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Screening Women’s Imprisonment: Agency and Exploitation in *Orange is the New Black*

Editors: Sarah Artt and Anne Schwan

Based on Piper Kerman’s 2010 memoir *Orange is the New Black: My Time in a Women’s Prison*, Jenji Kohan’s adaptation for Netflix follows white middle-class New Yorker Piper Chapman (Taylor Schilling) into the fictional Litchfield Penitentiary where she encounters a diverse community of incarcerated women. Together with *House of Cards* and *Hemlock Grove*, *Orange is the New Black* (OITNB) was one of the first original series commissioned by on-demand streaming platform Netflix. At the time of writing, three seasons, produced by Lionsgate, have screened (2013-2015), with a further four seasons to follow (Littleton 2016). Season one introduces Piper and the audience to the world of the prison, including a core group of women such as Alex Vause (Laura Prepon), Piper’s former girlfriend whose drug smuggling business she had been implicated in ten years prior; Galina “Red” Reznikova (Kate Mulgrew), one of the show’s older women who has built an empire through her role as cook; Suzanne “Crazy Eyes” Warren (Uzo Aduba) who develops a romantic obsession with Piper; Tasha “Taystee” Jefferson (Danielle Brooks), one of a group of black women who challenge Piper’s internalized privilege; butch lesbian Carrie “Big Boo” Black, played by comedian Lea DeLaria; “white trash” drug addict Tiffany “Pennsatucky” Doggett (Taryn Manning) who becomes Piper’s nemesis in season one; Gloria Mendoza (Selenis Leyva) who challenges Red over the kitchen empire; and Dayanara “Daya” Diaz (Dascha Polanco) who falls in love with (and is impregnated by) officer John Bennett (Matt McGorry). Season two increasingly shifts attention from Piper to the stories of other women, exploring conflict and collaboration between members of the prison’s “tribes.” The third season develops a more overtly

political agenda, turning to the privatization of Litchfield as an overarching theme.

While mostly focused on the women's interactions with each other and with prison officials—from corrupt warden Natalie “Fig” Figueroa (Alysia Reiner), inefficient assistant warden Joe Caputo (Nick Sandow), and counselor Sam Healy (Michael J. Harney), to correctional officer and bully George “Pornstache” Mendez (Pablo Schreiber)—*OITNB* includes a series of flashbacks in an attempt to shed light on the women's backstories and the conditions that led to their imprisonment. With its predominantly female and ethnically diverse cast, which also includes transgender actress and activist Laverne Cox—who plays Sophia Burset, a transgender woman who faces discrimination from fellow inmates and the prison regime, and struggles to maintain a relationship with her son and former wife—the series continues to contribute to the redrawing of a feminist-inflected popular culture. The show and individual cast members have received multiple awards, including two comedy ensemble awards from the Screen Actors Guild and the female comedy actor award for Aduba. Although Netflix does not disclose viewing numbers, Netflix's chief content officer Ted Sarandos calls *OITNB* the streaming service's “most-watched show” (Birnbaum 2016). Netflix's global reach, spanning members in over 190 countries, contributes to the series' ongoing impact.

Since the time it was first broadcast in 2013, and despite its unquestionable commercial success, *OITNB* has garnered equal shares of praise and blame. Countless articles have appeared in the popular press discussing the show's treatment of race, sexuality, and class, as well as its depiction of the American prison system. As academics began to comment on the series, open-access sites such as *FLOW: A Critical Forum on Television and Media Culture*, and *In Media Res* have been homes for emerging criticism on *OITNB*. This special issue aims to continue the work initiated by those early contributors in the spheres of popular culture and academia while adding to a growing body of scholarship on popular representations of punishment in the age of US mass incarceration.¹

For 2013, the Bureau of Justice Statistics lists 6,899,000 people under adult correctional

supervision (Glaze and Kaeble). 2.2 million are in America's prisons and jails (Sentencing Project, 2). Such figures make the United States the country with the highest incarceration rate in the world. Men of color, especially black men, are significantly more likely to experience incarceration during their lifetime (Sentencing Project, 5); although overall, men are more likely to face imprisonment than women, women's incarceration rate has been rising at a level fifty percent higher than men's since 1980 (4). Within the female prison population, black and Latina women are significantly overrepresented (5). Such figures give the issues raised by the television show a particular sense of urgency in the US context, compounded by recent developments suggesting that high-profile decision makers, including President Obama, are showing new determination to help "fix the criminal justice system" (White House).

The articles contained in this special issue are indicative of the range of responses to *OITNB* as a series of texts that encompasses Kerman's memoir, the ongoing Netflix television series, and the various social media paratexts that have grown up around this narrative and its cast members. *OITNB* has had a particularly strong impact in the age of what has been termed "hashtag activism." The series has a strong official social media presence and its fanbase is active on Twitter. Cast members such as Cox and Polanco have made high profile appearances in campaigns to support racial and sexual diversity and several cast members made prominent appearances at the protests that followed the death of Erik Garner, a movement which became known on Twitter by its hashtag #ICantBreathe (Jordan 2014). A cynical view would deem these forms of real-world activism by the cast as little more than the commodification of resistance, making use of protests as sites for publicity. However easy it might be to dismiss showrunner Kohan's assertion that entertainment is her activism (in McClelland 2015), it is difficult to view the work carried out by actors like Cox as nothing more than publicity. Cox's status as a celebrity who is also a trans woman of color was cemented by her appearance on the cover of *Time* (June 9, 2014), but she has also appeared in conversation with feminist scholar and activist bell hooks.² On this occasion, hooks, while critical of *OITNB* in other ways, noted the sense of empowerment many women of color experienced when

being confronted with such unusual diversity on the screen. Events like this position the television show and its cast members as a nexus of activism. Such interaction suggests the possibility of using those issues *OITNB* brings to the fore as a springboard for wider public debate on the “Prison Industrial Complex” (PIC) and genuine social change.³

