

CONSTRUCTED REALITIES IN WOMEN'S PRISONS:  
FROM *BEYOND SCARED STRAIGHT* TO  
*ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACK*

by

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The show *Orange is the New Black*, released by Netflix in 2013 and set in a women's prison, received rave reviews and skyrocketed in popularity. Critics lauded the show as a realistic representation of prison. This paper examines the mediated reality of women's prisons, compares past and present representations of women's prisons in the mass media, and examines the prison industrial complex and media effects theories. This paper finds that *Orange is the New Black* represents a fundamental shift in media discourse and audience interest in the stories of incarcerated women.

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## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Objective of Research	2
Literature Review	3
The Prison Industrial Complex	3
Encoding/Decoding	8
Prison in the Media	8
Real World Prison Issues	17
Summarizing the Literature	18
Materials and Methods	19
Women's Prison in <i>Beyond Scared Straight</i> and <i>Lockdown</i>	20
A New Look at Prison: <i>Orange is the New Black</i>	29
Media Response and Cultivating Legitimacy	41
Rave Reviews	41
The Real Piper Kerman	43
Critical Voices	47
Creating a Platform for Social Change	53
Conclusion	55
Future Research	56
Bibliography	58

## Introduction

In 2013 the Netflix original series, *Orange is the New Black* skyrocketed in popularity. Billed as both drama and comedy, the series follows Piper Chapman, a white, college-educated, upper-middleclass woman sentenced to prison in a minimum-security correctional institution. The show is based on a memoir of the same name by Piper Kerman. Unlike prison shows of the past, *Orange* focuses less on the violence and brutality of inmates. Instead, the show criticizes the corrections system and shines an empathetic light on the stories of women in prison. I believe this represents a fundamental change in the depiction of prisoners in the mainstream media. This thesis will examine representations of women prisoners in the past and present to see if *Orange* continues or disrupts the popular narrative of incarceration.

## Objective of Research

The objective of my research is to do a critical textual analysis of representations of incarcerated women in the entertainment and news media. My research will primarily focus on the show *Orange is the New Black* and the way that it is discussed in the news media. My research will build upon previous research on the representations of prisoners in the mass media. My research will be grounded in cultivation theory, which provides a framework for explaining the complex ways individuals interact and are influenced by mass media messages. I will also put *Orange is the New Black* in context with previous representations of incarceration in the entertainment media. Questions I will try to answer are: What different representations of women's prison exist in the entertainment media? What dominant ideologies occur in these representations? Does *Orange* reflect the reality of women's prisons? How do *Orange* and the news media treat topics such as race, sexuality, and rehabilitation? Does *Orange* reinforce or depart from previous representations of incarceration?

## Literature Review

### The Prison Industrial Complex

There is a lot of literature on the prison industrial complex, the system of economic and political incentives that drive mass incarceration.<sup>1</sup> These incentives have caused the prison population to explode in the last few decades. Today the U.S. has 5 percent of the world's population, but 25 percent of the world's incarcerated.<sup>2</sup> Politicians get elected with promises of keeping the community safe from crime. Meanwhile, the increasing prison population supports the prison industry. The largest private prison corporation, Corrections Corps of America, has spent over 17 million dollars lobbying politicians over the last decade.<sup>3</sup>

The mass media is a major influence in the prison industrial complex. Sensationalized crime coverage draws more readers and viewers to media outlets. At the same time, advertisers and big corporations that benefit from mass incarceration hold power over editorial. Joel Dyer argues that mass media has increased their coverage of crime (especially violent crime), which has led to the perception that crime rates have also increased. "Understanding that media corporations have greatly escalated their use of violent content during the last two decades is important because it helps to explain how the public's impression of crime has managed to free itself from

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<sup>1</sup> Joel Dyer. *The Perpetual Prisoner Machine: How America Profits from Crime*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>2</sup> International Centre for Prison Studies. *World Prison Brief*, December 12, 2011, accessed November 15, 2013, [http://www.prisonstudies.org/info/worldbrief/wpb\\_stats.php?area=all&category=wb\\_poptotal](http://www.prisonstudies.org/info/worldbrief/wpb_stats.php?area=all&category=wb_poptotal)

<sup>3</sup> "Lobbying Spending Database-Corrections Corps of America," The Center for Responsive Politics, 2003-2013, accessed May 10, 2014, <http://www.opensecrets.org/lobby/clientsum.php?id=D000021940&year=2003>

the bounds of the actual occurrence of crime. This is to say that the public's belief in the 'crime gap' is being inspired more by the quantity of our exposure to the images of crime in the media than by anything else."<sup>4</sup>The crime gap refers to the difference in the public's perceptions of the rate of crime and the actual occurrence of crime. Crime rates went down in the tough-on-crime era of the last few decades, but people perceived an increase in crime over the same period.<sup>5</sup>

Within the prison industrial complex the media functions to support mass incarceration by justifying the system as effective and necessary to control criminals. The media do this by focusing on deviance as the product of individual choices. They cast criminals as unable to be reformed, and they focus on victims of crime to show the need for punishment.

In "Spectacles of Incarceration" John Riofrio links the prison industrial complex to neoliberalism, a political/economic wave that gained traction in the 1980s and championed free markets and minimal regulation. These ideals place more importance on the success of corporations than the needs of individuals and communities.<sup>6</sup> Riofrio writes, "The seductive power of neoliberalism is at its most strident when we consider the ways in which it has both forged and forced an understanding of failure as an individual act of choice."<sup>7</sup> Failure as an individual choice is omnipresent in the representation of prisoners in the mass media.

Riofrio argues that while prisoners are highly visible on television, they are selectively visible. They appear only to reinforce society's fear of criminals. "The

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<sup>4</sup> Dyer, 53.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>6</sup> Riofrio, John. 2012. Spectacles of Incarceration. *Symplokē*. 20, no. 1, 141.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



protagonists in [prison] shows thus play the unwitting role of drawing audiences further away from conceptualizing even the possibility that crime and criminality are intricately connected to structural systems of inequality.”<sup>8</sup> Television shows intentionally stay away from the underlying issues that result in incarceration. Riofrio continues, “By largely obscuring or downplaying issues of race, sexism, and homophobia while rationalizing the brutality of prison punishment, prison shows function to actively normalize both incarceration and its subsequent, attending violence.”<sup>9</sup> This study will take into account how the prison industrial complex shapes media portrayals of prisons and prisoners.

### **Media Effects Theories**

In this section I bring up cultivation theory and the encoding/decoding model to establish that television viewing does influence people’s beliefs, but also that the process of decoding mass media messages is complex and varies between individuals. Though television shows are often produced for entertainment value rather than accuracy, a lot can be revealed about a culture's dominant ideology by analyzing mass media products.

