Screening Women’s Imprisonment: Agency and Exploitation in Orange Is the New Black

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Abstract
Since the time it was first broadcast in 2013 and despite its unquestionable commercial success, Netflix prison comedy-drama Orange Is the New Black has garnered equal shares of praise and blame. Countless articles have appeared in the popular press discussing the show’s treatment of race, sexuality, and class, as well as its depiction of the American prison system, while academics have also begun to comment on the series. This special issue aims to continue the work initiated on this important television series, while adding to a growing body of scholarship on popular representations of punishment in the age of US mass incarceration.

Keywords
Orange Is the New Black, women in prison genre, female-centered drama, activism, transgender representation, postfeminism

Based on Piper Kerman’s ([2010] 2013) memoir Orange Is the New Black: My Time in a Women’s Prison, Jenji Kohan’s (2013–) adaptation for Netflix follows white, middle-class New Yorker Piper Chapman (Taylor Schilling) into the fictional Litchfield Penitentiary where she encounters a diverse community of incarcerated women. Together with House of Cards and Hemlock Grove, Orange Is the New Black (OITNB) was one of the first original series commissioned by on-demand streaming platform Netflix. At the time of writing, three seasons, produced by Lionsgate, have screened (2013–2015), with a further four seasons to follow (Littleton 2016). Season 1 introduces Piper and the audience to the world of the prison, including a core group of women such as Alex Vause (Laura Prepon), Piper’s former girlfriend whose drug smuggling business she had been implicated in ten years prior; Galina “Red” Reznikova (Kate Mulgrew), one of the show’s older

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women who has built an empire through her role as cook; Suzanne “Crazy Eyes” Warren (Uzo Aduba) who develops a romantic obsession with Piper; Tasha “Taystee” Jefferson (Danielle Brooks), one of a group of black women who challenge Piper’s internalized privilege; butch lesbian Carrie “Big Boo” Black, played by comedian Lea DeLaria; “white trash” drug addict Tiffany “Pennsatucky” Doggett (Taryn Manning) who becomes Piper’s nemesis in season 1; Gloria Mendoza (Selenis Leyva) who challenges Red over the kitchen empire; and Dayanara “Daya” Diaz (Dascha Polanco) who falls in love with (and is impregnated by) officer John Bennett (Matt McGorry). Season 2 increasingly shifts attention from Piper to the stories of other women, exploring conflict and collaboration between members of the prison’s “tribes.” The third season develops a more overtly political agenda, turning to the privatization of Litchfield as an overarching theme.

While mostly focused on the women’s interactions with each other and with prison officials—from corrupt warden Natalie “Fig” Figueroa (Alysia Reiner), inefficient assistant warden Joe Caputo (Nick Sandow), and counselor Sam Healy (Michael J. Harney), to correctional officer and bully George “Pornstache” Mendez (Pablo Schreiber)—*OITNB* includes a series of flashbacks in an attempt to shed light on the women’s backstories and the conditions that led to their imprisonment. With its predominantly female and ethnically diverse cast, which also includes transgender actress and activist Laverne Cox—who plays Sophia Burset, a transgender woman who faces discrimination from fellow inmates and the prison regime, and struggles to maintain a relationship with her son and former wife—the series continues to contribute to the drawing of a feminist-inflected popular culture. The show and individual cast members have received multiple awards, including two comedy ensemble awards from the Screen Actors Guild and the female comedy actor award for Aduba. Although Netflix does not disclose viewing numbers, Netflix’s chief content officer Ted Sarandos calls *OITNB* the streaming service’s “most-watched show” (Birnbaum 2016). Netflix’s global reach, spanning members in more than 190 countries, contributes to the series’ ongoing impact.

Since the time it was first broadcast in 2013, and despite its unquestionable commercial success, *OITNB* has garnered equal shares of praise and blame. Countless articles have appeared in the popular press discussing the show’s treatment of race, sexuality, and class, as well as its depiction of the American prison system. As academics began to comment on the series, open-access sites such as *FLOW: A Critical Forum on Television and Media Culture*, and *In Media Res* have been homes for emerging criticism on *OITNB*. This special issue aims to continue the work initiated by those early contributors in the spheres of popular culture and academia while adding to a growing body of scholarship on popular representations of punishment in the age of U.S. mass incarceration.

For 2013, the Bureau of Justice Statistics lists 6,899,000 people under adult correctional supervision (Glaze and Kaeble 2014). In total, 2.2 million are in America’s prisons and jails (The Sentencing Project 2015, 2). Such figures make the United States the country with the highest incarceration rate in the world (Tsai and Scommegna 2012). Men of color, especially black men, are significantly more likely to experience incarceration during their lifetime (The Sentencing Project 2015, 5); although, overall,
men are more likely to face imprisonment than women, women’s incarceration rate has been rising at a level 50 percent higher than men’s since 1980 (p. 4). Within the female prison population, black and Latina women are significantly overrepresented (p. 5). Such figures give the issues raised by the television show a particular sense of urgency in the U.S. context, compounded by recent developments suggesting that high-profile decision makers, including President Obama, are showing new determination to help “fix the criminal justice system” (The White House 2015).

