights movement through the character of Sophia (played by activist Laverne Cox).[1] The word trans is used throughout this article because the character of Sophia, and the actress and activist Laverne Cox who plays her, do important work in popular culture for advancing visibility and rights for folks who identify as trans. We use the term trans throughout this article to addresses the unique political fight that trans inmates, particularly women of color, continue to face every day within popular discourses of feminism, popular culture, and the prison-industrial complex (PIC). Through Piper's white privilege and bleakly comic interactions with the realities of racialization in the PIC, the text of *OITNB,* albeit in a limited way, works to subvert popular post-racial discourses popularized during the Obama presidency.

This article suggests that *OITNB* challenges post-racial discourses, particularly as they intersect with debates around the PIC and representations of prison in the media. While it is tempting to dismiss *OITNB* based on previous representations of women in prison, in doing so, viewers may miss how the series repurposes many of the clichéd tropes of the women-in-prison (WIP) genre. Namely, the narrative use of white privilege in the series and its innovative use of flashback and point-of-view shots serves as feminist intersectional pedagogy for a mass Netflix audience (Crenshaw; hooks). *Orange Is the New Black* employs white privilege as a comic and pedagogical strategy rendering white privilege visible and uses mise-en-scene and flashbacks to represent the human stories of individual women navigating interlocking oppressions that lead to their conflicts with the law. Finally, toward the end of the article, the dialogue unfolding between academic and public feminisms initiated by and through the series is examined to show how this flawed yet productive text offers a mainstream platform for broader social activism. Moments like the exchange above between Piper and her mother reveal the self-

[1] The word trans can be claimed by a diversity of folks with nuanced identities. For example, trans can include genderqueer, non-gender, third gender, two-spirit and more. We use the word trans in this text when referring to the character Sophia and the actress Laverne Cox because both Kohan and Cox center trans rights in public discourses around the show. We resist any discourse that would purport one prescriptive system of trans identity (Clements).

reflexive use of white, middle-class privilege mobilized through comedic strategies in the show to critique the dynamics of race and class oppression embodied in Litchfield.

Many scholars and critics have swiftly and rightly problematized the insidious elements of the show, such as the clichéd ethnic and racial tropes that it often reproduces. This article provides a qualitative textual analysis of *OITNB* through an intersectional feminist media lens. It draws on textual analysis to conduct a discourse analysis of the larger cultural conversation around the criminalization of women of color of which the series is one part. This text examines significant moments from the first four seasons of the popular series when public discourse around the show — and its engagement with mass incarceration — was at its peak. In this article we apply an intersectional feminist media lens to the textual analysis of sequences from *OITNB* to demonstrate how the series subverts the WIP genre. This textual analysis situates the series within a larger cultural conversation about the racialized, classed, and gendered dimensions of the prison-industrial complex.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Intersectional Feminism. Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's article, *Mapping the Margins,* in which she coined the term intersectionality, signaled the formal introduction of intersectionality to academic feminism. Crenshaw, along with Collins and hooks, developed the theory from black feminisms. Intersectionality is a crucial addition or corrective to second-wave feminism. Intersectional theorists hold that gender is not the primary structuring principle of women's lived experience. Instead, gender is one identity factor that intersects with other categories of social location such as racialization and class producing asymmetrical impacts of structural oppression on individuals. Crenshaw's original paper included dozens of cases detailing how black and immigrant women's experiences continue to be ignored by both feminism and the anti-racist movement. For example, Crenshaw examines the complexities that non-English speaking women, women of color, and immigrant women face while trying to access rape crisis and shelter services.

Applying an intersectional lens to a text means that readers must confront how different prejudices are connected and inform each other. As Laura Bates argues, intersectionality is crucial to contemporary feminism as it is a tool that allows people to examine how discriminatory practices such as homophobia, transphobia,

ageism, and ableism stem from the same cause (293). People who face prejudices such as racism and homophobia are experiencing the impacts of being considered "Other" from the dominant position. Just as sexism partly springs from placing men as the norm from which women deviate (Bates 294), racialized folks, sexual minorities, or those living with a disability face being considered an "Other," who deviates from normative identities.

News anchors and talk show hosts in the United States mass media often mobilize the term "post-racial" to assess the "measure of progress in the Obama Era" (Coates para 1). The examples of public pedagogy from *OITNB* analyzed herein exist alongside other contemporary art practices that critique post-racism. *Orange Is the New Black* represents a critical approach to empty notions of "post-racial" equality and, we argue, draws mass audience attention to the raced, gendered, and classed inequalities of the PIC. Attending to the way the series subverts post-racial discourses is crucial because, as Catherine Squires notes, "popular television can inspire moments for confronting race and racism" (136). Jenji Kohan repurposes the WIP genre and employs subversive feminist humor, building human characters whose personal stories highlight the pains of imprisonment (Sykes). These characters walk viewers through the prison complex so that the viewers understand how the PIC functions through a logic of white supremacy, sexism, and advanced capitalism.

In other words, *OITNB* mobilizes flashback and comedy in its representations of women in prison to render visible the way that Litchfield functions as a microcosm of the PIC. OITNB highlights the relationship between the PIC and the informal but ongoing racial segregation of the United States and North America. *Orange Is the New Black* offers a corrective to the "post-racial mystique" (Squires) of television shows that represent racialized characters but fail to represent how racism structures lived experiences. Instead, flashbacks in the series portray Litchfield's occupants navigating the racialized, classed, and gendered prisons of larger society before landing in Litchfield. These flashbacks demonstrate how the series represents the criminalization of women's experiences that happen long before they enter prison. Flashbacks lay bare how the PIC operationalizes systemic racism. Kohan's use of the WIP genre works as a corrective to the historical legacies of the genre, built on sensationalizing and profiting from the representation of women in prison.

