There Is No Such Thing as a Post-racial Prison: Neoliberal Multiculturalism and the White Savior Complex on Orange Is the New Black

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Abstract
This article argues that Orange Is the New Black’s multiculturalist approach to diversity on television is indicative of the show’s inability and unwillingness to critique neoliberalism, and thus to effectively critique the prison industrial complex in the United States. It claims that because the women in prison genre demands a diverse set of characters, the show uses intraracial, class-based conflict to participate in a culture of “color blindness” on screen.

Keywords
race, sexuality, stereotypes, television, audience, citizenship, cultural politics

In the promotional trailer for Orange Is the New Black’s (OITNB; Netflix, 2013–2015) first season, Piper Chapman sits across from her visibly wealthy mother in a prison visitation room, taking responsibility for her crime: “I am no different than anybody else in here. I committed a crime. Being in here is nobody’s fault but my own.” This acceptance of personal responsibility is voiced over a montage of scenes that alternate between blonde, middle-class Piper behind bars and, respectively, black inmate Suzanne “Crazy Eyes” Warren, white butch lesbian “Big Boo,” and black trans woman Sophia Burset. Despite the series’ “fish out of water” premise, viewers witness Piper’s insistence on color blindness, as she ignores structural difference and claims parity with the women of color and queers who surround her. The premise of OITNB, and the

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memoir on which it was based, depends on wealthy, white Piper forging a relationship with a working-class lesbian involved in an international drug smuggling ring, thus landing her in prison, a deviation from the path of model citizen. However, Piper redeems herself, ironically becoming the most felicitous character in Litchfield prison on the grounds of her “color blindness.” The color blindness that Piper espouses is central to “multiculturalism”—a tenet of formal, state anti-racism—which stresses the importance of diverse representation and recognition, while delegitimizing anti-racisms that address material disparities attached to racialization in the twenty-first century.1

However, Piper’s multiculturalism remains empty, as viewers witness her hiring a diversity of women for her used panty enterprise in season 3, yet needing to be reprimanded by her former lover, Alex Vause, for firing Marisol “Flaca” Gonzales: “What you did to Flaca was weird, Piper. She’s poor. A lot of these girls, they’re poor” (S3 E11, “We Can Be Heroes”). In her new role as a prison entrepreneur, Piper hires a diverse workforce but fails to understand structural racism and its effect on the women she employs. Regardless of the show’s commitment to diversity in representation, Piper’s color blindness lies at the heart of what Jodi Melamed (2006) has termed “the spirit of neoliberalism.” This is a color blindness that, as David Theo Goldberg (2008) argues, has become civil society’s manner of expanding structural racisms while appearing anti-racist in its maintenance of a multiculturalist value system.2

This article argues that color blindness in the twenty-first-century United States—as the spirit of neoliberalism and a central ethos of OITNB—belongs to the middle and upper classes. Piper’s privileged faux pas are central to the show’s comedic force, but her middle-class discomfort with the prison’s racial segregation signals that she is appalled by its racism, and thus morally superior to the women who surround her and acknowledge racial difference. After the rude awakening of the prison’s intake process, Piper is treated well by Lorna Morello, another white inmate, who provides her with tissues and a toothbrush. Lorna needs no “thank you” for this kindness because “we [white inmates] take care of our own.” Visibly stunned by the acknowledgment of racial affiliation, Piper questions “our own” and is schooled by Lorna: “Oh, don’t get all PC on me. It’s tribal, not racist” (S1 E1, “I Wasn’t Ready”). Piper looks disgusted at Lorna’s “tribalism” and is clocked by a black inmate who understands that no benevolent white woman will be providing her with comforts like tissues and a toothbrush on her first night in prison. While the protagonist’s anti-racism, and OITNB’s commitment to multiculturalism, may initially seem progressive, the show’s representations of race hinge on class difference, ultimately making whiteness and capitalist wealth commensurate with liberal freedom.3 Because it must avoid interracial conflict to preserve its veneer of multicultural progressivism, the show’s neoliberal racial politics come out most clearly in its intraracial interactions. Behind a veil of class conflict—particularly between Piper/Tiffany “Pennsatucky” Doggett and Poussey Washington/Vee Parker—the show communicates ideas about the pathology of blackness and the redemptive power of whiteness.

