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**Postfeminism Meets the Women in Prison Genre:
Privilege and Spectatorship in *Orange is the New Black***

This article argues that Netflix’s original series *Orange is the New Black* (2013-), based on Piper Kerman’s memoir (2010), uses postfeminist strategies to covertly promote prison reform and exercise a subtle critique of (female) mass incarceration while renegotiating the boundaries of the women in prison genre in a neoliberal context of media production.¹ Similar to earlier examples of the women in prison genre, *OITNB* highlights relationships between women, in this instance relationships between a particularly diverse group of women, with a view to interrogating white, middle-class women’s identity through Piper Chapman’s character, who also serves as a foil for the show’s implied viewer, at least initially. *OITNB* inhabits the tensions associated both with the women in prison genre and postfeminism, tensions manifesting themselves in titillating content and Netflix’s aggressive marketing campaigns, which appropriate women’s prison experiences as a life-style choice rather than focusing on in-depth analyses of the root causes of incarceration. Yet, the series has the potential to mobilize social awareness and activist sensibilities amongst its target audience, in a political and media environment where the individual and social cost of mass incarceration is increasingly recognized as untenable.² Building on theories of postfeminism and recent work on the women in prison genre in feminist

media, film and cultural studies, and by analyzing the show's self-reflexive strategies and its exploration of Piper's perspective, I suggest that the series affords useful opportunities for assessing the effectiveness of (post)feminism's tactics as an ally in the fight against social inequalities, media (mis-)representation and mass imprisonment specifically.

Female-Centred Television, Postfeminism and the Women in Prison Genre

OITNB follows thirty-something character Piper Chapman's journey into Litchfield prison after being convicted for involvement in her former girlfriend Alex Vause's international drug operation. Although Piper, like many of her fellow prisoners, falls prey to America's harsh sentencing laws in the wake of the "War on Drugs," her WASP character is anything but representative of America's prison population at a moment when people of color from socially underprivileged backgrounds constitute the majority of the (female) prison population.³ Piper Chapman, like her real-life inspiration Piper Kerman, cannot and should not speak on behalf of *all* incarcerated women, but neither the memoir nor the television adaptation pretend to do so. It is precisely Piper's atypical viewpoint, conveyed through the conventions of comedy-drama, and the show's innovative use of genre, that has the potential to bring issues around women's imprisonment to a broader audience of viewers who are unlikely to consider them otherwise.⁴ *OITNB*, despite, or in fact *because* of this limitation, is able to reinvigorate public debates around *how* stories of the incarcerated are mediated for the public; who gets to tell their story and who does not, and why.

Creator Jenji Kohan was conscious of the difficulty of creating a platform for socially marginalized perspectives, as she notes in an interview with NPR in 2013:

In a lot of ways Piper was 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 take this white girl, this sort of fish out of water, and you follow her in, you can then expand your world and tell all of those other stories. But it's a hard sell to just go in and try to sell those stories initially. The girl next door, the cool blonde, is a very easy access point, and it's relatable for a lot of audiences and a lot of networks looking for a certain demographic. It's useful.

What Kohan is suggesting here is a *tactical* use of Piper's subject position as an "access point," paving the way towards less familiar perspectives and less readily digestible material. It is precisely the benefit of Piper's privilege, in other words, which buys the privilege of making prison life visible in the first place—and it is this position of privilege which the series explicitly explores.⁵

While Netflix is secretive about its audience statistics (Pollak 2015), the implied audience, the "certain demographic" Kohan alludes to, arguably consists of young or middle-aged, affluent, urban and predominantly white professionals willing and able to subscribe to the company's streaming service (or, those who have the know-how to download the show illegally)—in short, the "bourgeois bohemians" or "bobos" (Brooks 2000) who would identify with Piper and fiancé Larry's lifestyle and recognize the books they display in their comfortable Brooklyn home, including New York restaurateurs Matthew Kenney and Sarma Melngailis's *Raw Food/Real World: 100 Recipes to Get the Glow* and London-based Yottam Ottolenghi's vegetarian cookbook *Plenty* (see figure 1).



Figure 1: Piper and Larry at home in front of their healthy eating cookbooks (S1 E2).