The Women in Prison Genre and the Post-Racial Myth

Film historians and media theorists often place women in prison films within the “sexploitation” sub-category of exploitation films (Clark). Exploitation films (sometimes referred to by film historians as Grindhouse films or B-movies) included biker films, zombie movies, and WIP films. Hastily made B-movies made cheaply — often looking grainy — ran in “grindhouse” theatres that stayed open all night (Stevenson). While films set in prison were popular as early as the 1930s, these were usually set in "penal institutions for men" (84). B-movie producers latched onto the idea of the women's prison setting in the 1940s after realizing "the lurid appeal of a movie set in a women's prison," (84) and by the 1940s and 1950s several of these films were being produced including many that take place in reform institutions for girls (Clark). These movies spawned a series of WIP television series in North America, England, and Australia. Clark points to *Girls in Prison* (1956), *Reform School Girl* (1957), and *Girl's Town* (1959) as examples. *The Big Doll’s House/Women's Penitentiary* (1971) is cited as being the first film of the WIP genre which emerged from the genre of films known as blaxploitation.

Locating the original roots of the WIP genre in blaxploitation helps us see how representations of incarcerated women are informed by historical legacies of American anti-black racism, specifically, racist depictions of black femininity. To be sure, a growing number of TV shows incorporate what Rachel E. Dubrofsky, in “Jewishness, Whiteness and Blackness on Glee: Singing to the Tune of Post-Racism” refers to as "hipster racism." Shows that employ “hipster racism” obfuscate racist premises by mobilizing explicitly racist jokes supposedly for satire (87). “Hipster racism” ridicules racist stereotypes without actually unpacking the underlying structure of the racist stereotype itself (Dubrofsky 87). In some sequences, *OITNB* slips into a post-racial ethos. For example, Piper's exchange with her mother that opens this article blurs the line between Piper's detachment from her privilege and the show's internal logic. For example, this scene is structured to elicit sympathy for Piper, thus shoring up her relationship of privilege with the viewer. However, *OITNB* also makes significant strides toward challenging post-racial discourses by ridiculing the myths of color-blindness and racial equality that bolster the United States’ PIC (Enck and Morrissey 303). The critique of post-racial discourse is particularly apparent in those moments where the show represents the intersection of gender and incarceration.

Methodology

In the following sections, textual analysis is applied to subversive sequences from the first four seasons. We approach these sequences through an intersectional lens and analyze discourses advanced by *OITNB* as elements of social practice. (Fairclough). We apply film theory (Bordwell and Thompson) and representation studies (Giroux and McLaren; Hall) to carefully read sequences, narrative strategies, and mise-en-scene of a sample of episodes and flashbacks. This approach was chosen, coding for the themes of "privilege as pedagogy" and "challenges to post-racial discourses" to elaborate upon how the series functions as intersectional pedagogy for a mass audience. This article draws on data from the text of the hit series, as well as from paratextual content about *OITNB*, including industry and production crew interviews about the program.

Series Summary. *OITNB* is an original series comedy-drama on the digital streaming platform Netflix. With seven seasons, it was Netflix's second original series and the most streamed of its original content as of 2019 (Ha; Wallenstein). This analysis concentrates on moments from the first four seasons as they generated a significant amount of substantive conversation in the public sphere around gender, race, and incarceration. Piper Kerman's memoir *Orange Is the New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison* is the inspiration behind the series. In the first season, viewers meet Piper after a drug charge from over a decade ago comes back to haunt her. This charge disrupts Piper's white, blonde, middle-class life in Manhattan, with her fiancé Larry (Jason Biggs) and catapults her into Litchfield Penitentiary. The first season showcases Piper's extreme privilege and ignorance as she blunders her way through acclimatizing to prison life. Throughout the first four seasons, Piper's role becomes increasingly less central, and viewers learn about the lives and circumstances of the diverse group of women that are in Litchfield Penitentiary.

Marginalizing Representations or Representations of Marginality?

Karlene Faith notes, in *Unruly Women: The Politics of Confinement & Resistance*, how media representations of women's crimes are often exaggerated. Faith argues that "the monsters serve as the sick/bad backdrop for potential normalcy" (Faith 259). Smart notes:

> legal, medical and early social scientific discourses intertwine to produce a woman who is fundamentally a problematic and unruly body; whose sexual and reproductive capacities need constant surveillance and regulation

> because of the threat that this supposedly "natural" woman would otherwise pose to the moral and social order. (8)

While certain representations in *OITNB* often play on racial stereotypes -for example, the depiction of Suzzane's (Crazy Eyes) hyper-embodied-ness and obsession with white femininity- it also humanizes the women in conflict with the law.