Melamed describes multicultural neoliberalism as a cultural model of racism that replaced a biological one after World War II. Under this cultural model, both whiteness
and blackness can take on privileged or stigmatized forms based on their adherence to normative cultural criteria, that is, the heterosexual family unit, middle-class status, and patriotism. Becoming part of a nationalist ethos in the wake of biological racism, this cultural model “promoted an idea of a racially inclusive U.S. national culture as the key to achieving America’s manifest destiny and proof of American exceptionalism” (Melamed 2006, 7). Under such a national culture of inclusivity, the state is able to legitimately deny wealth and resources to those who deviate from the norm of valuing diversity.

Multiculturalist rhetoric in the contemporary United States lays claim to post-raciality, ironically erasing difference as it purports to promote social justice. The multiculturalist commitment to “color blindness” is thought to be achieved through an open market, rather than the acknowledgment and destruction of structural inequalities. Lauren Berlant (1997, 178) has described this hinging of so-called social freedom on market freedom as an “increasing tendency to designate political duty in terms of individual acts of consumption and accumulation,” and “anti-racism” is sutured to the great equalizer of the marketplace. Essentially, freedom of commerce and social freedom are collapsed in the neoliberal idiom of multiculturalism, as capitalism and democracy appear inseparable. In so far, as diversity-oriented programming such as OITNB emerged into a moment when networks feel pressure to respond to calls for multicultural television, it is a prime object for analyzing the ways that neoliberal multiculturalism manifests in the made-for-TV prison. If the space of the prison has become central to debates about race and privatization (Gilmore 2007), terms central to any discussion of neoliberal multiculturalism, we might think of OITNB as a central object in those debates.

The Made-for-Television Prison and Diversity-Focused Programming

The women’s prison itself dictates showrunner Jenji Kohan’s multiculturalist approach to race, class, and sexuality on OITNB, effectively forcing a departure from the “blindcasting” model that much network television has favored over the past decade. The practice of blindcasting is opposed to the traditional practice of explicitly specifying the role’s desired race/ethnicity before auditions. Rather, producers refrain from designating a racial preference for available roles, allowing productions to practice racially diverse casting without acknowledging structural difference as part of a show’s content (Warner 2015, 635). Showrunners like Shonda Rhimes have been blindcasting since the early aughts, a practice Kristen Warner has called a “public relations miracle,” allowing networks to address accusations of racial and cultural disparity on television, all the while evacuating the specificity of experience (p. 634). Rhimes’ shows, such as Scandal and How to Get Away with Murder, feature highly successful black women, but their blackness is not a defining factor of their character. Blackness remains largely unremarkable, and the opportunity to explore the ways that race factors into the gaining of, or failure to gain, success is held at bay. This keeps the racialized bodies on screen in line with what “white viewers want to see of black life,” that
is, black life whitewashed (Warner 2015, 634). Rhimes uses a diverse cast of actors to mollify a history of unequal racial representation, all the while whitewashing any difference, portraying these characters’ stories as universal rather than particular.

Refusing to whitewash its characters and their racialized struggles, OITNB departs from current standards in the field of diversity-forward television. Kohan’s award-winning casting director, Jennifer Euston, does the opposite of blindcasting, calling particularly upon actors of color to fill the roles that a show like OITNB requires, given its setting in a women’s prison. On NPR’s All Things Considered, Euston claimed that an explicit commitment to diverse casting, rather than blindcasting’s empty nod toward television’s lack of diversity, is not a trend. She describes diverse casting as a welcome response to the shift from network productions to streaming on Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon, platforms that do not require corporate sponsorship and thus corporate approval. Kohan’s neoliberal multiculturalist approach to the women in prison genre celebrates the diversity of perspectives that this industry shift welcomes.

