

# The Color Orange? Social Justice Issues in the First Season of *Orange Is the New Black*<sup>1</sup>

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**O**RANGE IS THE NEW BLACK (2013–) IS A POPULAR, CRITICALLY acclaimed Netflix original series, loosely based upon the best-selling 2010 memoir of Piper Kerman—a white, blonde, upper-middleclass Smith graduate who got involved in the drug trade via a lesbian lover. Kerman had left that lover and established herself in a straight lifestyle, including becoming law-abiding and engaged to a man. But, a few years later, the drug ring was discovered and Kerman named as a collaborator. Taking a deal, she served just over a year in a minimum security federal prison. The catchy title refers to the orange jumpsuit worn by new prisoners. Soon after Kerman was imprisoned, a friend mailed a clipping of a *New York Times* fashion spot, showing women sporting the color, and quipped: “NYers wear orange in solidarity w/Piper’s plight.” Kerman quipped back: “Apparently, orange was the new black” (71).

As that high-fashion reference suggests, *Orange is the New Black* (*OITNB*) is not a female version of HBO’s ultra-grim *Oz* (1997–2003). Rather, it is a “dramedy” or “dark comedy” and was designated a “comedy” by Netflix when it came to categorization for awards. *OITNB* has generated a great deal of media buzz, including in the alternative press. Writing in *Curve*, a lesbian magazine, Francesca Lewis praised it as “The Most Queer Feminist Thing Ever” and offered three reasons: the show’s “woman-centeredness,” “diversity,” and willingness to “take on a controversial subject—prison.”

Diversity in representation does matter. Media theorists George Gerbner and Larry Gross aver: “Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation” (182).

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The Hollywood Diversity Report finds continuing underrepresentation of women and men of color and white women in leading television and film roles, with existing representations marked by negative stereotyping, another mode of symbolic annihilation (Ralph J. Bunche Center).

*OITNB* does represent women regularly erased in the mass media, as well as stereotypically demonized and denigrated. Still, *OITNB*'s diversity also must be recognized as a reflection of the disproportionate over representation of marginalized women incarcerated in what activists call the *prison industrial complex*:

The overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social, and political problems in the United States... [a complex that] helps and maintains the authority of people who get their power through racial, economic, and other privileges... including [by] creating mass media images that keep alive stereotypes of people of color, poor people, queer people, immigrants, youth, and other oppressed communities as criminal, delinquent, or deviant. (Critical Resistance).

Hence, an examination of stereotypes in *OITNB* is particularly germane.

The United States imprisons more of its people than *probably* any other in the world. (Cuba and North Korea are not included in the usual counts.) Many more men than women are incarcerated, but the rate of women being imprisoned has been greater for several decades, increasing by 587 percent between 1980 and 2011, nearly 1.5 times the rate of men during that period (*Sentencing Project*). People of color have been and continue to be incarcerated in grossly disproportional rates. Two-thirds of women in prison are there for nonviolent offences, a third for drug-related ones; about sixty-four percent are mothers. Butch lesbians are "consistently treated by police as potentially violent, predatory, or noncompliant regardless of their actual conduct or circumstances, no matter how old, young, disabled, small, or ill" (Incite! 143). "Girls of color and/or girls who do not conform to conventional gender expression and sexual identity and who are victims of abuse are more likely to be defined as offenders needing to be punished rather than victims needing treatment" (Ajinkya). Eighty-five to ninety percent of incarcerated women have suffered

sexual and physical assault, often when they were children (ACLU). Many also have experienced these assaults in the midst of long-term, life-threatening situations of domestic violence. Trauma, poverty, homelessness, substance addiction, and mental illness pervade their life experiences.

The work of feminist scholar and activist Beth Richie on incarcerated women is particularly germane, for she focuses on intersecting injustices of race/ethnicity, class, sex, sexuality, and gender expression, as well as the crushing regularity of their experience of men's sexual and physical abuse. Richie, like other social justice theorists, recognizes the necessary knowledge conveyed through marginalized persons telling their own stories. She conducted life history interviews and then identified a specific pattern of "gender entrapment" found in the lives of jailed African-American women, a pattern of being "marginalized in the public sphere because of their race/ethnicity, gender, and class and then... battered by their male partners... forced or coerced into crime through their culturally expected gender roles, the violence in their intimate relationship, and their social position in the broader society" (Richie, *Compelled to Crime* 133).

Stories of incarcerated and marginalized women also are fundamental to *OITNB*. Jenji Kohan, its creator and showrunner, explained on NPR's *Fresh Air* that she was using the Piper character as

My Trojan Horse: You're not going to go into a network and sell a show on really fascinating tales of black women, and Latina women, and old women and criminals. But, if you instead sell them on the 'girl next door, the cool blonde,' you have a very easy access point [...] relatable for a lot of audiences and a lot of networks looking for a certain demographic.