The characters' backstories developed through flashback invite the audience to literally and figuratively witness the constraining (outside world) circumstances that preceded (literal) incarceration and continue to inform the women's lives in Litchfield. Despite the more harmful elements of Suzanne's characterization, the flashback that structures her story contextualizes her (inter)personal struggles. For example, the depiction of the racialized power dynamics in her family and, by extension, broader society suggests how Suzanne arrived in this social location. For example, viewers see Suzanne desperate to fit in on the day she is taken to the hospital to meet her new sibling. Suzanne's deep disappointment with her hair not sitting flat — and her white parents' evident transition toward treating her as an annoyance — clearly illustrates how her white family cast her as "less-than" upon the arrival of their long wanted biological child. For example, viewers see background narrative in film and television stories, which, just as in the solo numbers in musicals, flesh out information about a character's emotions. Backstories give life to characters and insight into their inner world to offer ways for the viewers to connect with a character. Usually, an absence of these types of backstories shore up depictions of people of color as one-dimensional, thereby re-centering white characters who are more fully drawn (Ono and Projansky). The oppressive legacies of minstrelsy can still be seen in popular culture portrayals of people of colour through one-dimensional stereotypes (Sammond).

The flashback structure of the show is more than just a clichéd tool used to reveal background information, as it is used in many television shows. *Orange Is the New Black* does reproduce many of the same assumptions underpinning the legacy and image bank of representations of criminalized women. However, in specific instances, such as the prison election in the episode "WAC Pack." the text of the series advances a critical analysis of the inequality and power relations inherent in mass incarceration. For example, the depiction of Pennsatucky's victimization in "A Tittin' and A Hairin,'" and the nuanced representation of trans inmate Sophia in the episodes "Lesbian Request Denied" and "Don't Make Me Come Back There" add to the contemporary visual archive of the pains of

imprisonment (Sykes). Moreover, it addresses the underrepresented issues that women in prison contend with daily. In episodes from season one such as “Tit Punch” and “The Chickening,” Piper's bumbling leads viewers through the world of the PIC.

Kohan uses POV shots to create the most visceral and significant images in season four. For example, in “Toast Can’t Never Be Bread Again” Daya ends up holding a gun dropped by one of the officers during a peaceful protest that turns into a riot. The viewer looks at the male correctional officer on his knees from Daya's POV before a spiraling dolly shot codes the anger and upheaval unfolding in the cafeteria. Poussey suffocates to death after being trapped under the weight of a correctional officer during this protest. As the camera moves up toward the ceiling the viewer is forced to witness Tasha “Taystee” Jefferson’s (Danielle Brooks) excruciating grief as she clings to her dead friend on the floor of the cafeteria as correctional officers look on (“Animals” 00:57:16-00:58:35). At the end of "Toast Can't Never Be Bread Again," the viewer sees an additional flashback sequence from Poussey's brief and vibrant life. She dances in a club with folks in drag (00:40:09-00:42:20) and has a meaningful conversation with a "pretend monk" overlooking New York City's skyline by the water's edge (01:07:24-01:08:11).

The episode closes with the series' first glance into the camera from a character. A tracking shot pans down over the New York City skyline and pushes into a close-up of Poussey in her pre-prison life. Poussey is laughing and looking out over the water toward the city. Poussey then turns to stare directly at us, the viewer, smiling broadly; she looks happy and free (01:15:10-01:15:32). In this sequence, the viewers have come a long way from season one in which the impacts of mass incarceration on the black female body remain at a distance, out of focus. At the close of season four, the devastating effects of mass incarceration on women of color are made visible without reducing women of color to a monolithic group identified solely through victimization. The flashback structure such as this one in “Toast Can't Never Be Bread Again” does so much more than break up the prison interior mise-en-scene for the viewer. Instead, Kohan's use of a flashback structure to give full humanity to Poussey shows us how Poussey’s identity took shape in the outside world. Poussey’s life outside of prison, like the flashbacks reveal of so many characters, contain as many obstacles and cultural barriers as Litchfield itself.

The flashbacks do meaningful work that extend beyond the narrative of the first four seasons of *OITNB*. For example, the show quickly dispels any stereotypes viewers may have of what constitutes a 'queer' upbringing in Big Boo's flashback

sequence in “Finger in the Dyke”. Rather than a stereotypical troubled childhood, the viewers see a stable, upper-middle-class home. Big Boo, as a little girl with a short haircut and wearing boy's clothes, is arguing with her mother, who is pleading with her to wear a feminine dress with a lace collar for picture day at school. Her father finally promises Boo a root beer if she will put on a dress so that her mother will have a picture of Boo that "won't give her a stroke" that her mom can show to her grandmother (“Finger in the Dyke”. 00:06:39-00:07:30). In moments like this, the series pushes back against one-dimensional tropes of criminalized women. In “Finger in the Dyke” the viewer sees *OITNB* re-purposing the WIP genre and creating representations of female prisoners that offer mass audiences an introduction to how women’s lives are shaped through intersecting oppressions. The series' careful use of flashback elicits empathy for the women in Litchfield (Tillet) allowing for representations of the women's experiences of confinement before and after they enter prison.

The flashbacks create whole people, including the people on the outside of Litchfield that struggle to maintain relationships with the women inside and guards who contend with domestic challenges. For example, we see corrections officers struggle with their low incomes and the challenges posed by the increasing privatization of vital services. While many of the characters portrayed on the show at first appear to be stereotypes it is through the backstories that each and every character comes to life in full, complex and nuanced ways. For example, Taystee consistently speaks in African American Vernacular English (AAVE). It is well documented that AAVE, especially when written into television dialogue by white creators, is often inaccurately portrayed and linked to harmful stereotypes (Ruzich and Blake). In *Orange Is the New Black* however, Taystee’s brilliant use of humour as a political tool that highlights systemic racial oppression, is communicated through AAVE. Danielle Henderson’s commentary on the character Taystee neatly summarizes the radical work that OITNB dialogue does at its best.