Although reflections on the gender of *OITNB*'s audience have to be largely speculative also, the show—as female-centred television comedy-drama—certainly targets female viewers within the larger “bobo” grouping, indicated by advertisements in women’s magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*; similarly, the original memoir was advertised through interviews with Kerman and book excerpts in *Marie Claire* in the lead-up to the publication date.⁶ With its racy storylines, *OITNB* builds on and combines the long tradition of sexualized imagery in the women in prison genre with the popular success of woman-centred television series such as *Sex and the City* (1998-2002), which Kohan contributed to, and Kohan’s own *Weeds* (2005-2012), which had already explored white middle-class femininity gone astray.⁷ In its thematic interrogation of mother-daughter relationships (Daya Diaz and her mother Aleida), and the romance of star-crossed lovers behind bars (Daya and officer John Bennett), the show also mobilizes generic features of melodrama, traditionally

perceived as a “woman’s genre.”⁸ This unique generic fusion moves the more lascivious aspects of the women in prison genre, which the show occasionally and self-consciously exploits—particularly in the pilot episode with its series of lesbian shower scenes—into the realm of respectability while capitalizing on the women in prison genre’s penchant for exploring ethnic and sexual diversity.⁹ In this way, and through its mix of comedic and dramatic elements,¹⁰ *OITNB* is able to address affluent, white liberals with a social conscience and simultaneously—in Netflix’s marketing campaign¹¹ and the show’s strategies of representation—echo *Sex and the City*’s postfeminist “consumerist approach to sexuality, in which women’s sexual pleasure and agency are frankly encouraged as part of a consumer lifestyle and attitude” (Arthurs 2008, 44). In this context, *OITNB*’s relationship to postfeminist media culture warrants further attention.

The contested concept of “postfeminism” continues to inspire debate amongst scholars in screen and media studies. Gill (2007, 148) has identified “three dominant accounts of postfeminism,” ranging from an understanding of the term as a “backlash against feminism,” via “an historical shift within feminism,” to an epistemological or political position in the wake of feminism’s encounter with ‘difference.’” Gill herself regards postfeminism as “a sensibility that characterizes increasing numbers of films, television shows, advertisements and other media products;” she proposes to study “postfeminist media culture” as a “critical object” as opposed to treating it as “an analytic perspective” (148). However, as the following reading of *OITNB* will demonstrate, postfeminism is best understood as *both* an analytic viewpoint *and* a sensibility that requires critical scrutiny. In its treatment of women’s incarceration and self-conscious engagement with the women in prison genre, *OITNB* is caught precisely in a tension between performing its own mode of (post)feminist critique

while exposing itself to critical analyses of the limitations of its postfeminist sensibility. Through the figure of Piper, and the show's distinctive use of women in prison tropes, *OITNB* both problematizes, and remains constrained by, the double bind of postfeminism's ambivalent politics.

In its stance towards imprisonment and the women in prison genre, the show pursues what Stéphanie Genz, drawing on theorist of postmodernism Linda Hutcheon, calls a “complicitous critique” that is “always compromised and controversial” (Genz 2006, 341), since it is “bound up [...] with its own complicity with power and domination” (Hutcheon 1989, 4). *OITNB*'s model of success relies on the globalized structures of capitalist (media) distribution and working within the confines of the prison as setting. It is precisely this consensual positioning *within* existing structures of power that facilitates *OITNB*'s unique brand of “complicitous critique.” According to Genz, whose approach echoes Foucault's theories of power and resistance (Foucault 1978, 95-96), postfeminism operates by subverting “from the inside” so that its “critical and/or political endeavour is not to establish a viewpoint outside power constraints but is to locate subversive strategies that are enabled by those very limitations” (Genz 2006, 342).¹² *OITNB*'s subversion of the women in prison genre “from the inside” works on multiple levels—based on an “insider” woman's prison memoir and partially shaped by Kerman's input as consultant, brought to life by successful female creator Kohan, with some episodes directed by well-known female directors such as Jodie Foster, and with a diverse cast of women, the series overcomes existing barriers typically faced by women in film and television while remaining constrained by the industry's internal policing mechanisms (as suggested by Kohan's assessment above, implying that content that appears too radical will not be picked up).

Re-appropriating Generic Tropes: Shower Scenes and Lesbian Sexuality in

OITNB

One of the most striking strategies in *OITNB*'s "complicitous critique" is the show's use of the women in prison genre's conventions of the gaze and eroticized shower scenes. Recent critical approaches to the women in prison genre by scholars such as Judith Mayne (2000) have shifted away from a concern with women as mere victims of patriarchal exploitation and objects of the male gaze to a more complex understanding of female agency in relation to the gaze and sexuality. Mayne complicates classic feminist film theory, including Laura Mulvey's influential essay (1975), by extending concepts of spectatorship to the female and, in particular, the lesbian spectator. The women in prison genre, Mayne suggests, provides a rich field of analysis in this regard, since its plots typically revolve around "women surveying other women, women objectifying other women" (118). As Mayne demonstrates through her interpretation of a number of classic women in prison movies from *The Big Doll House* (1971) via *Black Mama, White Mama* (1973) to *Caged Heat* (1974), they offer particularly interesting opportunities for comprehending "the complexities of the ways in which women, across the dividing lines of sexuality and race, see other women," since in such films "[d]ifferences between women are stressed as if to take the place usually occupied by gender" (127). Similarly, *OITNB* exploits generic tropes to open up a debate around relationships and differences between women, differences to do with ethnic and sexual identity.