Kohan's remarks, however pragmatic, immediately raised concerns. Jasmine Salters pointedly asks why "the stories of black women and other marginalized groups must be mediated through whiteness and if, in fact, such strategies function to advance American race and gender relations"?

My title invokes Alice Walker's classic 1982 novel, *The Color Purple*, a story centering on marginalized women that arguably works to heal some of the wounds wrought by racism and intersecting with

men's sexist violence against women. A close analyses of key patterns laid down in its first season may reveal if *OITNB* makes any related type of cultural contribution. Does it accurately represent marginalized women's stories? Or, does it, rather, contribute to the ideologies and stereotypes supporting the prison nation? Salter's questions are a good place to begin, for *OITNB*'s central character, the "girl next door" or "cool blonde," is a stereotype with a great deal of history—and not a benign one.

### Orange is the Old White?

A comment from a rave review appears on the back cover of Kerman's memoir: "This book is impossible to put down because [Piper] could be you. Or your best friend. Or your daughter" (Wagman). But, who is this "you"? And who is left out? Though Kohan hopes to use this "cool blonde" as a way to sneak in stories of silenced others, this project is questionable because of this type's historical role as an agent of "cultural imperialism," defined by Iris Marion Young as the "universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm" (59). Against this norm, some groups are erased as insignificant and marked as inferior, as "Other," thereby justifying oppression—including by being incarcerated.

Oppression, Young writes, is "structural," "embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols. . . [and] rules" and carried by "unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms—in short, the normal processes of everyday life" (40–41). *OITNB*, like all popular culture, is entertaining; and viewers are not mere open containers for stereotypic messaging. Everything is subject to interpretation, appropriation, oppositional readings, subversive cross-identifications, and outright rejection. Much feminist and queer criticism has worked to claim some aspects of popular culture as subversive of hegemonic norms. However, although *OITNB* intends to be progressive, it enacts cultural imperialism.

Salter asks what happens when stories of "Others" are mediated through whiteness. In American myth and symbol, *whiteness* (coupled with high class status) has long been linked to what Toni Morrison

calls the “major and championed characteristics of our national literature,” including “innocence” (5). Stereotypes of white female brands of *innocence* include the “virgin,” “lady,” “good girl,” “damsel,” and, yes, “girl next door.” These projections historically provided cover for conquest and colonization (Smith; McClintock) and have marginalized, if not criminalized, girls and women who, variously, resist male control, are not white, and/or who are bisexual, lesbian, transgender; fat, old, rural, poor, uneducated, colonized, Jewish, and so on. Against that “good girl” norm, “Others” are differentiated and defined as exploitable, expendable, ugly, deviant, deficient, dumb, dirty, mad, bad, and *guilty*.

Consider the opening sequence of *OITNB*, viewers first see a dingy tile wall as a soundtrack brings in the sounds of singer and civil rights activist Mavis Staples taking up the lyrics to the classic “I’ll Take You There.” Just seconds later, the speaking voice of *OITNB*’s protagonist, Piper (Taylor Schilling), who is given the last name of Chapman, comes in: “I’ve always loved getting clean. I love baths. I love showers. It’s my happy place.” Flowing imagery shows Piper in a variety of luxurious locations, where warm water flows abundantly: a baby in a sink being lovingly washed by her mother; a child in a bubbly bath; Piper sexually showering with her criminal female lover Alex (Laura Prepon), then smooching in the bath with her fiancé, Larry (Jason Biggs). Resources are plentiful. Piper continues: “It *was* my happy place.” The song stops, a loud buzzer sounds, and the scene shifts to a miserable Piper, dealing with a pitiful stream of apparently lukewarm water. The camera travels down her body, though discreetly, ending up on her well-manicured feet and prettily polished toes in makeshift shower slippers. The juxtaposition is meant to be ironic and funny. Piper is in prison, where resources are virtually nonexistent. And other dangers lurk as well.