> See, I loved Taystee right away. One of the funniest aspects of my life as a black feminist is noticing how quick white liberal media (and white liberals in general) are to classify women of color as singular entities. You can be a paralegal, but you can't use African-American vernacular English. You can use African-American vernacular English, but that means you work retail or in a fast-food restaurant. In my life, people do both, and are way more fluid in terms of how they adapt to different situations (which is a whole different commentary). So I loved that for most viewers, the assumption

> would be that Taystee was the “typical black girl” as they were accustomed to seeing her, but when you listen to what she is actually saying, her intelligence, humor and personality confound the traditional notions of what white folks think they know about black folks. (Doyle)

Flashbacks are employed to narrate Taystee’s entire life of institutionalization moving from foster care to juvenile prison (“Thanksgiving”). As Sophie Gilbert points out in *The Atlantic*, the show does not draw a distinction between "inmates, prison guards, corporate overlords, and family members in its thesis that everyone can do terrible things whatever their background or religion or financial status.” Kohan’s unique intervention, however, exists in the richly drawn characters whose stories highlight the uneven impacts of criminalization on the most marginalized folks such as working-class women of colour.

Even critics who largely dismiss the show praise the representation of the women’s backstories through *Orange Is the New Black’s* complex flashback structure (Dumas). It is through the flashback structure that Kohan demonstrates how often the only thing that separates the ladies in Litchfield from those in the outside world is luck (and privilege). Far from advancing a color-blind approach, many sequences of the show, including entire episodes (“WAC Pack”), are devoted to ridiculing post-racial discourses through a mix of comedy and pathos. This resistance to post-racial fantasy is seen in Suzanne’s "Crazy Eyes"' flashback sequence as she sits with her adoptive younger white sister and her sister's friends at a slumber party. Before the party, her sister tells her not to "be weird," and when Suzanne adds a dragon to their princess story, one of the white, blond girls says to her “That’s stupid. You’re stupid” (“Hugs Can Be Deceiving” 00:28:28-00:29:02). The logic of *Orange Is the New Black* does not always *operationalize* intersectionality. That is, the series does not use each episode to represent the power imbalances between the women nor does it engage as deeply as it could with racialized embodiments. However, some sequences, while flawed as all popular culture texts are, offer visibility for those often rendered invisible within mass culture broadly and the prison genre specifically. These moments shine a light on race rather than shy away from the racism experienced by these women at the familial, cultural, political, and institutional levels. The series is opening space for public and accessible dialogue around race, sexuality, transphobia, women's bodies, and incarceration.

OITNB offers up a potential space through which to challenge the "individual and social cost of mass incarceration," which is "increasingly recognized as

untenable" (Schwan 474). *Orange Is the New Black* performs much needed public intersectional feminist pedagogy through locating individual women's stories within broader narratives of inequality and constrained choice. In this vein, the series is situated alongside "artistic creations and activist scholarship that employ the visual as a way in which to more effectively and poignantly convey the scale, scope and irrational logic of mass incarceration" (Brown 177; Carrabine).

Audiences Prefer Blondes: Privilege as a Narrative and Pedagogical Strategy

As several critics have noted, *Orange Is the New Black* frequently employs many racial and ethnic stereotypes from dominant popular culture as well as the WIP genre. The early seasons center prison life around white femininity and reproduce many harmful tropes linking people of color to deviance and criminal behavior (Mustakeem 324; Wilson). The show downplays the harsh physical and emotional realities of prison to make the series more palatable for a wide viewing audience. However, the series also shines a light on the racialization of mass incarceration and "provides the first real exposure through an online platform for both national and international audiences to consider the often-marginalized lives of women jailed for various reasons" (Mustakeem 323). It is true that Piper, the protagonist, occupies a position of privilege. The many nuanced arguments around the politics of visibility (Hall; hooks) can and should apply to the use of a white protagonist. However, the text of the show weaves her privilege into pedagogy.

The series creator explained her use of white privilege in an interview about her motives for using Piper as the central vehicle of the show: "You can take this yuppy white woman and follow her, as like a gateway drug, and through her, you can tell all these other stories as well" (Celebs.com, 00:00:40-00:00:52). The sequences from *Orange Is the New Black* that put faces to otherwise invisible incarcerated women of color exist alongside an expanding visual image bank (Brown; Carrabine). Visual criminology is a corollary of the growing US anti-prison movement (Davis) that is emerging from the work of women of color activists and scholars who approach prison abolition through an intersectional anti-violence lens. The very nature of the prison renders the incarcerated as "disappeared subjects" (Brown 185). In offering a visual representation of a women's prison, the series fits well within a critical visual criminology of prison "through which other social problems become visible" (Brown 184). Namely, OITNB highlights how women

in prison experience the foundations of criminal justice: policing, arrest, prosecution, and sentencing that disproportionately target[s] poor communities and communities of color (Brown and Shept). The show creator Jenji Kohan addresses the rationale behind the intentional use of privilege as pedagogy and unpacks it. She wanted to tell the stories of criminalized women of color and admits, "I could not have sold a show about black and Latina and old women in prison, you know?" Kohan goes on to explain, "but if I had the girl-next-door, coming in as my fish out of the water, I can draw a certain audience in through her that can identify with her" (McIlveen). Kohan's market logic is obviously problematic. Plenty of room exists to critique Kohan's reliance on white privilege as the way to hook a large audience into the story. However, her upfront discussion about how she is mobilizing white privilege highlights a key strategy behind much of the feminist humor in the show (Sochen). *Orange Is the New Black* uses this privilege to create a series of "teachable" moments regarding the intersections of race, class, and gender as they impact the characters' lived experiences.