From the start, the gaze between women is highlighted, with Piper eyeing her new companions cautiously, and her fellow prisoners inspecting her more

provocatively. This exploration of the female gaze culminates in the first episode's shower scenes, which demonstrate Piper's transformation from object of African-American Taystee's gaze as she takes her first prison shower, to gazing subject, when she observes Nicky perform oral sex on another woman (S1 E1). While Piper's facial expression is initially a mix of surprise, embarrassment and displeasure, making her look away, she quickly resumes her observation. This shower scene functions as a meta-narrative on a key feature of the women in prison genre, but also, more broadly speaking, a critical exploration of lesbian identity and representation which mirrors that to be found in other media portrayals such as television series *The L Word*. Commenting on a moment in *The L Word* where the character Jenny observes two women having sex, Wolfe and Roripaugh (2008, 215) argue that

[t]he audience is thus immediately implicated in a voyeuristic observation of lesbian sex, rendering the act of viewing as both titillating and inappropriately transgressive. Furthermore, the camera not only cinematographically forces the viewer to spy on the lovers through Jenny's point of view, but also to spy on Jenny spying on the lesbian lovers.

Similarly, in *OITNB*'s shower scene, both Piper's and the viewer's spectatorship is problematized, undercutting what might otherwise be regarded as a straightforwardly objectifying, exploitative portrayal of lesbian sexuality. While the visual emphasis on lesbianism could be seen as problematic in that it reaffirms the traditional, stereotypical conflation of women's social and sexual deviance, such strategies of representation operate in more complex ways in a postfeminist media climate where the show also has the potential to positively affirm lesbian—and in Piper's case, bisexual—visibility and agency.¹³ Although Nicky seems initially coded as a vampiric, sexual predator who engages in lesbian sex in a public space—with fellow

prisoner Lorna Morello who is otherwise portrayed as heterosexual—and shamelessly returns Piper’s (and implicitly the audience’s) gaze, the episode subtly challenges this stereotype by implicating Piper and the viewer in sexual desire and agency, at a moment in the show when the audience has already been informed that Piper has enjoyed sexual encounters with both men and women in the past.¹⁴

This sexualized shower scene—as much as the other sex scenes in the early episodes of the series—jars with Kerman’s assertion in her memoir (2013, 85) that “there did not seem to be any lesbian activity” at Danbury, the institution where she was incarcerated. The adaptation’s choice to open with a number of highly sexualized scenes, then, must be read primarily as a self-conscious nod to generic convention and perceived audience expectation, rather than a desire for “authentic” representation of prison life. A later episode problematizes this conundrum in a conversation between Piper’s fiancé Larry and his editor. Responding to Larry’s desperate efforts to get an assignment, his editor suggests: “Here is your assignment: my wife is in prison [...]. She takes naked showers with bad busty women, and I’m home alone thinking about her, trying not to come. That’s a story for us; knock yourself out!” (S1 E6). Through the portrayal of the editor, who serves as a symbolic representative of media companies and their demands to feed a perceived appetite for racy, generic story lines, and Larry’s resigned response, the episode offers ironic self-reflection on, and a partial disavowal of, its own artistic choices. Viewed in the context of the season and series as a whole, then, sexualized scenes emerge as one way in which the show generates a critical meta-commentary on what is regarded as saleable to the media and popular audiences, although the series’ creators of course remain implicated in this process of commercialization.¹⁵

The “New Fish” and Problematizing “Inside”/“Outside” Viewpoints

In addition to eroticized shower scenes, *OITNB* uses other generic features such as the “new fish” trope to problematize Piper’s character and viewpoint. A classic women in prison film such as the critically acclaimed *Caged* (1950), which is sometimes regarded as the genre’s prototype, deploys the trope of the young, innocent and pregnant “new fish” Marie Allen, imprisoned for being the unknowing accomplice to her husband’s crime, in order to expose the prison system’s failure.¹⁶ The opening shot uses a claustrophobic frame, creating the impression that the viewer, like Marie Allen, is now “caged.” Ultimately, the film suggests that prison functions as morally corrupting rather than reforming force, which turns Marie Allen into a cynical, hardened offender who, the ending insinuates, will reoffend after release.