While few would argue that OITNB portrays difference without celebration, the show continues to ignore structural inequality through its endorsement of neoliberal individualism and an emphasis on personal responsibility. While season 2 interrogates the efficacy of prison reform and season 3 makes prison privatization central to its plot, the lynchpin of the series remains a group of women who, as audiences are constantly reminded, made poor choices leading to their incarceration. Despite coming face to face with women of color navigating racism and classism in her newfound distance from the polite “color blindness” of Park Slope, Piper’s voice opens the series by reminding viewers that being incarcerated is “nobody’s fault but [their] own.” The show eschews overt racism by representing a diversity of bodies and cultures, but the structural racism that lands a skewed sample of black and Hispanic women in prison is ultimately left without much interrogation.

**White Trash Is the New Black: White Monoculturalism on OITNB**

If Americans stigmatize forms of blackness that fail to adhere to a multiculturalist national culture—giving cause to black inequality—that culture likewise pathologizes abject forms of whiteness. In fact, pathologizing whiteness is what allows black inequality to appear fair and legitimate, rather than a product of white supremacy. Thus, the show places Pennsatucky—Christian fundamentalist, recovering meth-addict, and villain of season 1—opposite Piper, the exemplar of urban, creative-class whiteness. Despite (or perhaps because of) her lack of religion and rapid descent into
moral ambiguity, Piper is higher on the moral ladder of Litchfield Prison than Pennsatucky. In fact, the series begins with Pennsatucky as the only character more unlikable than Piper, but for an entirely different set of reasons. Racist and homophobic, Pennsatucky is an easy villain, whereas Piper’s faults by comparison—racial and class privilege, naiveté, self-involvement—ostensibly align with Netflix audiences who would likely identify with Piper’s “colorblind” approach to the women who surround her.

Pennsatucky’s world, one that was bred of poverty and likewise breeds hatred toward all minorities, is absolutely necessary to the maintenance of the show’s multiculturalist ethos. White poverty in America—associated as it is with blinding religious fundamentalism, racism, and homophobia—seems the natural enemy of liberal whiteness and its multicultural value system. Pennsatucky captures this failure of adherence to an idealized American national culture. She does so most explicitly in a flashback when she discusses her upcoming abortion with her boyfriend, who asks her to reconsider because “you show ‘em a baby, you get good money from the government” (S1 E12, “Fool Me Once”). This is the portrait of white pathology, and it implores viewers to vilify the welfare state rather than the carceral state, all the while further deprivileging the economically disadvantaged figure of “white trash.” Pennsatucky’s flashback perpetuates the myth central to the spirit of multiculturalism: that America is an exceptional meritocracy, and white or black, those who are productive members of society will prosper, and those who do not will fail.

Most telling is that the Pennsatucky character in Piper Kerman’s (2010, 137) memoir was not a Christian fundamentalist bent on raining hellfire on the heads of minorities and queers, but rather part of a group Kerman called the “Eminemlettes”: “Caucasian girls from the wrong side of the tracks with big mouths and big attitudes . . . thinly plucked eyebrows, corn-rowed hair, hip-hop vocabularies, and baby daddies . . .” Among the changes Kohan and her team of writers made to craft Piper’s story from Kerman’s memoir was to cleanse Pennsatucky of any African American comportment: the hip-hop vocabulary, the corn-rows, the baby daddy. The show needs a villain, and that villain needs to be unwaveringly white; she needs to be the worst kind of white. The poor white woman who finds herself on the wrong side of the multiculturalist tracks legitimates a neoliberal brand of freedom: she had the choice to make between fundamentalist Christian bigotry and liberal open-mindedness, and for her crimes against diversity, she must pay. And yet, Piper and Pennsatucky are actually two sides of the same coin, two differently oppressive and hegemonic forms of whiteness that perpetuate the prison as home to the women and queers of color for whom the title is true: Orange Is the New Black.

The Reign of Whitey Is Not Over: Black monoculturalism on OITNB

As a matter of course, given the show’s commitment to diversity, OITNB’s most tangible representations of villainy are overwhelmingly monoculturalist characters engaged in the preservation of the cultural or racial group with which they identify,
avoiding external contact and influence. With Piper having defanged the first season’s monocultural villain, black inmate Vee assumes the role of Litchfield’s most violent and vitriolic character in season 2. Considering the show’s purportedly anti-racist ethos, it is surprising that the role of the villain would be so clearly pinned upon a black woman. But when an affable, middle-class black queer—Poussey—emerges from the background to become the season’s romantic hero, the racial grounds of the show shift to allow for black villainy without appearing blatantly racist. And yet the show’s portrayal of black female ambition is nothing short of racism. Vee embodies many of the terrifyingly destructive stereotypes about black women, and particularly black mothers, that white supremacist culture generates. Physically, psychologically, and sexually abusive, Vee uses her “children” to earn a buck, and she has no moral objection to abandoning them. She sells drugs, devalues diversity (through expressions of homophobia), and commits the taboo of incest, making her a representative of stigmatized blackness, beyond the criminality that marks all black women in Litchfield.