Many critics are rightly preoccupied with Piper's troubling role as the viewer's eyes and way into the prison space. However, as the viewer sees in the narrative progression of season two, three, and (most notably) four, the audience gets to know and sympathize with the characters in Litchfield. Piper begins to take a backseat in terms of her importance to the narrative. A close reading of this series reveals that the complex ways in which the representations are constructed result in Piper being not merely a privileged viewer but also a viewer of privilege. In other words, many of the episode storylines place Piper in a situation in which she, and by extension, the audience learns about some of the factors (such as systemic racism, child abuse and transphobia) that increase an individual's chances of coming into conflict with the law.

The viewer sees privilege employed as a pedagogical strategy numerous times. For example, in an early attempt to get shea butter from Sophia at the hair salon by offering future payback in commissary goods, Taystee and Sophia share a laugh after Sophia proclaims, "credit denied" ("Tit Punch," 00:31:42-00:32:33). This moment turns Piper's expectations and assumptions rooted in race and class privilege upside down; her credit does not work here, and for the first time in her life, Piper explicitly confronts her internalized sense of entitlement. This pedagogy of privilege weaves through *Orange Is the New Black*, most notably through Kohan's use of a flashback structure. The representation of Litchfield is constructed through the eyes of women who live there. Giving women prisoners POV shots is

not a standard feature of the traditional WIP genre. However, they are used to significant effect in the series by drawing the audience into the women's individual life stories.

Several culture watchers have also noted the importance of reading Piper as a "viewer of privilege" as well as a "privileged viewer." For example, the talk show host Hari Sreenivasan observed of Piper, "it's almost like this character gives you a lens to look at perhaps how women of color are getting into the penal system" (00:03:30-00:03:40). The narrative and marketing importance of Piper as a way into prison space steadily declines throughout the first three seasons of the show. Kohan's use of Piper as an entry point to more pressing issues is especially evident in the episodes in which Piper is mostly absent from the central narrative ("Thirsty Bird"; "Looks Blue, Tastes Red"). By season three, Larry disappears from the narrative, and Piper's role as the eyes of the viewer gives way to more compelling storylines. The arc of the first four seasons is a testament to the more significant narrative role that Piper serves within the landscape of the series. Since the series has established an audience that is absorbed in these women's lives, Piper as a gateway and tour guide has fallen away.

Throughout season three and four, we are given several examples of how Kohan slowly displaces Piper as the viewer's surrogate or the eyes of the prison. In season three, Piper is just another one of the women of Litchfield. Further, Piper capitalizes on her privilege and is profiting from other inmates. For example, she has them participate in her used-panty business ("Fear and Other Smells") in the same way that the corporation Whispers is profiting from the manufacture of the lingerie inside the prison while paying inmates one dollar a day. Season three offers numerous representations of how individuals become inculcated in systemic problems rather than being individual 'bad apple' characters. The show does well to place criminalized women within broader systems of power inside and outside the walls of Litchfield. For example, in the previous episode ("Where My Dreidel At") the viewer sees that Pensatucky thinks that when the guard Coates demands that she imitate a dog by fetching a donut, she believes this the beginning of a romantic relationship. Another example of this occurs when a guard rapes Pensatucky ("A Tittin' and a Hairin'"). Rather than portray Pensatucky's sexual assault through the typical lens of the WIP genre, the flashback sequence places Pensatucky's experience within a broader history of poverty and abuse at the hands of boys, men, and her mother. Piper's questions, particularly in the earlier episodes of the show, are frequently met with retorts from the other women. The retorts play

on Piper's assumptions and, by extension, those of the audience. Moments of feminist humor highlight her ignorance regarding the extent to which her race and class advantages color her expectations.

Sequences like the one discussed above also tear down pre-conceptions about women that come into conflict with the law. For example, one such response is given to Piper by Nicky in the fourth episode of the series. When Piper asks Nicky why she is drilling a hole in the wall, Nicky tells her, “it's uh, an art piece representing the futility of blue-collar labor in a technological age…and vaginas” (“Imaginary Enemies” 00:06:30-00:06:50). These sequences are also sometimes heavy-handed. However, Piper moves into the background of the narrative as the series progresses. By season four, the viewer sees some more nuanced discussions of white privilege and accountability from multiple white minor characters. The second episode of the fourth season called “Power Suit” offers an instructive example of how far the United States of Litchfield is from a post-racial reality. “Power Suit” offers an example of how the series mobilizes a self-conscious white privilege as an anti-racist pedagogy for a mass Netflix audience.

Racial and ethnic divisions in the prison increase as Litchfield becomes increasingly over-crowded. Throughout “Power Suit,” numerous white characters, those from working-class and poor backgrounds as well as the affluent Judy King, reference how they read fellow prisoners. Throughout the episode, the viewer sees repeated examples of white characters explicitly and implicitly discussing racism. For example, when Angie Rice says, “there's (sic) so many Mexicans now it's like a Home Depot parking lot in here," Leanne Taylor points out that she should have focused her racial ire on folks from the Dominican Republic saying: “Dominicans… if you're going to be racist, you have to be accurate, or you just look dumb” (00:07:30-00:07:40). They then go back and forth, describing stereotypes of various ethnicities and nationalities until they land on stereotypes of people from the Dominican Republic before Angie says, "yeah, that's right…I hate them" (00:07:40-00:07:50).