Although *Caged* and *OITNB* differ in that *OITNB* is a serial and “dramedy” whereas *Caged* is a serious social problem film which earned several Academy Award nominations and the International Award for lead Actor Eleanor Parker at the Venice Film Festival, season one of *OITNB* uses a similar narrative arc, starting with a timid Piper entering Litchfield Correctional Facility, and ending with her viciously and relentlessly beating Tiffany “Pennsatucky” Doggett. Similar to the opening shot of *Caged*, the camera angle in the opening scene switches between medium shots and POV, so that the POV shots align Piper’s field of vision with the intended, uninitiated viewer’s perspective (S1 E1). The spectator “discovers” prison and its population for the first time, just like Piper. The processing-in scene—with Piper accompanied by Latina Daya Diaz and African-American Janae Watson—emphasizes WASP Piper’s new positioning in a diverse prison community (see figure 2).



Figure 2: Piper Chapman arriving at Litchfield, flanked by Daya Diaz and Janae Watson (S1 E1).

Initially, Piper, serving as a vehicle for identification for the implied viewer, is presented as different from the rest of the prison population—underscored in figure two’s frame, which places Piper’s white identity at the centre, whereas the two women of color remain slightly out of focus. Rather than merely reaffirming middle-class whiteness, though, the series interrogates this subject position, making its presumed centrality and internalized privilege visible, through encounters with other characters.¹⁷ The frame visually represents Kohan’s “Trojan Horse” agenda, which will allow her to eventually bring into focus the stories of a diversity of women who initially remain in the background, obliterated by the centrality of Piper’s middle-class whiteness. As the series proceeds, Piper’s perspective, initially reinforced by her voiceovers at the beginning of season one, ceases to serve as central consciousness.

The show frequently draws attention to Piper's difference in status and her internalized privilege.¹⁸ Her difference—and supposed superiority—is underlined by her counselor Sam Healy's insistence that the other inmates “are not like you and me; they're less reasonable, less educated” (S1 E5). But this view is increasingly debunked, as Piper's detachment from the rest of the women decreases during season one, while she continues to distance herself from homophobic Healy, culminating in a stand-off after Piper has been sent to the SHU for “lesbian activity” (an intimate dance with her ex Alex), marking her ultimate break with the counselor. The shot reverse shot technique here is combined with POV shots so that the viewer's alignment constantly switches between Healy and Piper's perspective (we are looking over the shoulder of each at various points). The multiple uses of framing—Healy and Piper's heads are framed by the door's inspection glass respectively—also serve as a meta-commentary on the individuals' positioning on the inside and outside. Such techniques could be read as the show's attempt to encourage self-reflection on the part of the viewer who, like Healy, is “outside,” but also invited into Piper's “inside” perspective. Healy's perspective is compromised by the etching of “Bastard” in capital letters next to his head on the cell door, a clue that the viewer should question his judgement (see figure 3). Viewers, like Healy ultimately on the “outside,” though, are reminded by Piper that “you don't know me,” hinting at the impossibility of authentic representation and a warning lest audience members uncritically assume that by watching the show, they can simply “get” prison life and the thoughts and emotions of those inside.



Figure 3: Counselor Healy and Piper talking in the SHU (S1 E9).

Another scene supports this interpretation. During a phone conversation, Larry reports on reactions to his *New York Times* article, “One Sentence, Two Prisoners,” about his experience of visiting his fiancée in prison. He says that a friend’s friend feels like she knows Piper because of how well he “captured her spirit” (S1 E8). Piper responds: “She doesn’t know me. That girl that you wrote about, that’s not me.” Later on, Piper confides in Alex, her former lover: “He got so much of it so wrong. [...] I’m not some cool story at a yuppie fucking cocktail party.” The show thus explicitly explores questions of representation and the ethics involved in mediating the stories of the incarcerated. Piper Kerman, as author of her memoir and executive consultant for the show, was not only responsible for mediating her own story, but also those of the women around her. Season one implicitly examines Chapman/Kerman’s complicity in this act of storytelling, although the show ultimately displaces responsibility onto Chapman’s fiancé Larry. After Larry lands an NPR interview with his icon Mori

Kind—a thinly disguised Ira Glass of NPR’s *This American Life*—Piper is stared at in the prison’s cafeteria and has to apologize to various women who feel aggrieved by the way in which Larry, based on Piper’s reports, portrayed them on radio (S1 E11). Through voice-over technique, pairing Larry’s narration with the actual women behind the stories, these scenes expose the fine balance between the worthy desire to tell the world about people whom society has given up on, and the danger of treating them reductively and sensationally, as we witness the upset and sense of violation experienced by those whose stories are appropriated in a one-sided and simplistic fashion. Thus, the show suggests that even well meaning liberals like Larry and Mori Kind can inadvertently cause damage through their portrayals. Larry’s excitement at the “latest prison gossip,” which he finds “highly entertaining,” comes across as particularly shallow and thoughtless as it arrives on the back of young drug addict Tricia Miller’s death (S1 E11). Mori Kind arguably serves as Kohan’s alter ego—in interview, the show’s creator declared herself a huge Ira Glass fan (Kohan 2013); through Kind’s voice, Kohan conveys the producers’ awareness that Piper is more “fortunate” (S1 E11) than many incarcerated women, since she has regular visits, resources and family at her disposal. But Kind’s position, perhaps unintentionally, also draws attention to Kohan’s own problematic role in mediating and commercializing the stories of incarcerated women—an entanglement that the metaphorical act of displacing responsibility onto two male journalists cannot fully obliterate.¹⁹