Despite the ethic of multiculturalism that pervades *OITNB*, there is no expectation that viewers sympathize with a black woman like Vee, just as viewers were not expected to sympathize with Pennsatucky in season 1. Never given the justificatory flashback that the show afforded even Pennsatucky, viewers cannot understand Vee’s violent ambition to control the market. She is simply a financially motivated black woman, but she is not the rightful recipient of capitalist incentives. Over the course of season 2, Vee transgresses nearly all of the normative criteria that Melamed claims to be requirements for non-white access to the spoils of a neoliberal order, that is, access to capitalist wealth and liberal freedoms. While her stigmatization ultimately precludes her from taking legitimate part in the building of capitalist wealth, Vee believes that the marketplace is the great equalizer. She invests in the spirit of multicultural neoliberalism, believing that she has as much right to the market as Red, the white woman who had been running Litchfield’s contraband trade for years.

Yet Vee is wrong to think that the market exists for her. Angela Davis (2008) makes clear the ways that race as the determinant of liberal freedom comes to bear on prison populations: “With the dismantling of the welfare state . . . the institution of the prison—which is itself an important product marketed through global capitalism—becomes the privileged site into which surplus impoverished populations are deposited.” Like Vee, Cindy (“Black Cindy”), incarcerated for felony theft, fails to understand her role as a deposit, not a capitalist player, within the prison. In one of the clearest articulations of multicultural neoliberalism on the show, Cindy explains,

> Drugs in a prison ain’t the craziest thing that could happen. I’ll tell you what is though. [Red] opening a road and saying only white people can drive on it . . . This America. The bathrooms may be segregated, but the market be free.

And yet, Cindy is wrong. The market is not free for illegitimate trade if the trader is not white.

If season 1 pitted a progressive, middle-class anti-hero against a white trash bigot in a battle of epically white proportions, season 2 continues to wage class warfare
through its neoliberal multiculturalist ethos. However, in season 2, a black queer character, rather than a “nice white lady,” ultimately wins the season’s heroic title. Despite what might first appear to be a recession of the (white) individual in the show’s expansion beyond Piper’s perspective, season 2 retains a commitment to multicultural neoliberalism, which legitimates racialized inequality. The difference between Poussey and the other black women in Litchfield is economic class, and with class comes the redemptive power of education. Poussey’s flashback reveals a worldly kid with a “frohawk,” a fluency in German, and a family who supports her as a queer teen in an interracial relationship. Her hardships are unlike those of her black friends in prison, whose early lives are shown to have involved teen pregnancy, absent parents, and cycles of abuse.

We see this class distinction most clearly in season 1, when Taystee cycles back into prison after having been released weeks prior. Taystee explains her non-existent safety net to Poussey who, never having personally experienced a lack of support on the outside, is incredulous that she has landed back in Litchfield. In one of the show’s most forceful indictments of the prison system, Taystee confesses to Poussey that she had no support on the outside, no job prospects, no means to pay the state the $900 in fees that she owed upon release: “Everyone [she knows] is poor, in jail or gone” (S1 E12, “Fool Me Once”). In season 2, after they rekindle the friendship that Vee spent the majority of the season tearing apart, Poussey wants to talk about the evolution of her friendship with Taystee who claims that because she never learned to access and express her feelings, the thought of discussion makes her “want to jump out of [her] skin.” Class-based coping mechanisms aside, what Taystee and Poussey share is humor, and later in the final episode, they take on the voices of their White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) alter egos—MacKenzie and Amanda—for Taystee to comfortably discuss the reasons why she fell under Vee’s spell. Imitating the voice and affectation of an upper-class white woman, Taystee jokes that “Amanda has a theory: that it’s all the cycle of poverty, and the bad schools and the government cheese, and because I’m brown and my mom was on crack.” Then her affect changes back to Taystee, and she distances herself from “Amanda,” explaining, “But I think I was just being an asshole.” This code switching between the bourgeois affectation of “Amanda,” who recognizes structural racism and its reverberations, and Taystee’s genuine assertion of “I think . . . ” privatizes the issues that led to her conflict with Poussey. While “Amanda” may be correct about the cycle of poverty, racism, and drug addiction as factors that lead to a disproportionate number of young black women in prison, the comedic shift between “Amanda” as bourgeois and Taystee as genuine allows Taystee’s individualist acceptance of responsibility to have the last word—“I think I was just being an asshole”—thus discounting the reality that alter ego Amanda cites as a factor in both Taystee’s imprisonment and her inability to process emotions (S2 E12, “It Was the Change”).