Cultivation Theory is used to identify dominant media representations and study how those depictions affect people's perceptions of reality. Cultivation Theory is that television (and other mass media sources) teaches common values, common roles, and a common worldview that heavy viewers of television will take on as their values.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Morgan, James Shanahan, and Nancy Signorielli. 2012. Living with television now: advances in cultivation theory & research. New York: Peter Lang.

Different types of beliefs are affected by cultivation. First-order beliefs are beliefs about facts while second-order beliefs are our general expectations or orientations toward certain issues. Cultivation can occur through mainstreaming, resonance, and substitution.

Mainstreaming is when the values presented on television are adapted across groups regardless of demographics such as race, gender, and class. For example, in Gerbner's 1980 study on fear of crime, heavy and light viewers of television were asked whether they agreed that crime is a "very serious and personal problem." Among light viewers of television low-income respondents were much more likely to say that crime was a serious problem than high-income respondents. However, among heavy viewers of television both high-income and low-income respondents considered crime to be a "very serious and personal problem."<sup>11</sup> Mainstreaming occurred because despite their income differences both groups shared the same viewpoint.

Resonance is when the effects of cultivation theory are exaggerated in a certain segment of the population because their experience resonates with the values presented on television.<sup>12</sup> For example, someone who lived in a violent neighborhood would be even more likely to agree that crime is a very serious and personal problem. On the flip side, people who have no personal experience with something may be more susceptible to media messages about that topic. When someone uses mediated messages to fill in the gaps of their own experience it's called substitution.<sup>13</sup> In the case of the criminal justice system, many people in the viewing audience have never been victim to a violent

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 51.

crime, experienced arrest, or gone through the trial process. A little less than 1 percent of the population is currently in prison.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the only source of information they have available to them about prison is what's depicted in the media.

Perceived realism is at the heart of cultivation theory. If an audience perceives a media message to be a real and authentic representation they are more likely to accept the message. The criteria that audiences use to evaluate realism shifts between genres.<sup>15</sup> A show billed as a "reality show" won't necessarily be evaluated as realistic if the acting or situations appear contrived. In a fantasy series, some aspects like magic are clearly outside reality but audiences might still evaluate characters and their behaviors as realistic. The designation "based on a true story" may invite skepticism from the audience rather than acceptance as they try to pick out which aspects are real and which are dramatized.<sup>16</sup>

Researchers in narrative persuasion suggest that focusing cultivation research on "unrealism" is more useful because audiences are more likely to accept the message until they are given reason to suspend their belief. "Specifically, the effect of perceived *unrealism* should be to guide individuals' media choices toward content they find more engaging, more enjoyable, more consistent with their extant perceptions of reality, and ultimately to content that is more likely to contribute to and reinforce the social constructions of the perceived 'real' world."<sup>17</sup> This means popular shows should generally represent the audience's values and viewpoint.

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<sup>14</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Correctional Populations in the United States 2012*, by Lauren E. Glaze and Erinn J. Herberman, Ph.D., December 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Morgan et al, 168.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 181.

## **Encoding/Decoding**

Another important framework is the Encoding/Decoding Model.

Encoding/Decoding describes the process of how meaning is created and received. Mass media corporations decide what message they want to send. They encode the message and pass it through a channel such as television. The receiver (or television viewer) decodes the message and interprets its meaning. This theory is used to study the complex way mass media messages are received by individuals. When mass media messages are encoded they are usually grounded in certain ideologies and frameworks, but they can still convey different meanings to different people. Individuals can accept the message's meaning fully, negotiate its meaning with their personal experience, or reject its meaning. The encoding/decoding model rejects the media effects theories that say audiences are extremely susceptible to media messages.<sup>18</sup>

## **Prison in the Media**

The representation of prison varies between television, film, and print. There is definite overlap between all three, but there are places where the message can diverge. While there are many prison films that focus on the inmates' struggle against an oppressive system, television tends to focus on the prisoner as a danger to society. Women-in-prison films present their own distinct genre, one where the prisoners are sexualized. This section will provide an overview of different media representations.

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<sup>18</sup> Stuart Hall. 1980. "Encoding/Decoding." In *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, edited by Meenakshi G. Durham, and Douglas Kellner. 163-173. (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 2001.)

*Prisons on Television and Film*

Ray Surette makes many important arguments in *Media, Crime, and Criminal Justice*. He argues that the emphasis on law enforcement as a dramatic and heroic event gives the illusion that subsequent steps of the criminal justice system are unimportant.<sup>19</sup> He argues that “the repeated message in the visual entertainment media (film and television) is that crime is largely perpetrated by individuals who are basically different from the majority, that criminality stems from individual problems, and that criminal conduct is freely chosen behavior”<sup>20</sup> He argues that depictions of incarceration show corrections to be inadequate in their ability to reform criminals. This suggests that criminality is a condition from which deviant individuals can never recover. He also argues that whatever television shows to be true about the criminal justice system is the complete opposite of reality because of the emphasis on the most horrific and unlikely crimes.<sup>21</sup> He also raises concerns that the news media echoes the entertainment media. “The news media do claim to depict the world objectively and realistically. It is therefore more disconcerting to find considerable correspondence between the images of crime and justice put forth by the entertainment media and those put forth by the news media.”<sup>22</sup>

*In Prime Time Prisons on U.S. TV*, Bill Yousman analyzes incarceration as represented in different entertainment and news media. He analyzes the show *Oz*, a show from the 1990s and 2000s about a fictional maximum-security prison, Oswald

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<sup>19</sup> Ray Surette. *Media, Crime, and Criminal justice: Images and Realities*. (Pacific Grove, Calif: Brooks/Cole Pub. Co., 1992). 37.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

State Penitentiary. The show was hailed as realistic and groundbreaking. However, Yousman reveals there are many errors in this assessment. The extreme violence depicted in *Oz* grossly misrepresents the reality of maximum-security prisons.<sup>23</sup>

Yousman conducted interviews with former inmates to get responses to prison depictions in the media. The former inmates rejected the overwhelming message of violence on television, instead focusing on the intense supervision and routine of prison life. Yousman writes:

“Interviewees also spontaneously brought up many issues that were rarely or never dealt with in either dramatic or news programming. Issues such as poor nutritional and health care services; limited opportunities to participate in educational, vocational, or other rehabilitation programs; frequent verbal or physical abuse by corrections staff; complicity of corrections staff with the prison drug trade; the difficulties released prisoners have in finding employment; and high turnover rates and inadequate training programs for COs, came up in every interview and yet were almost entirely absent from the television discourse about incarceration.”<sup>24</sup>

These responses by inmates suggest that there is a large part of the prison narrative the mass media neglect.

Like *Orange*, *Oz* utilizes flashbacks. Yousman argues these flashbacks showed that the criminal justice system is not doing enough to combat violent criminals.