“Do you want to be remembered?”: Postfeminist Entrepreneurial Individualism vs. Female Solidarity

Season three constitutes the most politicized season of the series to date; it increasingly problematizes Piper's character, who no longer functions as the show's central consciousness. Through intertextual references, season three combines an ironic interrogation of the women in prison genre with an exploration of neoliberalism and postfeminist subjectivity as viewers follow disgraced warden Natalie "Fig" Figueroa's successor Joe Caputo's desperate efforts to protect his staff and prison population from the consequences of Litchfield's privatization. After the new provider introduces a new type of competition between the incarcerated women by recruiting some for the higher-paying job of making panties for lingerie company "Whispers," Piper reclaims neoliberal agency as postfeminist entrepreneur—harking back to the times before imprisonment when she started a soap-making business with her friend Polly—to invent a secret scheme for producing additional panties with leftover fabrics. Initially inspired by Lorna Morello's scam to milk a long list of male pen-friends for commissary money, Piper's "stinky panty" business supplies underwear worn by a group of fellow prisoners to the outside world, taking advantage of men's sexual fantasies about women's prisons. As Piper sits with a group of women, she muses: "I think that women's prison feeds into the whole '70s exploitation fantasy for men. It's like we're all in *Chained Heat* or *Cellblock Sisters* and all we do is have lesbian sex and strip-searches and naked cat fights in the shower" (S3 E7). Piper's realization—that she, too, should exploit the male "exploitation fantasy"—comes when Lorna retorts: "Who cares if it's a fantasy? They get what they want; I get to make a buck; everybody wins!" Her business logic here also functions as another coded meta-commentary on and justification of the path chosen by the team behind *OITNB*, a show which, as I argued above, both builds on

and problematizes the exploitation fantasies associated with the women in prison genre.

In a highly ironic, postfeminist monologue—delivered in exaggerated style and underscored by a grandiose soundtrack of the kind that would typically accompany a male hero summoning his warriors to the battlefield—Piper defends her business rationale in front of her initially skeptical colleagues:

I too was once embarrassed and squeamish by my personal *eau de parfum*, but then I thought, why, should I be ashamed? Isn't that a part of the self-hatred that has been bred into me by the patriarchy? And are those same men that would shame me not the same men that would wear my panties on their faces, inhaling deeply? Ladies, now is the time to be bold, for when these men smell your panties, they are smelling your character. Let them smell daring and courage; let them smell women who are unabashed and unselfconscious. And let them say, Litchfield is a place where women love their bodies and have love to spare. Sisters, we may be incarcerated, but our panties will travel the world, and in that way, long after we are gone, our smell will linger. [...] and in that way, we are known, and in that way, we are remembered. Do you want to be remembered?
(S3 E8)

Through a fusion of postfeminist and neoliberal rhetoric, Piper advises her colleagues to become female agents who acknowledge and capitalize on the sexualization of women's bodies in order to leave a mark in the world. Even butch "Big Boo," who initially sees through Piper's strategy and comments cynically that it is only Piper who will profit financially, eventually buys into the scheme. Piper's hyperbolic speech, and the way in which it elicits the women's approval for the scheme, of course also appears laughable. Irony—according to Gill (2007) a key feature of the

postfeminist sensibility—here operates as a distancing device through which the show seemingly endorses Piper’s tactics while simultaneously exposing them as preposterous, displaying precisely the kind of “complicitous critique” that Genz (2006) and Hutcheon (1989) speak of. We could, once more, read Piper’s speech as a coded reflection on and justification of the television program’s cultural project of commemorating female prison experiences—the show suggests that “to be remembered” in popular culture, female prisoners, and those wishing to give voice to their concerns, have to buy into generic tropes and sexualized imagery to some extent.