This collection of articles explores to what extent *OITNB* has the potential to unite the popular and academic spheres, while also addressing the limitations emerging from the show’s own representational strategies across its first three seasons, and Netflix as a media platform. The special issue opens up a conversation between critical positions that broadly fall into two camps—those who affirm the value of *OITNB*’s contribution to public debate about women’s imprisonment, despite the program’s flaws, and those who emphasize the series’ failure to address structural inequalities due to a neoliberal frame of reference. Anne Schwan’s “Postfeminism Meets the Women in Prison Genre: Privilege and Spectatorship in *Orange is the New Black*” argues that Piper Chapman becomes a vehicle for critically examining white middle-class identity on the show and among audience members. While acknowledging the series’ “uneven and contradictory” agenda—a reading that is framed through postfeminist theories—the article argues that “*OITNB* should be seen as an important ally in the process of raising awareness about media (mis)representations of female prisoners, not least because of the show’s own self-reflexive commentary on the women in prison genre.” Placing a different emphasis in her article “There is No Such Thing as the Post-Racial Prison: Neoliberal Multiculturalism and the White Savior Complex on *Orange is the New Black*,” Christina Belcher suggests that the show stops short of a systematic critique of structural racism and poverty as root causes of women’s incarceration by reinforcing “colorblindness” and—despite its apparent commitment to diversity—promoting both white and black “monoculturalism” through its portrayals of anti-hero Piper Chapman and her interaction with other characters. In “Extended ‘Visiting Hours’: Deconstructing Identity in Netflix’s Promotional Campaigns for *Orange is the New Black*,” Lauren DeCarvalho and Nicole B. Cox draw attention to the instrumentalized use of intersectional identities in Netflix’s marketing campaign for season two. Contrasting the

commodification of life in women's prisons in parts of the campaign with efforts to "humanize" incarcerated women in the actual show and other promotional materials, they ask: "Is Netflix using itself to promote policy reform or using the need for policy reform to promote itself?" They conclude with a nuanced answer, suggesting that while Netflix successfully "maximized its target audience" from a commercial point of view, it simultaneously "provides a platform for incarcerated women to be more than just numbers in a system." Through a combined analysis of "marathon viewing" as a critical practice and the representation of older women on *OITNB*, Rachel E. Silverman and Emily Ryalls explore the "stigma of temporality" on the show and its wider cultural context. They argue that although "the progressive potential of including elderly women within the series exists," since these representations make visible the prison system's inability to adequately cater for aging inmates, such potential is curtailed by the perpetuation of gendered stereotypes portraying elderly women as manipulative. Marta Fernández-Morales and María Isabel Menéndez-Menéndez employ a feminist-Foucauldian framework to argue that the television show interrogates concepts of female agency and resistance, thus expanding consciousness about the issues faced by incarcerated women, their life stories, and gendered inequalities in the criminal justice system. Maria Pramaggiore's article "From Screwdriver to Dildo: Retooling Women's Work in *Orange is the New Black*," turns to "the ambivalent sensibility that pervades the political discourse of *OITNB*," especially the series' treatment of prison labor. Placing the program's depiction of prison labor in a wider context of neoliberalism and prison industry, Pramaggiore argues that *OITNB* ultimately fails to present an effective critique of prison labor "by focusing on individual needs and affective ties over group solidarity against structural conditions."

Many of these articles draw on material that was originally presented as part of the one-day conference *Orange is the New Black and New Perspectives on the Women in Prison Genre* held at Edinburgh Napier University in June 2015. The conference brought together academics, prison teachers, and professionals from the criminal justice system and included the views of incarcerated women who had watched *OITNB*, a perspective customarily absent from critical discourses on the

series. While the conference was a first step in bringing together responses to *OITNB* from a wider range of stakeholders, our inability to include the perspectives of imprisoned women in this special issue—for a complex set of reasons—serves as a timely reminder that much work remains to be done in overcoming existing boundaries between academic discourse, those affected by incarceration, and wider public debates on the criminal justice system and its role in society and popular culture.

Notes

1 For another recent example of this critical investment in exploring cultural representations of punishment, see Charles J. Ogletree Jr. and Austin Sarat (2015).

2 See bell hooks and Laverne Cox in public dialogue at the New School

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oMmZIJjgY> (accessed November 14, 2015).

3 The “Prison Industrial Complex” (PIC) refers to the intertwining of government, the penal apparatus and capitalist interests. As Joe Lockard and Sherry Rankins-Robertson (2011, 38) point out, the phrase is often associated with Angela Davis’ “Critical Resistance” conference in 1998 and the related movement, although its origins date back to the 1960s and 70s. Davis herself (2003, 84) attributes the term to Mike Davis (1995).

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