Toward the end of the episode, when the famous TV personality Judy (a parody of Martha Stewart) arrives at the prison, Yoga Jones is selected as her only roommate, and Jones confronts Judy about her race and class privilege:

> Yoga Jones: “I was living a regular prison life, in my regular prison bunk, and now I'm the 1%. Everyone else is living on top of each other like Petco budgies; this is not fair.”
>
> Judy: “I used to be a hippy once I outgrew it…”

Jones: “Healey said you specifically requested a white roommate of the non-threatening variety.”

Judy: “I didn't ask for this.” [referring to the semi-private room].

Jones: “Well, you didn't turn it down.”

Judy: “Well, I'm not going to pitch a fit for my own discomfort. Lord, call me crazy, but I have learned if someone is offering you something nice, you shut up and say thank you.”

Jones: “You can't shut up and say thank you at the same time. The two things negate one another.”

Judy: “You know what I think, I think you secretly love being in this room away from all the others. You think it's nice, and that has thrown the crunchy parts of you into quite a tizzy.”

Jones: “Just because we live together doesn’t mean we have to talk.”

Judy: [beat, offering Jones a steaming mug of tea complete with mug and saucer] “It's herbal.”

Jones: [accepting the tea] “Goddammit.” (00:39:22-00:41:57)

This exchange highlights Judy's apathetic attitude in refusing to use her racial privilege to fight inequality. Kohan also represents liberal activist Yoga Jones’ susceptibility to accepting the advantages that come with whiteness. Over less than four minutes of dialogue, we see Jones rhetorically rebel against her new room assignment. She explains to Judy that even if she did not choose to be assigned to this room it is not fair to passively accept the privileges that attend her whiteness. Jones, in her conversation with Judy, cites the principle of staying silent in the face of white privilege and then realizes she is going to accept the herbal tea and stay in this semi-private room.

In season four the viewer is offered several examples of how *OITNB* represents whiteness as a privileged status. Whiteness is also represented as an identity actively assumed in different ways by Caucasian women in Litchfield. For example, in "We'll Always Have Baltimore," Danny interrupts a panel discussion on the topic of correction industry purchasing shouting at one of the panelists "why don't you tell us how you doubled the beds, Linda? Or, did you tell them how the food makes everyone puke or how Sophia Burssett is in the SHU for no reason?" (00:39:40-00:40:00).[2] Danny continues to confront a roomful of contractors at "CorrectiCon" a corrections conference. Interrupting the panel, a second time, Danny shouts:

[2] SHU refers to a particular housing unit for solitary confinement.

> I'm finished with a company that refuses to acknowledge what happens when we monetize human beings. Do you even see yourselves? Lasers and prison ice-cream? This whole thing is a disgusting display of how industry dollars are spent. I used to be like you I would come to this conference every year and never thought about the inmates. (00:40:52-00:41:55)

After mocking the conference's prison-themed ice cream and laser gun demonstrations, Danny continues to confront the room, "this whole thing is a disgusting display of how industry dollars are spent" (00:41:55-00:42:00). Danny completes his monologue by saying, "I was like you a few months ago, I came to this conference every year, and I never thought about the inmates" (00:42:05-00:42:50). The fact that Danny foregrounds the barbaric use of isolation in the case of trans inmate Sophia Burssett underscores the critical work that *OITNB* does in advancing visibility of the unique inequalities and barriers that trans inmates face in the PIC. Moreover, the character of Sophia and Laverne Cox, the actress who portrays her, offered unprecedented representation of the intersecting oppressions shaping the experiences of trans people of color helping to launch the contemporary trans rights movement. For example, *Time* magazine's May 2014 cover story "The Transgender Tipping Point," featuring Cox introduced the trans rights movement to a mass North American audience (Steinmetz).

In season four, Piper is brought face to face with the implications of her persisting blindness when it comes to her racial privilege. In a gloomily comic and dramatic sequence, Piper has assembled a room full of people for a prison advisory council meeting to discuss making the prison a safer place amid increasing crowding. While she seems oblivious to the fact that everybody that is listening to her impassioned speech about being on the lookout for violence and graffiti are white, Piper unwittingly incites racial hatred. For example, Leanne suddenly stands and declares, "Piper is right, you guys, you can't swing a cat around here lately without hitting a dirty Dominican. The viewer watches as Piper's face goes pale while she tries to clarify with a weakly uttered "that's not what I meant" ("We'll Always Have Baltimore" 00:55:15-00:55:33). Again, the viewer is presented with Piper's alignment with a "color blind" approach to egalitarianism than unwittingly leads her to stumble into chairing a meeting that foments white supremacist fervor.

As the episode closes, the viewer sees Piper looking on in disbelief as her "community carers" group becomes a white supremacist gang. Strains of

"Tomorrow Belongs to Me" from the musical *Cabaret* (ironically a popular song at white power rallies)[3] crescendo as the women chant "white lives matter" louder and louder in unison. The camera pulls back to a closing shot of the group spiraling into a frenzy while the camera focuses on a Confederate flag boldly emblazoned on the back of one group member's neck then closes in on Piper's bewildered face. The minority group of white individuals in Litchfield feel oppressed because they are an underrepresented group within the prison. This dramatic musical sequence uses comedy to ridicule the feelings of the white minority when they realize that more and more people of color are making their way into this prison space. White people are vastly underrepresented in the PIC. The viewer is presented with this sardonic take on the notion of white "underrepresentation" that makes it clear how racial privilege informs this reality within the phenomenon of mass incarceration.