Piper’s experiment quickly blossoms into a capitalist venture as she recruits more and more women and sells underwear with the help of a corrupt prison guard, her brother and sister-in-law. Close to the finale of season three, though, Piper faces resistance from her “employees” when they ask for real payment instead of flavor packets from commissary. Although Piper grants their request for remuneration, she sacks “Flaca” Gonzales as instigator of the rebellion, a gesture which Alex, initially Piper’s business partner in the new venture, criticizes her for. The end of season three sees Piper with renewed confidence, transformed from implicated victim of Alex’s narco-capitalism to ruthless prison entrepreneur. Piper, although successful, is also shown as increasingly isolated and mean, when Alex leaves both her and the business venture (S3 E11). The season finale contrasts images of Piper’s increasingly selfish, middle-class, entrepreneurial individualism—which reaches its zenith when she flashes her tattoo “Trust No Bitch” at her new flame and business partner Stella Carlin after framing her—with moments of female solidarity and reconciliation between formerly estranged characters, as the rest of the women enjoy a rare moment of uninhibited freedom, bathing in the lake that adjoins the facility after escaping through a hole in the fence (S3 E13).

Through the underwear storyline and the season's ending, *OITNB* both embraces postfeminist strategies of representation *and* performs a critique of postfeminist and neoliberal sensibilities—most vividly represented through Piper's increasingly unsympathetic character—while also popularizing abolitionist debates around the exploitation of prison labor through the “Prison Industrial Complex.”²⁰ As Linda Evans and Eve Goldberg note in an abolitionist pamphlet, “[f]or private business prison labor is like a pot of gold. No strikes. No union organizing. No health benefits, unemployment insurance, or workers' compensation to pay. [...] Prisoners do data entry for Chevron, [...] and make circuit boards, limousines, waterbeds, and lingerie for Victoria's Secret, all at a fraction of the cost of ‘free labor’” (in Davis 2003, 84). By introducing the “Whispers” panty business—arguably a thinly disguised allusion to Victoria's Secret—*OITNB* creates a platform for debates around the exploitation of prison labor while putting a unique stamp on the discussion by placing it in a postfeminist context and subversively deploying the sexualized discourse of the women in prison genre for a subtle, but increasingly politicized agenda.²¹

Coda: The (Un)happy Marriage of Postfeminist Popular Culture and Prison Abolitionism?

Similar to twentieth-century classics of the women in prison film such as *Caged Heat*, *OITNB* employs sexualized iconography for the purpose of titillation and entertainment while also illustrating awareness of its own representational strategies.²² Like its precursors in the women in prison genre, *OITNB* is caught up in an uncomfortable tension between commodification of female prison experience on

the one hand and activist / social reformist undertones on the other hand.²³ Although much of *OITNB* jars with radical critiques of mass incarceration or the agenda of prison abolitionism, those of us interested in thinking critically about imprisonment and its cultural representation should regard the show's creators as tactical allies with the ability to reach new audiences and inspire a wider public discourse about the detrimental effects of incarceration today. In a conversation with Dylan Rodriguez on "The Challenge of Prison Abolition," former political prisoner, scholar and activist Angela Davis outlines her view that prison reform efforts "can be integrated into an abolitionist context that elaborates specific decarceration strategies and helps to develop a popular discourse on the need to shift resources from punishment to education, housing, health care, and other public resources and services" (Davis and Rodriguez). *OITNB*, through the wide media attention that it has received, and its own, albeit often covert commitment to a critique of contemporary prison conditions, has the potential to help develop this agenda, even if the show's ability to portray issues facing incarcerated women and their families is necessarily limited.

In her criminological critique of media images of women in prison Dawn K. Cecil (2007) argues that media representations of women in prison do matter for how such women and their lives are understood. Analyzing the portrayal of female prisoners in documentaries, televised news magazines, talk shows and women in prison films, she deplores the lack of "accuracy" in such representations (306). Cecil joins in fellow criminologist Chesney-Lind's call to "the people who are most knowledgeable about female offenders to challenge incomplete and inaccurate media images by 'actively seek[ing] ways to build alliances, and build credibility, with progressive journalists, to construct better coverage of crime issues'" (Cecil 2007, 305). While it would be misplaced to hope for complete authenticity in a dramedy

about women's imprisonment, this article has argued 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.²⁴ The series both evokes, and critically explores, stereotypes and myths about women in prison, suggesting that popular culture's contribution to the debate is more ambivalent than Cecil's approach proposes. In her analysis of twentieth-century women in prison films Suzanna D. Walters (2001, 106) contends that these movies "elaborate fully the creation of the marginal subject. Marginalized by gender, stigmatized by sexual preference, victimized by callous bureaucracies, physically isolated and preyed upon—these women are most assuredly the marked other." Although *OITNB* may be regarded as more mainstream than classic women in prison films—themselves marked by "multiple marginality" in the "murky realm of 'B' film making and exploitation schlock" (Walters 2001, 106)—the series holds on to the genre's commitment to the exploration of marginal identities while also critically interrogating white middle-class privilege through the character of Piper.