The articles contained in this special issue are indicative of the range of responses to OITNB as a set of texts that encompasses Kerman’s memoir, the ongoing Netflix television series, and the various social media paratexts that have grown up around this narrative and its cast members. OITNB has had a particularly strong impact in the age of what has been termed hashtag activism. The series has a strong official social media presence and its fan base is active on Twitter. Cast members such as Cox and Polanco have made high-profile appearances in campaigns to support racial and sexual diversity, and several cast members made prominent appearances at the protests that followed the death of Erik Garner, a movement that became known on Twitter by its hashtag #ICantBreathe (Jordan 2014). A cynical view would deem these forms of real-world activism by the cast as little more than the commodification of resistance, making use of protests as sites for publicity. However easy it might be to dismiss showrunner Kohan’s assertion that entertainment is her activism (in McClelland 2015), it is difficult to view the work carried out by actors such as Cox as nothing more than publicity. Cox’s status as a celebrity who is also a trans woman of color was cemented by her appearance on the cover of Time (June 9, 2014), but she has also appeared in conversation with feminist scholar and activist bell hooks.² On this occasion, hooks, while critical of OITNB in other ways, noted the sense of empowerment many women of color experienced when being confronted with such unusual diversity on the screen. Events such as this position the television show and its cast members as a nexus of activism. Such interaction suggests the possibility of using those issues OITNB brings to the fore as a springboard for wider public debate on the “Prison Industrial Complex” (PIC) and genuine social change.³

This collection of articles explores to what extent OITNB has the potential to unite the popular and academic spheres, while also addressing the limitations emerging from the show’s own representational strategies across its first three seasons, and Netflix as a media platform. The special issue opens up a conversation between critical positions that broadly fall into two camps—those who affirm the value of OITNB’s contribution to public debate about women’s imprisonment, despite the program’s flaws, and those who emphasize the series’ failure to address structural inequalities due to a neoliberal frame of reference. Anne Schwan’s “Postfeminism Meets the Women in Prison Genre: Privilege and Spectatorship in Orange Is the New Black” argues that Piper Chapman becomes a vehicle for critically examining white, middle-class identity on the show and among audience members. While acknowledging the series’ “uneven and contradictory” agenda—a reading that is framed through postfeminist theories—the article argues 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.” Placing a different emphasis in her article “There Is No Such Thing as the Post-racial Prison: Neoliberal Multiculturalism and the White Savior Complex on Orange Is the New Black,” Christina Belcher suggests that the show stops short of a systematic critique of structural racism and poverty as root causes of women’s incarceration by reinforcing “colorblindness” and—despite its apparent commitment to diversity—promoting both white and black “monoculturalism” through its portrayals of antihero Piper Chapman and her interaction with other characters. In “Extended ‘Visiting Hours’: Deconstructing Identity in Netflix’s Promotional Campaigns for Orange Is the New Black,” Lauren DeCarvalho and Nicole B. Cox draw attention to the instrumentalized use of intersectional identities in Netflix’s marketing campaign for season 2. Contrasting the commodification of life in women’s prisons in parts of the campaign with efforts to “humanize” incarcerated women in the actual show and other promotional materials, they ask: “Is Netflix using itself to promote policy reform or using the need for policy reform to promote itself?” They conclude with a nuanced answer, suggesting that while Netflix successfully “maximized its target audience” from a commercial point of view, it simultaneously “provides a platform for incarcerated women to be more than just numbers in a system.” Through a combined analysis of “marathon viewing” as a critical practice and the representation of older women on OITNB, Rachel E. Silverman and Emily Ryalls explore the “stigma of temporality” on the show and its wider cultural context. They argue that although “the progressive potential of including elderly women within the series exists,” because these representations make visible the prison system’s inability to adequately cater for aging inmates, such potential is curtailed by the perpetuation of gendered stereotypes portraying elderly women as manipulative. Marta Fernández-Morales and María Isabel Menéndez-Menéndez employ a feminist-Foucauldian framework to argue that the television show interrogates concepts of female agency and resistance, thus expanding consciousness about the issues faced by incarcerated women, their life stories, and gendered inequalities in the criminal justice system. Maria Pramaggiore’s article “From Screwdriver to Dildo: Retooling Women’s Work in Orange Is the New Black,” turns to “the ambivalent sensibility that pervades the political discourse of OITNB,” especially the series’ treatment of prison labor. Placing the program’s depiction of prison labor in a wider context of neoliberalism and prison industry, Pramaggiore argues that OITNB ultimately fails to present an effective critique of prison labor “by focusing on individual needs and affective ties over group solidarity against structural conditions.”

Many of these articles draw on material that was originally presented as part of the one-day conference Orange Is the New Black and New Perspectives on the Women in Prison Genre held at Edinburgh Napier University in June 2015. The conference brought together academics, prison teachers, and professionals from the criminal justice system and included the views of incarcerated women who had watched OITNB, a perspective customarily absent from critical discourses on the series. While the conference was a first step in bringing together responses to OITNB from a wider range of stakeholders, our inability to include the perspectives of imprisoned women in this
special issue—for a complex set of reasons—serves as a timely reminder that much work remains to be done in overcoming existing boundaries between academic discourse, those affected by incarceration, and wider public debates on the criminal justice system and its role in society and popular culture.

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Notes

1. For another recent example of this critical investment in exploring cultural representations of punishment, see Charles J. Ogletree and Austin Sarat (2015).
3. The “Prison Industrial Complex” (PIC) refers to the intertwining of government, the penal apparatus, and capitalist interests. As Joe Lockard and Sherry Rankins-Robertson (2011, 38) point out, the phrase is often associated with Angela Davis’s “Critical Resistance” conference in 1998 and the related movement, although its origins date back to the 1960s and 1970s. Davis (2003, 84) herself attributes the term to Mike Davis (1995).

References


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**Anne Schwan** teaches at Edinburgh Napier University. Her recent research interests include the long nineteenth century, women and gender studies, and critical prison studies. She is the author of *Convict Voices: Women, Class, and Writing about Prison in Nineteenth-Century England* (2014), and coauthor of *How to Read Foucault’s Discipline and Punish* (2011).