Poussey reveals her class privilege, aligned with her alter ego MacKenzie, when she explains, “MacKenzie thinks [you are experiencing] repressed frustration cause you ain’t never been to Paris.” While she invents a bourgeois excuse for Taystee’s regression into criminality, Poussey’s vocabulary and accent do not change as Taystee’s
had, but rather she articulates this reasoning using her own affectation. Poussey is marked—by her lack of understanding of the cycle of poverty, the skills she learned as a member of the black middle class, and her refusal to run drugs in the prison—as other to Taystee and the rest of her black friends. In contrast, Taystee’s imitation of white girl Amanda is only that—an imitation—while Poussey embodies a particular intersection of race, class, and sexuality that primes her for OITNB heroism. In the hierarchy of blackness on OITNB, Poussey is the middle-class, queer knight in shining armor; Taystee is the downtrodden damsel primed for redemption; and Vee is the black dragon, slain at season’s close with no remorse.

The White Savior Industrial Complex

These depictions of intraracial class conflict make possible the emergence of the white savior, a figure that supports liberal whiteness and sustains the racial economy of the U.S. prison system. A consideration of scale demonstrates the power of the white savior, while Poussey was busy saving Taystee in season 2, Piper was saving the entire prison population from embezzling administrator, Natalie “Fig” Figueroa. As OITNB becomes more nuanced in its representation of prison activism, the show also takes its place in a long history of white benevolence on screen, from Mississippi Burning (1988) to Dangerous Minds (1995) and The Blind Side (2009). No longer plagued by a liberal model of “white guilt” that implores always already privileged whiteness to uplift always already underprivileged blackness, the neoliberal model of white benevolence presents color blindness as a quality of good character that allows the white savior to emerge. Thus, an ethical hierarchy materializes, in which white inmates advocate for themselves and others, while inmates of color are too distracted by personal ambition to bother with the collective battles being waged behind bars, such as the hunger strike in protest of solitary confinement, unsanitary living conditions, and “compassionate” release for the elderly. With the exception of progressive-yet-naïve Brook Soso—who has Litchfield’s symbol of white privilege (a toothbrush at intake) bestowed upon her by Lorna because “[she doesn’t] look full Asian”—OITNB portrays white saviors as the only legitimate forces in a fight for reform (S2 E3, “Hugs Can Be Deceiving”).

According to OITNB, women of color impede the reform work of white women. After black inmate Janae Watson returns from her latest stint in solitary confinement, her white friend Yoga Jones crosses Litchfield’s increasingly regulated racial lines to offer comfort, and to tell Janae that the arbitrary use of solitary “got [her] motivated to join the hunger strike” (S2 E11, “Take a Break From Your Values”). Janae does not respond with the gratitude that Yoga Jones expects. Instead, she tells Yoga Jones, “I’m not here to make you feel good about yourself, alright? You got guilt about something, that’s not my problem.” In this scene, Janae makes reference to what she interprets as her fellow inmate’s white liberal guilt, which she believes to be motivation for the hunger strike. Julie Ellison (1996, 349) describes the problem of liberal guilt: “In the throes of liberal guilt, all action becomes gesture, expressive of a desire to effect change or offer help that is never sufficient to the scale of the problem.” For Janae,
Yoga Jones’ activism is gestural rather than substantive, and it serves to alleviate her own pain (white guilt) rather than the pain of others (solitary confinement).