The irony of this moment in "WAC Pac" underscores Kohen's use of feminist humor. This episode is a useful example of how Kohan built growing complexity into representations of whiteness and privilege in the series while navigating the neoliberal context of media production. For example, a comic sequence between Taystee and Poussey in "WAC Pac" evidences the comedic challenges *Orange Is the New Black* mobilizes, rendering mainstream post-racial discourses and fantasies in the United States visible. During the episode "WAC Pack," the women are choosing representatives for the prison's Women's Advisory Council (WAC). Several African American women are discussing which issues to prioritize when Taystee and Poussey perform an extended impression of "white people politics" (00:19:22-00:20:13). The two women exchange facts about sushi, veganism, and whether they should wear their bangs "straight or in a sweep to the side" (00:19:22-00:20:13). Feminist humor highlights the vast delta between the struggles of white women and those of women of color.

The use of feminist humor is one example of how Kohan resists the myth of a post-racial America. In this lunchroom setting, Taystee and Poussey, who have both navigated lives shaped by systemic racism, do an impersonation highlighting a significant privilege white women have: they can leave race out of their political priorities. The two friends impersonating fictional white people Amanda and

[3] The song "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" was written by John Kander and Fred Ebb, in the style of traditional German folk songs, for the stage and film version of the musical *Cabaret* (1972). In *Cabaret,* a Nazi youth sings the song to drum up patriotism for the fatherland. Ironically the song penned by two Jewish lyricists for a musical about the deplorable rise of Nazism in Berlin of the early 1930s, is frequently sung at white power rallies.

Mackenzie banter in response to Sophia's admirable quest to bring trans rights to the prison; a feat that Taystee and Poussey argue might not be possible with white people at the helm. Taystee — portraying Mackenzie- remarks: "Let's talk about health care Amanda" to which Poussey (portraying Amanda) responds "I'd rather not it's not polite" (00:18:50-00:19:20). Taystee then tells her friends about "a documentary about the best sushi in the world" which she "didn't enjoy" as much as she might have since she is now "a vegan" ("WAC PAC" 00:19:22-00:20:13). Media representations are a significant site where power dynamics unfold in popular culture. For example, characters that push the boundaries of what is typically portrayed in popular culture can reveal systems of gender, race, and class domination. As we know, *Orange Is the New Black* is an original series that was created for Netflix and reaches a broad demographic (Matrix), which has already resulted in knowledge translation and real-world offline activism. What Sidneyeve Matrix refers to as "the Netflix effect" necessarily means that video-on-demand content allows viewers to participate in online/offline cultural conversations around content in ways that the broadcast era of television programming did not allow. This participation occurs in fan conversations around *Orange Is the New Black*, which unfold through social networking sites and become tied to digital spaces of activism such as Black Lives Matter and the trans rights movement.

Sophia Bursett: Prison Hairstylist and Intersectional Educator

OITNB's Laverne Cox has embraced the show as a platform for trans rights activism.[4] Actress Diane Guerrero (who plays Maritza Ramos) used her visibility afforded by the show to write an op-ed for *The Los Angeles Times*, about the tragic and abrupt separation from her parents that she experienced as a child, urging Americans to inform themselves about immigrant rights. Despite heated debate and dialogue around the extent to which this text can be deemed progressive, critics have seemingly found consensus when it comes to the character of Sophia (played by Laverne Cox). Even feminist theorist bell hooks, who is admittedly not a fan of the show, argued that "one of the most compelling images in the series, one of the most progressive images on the show is the character of Sophia" ("Public Dialogue

[4] Laverne Cox regularly speaks on the issue of rights for trans people, mainly focusing on trans women of color, who encounter disproportionate levels of violence, including homicide. Cox also writes on the topic for outlets such as *Huffington Post*.

at The New School" 00:15:30-00:16:00). The sequence in which Sophia and her wife Crystal have an intensely emotional conversation about their son in "Lesbian Request Denied" is cited by hooks in the "Public Dialogue at The New School" (00:16:50-00:18:10) and others as being unprecedented in the history of television representations (please also see Rosenberg and Henderson). As hooks notes, this conversation between Sophia and her wife is a television first; the scene depicts folks of colour, who are usually represented only through the lens of difference, engaged in a meaningful conversation in which they work through personal conflict ("Public Dialogue at The New School").

In the third episode of the series "Lesbian Request Denied," Sophia, in a moment of desperation, asks Crystal to smuggle hormones into the prison for her. Crystal's anger and disappointment lead to a complicated and emotional conversation between the two women of color: one, a trans person, and the other her wife. This nuanced conversation between Sophia and Crystal is further evidence of the complexity that *OITNB* offers around the intersections of race and gender as they inform sexual orientation, gender identity, and incarceration. Perhaps the most compelling evidence of broader activism attached to the show is Laverne Cox's work on the issue of rights and visibility for trans people. From producing a documentary film on the human rights abuses of trans individuals to lecturing about violence facing trans people of color, Cox has used the show as an activist springboard. Through her platform on *OITNB*, Cox has transformed transnational conversations on trans rights particularity their intersection with ongoing systemic forms of racist violence such as the PIC.