“Nearly every episode of *Oz* includes at least one black-and-white flashback to the crimes that led to particular characters’ sentences. During these flashbacks, the brutality of the crime is displayed in graphic detail while the narrator intones the prisoner’s name, number, date of conviction, crime and sentence. There is always an emphasis on the disparity between the original sentence and the date when the prisoner may be eligible for parole. This emphasis on the notion that violent criminals may only have to serve a fraction of their sentence seems to

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<sup>23</sup> Bill Yousman. Prime time prisons on U.S. TV: representation of incarceration. (New York: Peter Lang, 2009.) 142-145.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

directly play into the mainstream political discourse that call for longer, harsher sentences.”<sup>25</sup>

This thesis will look at the backstory device and see how it is utilized in *Orange*.

### *The Women-in-Prison Film*

Several researches have found that women-in-prison films (WIPs) sexualize the prisoners. Surette addresses films on women’s prisons and says they “focus chiefly on lesbianism and sexual relations.”<sup>26</sup> Other researchers also found women-in-prison films to be instrumental in promoting prison reform.

In “Containing Deviant Desire” Ann Ciasullo analyzes the representations of women’s sexuality in women-in-prison films. First she outlines the typical women-in-prison narrative:

“If you have ever seen a women-in-prison movie or read a women-in-prison pulp novel, then you have already been introduced to its standard narrative trajectory: Due to her involvement—typically unwitting, though sometimes not—in a crime, a young woman is sent to prison. Upon entering the hellhole, she must endure its “welcoming” ritual: giving up her personal possessions; stripping, showering and being sprayed for lice; and all the while, being observed lasciviously by a few perverse matrons. In the slammer, she is faced with a range of female criminals, including the tough-talking, sarcastic prostitute; the manipulative, back-stabbing snitch; and, of course, the aggressive prison lesbian. She is also quickly acquainted with the authority figures of the prison—superintendent, warden, and matrons—among whom exists a cruel, sadistic woman (often herself a variation on the prison lesbian) who will make the new prisoner’s life hell. To counterbalance the omnipotent, sinister female, there is usually some benevolent male figure employed in the prison—typically a doctor— who intervenes on behalf of the innocent lamb. Over the course of the narrative, we witness the protagonist’s horrifying prison experience, from being thrown in the “hole” (solitary confinement) to being sprayed with fire hoses for punishment. In addition to these events, there is nearly always a shower scene, a catfight (customarily in mud), and often a suicide or death of a

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>26</sup> Surette, 45.

lesser-known character. As tensions mount, the narrative culminates in some sort of rebellion: a food fight, an attempted breakout, a prison fire, and in one narrative (the 1956 film *Girls in Prison*), an earthquake. The story typically concludes with the heroine's release from prison and leaves the viewers/readers with a sense of her life thereafter. And in many narratives, the prisoner is reunited with and guided to goodness by the man in her life—a father, a husband, even a priest—swept back into familial and heterosexual bliss.”<sup>27</sup>

This quote provides a framework to understand the women-in-prison genre and should be taken into consideration when analyzing current depictions of women's prisons.

Ciasullo then analyzes “true” versus “pseudo” lesbians in prison films. Lesbian characters in WIPs are used to satisfy the male fantasy and to show deviant sexualities being disciplined. The pseudo lesbian is an inmate who conforms to heterosexual norms outside of prison and experiments with her sexuality only inside prison. She is reformed upon release and returns to heterosexual norms. Ciasullo argues that lesbianism in WIPs can only be contained inside prison walls. The true lesbian is a masculine character who represents deviance and aggression. This character is never released from prison. Ciasullo writes, “Whereas the straight female protagonist is almost always released from prison, the “true” lesbian almost always remains—or dies—in prison. The narrative thus resolves the threat of the prison lesbian by keeping her confined within the prison walls.”<sup>28</sup> Confining “true” lesbians to prison demonstrates to viewers that there is a connection between criminality and homosexuality.

In Suzanne Bouclin's analysis, she defines two types of women-in-prison films: sexploitation films and social purpose films. She writes:

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<sup>27</sup> Ann Ciasullo, "Containing 'Deviant' Desire: Lesbianism, Heterosexuality, and the Women-in-Prison Narrative." *Journal of Popular Culture*, 41.2 (2008): 195-223.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 204-205.



Whereas the social purpose WIPs claimed in advertising to depict ‘the story of a women’s prison today,’ the exploitation movies offered ‘caged passions igniting in carnal confinement and exploding into violence.’ Neither delivers exactly what it promises. Both obscure questions of race, class, physical and sexual abuse, intellectual disabilities, and sexual orientation in the development of stock female characters and filmic conventions.<sup>29</sup>

Bouclin chooses to focus less on lesbianism and “sexploitation” and more on the social commentary found in WIPs. Bouclin analyzes the 1950 movie *Caged*. The movie, like *Orange is the New Black*, was based in fact. Screenwriter Virginia Kellogg, visited several women’s prisons to conduct research and even had herself committed to one prison.<sup>30</sup> The preview for the movie presents a story that is half documentary and half drama. The narrator says, “Each day the criminal courts condemn scores of unfortunate girls to prisons that need reforming more than the prisoners. For in these dismal cages the first time loser is exposed to the habitual criminal by a vicious outmoded penal system.”<sup>31</sup> Bouclin’s analysis shows that using women-in-prison films for social commentary started during the prison reform movement of the 1950s.

### *Prisoners in the Print Media*

In *The Cultural Prison*, John Sloop discusses dominant ideologies about prisoners from the 1950s to the 1990s. He analyzes many popular magazines and the common themes that emerge from representations of male and female prisoners in print news. He identifies three main characterizations of incarcerated women: female

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<sup>29</sup> Suzanne Bouclin. "Women in Prison Movies as Feminist Jurisprudence." *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*. ( 21:1, 2009) 22.

<sup>30</sup> “Bleak Picture of Women’s Prisons.” *New York Times*. May 20, 1950. Accessed May 10, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review>.

<sup>31</sup> “Caged (1950) Trailer.” YouTube video, 2:04. Posted by “alifeatthemovies,” Posted June 18, 2010. <http://youtu.be/DnTOIRoHoLI>.

prisoners are mothers, victims of their circumstances, and redeemable. Women who commit crimes are often portrayed as being out of options. Perhaps they were in an abusive relationship or had a rough childhood, which led them to commit their crimes. Maybe they were only trying to provide for their children or lift their family out of poverty.<sup>32</sup> Many stories about women prisoners focus on their role as mothers. Women are also represented as having the potential to reform. "Furthermore, many observers of female prisoners during this period suggest that the greatest percentage of them are drug offenders who are already morally straight and need more medical help than punishment."<sup>33</sup>

Sloop also writes about the static representation of women across the different time periods he studied. He argues that their representation doesn't change over time or based on race:

"First, the characterization of women remains remarkably consistent across periods, while the characterizations of male prisoners change more rapidly. That is, while the way in which women are punished changes over time as different penological ideas concerning rehabilitation and methods of punishment gain and lose currency, the overall representation of female prisoner remains fairly stable. Second, gender transcends ethnicity in the representations of female prisoners. That is, female prisoners are not only represented as distinct from male prisoner, but they are represented similarly as women despite their racial and ethnic differences."<sup>34</sup>

Regardless of whether dominant ideologies of the time period supported prison reform or a crime crackdown, the representation of women remained consistent. Sloop

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<sup>32</sup> John M. Sloop. "The Cultural Prison: Discourse, Prisoners, and Punishment." (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996).168.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 52-53.

analyzed news accounts in the print media, so it's unclear whether the same thing occurred in film representations.