We next get a view of the scummy bathroom area along with a peep show of the near-naked body of another slim, white—though dark-haired and openly tattooed—woman with large breasts. An announcement plays, stating that all inmates in D dorm must be checked for lice. And, just then, into the frame comes the first person of color yet seen<sup>2</sup>: a big, broad-faced and dark-skinned African-American woman, large, floppy breasts apparent under her shift and (in a world where the cool blonde sets the standard) with hair that seems especially “unkempt.” Taystee (Danielle Brooks), proceeds

toward the stall occupied by Piper and clears her throat, implicitly asking Piper to hurry. Piper assures her that she will, but keeps showering. Taystee says she will wait, but adds that Piper had best leave her some hot water. Piper says there wasn't much to begin with and continues to shower as Taystee peeks through a hole in the shower curtain. Piper finally turns off the shower; then, as she steps out, her towel falls a bit and Taystee actually pulls it away, making a big-eyed expression, sticking out her tongue, and gawking at Piper's smallish breasts, complimenting her on her perky "TV titties." Taystee then actually makes a grab at Piper's breasts. Piper squeaks a protest and retreats, though taking a moment to admire her "perfect" breasts, while Taystee goes into the shower and starts singing, "I'll take you there." Where, we might start to wonder, exactly is *there*? In the song, *there* refers to a heavenly place free of racism, but, here, *there* seems to be a kind of hell. As Toni Morrison has observed, when whiteness is associated with innocence, the national literature projects African Americans and places associated with them as "figurations of death and hell" (5).

The authors of *Queer (In)Justice* remind us that in culturally imperialist stereotypes, "prisons and jails have always served as a breeding ground for a raced, gendered and classed archetypal amalgam of criminality, disease, predation, and out-of-control-sexuality... powerful images used to control people both inside and outside prison walls" (Mogul, Ritchie, and Whitlock 95). This amalgam is repeated here. Piper is immediately registered as someone who does not belong in prison, "clean," while Taystee is "dirty, sick and sinful," damning traits stereotypically ascribed to black women (Collins 129). Tellingly, the lice announcement plays just as Taystee enters the frame; and the racist trope of a black person sexually aggressing against a white victim, begun in slavery, now continues in stereotypes of "Black women as sexually degenerate seductresses, whose depravity is further twisted in the context of sex-segregated prisons against members of their own sex" (Mogul, Ritchie, and Whitlock 104).

Throughout the first season, Piper remains the centerpiece, even as Taystee and many of the "Others" Piper encounters are given some depth. Viewers do learn that Taystee was an unwanted, impoverished foster child, that she has a good mind, that white people negatively judge her hair; and that when she was released from prison she found such hostile conditions (unemployment and homelessness) that she

found relief in being returned there. That particular sequence provides one of the welcome occasions where *OITNB* does provide insight into actual social conditions. Others are when Taystee, along with some of the other black characters, including Sophia (Laverne Cox) and Poussey (Samira Wiley), occasionally get to make pointed observations about racism, transphobia, class privilege, and so on. Even Piper's self-absorption and intellectual airs come in for some mockery. These moments have led many commentators on the show's first season to claim it as a successful deconstruction of white privilege. But, white, class privilege is continually, if subtly, reinforced, including by reserving key moments of viewer focus, identification, and empathy for Piper alone.<sup>3</sup>

Through Piper, viewers get to experience some of the worst aspects of prison life, including the "total degradation ceremony" (Gilligan)—the booking process's mandatory strip search. Piper is the only one shown undergoing this, even though she was booked at the same time as an African-American woman, Janae Watson (Vicky Jeudy), and a Latina, Daya Diaz (Dascha Polanco). Significantly, only Piper is shown in the throes of solitary confinement, SHU (Security Housing Unit), even though other prisoners, notably Janae Watson, are confined there. Watson is there for several weeks, but Piper is released quickly because Larry institutes such a series of complaints that higher administration intervenes. The script, thus, overtly draws attention to Piper's unfair class advantage, but it also covertly privileges her, as viewers experience with Piper, only, the horrors of SHU, including mental pain, inedible food, the tormented shrieks of others, auditory hallucinations, and uncertainty about one's fate. And Piper was there for maybe two days. What was it like for Watson during her much longer stay? Viewers do not know and maybe do not even think to ask. The underlying message is that such treatment is horrific only when suffered by the "good girl," the socially significant one, the one worthy of empathy, attention, resources, and justice. Jill McCorkel found that women's prison officials regularly made a distinction between "good girls" and "real criminals," designations "fueled by racist stereotypes," even though most of those she interviewed would not "come right out and say this (though some did)" (78–79). Though *OITNB* also does not come right out and say it, doesn't it implicitly convey some of those same distinctions?