Like many of the show’s potentially instructive confrontations between white women and women of color, the scene quickly shifts from a critique of white benevolence to a critique of black ingratitude, undermining the legitimacy of Janae’s accusations. As Janae tells Yoga Jones not to talk to her anymore, viewers are not permitted to linger with Janae, who has been brutalized by the secure housing unit (SHU) over and over again across the show’s brief timespan. Instead, her face appears out of focus on the edge of the frame while the camera rests on Yoga Jones in disbelief. The scene ends with a white woman in tears, slighted by an angry black woman who is unwilling to accept an invitation to fight for justice and advocate for herself. After being accused of gestural rather than substantive activism, Yoga Jones returns to fellow strikers Brook and Sister Ingalls, and white tweakers Leanne Taylor and Angie Rice join them. Unlike Yoga Jones and Sister Ingalls, the show portrays Leanne and Angie as inauthentic, particularly through the irony that their hunger strike demands involve the cafeteria food. When guards tempt the women with pizza, a tactic that prison officials actually use to break strikes, Leanne and Angie cave and eat to the delight of Sister Ingalls, who reminds the more “respectable” strikers, “We don’t need them. They confuse our message” (S2 E11, “Take a Break From Your Values”). OITNB thus pushes an activist ideal, but it does not include women of color, drug addicts, or the poor: the majority of women serving time in America.

Unlike Brook, Sister Ingalls, and Yoga Jones, Piper’s entrance into the fight for prisoners’ rights at Litchfield is purely self-motivated. When muckraking journalist Andrew Yance visits Piper to build his case against Fig’s embezzlement of state funding for prison programming, Piper refuses to help him. Although she claims to be an advocate for all of the programs that the prison has de-funded, she will not risk her own release date for the good of the inmate population. Piper’s determination to end Fig’s career comes at the heels of her furlough, when she comes to believe that she is being transferred to a Virginia prison because she had been granted furlough to visit her sick grandmother. In the ultimate expression of liberal guilt, Piper begins to see her white privilege as a burden, that is, it afforded her furlough, but that furlough came at a price. Piper rides these delusions of victimhood into the fight against corruption. No one—not Sophia or Poussey who each tell heartbreaking stories of lock-up without furlough when their parents passed—can convince Piper that she does not deserve to be furloughed for her grandmother’s hospitalization. Inmates of color call out Piper’s privilege, but her response exhibits no substantive reflection on her circumstance, rather only privilege-denial and white guilt. Ironically, after spending a brief period of time in the SHU, Piper—rather than Janae, who has been repeatedly brutalized by solitary confinement—becomes the inmate to dismantle abuse and corruption at Litchfield. In turn, OITNB becomes yet another representation of whiteness stepping up and saving the day, this time for a prison populated mostly by women of color who are written out of the stories of their own struggles against oppression.

By Kohan’s own admission, networks still require a white frame-narrative to consider stories about women of color marketable to mainstream audiences, in effect “saving”
those women from scarcity of representation if not material wealth and well-being (Fresh Air). And despite her naïve ignorance and privilege, the show continues to mark Piper as heroic: as an unlikely crusader against bigotry in season 1, a reluctant prison reformer in season 2, and a cutthroat neoliberal anti-hero in season 3. The fact that activist and entrepreneur are collapsed in the white, middle-class, sexually fluid Piper speaks volumes about the neoliberal multiculturalism from which the show cannot be unmoored. A hardened, entrepreneurial Piper emerges in season 3, and this transformation renders her a neoliberal anti-hero. Elsewhere in this issue, Anne Schwan argues that Piper’s ironic, postfeminist rhetoric regarding her panty business gives way to an isolated, individualist character who enjoys a solitary moment of revenge on her business partner, Stella Carlin. This isolation occurs while the other women experience a moment of freedom and solidarity, together in their escape to the lake. While I agree with Schwan, I contend that Piper’s anti-hero status remains intact, particularly as the season ends with her cutthroat neoliberal success. She is the only character not being duped, as a Department of Corrections van unloads numerous inmates for intake. The fleeting scene of collective freedom becomes cruelly ironic, as viewers are clued in to the fact that conditions are about to worsen at the recently privatized prison.