Sloop also briefly addresses sexuality, saying that while film heavily sexualized women prisoners the print media stayed away from this. "While films of the 1950s show female prisons to be hotbeds of rampant lesbian activity and brutality, the representations of female prisoners in print media frame the prisoners primarily as heterosexuals."<sup>35</sup> Ciasullo argues that lesbianism was used as a marker of deviance in women-in-prison film. If the print media largely tried to represent women as essentially moral and redeemable, this could be a reason homosexuality was not discussed.

### **Female Criminals in the News**

The news media use a different tact in its representation of female criminals, which are distinct from female prisoners. As Surette noted, most media coverage of the criminal justice system focuses on crime fighting and trial proceedings. When women criminals appear in the news, only the most sadistic and salacious stories are presented. The novelty of horrific crimes committed by women grab the media spotlight. While women only commit 14 percent of violent crime, major news outlets are littered with articles about women killers.<sup>36</sup>

In her book *Media & Crime*, Yvonne Jewkes presents the feminist argument that news coverage of female criminals is largely misogynistic.<sup>37</sup> Jewkes outlines the main media narratives about women criminals. The narratives told about women criminals

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 53

<sup>36</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Women Offenders*, by Lawrence A. Greenfeld and Tracy L. Snell. December 1999. Revised 2000.

<sup>37</sup> Yvonne Jewkes. "Media Misogyny: Monstrous Women." in *Media and Crime*. (London: SAGE, 2004.) 107-138.

contain several paradoxes, they are either ugly or dangerously seductive, either manipulative or acting under someone else's influence. The media relishes in depicting women who are sexually deviant, either as lesbians or as rapists. Female criminals are shown to fail miserably in traditional roles as wife and mother. The "bad wife" or "bad mother" commits spousal homicide or filicide. According to Jewkes, there is also comparison of female criminals to mythical monsters such as Medusa, vampires, and pagan witches. These constructions all serve to deny women agency in their crimes, to reduce their humanity and "otherise" them. Jewkes posits that underneath these constructions is a societal fear of women turning on those they are supposed to nurture. "Our inability to view women who commit serious offences as anything other than – well- 'others', may relate to our psychological make-up in so far as early dependence on our mothers makes us especially vulnerable to the fear that evil women can elicit."<sup>38</sup>

Jewkes identifies the following narratives of female criminals:

1. sexuality and sexual deviance
2. (absence of) physical attractiveness
3. bad wives
4. bad mothers
5. mythical monsters
6. mad cows (dangerous and mentally ill)
7. evil manipulators
8. non-agents

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 131-132.

These narratives are important to keep in mind for the study of the media's portrayal of women's prisons because prisons should supposedly be filled with the monstrous women portrayed by the media. Elements of Jewkes' analysis show up in the portrayal of female prisoners discussed by Sloop in women-in-prison films. In these materials viewers largely see women who are sexualized for the male viewers' pleasure or who are sexually deviant lesbians. In Sloop's analysis he found women to be non-agents, meaning they were led into crime by outside forces in their lives.

### **Real World Prison Issues**

This analysis will focus on the stories the media tell about prison and prisoners. It's important to note the main issues prison reform advocates see in prison so that this can be compared to the stories the media put forth. According to the Sentencing Project the main issues for incarcerated women are<sup>39</sup>:

1. Rapid prison population growth (the number of incarcerated women has increased by 800 percent since the 1980s).
2. Racial disparities in the prison population.
3. Limited access to health care, drug treatment, and mental health services.
4. Motherhood and family disruption during incarceration. (According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 61.7% of incarcerated women in state prison are mothers of minor children.<sup>40</sup>)
5. Lack of job training and education programs during incarceration.
6. Lack of transitional housing and reentry programs upon release.

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<sup>39</sup> The Sentencing Project. Women in the Criminal Justice System. May 2007.

<sup>40</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics, Parents in Prison and Their Minor Children, by Lauren E. Glaze and Laura M. Maruschak. August 2008. Revised March 30, 2010.

I will also add to the list the issues Yousman found in his interviews of former inmates<sup>41</sup>:

7. Frequent verbal or physical abuse by corrections staff.
8. Complicity of corrections staff with the prison drug trade.
9. High turnover rates and inadequate training programs for corrections officers.

### **Summarizing the Literature**

Based on this literature review the stories told about prisons and prisoners can be broken down as follows:

1. Prisons are violent places.
2. Rehabilitation programs are ineffective because prisoners cannot be reformed.
3. Crime is an individual choice.
4. Women's prisons are full of lesbians, with a link between deviance and masculinity.
5. Women criminals are promiscuous, crazy, ugly, seductive, conniving, and/or non-agents.
6. Women have some chance for redemption, but only if they conform to traditional gender roles as heterosexual mothers.
7. Media representations of women prisoners are static and do not vary according to a woman's race.

These narratives will help guide the rest of this thesis as I determine which of these narratives are continued or disrupted.

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<sup>41</sup> Yousman, 77.

## Materials and Methods

I will do a critical textual analysis of *Orange is the New Black* using previous published work about the prison genre to see how *Orange* both reflects and differs from established paradigms. The main texts I will analyze are the television shows *Orange is the New Black*, *Beyond Scared Straight*, and *Lockdown*. *Orange* is significant because of its popularity with both viewers and critics. The news media have devoted many articles to the show, further promoting its popularity. I will also analyze how the news media has responded to the show to see if there is support or opposition for the show's representation of prison. I will crosscheck the television representation of women prisoners on *Orange* with a couple episodes from A&E's *Beyond Scared Straight* and National Geographic's *Lockdown*. Since the news media overwhelmingly claim that *Orange* presents a fresh look into prison I will analyze *Beyond Scared Straight* and *Lockdown* to see if those shows are dramatically different from *Orange*.

## **Women's Prison in *Beyond Scared Straight* and *Lockdown***

### **A&E's *Beyond Scared Straight***

In *Beyond Scared Straight* troubled youth are given tours of prisons where they face intimidation, harassment, and humiliation at the hands of inmates and guards. Most of the youth are black or Latino, reinforcing the image of criminals as people of color.