### “Beggars Can’t Be Choosers”

In one episode, Piper is visited by her WASP mother, who observes that Piper is *different* from all the other women in the prison. Piper protests, insisting that she is no different, proclaiming: “I made bad choices, I committed a crime, and being in here is no one’s fault but my own.” While this seems to show Piper’s growing awareness, it actually shows her denial. Piper *is* different, having the options that come with a first-class education, connections, and a supportive, well-fixed family. Nothing in the memoir reveals any threat or trauma that played a role in thwarting Kerman’s ability to make healthy decisions and the show does not invent any. Kerman analyzes her step into crime as a deliberate one, stemming from a “desire to have an adventure, an outrageous experience, and the fact of it being illegal made it all the more exciting” (279). The *Feminist Griote* breaks this down: “Piper gets involved in criminal activity because she was a privileged white woman who got bored with life.” Mohadessa Najumi adds: “Reality is less about WoC [Women of Color] choices than. . . socio-economic destinies. And avoiding prison has less to do with making “bad choices,” as Piper so erroneously claims, than it is avoiding the Prison Industrial Complex that sees people of color face harsher sentences than whites or comparable crimes.”

The “bad choices” account obscures the lack of options for oppressed peoples; it cannot explain the huge jump in the rate of imprisonment for women, and especially minority women, since the 1970s; and it neatly shifts blame away from the unjust structures that mark the legal and criminal justice systems. Moreover, real stories told by marginalized women show them routinely and unjustly blamed for “bad choices,” as when abusive men harm their children and abused women get punished, as if this were something they had control over (McCorkel 11, 130; Adair 16; *Compelled to Crime* 105–10). Multiple forces of coercion, Richie finds, work to criminalize behaviors many black women adopt in order to cope with poverty, inadequate education, and domestic violence, for example, acquiescence to an abusive partner’s demand for participation in criminal activities, prostitution, drug use (*Compelled to Crime*). And a larger social level of violence includes that of stereotypes—negating ones like “welfare queen” or “crack whore,” but also valorizing ones like



“cool blondes” and “good girls” that work to ensure that Other women rarely seem innocent or even “real” (*Arrested Justice* 117).

Consider *OITNB*'s backstory for Janae Watson, who, we learn, in an aside, grew up poor. A flashback shows her as a child in an urban and all-black playground where boys challenge the girls to a chase. Janae easily outruns a boy and then finds, to her dismay, that he has lost interest. Next, we see teenage Janae, a high-school track star, well on her way to college scholarships and success. But Janae is distracted, eyeing one of her teammates sharing an embrace with a boyfriend. Later, Janae goes to a party, where one man, an apparent gang leader, tells her that she does not belong there, that her talent provides her with a ticket to success, and that she must go home. But Janae, instead, chooses to hook up with an obvious bad boy. Later, he has somehow induced her to commit a robbery with him. As the police chase them, he cannot keep up and asks her to slow down. When Janae complies, the police pounce on her, while he escapes.

The answer to why Janae is in prison seems simple: She was young, wanted some excitement and male attention, and made a bad choice. But questions should remain, including: What if the star athlete, charged with her first crime, had been a well-off white girl? Why was Janae so susceptible to the “bad boy”? Deeper understanding of some of the intersecting forces can be gained by consulting Richie's analysis of the self-sabotage that is common in the experiences of poor and battered African-American women, whose stories reveal consistent patterns of “vulnerability, risk-taking, and fear of success” (Riche, *Compelled to Crime* 52; Crenshaw 1991). Many, as children, had been favored and considered exceptional, but they began to feel ambivalent about this, fearing not only that their exceptionalism could “harm relationships with their siblings, peers, and potential mates,” but also set them up for disappointment in a hostile outside world, particularly as they began to experience the harmful “effects of growing up as a girl, poor, and African American in contemporary society” (*Compelled to Crime* 52). For them, “risk-taking” behaviors were adopted as a way to sabotage their success and allow them to remain in the “boundaries of expected gender behavior and racial/ethnic stereotypes” (*Compelled to Crime* 54).

One story is that of Blondie, a twenty-one-year-old African-American battered woman detained on a felonious drug charge:

“When I was young, I thought I’d have a great life. I felt like I was going to be able to run with the wind, to take risks and succeed—surprising the world with myself.” But Blondie’s mother became ill and was unable to work, and the family “became poor very fast.” Blondie took a job at a clothing store, but was falsely accused of stealing: “I quit that job, but things like that just kept happening to me. I’m not saying I was perfect, but I am no thief. I got real depressed real fast.” Blondie then was raped by a boss: “I was hurt, but I wouldn’t let him stop me. Instead, I stopped myself. I started hanging out with a group of people who were no good for me. . . I thought it was easier not to try and fail again. It was a control thing. . . like no one was going to get me down but myself” (*Compelled to Crime*, 52–53). How much more real, responsible, and interesting *OITNB* would be if the writers worked in stories that point to the negative effects of intersecting social injustices, instead of solely blaming the victim.

