

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 argues that the first season of *Orange is the New Black* is a diverse, women-centered program that breaks stereotypes surrounding minority groups by showing marginalized women's stories; however, it also continues many of the stereotypes in our society by presenting marginalized women as "other." She argued that women marked as "other" are positioned against the main character, Piper – a white, blonde, upper-class woman – who is represented as the innocent good girl that audiences should sympathize with. The show mediates the stories of Black, Hispanic, poor, mentally ill, trans, and lesbian women through Piper's whiteness and privilege. Caputi noted that the show does have the potential to bring critical awareness and active resistance to the prison industry as it displays some of the conditions that are still prevalent in our current prison complex: poverty and homelessness in lives of the women prior to and subsequent to imprisonment; the torture of solitary confinement; sexually abusive guards; corrupt officials; inadequate health care; the dreadful situations of women who are released into lack of institutional or community support. However, it also distorts and denies the results of men's sexual, psychological, and physical abuse of (incarcerated) women.

### Key Concepts

- **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... [It] helps and maintains the authority of people who get their power through racial, economic, and other privileges" (p. 1131).
- **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" (p. 1132).
- **Oppression:** "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—the normal processes of everyday life" (p. 1133).

### Key Quotes

- "Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation" (p. 1130).
- "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" (p. 1140).
- "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" (p. 1141).

### Essential Question

- How does *Orange is the New Black* break and reinforce stereotypes?