Despite its often uneven and contradictory agenda, the show indicates awareness of debates around media representations of female prisoners and US mass incarceration, implicitly inviting its audience to engage with them further. The "Prison Industrial Complex," for example, a phrase resonating with those committed to a radical rethinking of criminal justice in America, is mentioned explicitly early in season three. Kohan herself expressed a desire to start a conversation about the "prison-industrial complex," claiming entertainment, rather than didacticism, as her own, valid method of "activism" (McClelland 2015).²⁵ Season three ends hauntingly, with a long scene of processing in (S3 E13). The use of tracking shots emphasizes the

seemingly endless flow of newcomers, offering a visual representation of mass incarceration in action, which immediately follows a scene in which single beds are being replaced by bunk beds, suggesting that more and more women are going to be piled into small spaces. Rather than viewing such moments in the show cynically, as a disingenuous attempt to pander to the series' critics, our task as feminist critics of popular culture remains to harness the critical potential of mainstream engagements with women's (mass) incarceration to help cement and popularize more fundamental critiques of imprisonment, and its cost to individuals, families and society.

Notes

1 For a discussion of the women in prison film as a subgenre of the exploitation movie, and a brief overview of classics of the genre and its typical features, see Walters, Morton, and Zalcock.

2 Scholars and activists have been critically analyzing mass incarceration and its racial dynamics in the US for years. See for example Alexander; Simon; Mauer and Chesney. High-profile politicians such as presidential candidate Hillary Clinton (Frizell 2015) and President Barack Obama (Bacon 2015) have recently given elements of such critiques a wider public profile.

3 At 113 per 100,000, black women's rate of incarceration is significantly higher than that of white (and Latina) women (65 and 66 respectively). Based on US Bureau of Justice Statistics for 2013 (The Sentencing Project).

4 My primary interest lies in the construction of Piper Chapman, the *character*, not Piper Kerman, the woman, though I will bring in cross-references to Kerman's memoir where they suggest themselves. References to "Piper" in the text are to the character, unless indicated otherwise.

5 This is equally the case with the publication of Kerman's memoir to begin with, facilitated, presumably, through a combination of her Smith College pedigree and existing connections to the publishing world—her husband Larry Smith is also a writer and editor, for example.

6 See the July 2014 issue of *Cosmopolitan*, which also featured an article by Piper Kerman on "Why Bad Girls Rule" (Kerman 2014), and Goldman (2010). Like many television series and films in the women in prison genre, *OITNB* has a fan base in the

LGBT community, too, especially because of its transgender character Sophia, played by transgender actress and producer Laverne Cox (Anderson-Minshall 2013). Shortly before the release of season two, *Time* published an article titled “What Men Can Learn from *Orange is the New Black*,” implying that the show is a tougher sell with straight male audiences. The article tries to lure heterosexual men with promises that the series offers valuable tips on female anatomy and the best ways to sexually please a woman (Dockterman 2014).

7 See Arthurs (2008, 41) who regards “the migration of a woman-centered and explicit sexual discourse into television drama” as *Sex and the City*’s innovation.

8 For an overview of definitions of and approaches to this genre, and the limitations of this category, see Hollinger (2012, 35-66).

9 See also Walters (2001, 107) on the generic features of earlier women in prison films, conceptualized as “not one unitary genre but rather an odd and eclectic pastiche of many subgenres—from melodrama to teenage trouble to exploitation to profeminist.” The Netflix platform itself generates new genre categorizations, with classifications such as “strong female character” as suggestions according to user profile. This feature is parodied @AutoNetflix <https://twitter.com/autonetflix> (accessed November 4, 2015). I am indebted to Sarah Artt for drawing my attention to this.

10 *OITNB* arguably eschews generic classification into “drama” or “comedy,” as illustrated by the producers’ unsuccessful appeal to the Television Academy to be reclassified as “drama” after initially competing for Comedy Emmys. Netflix chief content officer Ted Sarandos views the show as “an iconoclast which has always defied genre or easy categorization” (Birnbaum 2015).

11 As Lauren J. DeCarvalho and Nicole B. Cox argue in more detail elsewhere in this issue, the series's marketing campaigns, for example, trivialize and appropriate women's prison experiences for commercial gain, existing in tension with some of the more critical agendas in the show's content.

12 For a reading of *OITNB* which draws on feminist Foucauldian approaches in more detail, see Marta Fernández-Morales and María Isabel Menéndez-Menéndez, "'When in Rome, use what you've got': A Discussion of Female Agency through *Orange is the New Black*" in this issue.