A much-loved character of *OITNB* is Sophia Burset, played by African-American transgender woman and social justice activist Laverne Cox. Trans, queer, antiracist, and feminist commentators, even if critical of other aspects of the show, applaud Cox’s performance and the significance of a transgender woman playing a transgender woman. Moreover, Burset is not the conventional transgender woman stereotype—conglomerate of sex worker, drug addict, psycho killer, and woman-hater. The backstory for Burset is that, prior to transitioning, she was a fire fighter, married to a supportive wife and with a son. But to finance gender-reassignment surgery, she participated in credit card fraud. Here, a key issue of oppression against transgender people—discriminatory health care—is opened up but unexplored. As a fire-fighter, she most likely had insurance, but did that insurance refuse to cover her treatment? Who knows? Another problematic plot point concerns the aspersions associated with *fraud* itself, for an accusation of *fraudulence* provides the basis for much transphobia (Mitchell). Burset’s character works to belie negative stereotypes of transgendered women, but it would also have been beneficial for *OITNB* to reflect in some other way the terrible life experiences (including poverty, homelessness, sexual violation, street harassment) of many of the transgender people who end up in prison (including transgender women incarcerated in men’s prisons). Cox’s character contributes mightily toward bringing transgender human rights into

view. But marketing mechanisms and the requirements of mainstream appeal steer *OITNB* toward muting some of the realities of racist and transphobic oppression.

Another character is the older, immigrant “Miss Claudette” (Michelle Hurst), rumored to be a cold-blooded killer as well as having been involved in some “slave trade shit.” Her story reveals her as probably a Haitian woman, who, like many other poor children, had been made into a *restavék*, a contemporary equivalent of a domestic slave, often subjected to sexual abuse. But viewers are not given enough narrative material, nor any information about impoverishment and other neocolonial realities in Haiti that support modern slavery. When grown, Claudette has become part of the operation that oversees the placement of new children in the United States. Cold, strict, and unsympathetic, she nonetheless becomes upset when she finds one of the young girls suffering from a beating (and perhaps also sexual abuse). But nothing is explained. Claudette goes to the home of the older, wealthy white man for whom the girl was working and knifes him to death (off camera). Why would Claudette commit so extreme a crime? Perhaps, she had suffered similar or worse abuse, yet no unpleasant details are given. But these are needed to put the original crime (enslavement) against Claudette and her subsequent murderous rage into a personal, cultural, and political context. As it stands, all we are left with is confirmation of Claudette’s involvement “in some slave-trade shit.”

In an interview with *Salon*, Richie speaks to the “complicated” life histories of oppressed peoples: “It’s difficult for people who are removed from the lives of more disadvantaged communities to understand the complexity of life there.... [There is a] general inability, whether it’s the news media or research studies, to really show complexity” (McKeon). One place to more easily represent complicated realities is in fiction. But *OITNB* instead offers simplified stories “mediated through whiteness” and scripted through a frame of valorized “personal responsibility,” obscuring the complex experiences of coercion, not choice, produced by “lack of resources and structural arrangements” (Richie, *Arrested Justice* 108). *OITNB* does occasionally challenge the “bad choices” explanation, as when Taystee returns to prison as the best of her miserable options. Still, the challenge has to go beyond the merely occasional or implicit. As is, any substantial challenge *OITNB* offers to the “bad choices”

explanation remains dependent on the viewer figuring it out. A similar pattern characterizes *OITNB*'s handling of gender-based violence. None of the stories from *OITNB*'s first season say anything directly about prisoners' prior experiences of sexual harassment, rape, sexual assault, physical abuse, or incest, even though eighty-five to ninety percent of women prisoners have been victims of these (ACLU). *OITNB*'s silence on the topic arguably becomes complicit with the enabling denial of the larger culture, only compounded when *OITNB* also problematically romanticizes sex between an imprisoned woman and a male guard.

### Sex-and-Violence

Due to the character of women's prisons as "total institutions," places where guards and officials exert complete control, "it is impossible for prisoners to voluntarily consent to sexual advances by staff members" (Hunter). Abusive guards routinely sexually harass and often rape. They traffic illegal drugs and extort sex in exchange for these. They engineer scarcities of necessities, like prescription medication, tampons and toilet paper, inducing prisoners to submit to sex in order to acquire these (Summer).

All of these abuses are reflected in *OITNB*. One vile guard, George Mendez (Pablo Schreiber) provides drugs to an inmate in exchange for fellatio. When Mendez starts forcing her to deal drugs, she overdoses. He covers this up as suicide, enabled by a corrupt prison administration that wants to forestall outside investigation. Mendez also offers to get Burset necessary hormones denied to her by the prison doctors if she will submit to sex with him; Burset refuses. Mendez verbally sexually harasses prisoners and, on a couple of occasions, threatens rape. But, perhaps because *OITNB* is a comedy, no rapes take place and the prisoner he most directly menaces, a young white woman, is able to thwart him by being verbally assertive.

