

Caputi, J. (2015). The color orange? Social justice issues in the first season of *Orange is the New Black*. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 48(6), 1130-1150.

Synopsis

Caputi argued that while *OITNB* does feature the stories of marginalized women (Black, poor, trans, Hispanic, Old, etc.), it does so by filtering those stories through Piper's white and class privilege. She noted that while Piper is positioned as the good, innocent girl, already marginalized women are positioned as other and therefore as inherently guilty, deficient, and dumb. Despite giving some depth and characterization to "Othered" characters in the first season, Piper remained the focus of the show and viewers' were made most aware of the significance of her pain, as the "'good girl,' and the socially significant one" (p. 1136). Caputi pointed out that Piper's sentence was the result of her freely making bad choices while most of the other characters' fates were at the mercy of the Prison Industrial Complex and their socio-economic position, but this is not addressed in the show. She also discussed how the romanticized relationships between guards and inmates only served to reinforce racist and sexist stereotypes of Women of Color and to glorify inherently nonconsensual relationships. Caputi noted that while the show did address the lack of mental health resources in prisons, it failed to present the prevalence of mental illness in prisoners or show any character with a mental illness in sympathetic light. Instead, a character with mental illness, "Pennsatucky," is shown as "white trash," adding class as another form of "otherness" that presents Piper as superior.

Key Concepts

- **Naïve White Savior:** "the well-meaning white person who ventures into third world conflicts in the role of 'savior'... about having 'a big emotional experience that validates privilege'" (p. 1147).
- **Oppression:** "[the] rules carried [out] 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" (p. 1133).
- **Cultural Imperialism:** "the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm" resulting in "some groups being erased as insignificant and marked as inferior, as 'Other,' thereby justifying oppression" (p. 1133).

Key Quotes

- "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'" (p. 1135).
- "The device of making "Pennsatucky" into the greatest threat Piper conforms to a long-standing narrative pattern... in which 'poor white trash...[becomes] the ghastly specter that haunts the white middle class" (p.1145).
- "The violence of black women seems to issue as a 'result of their being black' while the elite white woman's psychological violence is not...recognized as violence" (p. 1146).

Essential Question

- How would the portrayal of WoC be different in *OITNB* if Piper were a Black woman?