In season 1, episode 10<sup>42</sup> a 13 year-old girl whose crime is “soliciting older men” (displayed beneath her image every time she comes on screen) is screamed at and told she’ll be raped and brutally murdered. She eventually excuses herself to throw up at which point a CO questions her if she’s pregnant and if she’s had sex. She denies having sex, but the CO keeps pressing her until she finally admits that she’s had sex once, but used protection. The CO says she’ll need a pregnancy test. It is later revealed that she is not pregnant.

In another scene the COs order the kids to eat the prison food. When one refuses he knocks her tray to the ground and then screams at her to pick it up. Meanwhile, the parents of the children get a parenting class led by a police officer in which he shows them how children can conceal drugs inside highlighters. He tells them parenting is about active supervision, and that they need to constantly monitor their children’s actions.

The philosophy of the Scared Straight program is that these scare tactics will deter the youth from a life of crime. This show continues despite research that contradicts the programs’ effectiveness. In fact, studies show that youth are more likely

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<sup>42</sup> *Beyond Scared Straight*, season 1, episode 10, “San Bernardino County, CA (Girls),” directed by Arnold Shapiro, aired September 1, 2011, on A&E, accessed May 3, 2014, <http://www.hulu.com/beyond-scared-straight>.



to commit crimes after going through the program.<sup>43</sup> However, *Beyond Scared Straight* repeatedly emphasizes the youth's reformation in follow-up interviews a month later. In these interviews most of the youth claim to be changed or improving. The documentary-style program reinforces the effectiveness of the program based on personal anecdotes a month later instead of long-term evidence.

The image this show paints of the women's prison is one of chaos and brutality. The women in the prison are butch and threaten to rape the youth. In one episode a butch inmate says, "This is where I can take advantage of a woman because no one would tell."<sup>44</sup> They act brutal and animalistic as they scream and claw from behind their cells at the girls. An inmate named Wicked talks to the girls about making better choices. In an interview Wicked says she hopes she can make a difference in one girls' life. These inmates have no experience in youth counseling, and as offenders may not really know the most effective crime deterrence strategies.

Despite coming from abusive and drug-torn homes, the inmates take responsibility for the choices that landed them in prison. Wicked's mom died when she was five and her dad abandoned her. She has been in and out of prison for 25 years. "I don't feel sorry for myself," she says. "I know I chose the wrong road." Ambur, another inmate, had two drug-addicted parents. She started using at age 11. "My parents were on drugs, but it was my choice. I didn't have to follow in their footsteps," she says. A

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<sup>43</sup> Anthony Petrosino,, Carolyn Turpin-Petrosino, and James Finckenauer. "Well-Meaning Programs Can Have Harmful Effects! Lessons from Experiments of Programs Such as Scared Straight." *Crime & Delinquency*, 46.3 (2000): 354-379.

<sup>44</sup>*Beyond Scared Straight*, season 3, episode 1, "Boston, MA (Girls)," aired August 20, 2012.

third inmate, Candice, breaks down in tears and says she wishes she had a program like Scared Straight to help her.

These testimonies from inmates reinforce that crime is an individual choice instead of a social problem. They validate their own incarceration by asserting that without prison they would still be offending. Ambur, who is convicted of drug-related crimes, says, “To keep getting high you just keep doing stupid stuff that [lands you] here. You know, if I don’t have it then I’m going to find a way to get it.” Ambur’s statement confirms that she needs to be confined in prison to prevent her from committing crimes.

This program does very little to advance critical thinking about the justice system. The show is all about showing crime as a personal responsibility and not one caused by other influences such as poverty. The mother of one of the girls in the show spent time in prison herself. She says to the camera, “She didn’t fall into it accidentally, but there’s two options you could’ve chosen. You just chose that one.” While people always have a choice, there’s no doubt that having a mother in prison made the daughter’s life difficult and influenced her development and decisions. This show fits inside the media representations that bolster the prison industrial complex.

### **National Geographic’s *Lockdown***

National Geographic’s *Lockdown* is a documentary series that mostly documents men’s prisons. However, one episode in the first season takes viewers inside Valley State Penitentiary, a women’s medium security prison in California.<sup>45</sup> The show’s

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<sup>45</sup> *Lockdown*, season 1, episode 5, “Women Behind Bars,” produced by National Geographic, aired February 11, 2007, accessed May 3, 2014, <http://www.netflix.com/WiMovie/70148133?>

overwhelming message is that women can be every bit as violent as men. The show opens with a deep-voiced narrator saying, “If you think women in prison are soft, think again. Inside [are] 3900 of the most ruthless women in the state system. They’re thieves, drug traffickers, carjackers, and killers. All under one roof.” The narrator sets up an expectation of chaos within the prison. The episode delves into several aspects of prison life, each designed to show the brutality of the inmates rather than problems in the corrections system. The four main themes are: solitary confinement, drug use and drug trade, pregnancy in prison, and release from prison. In the following sections I will analyze these themes.

### *Solitary Confinement*

The episode opens in administrative segregation where viewers meet Earlene Mitchell, described as a typical inmate at Valley State. Mitchell says, “We are inmates from Hell.” She is in solitary because she instigated a fight. The narrator tells viewers that she is a dangerous inmate known to throw feces at the corrections officers. The crew shows a CO dressing in protective clothing before passing food to the inmates through a small opening. He explains that he carries pepper spray, a baton, and Kevlar gloves for his protection against the violent inmates. The narrator says, “Earlene, unrestrained in her cell is free to attack.” This statement seems contradictory because though Earlene isn’t chained, her options for attacking someone when she is contained in a cell with only a small opening in the door seem limited. Earlene explains the reason the inmates in solitary fight and scream is because they are angry.

Earlene has a hearing to decide whether she can live with a cellmate after two months in solitary confinement. The committee grants her the cellmate. The narrator

says, “Earlene worried that the prison would decide that she was too dangerous to live with another woman, but her new cellmate’s history is as violent as her own.” Earlene expresses her excitement to be out of solitary confinement. “I can’t wait to interact with other inmates,” she says with a big smile on her face. “When I first get out there I’m going to hug my best friend.” The scene cuts to Earlene being strip-searched. The narrator warns that inmates hide things inside their bodies to use as weapons in the yard. The juxtaposition of these two images reminds the audience that while Earlene might have some normal human emotions she is still a dangerous criminal who might go to extreme lengths to cause violence.

At the end of the show, the episode revisits Earlene. She is being escorted back to solitary. She says her cellmate instigated a fight. There is no discussion by the narrator about why she is going to solitary instead of getting a new cellmate. “Some people say they want to change, right? I can’t say that I want to change because I don’t know what change is.” They replay footage from a fight that she was in a few years earlier to reemphasize her tendencies towards violence. Earlene’s story shows viewers that prisoners are incapable of change.