A pernicious storyline glosses over guard-prisoner sex as "true love," depicts inmates fabricating rape charges, and is built on the stereotype of the hypersexual Latina, the "Hot Tamale." Judith Ortiz Cofer writes that "this stereotype has contributed to the "harassment that Puerto Rican women endured in factories where the 'boss men'

talked to them as if sexual innuendo was all they understood and, worse, often gave them the choice of submitting to advances or being fired" (111) In *OITNB*, the "Hot Tamales" are a mother–daughter pair, while the "boss men" appears in the form of a good guard/bad guard set up: Bennett (Matt McGory) the naïve, white "nice-guy" lover and the nasty Mendez. When Bennett gets overwhelmed by the flirtatious Daya and they begin a sexual relationship, Daya's mother Aleida (Elizabeth Rodriguez), who also is imprisoned, reacts with jealousy, getting naked, and trying to seduce (probably successfully) Bennett herself.

In the backstory, the young teenager Daya lives with her mother and four siblings, for whom she is the primary caregiver. Aleida is grossly neglectful, obsessed with the drug-dealing Cesar (Berto Colon), her lover, who ogles Daya. Cesar runs his drug business out of Aleida's home and it seems that Aleida must have taken the fall for Cesar. When Daya comes with the children to visit, Aleida evinces no concern and demands to know why Cesar is not there. The scene then shifts back to the home, where Daya, to get back at her hateful mother, initiates sex with the willing Cesar. Knowledgeable viewers might recognize Cesar's sexual attention to Daya as predatory, bordering on incest, and one of multiple ways he manipulates Aleida. But with this simplified story, all we really know is that Aleida is some kind of monstrous person, whose neglect causes her daughter to be caught in a lover's triangle with her and Cesar, one that is then mirrored in their sexual rivalry over Bennett.

When it becomes clear that Daya is pregnant with Bennett's child, Aleida starts seeing Bennett as an income source. She hatches a plot whereby Daya will seduce Mendez and then falsely accuse him of rape. Supposedly, Daya's pregnancy then will be attributed to Mendez. Daya reluctantly goes along and probably does feel raped, while Mendez decides that he is in love with her! Meanwhile, viewers learn nothing more about Aleida. She appears young (the actress is thirty-three) and some viewers might wonder about the circumstances that led to her becoming pregnant with Daya. Who was the father? How did incestuous patterns become so normalized to her? Why is she taking the fall for Cesar? And how did Daya end up in jail so young? Aware viewers might recognize that Cesar's sexual abuse of Daya precipitated both her criminalization as well as

her subsequent entry into another damaging relationship. But the narrative, instead, perpetuates racist and sexist stereotypes by showing a white guard having a romanticized love affair with a prisoner, that prisoner falsely accusing another guard of rape, and a pair of “Hot Tamales” who easily sexually manipulate two hapless “boss men.”

### The Good, the Bad, and the Crazy

For many, the most obvious representative of a negative racist stereotype in *OITNB* is the character Suzanne (Uzo Aduba), dubbed Crazy Eyes. The dark-skinned Suzanne expresses ardent desire for Piper, whom she calls “Dandelion,” and extolls as “shiny,” not smelling “funky,” and a “real woman,” but when rejected, Suzanne urinates on the floor in Piper’s room. Suzanne, like Taystee, gradually is humanized, shown as educated, funny, perceptive, even appearing to be a kind of truth-telling Shakespearean “wise-fool.” Some African-American viewers see past the stereotype to claim her as “one of the best characters on the show” (Bossip Staff). But, however deep the interpretive possibilities, it remains hard to deny that “Crazy Eyes” plays a culturally imperialist function—the role of the “inappropriate lover.” This type appears regularly in narratives where a rational, straight- and white-identified protagonist must successfully avoid the “wrong” lover, for example, the Diné woman (kicked down a hill) in the 1956 Western *The Searchers*, the abandoned Vegas sex worker in the 2009 comedy *The Hangover*, and the Thai “ladyboy” sex worker in the 2011 *The Hangover 2*. In *OITNB*, Alex, too, is another kind of “inappropriate lover,” for she is lesbian, criminal, tattooed, and lower class. But, she is also “hot” and white; hence her relationship with Piper is possible—at least while Piper is young and foolish or when she is older but incarcerated. In these ways, *OITNB* caters to heteronormative, racist, classist, and ableist standards.