Beyond this specific show’s production and protagonist, neoliberal multiculturalism imbues middle-class whiteness with the potential to “save” the underprivileged, simply by making the lifestyle choice of valuing diversity. As part of this system that produces and legitimates mass incarceration, all the while purporting to care about the communities of color ravaged by it, OITNB insists that all inmates deserve to be inmates, and that white women are best positioned to help them, especially because they cannot help themselves. If there were such a thing as a post-racial prison, Kohan and crew would likely be first in line to demonstrate their color blindness. But the prison itself demands the presence of queers and women of color, reminding us that the community-based multiculturalism of the 1970s has given way to neoliberal multiculturalism today, making the structures of racism appear to recede into the past. Meanwhile, representations of diversity like those on OITNB lull us into the false promise of a future wherein, as Piper says, one’s “being in prison is nobody’s fault but [one’s] own.”

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**Notes**

1. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2014) theorizes, color blindness is not actually an inability to see or acknowledge race, but rather a claim that race does not influence matters of civil life, such as hiring and incarceration.
Melamed and Goldberg are key thinkers who address the ways that neoliberalism functions through race and racism.

The presence of Brook Soso, a middle-class Asian American activist, complicates the show’s merging of whiteness and capitalist freedom. However, I will argue below that Brook is set apart from the other women of color on the show, and treated as an honorary white inmate. For another reading of *Orange Is the New Black* (OITNB) based around the idea of color blindness, see Suzanne Enck and Megan Morrissey (2015). Choosing a different focus than my article, they argue that “[b]y unabashedly addressing U.S. race relations in its storyline, *OITNB* encourages audiences to see the injustices of the current racial system” (p. 313). However, they concede that the show’s power of critique of racism’s systemic nature is “inherently limited” because of the series’ “microscopic focus” on individuals.

The women in prison genre is one of the only television genres to explicitly require the casting of women of color, given that one in 111 white women will be sentenced to prison in her lifetime, whereas one in 18 black women and one in 45 Latina women will be incarcerated. See The Sentencing Project website for an analysis of these statistics: http://www.sentencingproject.org/template/page.cfm?id=122 (accessed February 4, 2016).

This commitment to diversity is not specific to Kohan. Critics writing on the women in prison genre have suggested that the genre by and large demonstrates a commitment to exploring diversity among women (Mayne 2000).

While my point here is in keeping with Melamed’s—that the ability for whiteness to appear as devalued is crucial to maintaining the appearance of a “post-racial” society—various scholars have noted the manner by which whiteness can be devalued as it intersects with class, and the best of this scholarship does so while continuing to acknowledge the presence of white privilege (see David Roediger 2007).

While Pennsatucky assumes the role of villain in season 1, economic class is crucial to the show’s multiculturalist politics, and Pennsatucky loses her power to provoke when she loses her decaying teeth, a clear marker of class. As Pennsatucky’s prison-issued porcelain veneers appear in season 2, she begins her transformation from one-dimensional white trash villain to a dynamic and sympathetic figure (see Emma Eisenberg 2015; Arielle Bernstein 2015).

When she describes their General Educational Development (GED) graduation ceremony in Danbury Prison, Kerman directly associates the character she calls “Pennsatucky” with the “Eminemlettes”: “In one snapshot Pennsatucky and another Eminemlette grin . . .” (p. 164)

A history of the denigration of black motherhood could extend back to the plantation, but for contemporary analyses that align with Vee’s representation on *OITNB*, see Roderick Ferguson (2004); Candice Jenkins (2007).

For an account of this history of white benevolence on screen, see Henry Giroux (1997); Sarah Nilsen (2014).

These tactics were used against strikers in the most recent California prison hunger strike in 2013 organized by prisoners at Pelican Bay State Prison (see Brendan Kiley 2013).

Jasbir Puar’s (2007) work on “homonationalism” is instructive when thinking through the connections between Piper’s sexual fluidity and her neoliberal commitments to both multiculturalism and accumulation.

References


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