### *Drug Use and Drug Trade*

Every inmate interviewed on the show was a drug user. The show also spends a lot of time covering the drug trade and how corrections officers battle the problem. As the camera films inmates talking on the yard, the narrator says that while it may look like nothing is going on the inmates are actually making drug deals. The episode follows LeeLee, an inmate that the corrections officers believe to be a drug kingpin. She explains in an interview that she takes pride in keeping her cell clean. The narrator says,

“Her only motive for cleanliness is to avoid a cell raid.” He says this is because she is hiding drugs in her room. LeeLee explains that, “It’s like they come in here and violate us. They tear us up. It’s humiliating.” Rather than discuss the humiliation, the narrator says, “But sometimes it’s the inmates who tear cells up.” The scene immediately switches to the aftermath of a bloody fight in a cell.

### *Pregnant in Prison*

This episode also follows a pregnant woman in prison. This could have been an opportunity to talk about the poor medical care available in prisons and the unique challenges pregnant inmates face. Instead, the show glosses over the medical care and focuses on the violence that pregnant criminals are capable of. We are introduced to Crystal McLoughlin. The narrator says, “On the street Crystal McLoughlin is a young mom with two kids. In prison, she’s an inmate convicted of second degree burglary.”

The narrator reminds us that “California sentences women for their crimes, pregnant or not.” This statement is a reminder that these women did something to get themselves in prison and are not deserving of sympathy just because they are pregnant. It also portrays the justice system as fair and unbiased.

In the next segment the narrator emphasizes that McLoughlin took meth in her first trimester. She is only clean because she got arrested and brought to prison. This credits the prison system with rescuing her unborn child from possible birth defects. McLoughlin lives in the medical ward. She tells us that the medical ward is just as violent with just as many fights.

When McLoughlin gives birth the crew interviews a nurse at the hospital McLoughlin was transported to. She says, “I tend to be a bleeding heart and I feel for

them because by nature I'm a nurturer and I want to hug them and say it'll be okay, but you can't because we don't really know all the things these girls have done and unfortunately most of its drug-related and people do bad things when they're on drugs." This testimony by the nurse reinforces the public's fear of criminals. It tells viewers that when we feel a natural emotional response to a prisoner we should remind ourselves of the evil they are capable of. In addition, her statement is illogical. She links her fear of pregnant inmates to drugs, and says "people do bad things when they're on drugs." However, Crystal is not high at the hospital; instead she is mourning because her baby is being taken away from her.

As Crystal cries, she tells the camera that she wants to finish her sentence so that she can go home to her children and care for them. She says she's made her mistakes, but that it's unfair that her children have to pay for them. She has a moment of determination to change her life, but the narrator says "If Crystal makes up her mind to get out of prison and stay clean it won't be easy." The narrator once again puts the burden on the inmate for her own rehabilitation while casting doubt on her ability to change.

### *Preparing for release*

To illustrate prisoners preparing for release, the crew interviews Morene Green. The narrator introduces her: "Morene Green committed her first assault at age 7. She violently attacked a boy with a pencil, paralyzing him. Next came burglary at age 18. Then at age 24 she was convicted of battery and was caught doing drugs and at 26 she served her first stint at Valley State for a carjacking."

Morene talks about the challenges she will face when she is released. The CO urges her to fill out two job applications every day. Morene says that she has never been accepted for a job because she writes down her criminal record. This could be an opportunity for the narrator to talk about the challenges inmates face upon release. Instead, he reiterates her crimes.

“I am most comfortable, and I hate to say that, here in prison. I feel more safe here. I feel more loved here. I feel valued here. Respected here,” says Morene. This demonstrates that prisoners are meant to be in prison. Not only do they need to be contained, they are happier inside prison.

In the end *Lockdown* shows Green getting released. The narrator says she will have trouble staying out of prison. However, this is not to criticize the corrections system. Instead her failure to rehabilitate is her burden. Green has spent most of her life in prison and talks about how comfortable she is there. She can handle prison better than the outside world. She says she is determined to reform. As she walks out of the prison, the narrator says, “The street’s fast money could seduce Morene Green again and she knows it.”

*Prison is filled with violent, drug-addicted criminals.*

This show depicts female criminals as inherently evil, beyond rehabilitation, and with the same violent tendencies as men. There didn’t seem to be any nuance in their treatment of women. The show didn’t depict any work opportunities or training for the inmates. It didn’t depict educational opportunities either. It showed the inmates being idle in their cells. The narrator guided the audience to be skeptical

and wary of prisoners. While sometimes the prisoners provided opportunities for meaningful discussion, the narrator was quick to remind viewers they were seeing violent criminals. The whole story was framed and guided by the narrative in sometimes jarring and mismatched ways. When an inmate was talking about something emotional, the narration would quickly jump to their violent tendencies or drug addiction.

The depictions in *Lockdown* and *Beyond Scared Straight* are consistent with past depictions of prison in the media as places of violence. The women's prisons weren't distinguished from men's prisons in their representations aside from the depiction of pregnancy. However, the depiction of pregnancy was not to open discussion about women's healthcare in prison but rather to show the inmates as incapable mothers. The introduction to McLoughlin is problematic because it reduces McLoughlin's humanity in prison. While outside she may have a life as a mom, inside she is a dangerous criminal. Programs like these exemplify the media's relationship to the prison industrial complex.



## **A New Look at Prison: *Orange is the New Black***

*Orange*<sup>46</sup> is unique because of its popularity and its exclusive focus on women's prisons. Over the course of thirteen episodes it explores many issues within prison, making it more comprehensive than *Lockdown*, which only dedicates one episode to women's prisons. Unlike *Lockdown* or *Beyond Scared Straight*, the show provides social commentary on the justice system. The show was also one of the most popular shows of 2013. This popularity means that its message has reached more people, and perhaps created a more powerful cultivation effect on viewers. *Orange* explores many themes throughout the first season. This chapter will relate its representations of prisons and prisoners to *Lockdown* and *Beyond Scared Straight* and address unique themes that *Orange* presents. The two main features that distinguish *Orange* from current representations of prisons on televisions are its criticism of the corrections system and its humanization of the inmates through the portrayal of their crimes and identities.

### **Insights about the Corrections System**

Right from the beginning the narrative is critical of the corrections system. Every episode depicts the prison and its staff as ineffective, bureaucratic, and corrupt. In the first episode, "I Wasn't Ready" when Piper reports to Litchfield Penitentiary she encounters several flaws in the system. She arrives with a check for her inmate bank account as she was told to do over the phone, but is informed she needs to mail it elsewhere where it will take several weeks to process. In the mean time, she will not be able to buy anything from the commissary.

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<sup>46</sup> *Orange is the New Black*, season 1, episodes 1–13, directed by Jenji Kohan, published on Netflix July 11, 2013. Accessed on May 11, 2014. <http://www.netflix.com/WiMovie/70242311?>

During the booking process two corrections officers try to figure out how to operate a computer to take Piper's identification photo. Piper suggests that they try plugging in a loose cord, which connects the camera to the computer. Rather than thank her, the CO says, "Shut your mouth and stand still." This exchange both portrays the corrections officers as inept and reinforces Piper's inferior position as an inmate. While the audience might see her as "like them" or worthy of respect, the corrections officers treat her as a criminal.