Prisoners’ disabilities, mental and physical, are mostly mocked or used as foils in *OITNB*, highlighting Piper’s superior prowess and stability. Yet, disability has always been a core factor for incarceration (Ben-Moshe, Chapman, and Carey ix), marginalizing, and hence both leading to and justifying confinement, with particularly egregious conditions for those with disabilities. The reality of mental

illness is a dire one for incarcerated women. “Almost three quarters (73 percent) of all women in state prison have mental health problems, compared to 55 percent of men” (*Human Rights Watch*). Treatment and services for these women are virtually nonexistent, if not outright harmful. This reality is represented in *OITNB*, when two characters are sent to the “psych ward.” But this political recognition might be overshadowed since neither of the characters is presented at all sympathetically. One of them is the sexting Spanish-only Latina, sent there after freaking out upon discovering that her cellphone is gone, (Piper is the one who took it.) She gets no back or current story; nothing is shown of her travails in the psych ward, as she makes only a brief appearance, appearing dazed. The “white trash” character, who turns into Piper’s nemesis, “Pennsatucky,” is the other one sent to psych. She is shown suffering isolation, overmedication, and restraints. But since “Pennsatucky” is scripted to be the most obnoxious character of all, viewers might not really care so much.

In the first season, Suzanne’s significance fades when another “crazy” character, “Pennsatucky,” emerges as Piper’s true nemesis. “Pennsatucky” hails from “one of the groups [it] is most socially acceptable to stereotype, mock and despise in US culture today. . . the rural poor white people sometimes called ‘rednecks’ or ‘hillbillies,’ regularly insulted as ‘white trash’” (Leondar-Wright), those denigrated as “stupid, degenerate, law-breaking, lazy, irresponsible, unworthy, ‘dirty’ and ‘illegitimate’” (Adair 2). Pennsatucky’s backstory reveals her as a loud-mouthed “meth-head” who gets pregnant from consensual sex five times in about as many years. Each time, she just goes and gets an abortion, a plot line giving credence to the propaganda of anti-abortion activists. And further distortions abide. Even though “Pennsatucky” resides in a southern state, those with the most restrictive abortion laws, she doesn’t seem to have any trouble getting access to abortion or paying for it. Then, when an aide at the clinic comments derisively to her on the frequency of her abortions, she feels disrespected, gets a gun, and murders the woman. Of course, in reality, all of the known murderers of abortion providers and support staff in the United States have been men.

Subsequently “Pennsatucky” gets exploited by an antiabortion Christian group, which recasts her as a heroine. She starts to believe the lie, assuming the role of hyper-devout Christian and faith healer,

while also clashing with Piper and her prison lover, Alex, in part because she is openly homophobic (along with transphobic and racist). Alex, Piper, and a few others, vengefully trick her into believing that her healing powers are real. The device of making “Pennsatucky” into the greatest threat to Piper conforms to a long-standing narrative pattern, especially in times of economic threat, in which “poor white trash... [becomes] the ghastly specter that haunts the white middle class” (Newitz and Wray 183). Putting a poor woman of color into this role might have struck many viewers as racist. But putting the “white trash” woman in this role is classist and also racist. Patricia Turner identifies what she calls the “dangerous stereotype” of the good, noble, upper-class white person who is contrasted to the bad and mean-spirited racist, who also happens to be poor. Turner finds the flaw in this logic: “To suggest that bad people were racist implies that good people were not... It’s the fallacy... that well-educated Christian whites were somehow victimized by white trash and forced to live within a social system that exploited and denigrated its black citizens.” With the despicable “Pennsatucky” made into the focus of viewer’s ire, privileged white folks get a pass.

The war between Piper and “Pennsatucky” takes a disastrous turn when a group of delinquent girls are sent to the prison to experience a “scared straight” session. Some of the women have volunteered to “scare” the girls, but they are flagrantly unsuccessful with Dina (Adrienne Warren), a spunky black girl in a wheelchair. Piper happens to enter the bathroom where the group is broadly threatening the girls with sexual violence. When Dina appears unmoved, Piper gets roped into participating. One of the black women warns Dina: “Chapman a stone cold lesbian and she put you through your paces.” Everyone deliberately leaves Dina and Piper alone and Piper condescendingly touches Dina’s shoulder. Rejecting that boundary violation, Dina scorns Piper as a “dyke faggot bitch.” In this context, that insult could have been shrugged off, but Piper is not about to do that. She gets mad and draws upon all her intellectual capital to psychologically demolish the teenager. First, she eloquently elaborates the sexual threats she might pose and then claims to be able to perceive that Dina is weak (a classic stratagem of manipulators). Piper goes on, “confessing” that she also is weak, needing love, and sex to make it through her prison stay and then subjecting Dina to a self-absorbed soliloquy that ends: “I’m scared that I’m not myself in here,



and I'm scared that I am... The truth catches up with you in here, Dina, and it's the truth that's gonna make you her bitch." Dina's now tortured expression indicates that, while the other prisoners failed, Piper has managed, not just to "scare" Dina, but to psychologically break her down, crushing that spunk (something she undoubtedly needs in the face of the multiple injustices she faces). Once again, *OITNB's* imperative to mediate the story through whiteness and privilege dominates and, in this case, elevates Piper while silencing and squashes the vital Dina.