Some public intellectuals dismiss *OITNB* entirely due to its problematic use of a white, blonde, middle-class protagonist (Najumi; Sullivan). Critics rightly register hesitancy about embracing a show that confronts harmful ethnic and racial tropes head on and often, problematically, slips into them. Although Netflix is streaming seven seasons of the show due to its popularity with audiences, we focused on the first four seasons as they offer productive examples of public pedagogy. The first four seasons of *OITNB* mobilize white privilege as pedagogy and, coupled with paratextual activism around the show, act as intersectional pedagogy for a mass audience. Lastly, textual analysis demonstrates the series' place within a broader cultural conversation around the criminalization of women of color. Piper, as a vapid vehicle for "teachable moments," is evidenced by her decreasing screen time and visibility throughout seasons two and three.

Conclusion

Whether one loves it or hates it, seeks it out, or purposely avoids it, chances are they have heard about the popular Netflix original series *OITNB.* Chances are even higher that the reader is aware of the conversations around race, gender, and incarceration generated in the public sphere by the early run of the show. *OITNB* became the most-watched show on the platform, which has more than 60 million subscribers worldwide (McClelland). Mass incarceration in the United States is in the public consciousness as an urgent problem. The issue, particularly its link to institutionalized racism, is currently the focus of several prominent public debates and conversations. During the early run of *OITNB* in 2015 *The Atlantic* ran a cover series "The Age of Mass Incarceration" in which Ta-Nehisi Coates investigates the historical legacies and contemporary relevance of the intersection of racism and criminalization. *The New York Times* (2018), *The Guardian* (2016), *The Walrus* (2019) and *The Conversation* (2019) have all recently run stories on the disproportionate number of people of color behind bars in the United States and Canada. With attention to the disproportionate number of men of color in prison, scholars, activists, community leaders, and students have turned their attention and voice to the PIC.

The first four seasons of *OITNB* mark a shift from challenging to subverting dominant discourses around how feminine bodies come to matter in prison. *OITNB* performs the function of intersectional public pedagogy. The show is limited: it cannot do justice to the harsh physical and psychological realities of prison life and is made palatable for a mass audience. However, the show puts faces and bodies to women in prison. Kohan's flawed representations do essential work in showing audiences that these invisible women are not defined by one event or even the systemic inequalities that shape their experience. Women in prison contain multitudes: they are sisters, lovers, professionals, mothers, and friends. These visual representations are meaningful. *OITNB* is especially powerful since mass media and socio-legal constructions of female criminality often emerge from the inability to recognize or reconcile the lived, bodily experiences of battery, constrained choice, and violence that so many women experience. Reading the show through the lens of intersectional feminism may be a productive way to approach the bodies of criminalized women in the age of digital media.

While we are beginning to see a dramatic increase in dialogue around the future of mass incarceration, "the fate of black boys and men funnelled into the carceral

pipeline remains the primary focal point" (Mustakeem 332). However, recent interventions in popular culture, specifically digital media platforms such as Netflix, offer a rare visual representation of the lives of women in prison. Activist and *OITNB* actress Laverne Cox argues that the show is inherently political because it takes place in a women's prison, therefore, necessitating conversations around race, gender, sexuality, and incarceration (New School Public Dialogue). In an interview with *The Guardian* during the early run of the show, actress Danielle Brooke ties the opportunities that OITNB offers for social justice to "its ability to reach mass audiences" and Kohan's commitment to "discuss such urgent topics as police brutality, transgender issues, and race relations" (Kirst). Since the series premiere, the depictions of the ladies in Litchfield Penitentiary have garnered strong reactions from critics, fans, public intellectuals, scholars, and activists alike. For instance, Lindsay Beyerstein, Jamia Wilson, Danielle Henderson, Jennifer L. Pozner, and Salamishah Talle have all engaged in public commentary on the series in "Orange is the New Black Roundtable, Part 1: Why, Despite Ourselves We're Watching". *OITNB* shines a very public light on the most rapidly growing population in North American prisons. The fastest-growing demographic of incarcerated individuals are women, specifically women of color (Magnet; Najumi).

Women are the fastest-growing population in North American prisons. For example, in the United States, women's incarceration rate has grown at twice that of men. At the time of writing, more than 231,000 women and girls are incarcerated in the United States (Kastjura). Although women only make up six percent of the incarcerated population in Canada, Indigenous women are disproportionally impacted and account for nearly forty percent of the women who are incarcerated (Correctional Service Canada). Women, many struggling with mental health issues, are often locked up for non-violent crimes. When a woman does commit a violent crime, it is a statistic rarity (Bagaric). Moreover, when women receive convictions for violent offenses, their crimes are often found to be a response to life-threatening or violent abuse. Watching a movie or television show may be the only time many people contemplate the experiences of women who are incarcerated. Nobody would argue that a fictional series alone can cause social change for criminalized women. However, this series garners real empathy for characters through a genre traditionally used to exploit the image of the woman prisoner. *OITNB* continues to inspire conversations around the issues facing women experiencing incarceration that may otherwise remain suppressed in dominant news media, social media, and

popular culture. In a culture and time that increasingly emphasizes "individual freedom, choice, power, [and] ability," even becoming more conscious of systemic racial and gender inequity "is a tremendous achievement" (Bordo 30). The world undervalues women in prison represented by the ladies in Litchfield Penitentiary. Perhaps audiences of *OITNB* are underestimating the progressive potential of the real-world conversations the show is inspiring beyond Litchfield's fictional walls.

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