When Piper meets her councilor, Mr. Healy, she explains the crime she committed that landed her in prison. She tells him that she carried drug money 10 years earlier ("that one time," she emphasizes.) Mr. Healy asks her what the statute of limitations is on that crime, and Piper replies that it's 12 years. Mr. Healy says, "You know, I've been here 22 years and I still can't figure out how the system works. I've got a crack dealer who's doing nine months and I have a lady who accidentally backed into a mailman who is doing four years. I mean the guy broke his collar bone, but come on." Right away the audience is introduced to a system that is unfair and seemingly arbitrary.

In episode 4, "Imaginary Enemies," a screwdriver goes missing in the shop. It turns out Piper forgot that she left it in the pocket of her jacket during a lunch break. She realizes this with horror. She talks it over with her cellmate, saying she will just explain what happened, but her cellmate warns her not to because she'll get time in the segregated housing unit (SHU) and the cellmate will be considered an accomplice. Piper is used to having a presumption of innocence in the outside world, but this privilege gets her nowhere in prison where she is assumed a criminal. This shows how the system creates catch-22 situations where inmates might have no good course of

action. At the end of the episode the shop teacher replaces the screwdriver secretly, saying it was found under the sink, even though Piper knows he's lying. He's just covering for himself because he could get in trouble for his lax supervision. This is another example of the corrupt prison staff.

In episode 6, "WAC Pack," Mr. Healy decides to reinstate the Women's Advisory Committee (WAC). The committee is made up of female inmates whose job it is to bring suggestions to the prison administration. The prison proceeds to hold elections for positions on the WAC. Mr. Healy asks Piper to run, but she declines saying she wants to stay out of the spotlight. Once the votes have been tallied, Caputo (another CO) goes over the results with Mr. Healy. Mr. Healy says, "This isn't about giving them power... This is about your mother saying you can take your bath before dinner or after. You're still going to get wet. You don't have a choice." Mr. Healy rigs the elections so that Piper wins without running. This shows that the elections are just another facade.

## **Race**

This thesis will not attempt to do an in-depth analysis of the representation of race in *Orange*. In another section, I will address how the media has responded to representations of race. However, I would like to acknowledge that the cast is made up of diverse characters, and race is often addressed humorously within the show to point out systemic racism and inequalities. The humor often pokes fun at racial stereotypes. When Piper is confronted with racial divisions in the prison on her first day, Morello, a fellow white inmate, says to her "Oh don't go all PC on me. It's tribal, not racist." This

is one of many examples of racial humor. Sloop said that representation of female prisoners did not vary by race, but *Orange* consistently uses racially based humor.

### **Corrections Officers**

*Orange* portrays a range of characters in the corrections officers. Some seem to just be doing their job, others relish in the power they have over the inmates, one is naively optimistic, and another is a heartthrob. Some of these characterizations are more believable than others. Unlike *Lockdown*, which holds inmates responsible for the drug trade, *Orange* instead shows the corrections officers engaging in the drug trade. Mendez coerces and threatens an inmate into selling drugs for him. The corrections officers also sexually abuse the inmates by making inappropriate comments, groping them during searches, and harassing them for sexual favors. There is an unlikely romance between an inmate and guard. The decision to portray the corrections officers on spectrum of good and evil goes against the prison genre as well. The writers aren't just concerned with humanizing the inmates, but everyone within the corrections system.

### **Portrayal of Inmates**

Unlike the violent and animalistic depictions of female inmates on *Lockdown* and *Beyond Scared Straight*, *Orange* takes a more humanizing approach. One of the most significant ways the show does this is by taking the focus away from the crime. While both *Lockdown* and *Beyond Scared Straight* publish the inmate's name, criminal record, sentence term, and the crime they are serving for, *Orange* strays away from this. They imply, rather than overtly state the crime an inmate has been convicted for.

In Bill Yousman's analysis of *Oz*, he found the flashback tool was used to emphasize the potential that the monstrous criminals could be released on parole. In *Orange* the flashback device is used instead to introduce the audience to the often tragic circumstances of the characters' lives. This characterization is much more consistent with the portrayals Sloop described. The flashback usually takes the audience up to the moment before the character's arrest, but the humiliating process of arrest is never shown. Viewers never see the heroic crime fighters Surette described putting the characters in cuffs.

The audience often learns about each character's past after being introduced to the character. This allows the audience to develop attachment to the characters before they know their crime or on the flip side judge the character before they know their full story. This adds nuance to the representation of prisoners and makes it difficult for the audience to define their moral character. Often a character's backstory juxtaposes their vulnerability in their past with their tough act in prison. One example of this is Red's backstory. During episode 2 "Tit Punch," Red, who is head of the kitchen, denies Piper food because she is angry with Piper for insulting her cooking. Red's behavior towards Piper is cruel, but at the same time the audience sees flashbacks to Red being excluded and ridiculed by her peers. This vulnerability gives the audience empathy for Red.

*Orange* largely stays away from violence. There is a catfight in "Tit Punch" and a more serious fight in episode 13 "Can't Fix Crazy," but the show largely presents the prisoners as friendly. In episode 4, "Imaginary Enemies," the potential for violence is hinted at but instead ends in comic relief. When a screwdriver goes missing in the shop there is fear that an inmate might use it as a weapon. Instead, the inmate wraps it up and

uses it as a dildo. The screenwriters play on the audience's expectation of violence in prison.

Even the violent crimes committed are only hinted at instead of shown in graphic detail. When Ms. Claudette murders a man who abuses an underage girl, the scene shows Ms. Claudette cleaning the murder weapon and briefly pans to the victim covered in blood with his body facing away from the camera. This is the most graphic scene of the entire first season.

The characterizations of the women prisoners show them to be human, capable of good and bad choices. This characterization is consistent with Sloop's redeemable prisoner; the women at Litchfield have had tough lives and few good options.

### **Portrayal of Female Criminality**

*Orange* tends to diverge from the narrative Jewkes puts forth, providing a counter-narrative to mainstream news depictions of women criminals. The prison is minimum security, but so far there have been no women who have murdered their own children or participated in rape. There are women with mental health problems like Suzanne "Crazy Eyes" Warren, but far from being portrayed as dangerous or without agency, Crazy Eyes demonstrates an incredible passion and talent for poetry. The representations Jewkes outlines all framed women criminals as one-dimensional monsters, lunatics, or sadists. *Orange* completely flips that around and portrays complex characters that the audience can empathize with.