When Piper emerges, she finds a gathering of dumbstruck prisoners and guards who overheard. Poussey finds some words: "Damn, you cold." Piper replies: "Bitches gots to learn." Poussey's statement is ambiguous, but the way the group is assembled, standing as if to receive Piper, makes it seem as if they all are in awe of her. And what does Piper's adoption of black talk signify in this situation? Has Piper now one-upped her prior status as the ultra-privileged white woman by becoming also a "better," that is, a stereotypically "badder" black woman than the actual black women?

Just after this scene, Piper acts most arrogantly, unethically, and violently of all. She goes and finds "Pennsatucky," sending her into the bathroom to "heal" Dina. "Pennsatucky," predictably, utterly terrorizes Dina, getting her on the floor and praying wildly over her. Consequently, "Pennsatucky" is sent to the psych ward. Soon, though, Piper, learning from Suzanne that psych is even worse than SHU, feels guilty, confesses, and obtains her release. Piper thus keeps her credibility as a "good person," even though, in truth, she displayed extreme callousness toward the young Dina. The script then plays out predictably. "Pennsatucky" soon again feels disrespected by Piper and resolves to kill her. Though Piper has shown herself to be a master of psychological violence, she does need some instruction in physical violence from three black women (Taystee, "Black Cindy," and Poussey). Here, as elsewhere in hegemonic popular culture, the violence of black women seems to issue as a "result of their being black" (Springer 173), while the elite white woman's psychological violence is not even necessarily recognized as violence. The first season ends with Piper fighting back against "Pennsatucky" and beating her as instructed.

Mohadesa Najumi notes that the series casts Piper as a conventional "naïve white savior," a type defined by Teju Cole as the well-

meaning white person who ventures into third world conflicts in the role of “savior.” But, Cole continues, there is a fatal flaw in this narrative, for it really is “not about justice” but about individual gratification, about having “a big emotional experience that validates privilege.” Piper does play a variation on this role and by season’s end, no longer “good,” but now “bad.” But this is just fine because she is having that “big emotional experience,” one that will result not in her becoming a hopeless inmate, but someone who, can leave “prison with book contracts, while others keep moving through its doors, fodder for the expanding Prison Industrial Complex” (Nair).

## The Color Orange

Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* stands as a powerful story of healing for an individual and a community. Celie’s story is a song of herself, but also, at the same time, one that gathers in those excluded by the dominant “it could be you” Piper-type narratives. As Walker explains it, “When Celie comes in from the cold of repression, self-hatred, and denial, and only when Celie comes in from the cold—do I come in. And many of you as well” (“Finding Celie’s Voice,” 96).

In season one of *OITNB*, center stage mostly stays with Piper, someone who never really had been out in the cold and only has had to enter it temporarily (signified by that unhappy opening shower scene). But, the “girl-next-door” formula ensures that Piper will emerge at story’s end, having had her “big experience” and now able to return to her “happy place.” Others, like Taystee and Claudette, most likely will not.

The first season of *OITNB* is different in the ways that Lewis claims. It is woman-centered, diverse, and set in a controversial institution, prison. And the show does convey some of prison nation’s dire contexts and conditions: poverty and homelessness in the lives of women prior to and subsequent to incarceration; the torture of solitary confinement; sexually abusive, homophobic and transphobic guards; corrupt officials; inadequate or harmful health care; and the dire situation of women who are released only to face a dearth of institutional or community support.

In this way, the show does have potential to “take us there,” with *there* being critical awareness and active resistance to the prison indus-

trial complex. However, by mediating the “Other” women’s stories in ways that sidestep intersectional injustices; by distorting and denying the crushing results of men’s sexual, psychological and physical abuses in the lives of imprisoned women; and by so firmly installing Piper as the center, *OITNB* continues many of the stereotypes and canards on which the prison industrial complex rests. It thus becomes, as its title implies, a fashion that will not stand the tests of time—or justice.

## Notes

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2. Thanks to Ralpheal Lilly-Mooyoung for this insight.
3. Thanks to Helene Vann for first making me aware of this stratagem, which she first pointed out in the Oscar-winning “best picture” *Places in the Heart* (Caputi and Vann).

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