13 Stereotypes coding female offenders as sexually deviant can be traced back to nineteenth-century criminal anthropology, most famously to Havelock Ellis, Caesar Lombroso and William Ferrero. Ciasullo (2008) provides a useful overview of some of these theories. See also Hart (1994).

14 It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the portrayal of lesbian sexuality in the show in more detail, but *OITNB* arguably complicates the conventional trope of the "prison lesbian" through its portrayal of a range of lesbian and bisexual characters who are variously contained or given (temporary) agency. For a brief critique of the portrayal of lesbianism on *OITNB* see Pramaggiore (2015, 194-195). For a detailed analysis of the "prison lesbian" in women in prison narratives from the 1920s to the 1960s, see Ciasullo (2008).

15 Awareness of the role of sexualized scenes, and the show's meta-commentary on them, arguably emerges most clearly through critical binge-watching or "marathon viewing," a practice explored more fully in Rachel E. Silverman and Emily Ryalls's "'Everything is Different the Second Time Around': The Stigma of Temporality in *Orange is the New Black*" in this issue.

16 Morton (1986) sees *Caged* as the women in prison genre's foundational text while Zalcock (1998) notes that the early beginnings of the women in prison film date back to 1929.

17 By problematizing whiteness to some extent, the show thus arguably participates in a critical endeavor that Richard Dyer (1997) has theorized in more detail. For an alternative reading organized around the premise that *OITNB* and the character of Piper reaffirm middle-class whiteness through a "white savior complex," see Christina Belcher's "There is No Such Thing as the Post-Racial Prison: Neoliberal Multiculturalism and the White Savior Complex on *Orange is the New Black*" in this issue.

18 The show ridicules Piper for the blunders she makes because of her ignorance and internalized privilege, for instance in a conversation with Nicky, when Piper asks "Is SHU really that bad?" and Nicky responds "It's just like the Hamptons, just fucking horrible," so that Piper admits, "ok, that was a dumb question" (S1 E4); see also the scene during a Women's Advisory Council meeting with Healy, when an excited Piper explains the Robert Frost poem "The Road Not Taken" to Taystee and another colleague. Taystee pokes fun at Piper for fancying herself in the role of supposedly superior teacher, ready to impart knowledge to her fellow inmates (S1 E7).

19 See also the editor's role (S1 E6), discussed previously, which, I suggested, functions as a distancing device to problematize the show's use of the eroticized tropes of the women in prison genre.

20 Prison abolitionism seeks to imagine alternatives to imprisonment while engaging in radical critiques of social inequalities as the root causes of mass incarceration. For an overview of abolitionist ideals, see Davis, and Davis and Rodriguez. For a

definition of the phrase “Prison Industrial Complex” and its origins, see Artt and Schwan’s Introduction to this special issue.

21 The Whispers storyline has a real-life precedent. In the 1990s, garment manufacturer Third Generation struck a deal with South Carolina Correctional Industries. Victoria’s Secret was one of the companies purchasing clothing made by inmates (Yahr 2015). See Maria Pramaggiore in this issue for a detailed analysis of prison labor on *OITNB* and what she sees as “the failed potential of the program’s critique of prison labor.”

22 For a detailed discussion of self-conscious strategies and protofeminism in *Caged Heat*, see Walters (2001).

23 For a detailed critical assessment of this tension in what is arguably the nineteenth-century prototype of the women in prison genre, popular fiction writer Frederick William Robinson’s 1860s trilogy of narratives about women’s imprisonment (published under the anonym of “A Prison Matron”), see Schwan (2014).

24 Some of the serious, real life issues facing women affected by the US prison system that the show alerts its viewers to include the immense burden placed on relatives who travel long distances for visiting hours (in one flashback [S1 E5], a younger Daya Diaz is shown visiting her mother in prison with four little siblings in tow after a three-hour bus journey); the low rate of 11 cents per hour for prison labor, which Janae Watson equates with slavery [S1 E4]); Red’s comments on recidivism and the difficulties of re-entry, further illustrated by Taystee’s struggle to find a place to stay upon release [S1 E9]. Season three explores the threat of rape through Tiffany “Pennsatucky” Doggett’s initially seemingly harmless relationship with a new male prison guard.

25 For a further discussion of Kohan's statement, see Lauren DeCarvalho and Nicole B. Cox's "Extended 'Visiting Hours'" in this issue. Many of the show's actors have participated in actual activism, including the "I Can't Breathe" campaign to stop police violence against black youth (*Revolution*), and Laverne Cox's work on behalf of transgender and other social justice issues (hooks and Cox 2014). Piper Kerman has served on the board of the Women's Prison Association and spoken before the US Senate. See also her website with a list of organisations committed to criminal justice reform, <http://piperkerman.com/justice-reform> (accessed November 4, 2015).

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