## **Responding to the Prison Genre**

*Orange* consistently criticizes and talks back to media representations of prison and prisoners. In “I Wasn’t Ready,” Mr. Healy tells Piper, “This isn’t *Oz*.” Immediately *Orange* invokes another popular prison show and dismisses its message of brutality and violence. Mr. Healy is telling Piper as well as viewers that this is different kind of prison show.

The show, which often is light-hearted and comical, takes more serious moments to reflect in on itself. Piper’s fiancé, Larry, is a journalist. He publishes an article in the *New York Times* about his experience with Piper’s incarceration. The title, “One Sentence, Two Prisoners” bothers Piper. (A common theme in the show is that her friends and family consider Piper’s incarceration a bigger problem for themselves than Piper). Piper is upset about his article, which is his interpretation of her experience in prison. She says to Alex, her co-defendant and lover, “I’m happy for him, but he got so much of it so wrong. I’m not somebody’s girlfriend. I’m not some cool story at some yuppy fucking cocktail party. [In imaginary conversation] ‘You did a year in the Peace Corps? I did a year in prison.’ Fuck no. Those things we did, you and me, that wasn’t adventure or a romp. That was my life.” Piper is expressing the frustration of having no voice in her own story, which Larry is exploiting for the benefit of his career. However, Piper’s comment also causes the audience some uneasiness. Afterall, the viewers are also participants in exploiting her story for entertainment. The audience is, in a sense, being called out for the assumption that this journey has been funny and interesting for Piper too.

At the end of episode 11, “Tall Men With Feelings,” Larry goes on *This American Life* to talk about Piper’s experience in prison. He acts as interpreter for inmates that he only knows through Piper. As the show airs, the prisoners listen on their radios as Larry talks about their lives. This scene portrays a range of emotions among the prisoners who are enraged, hurt, or sometimes happy with the way Larry talks about them. However, there is no communication between the prisoners and the radio audience. They react in silence as Larry’s voice speaks over them. They are literally muted as their narrative is broadcast to the wider world.

An Ira Glass-type radio host asks Larry if he is concerned for Piper’s safety. He says, “Yes, absolutely... I know she can handle herself, but when you are dealing with unstable women you have no idea what they are actually capable of. I mean, when your fiancé says that she sleeps with one eye open because her roommate is rumored to be a murderer and might shiv her in her sleep, it’s impossible not to be scared.” Larry is voicing a common perception that prison is filled with dangerous people. However, Ms. Claudette (the inmate he is talking about) is someone the audience and Piper have grown to care about. Ms. Claudette is shown looking angry and hurt, but she has no way to stand up for herself as she is talked about on the air.

Larry then offers a counterpoint to the dangerous prison narrative:

I don’t want to imply that they’re all crazy and dangerous. There’s one girl who should’ve been a track star. She was actually going to start training again while she was in there, but they shut the track down because of budget cuts. There’s the girl whose been planning her wedding for months just like everything is normal. Oh, but she is also sleeping with the hot lesbian junkie. How’s that for a prison cliché? I mean the cast of characters goes on and on. There’s the Russian woman who runs the kitchen... totally terrifying, but she takes so much pride in



feeding everyone. You really have to admire the way these women find meaning in their days. How they take care of each other.”

Larry addresses several issues here. First of all, he tries to show there are many stories of women in prison, some of them clichés and some of them unexpected. He also suggests that a prisoner’s life might have meaning and that prisoners have the capacity to be kind. He even refers to the prisoners as “cast of characters,” which seems to speak directly to the audience. His radio appearance gets the audience thinking about how the media portrays prisoners.

*Orange* also specifically responds through parody to *Beyond Scared Straight* in episode 10, “Bora Bora Bora.” As the prison prepares for the visit a corrections officer tells the group of inmates that their job is to deter the youth from making the same mistakes they did. A character named Crazy Eyes says she volunteered because she thought it was an acting opportunity. She wanted to recite Shakespeare. “Tell you what,” says the corrections officer. “You can play whatever character you like, so long that character is the stuff of naughty little brats’ nightmares.” When the children arrive, the inmates do their part and start screaming at them in a similar manner to the inmates in *Beyond Scared Straight*. The difference is that the audience can see right through their acting since the audience knows their true character.

As two corrections officers look on, Officer Bell says to Bennett, “We aren’t helping these kids enough.” Bennett replies, “Are you sure? Most of them are crying.” This exchange points out how ridiculous the exercise is. The inmates chide Chapman into joining the intimidation of the youth. Chapman tells one girl that she doesn’t want to end up in prison, but the girl responds with a bad attitude. Chapman then launches into a speech that reveals the psychological toll prison takes on inmates. Unlike *Beyond*

*Scared Straight*, where the prisoners admit to their guilt and lament they never had a program to “scare them straight” Chapman says, “I was somebody before I came in here. I was somebody with a life that I chose for myself... The scariest part about coming to prison isn’t other people, Dina, it’s about coming face to face with who you really are. The truth catches up with you in here and it’s the truth that’s going to make you a bitch.” This speech both speaks to Piper’s humanity and rejects physical violence as the prison norm.

The visit by the youth comes to an abrupt end when an inmate commits suicide. A CO warns Officer Bell to take the children out a different hallway so they won’t witness the scene. This shows how the children are selectively exposed to prison, further undermining the supposed “real” prison experience the children were supposed to have.

### ***Orange* in the context of the Women-in-prison genre.**

There are many themes in *Orange* that are consistent with the women-in-prison genre. As Bouclin demonstrates, this is not the first time the women-in-prison genre has been used for social commentary. This section will focus primarily on Ciasullo’s analysis of narrative structure and sexuality.

There are many similarities between *Orange* and the narrative structure Ciasullo outlines. Piper is the innocent lamb. She is clearly framed like she doesn’t belong in prison. Even though she is guilty of her crime, she only carried drug money under the influence of her lover. This relieves her of responsibility in some sense. Many of the tropes Ciasullo describes occur in *Orange*: a strip search, shower scene, catfight, and suicide of a lesser-known character. Several of these tropes are used to make fun of the

prison genre while others are simple replications. While Piper's story seems to resonate more with the typical WIP narrative, the other inmate's stories push boundaries and depart from the typical narrative.

The first departure from the WIP narrative is the representation of other prisoners. There is no "tough-talking sarcastic prostitute" (prostitution is not even addressed), no "manipulative back-stabbing snitch" and no "aggressive prison lesbian." There are many lesbians at Litchfield, which is consistent with the popular image of prison. However, the lesbians do not always conform to stereotypes. Being butch is not necessarily a marker of deviance. Big Boo, who is described as a "bull dike" is light-hearted and friendly. She represents the complete opposite of aggressive masculinity. In fact, none of the prison lesbians are represented as dangerous.

Lesbianism is not contained solely within prison walls. A character named Mercy, who is one of the only two inmates released in Season 1 identifies as gay. This diverges from the narrative that Ciasullo found where homosexuality only existed inside the prison and that release signaled a return to heterosexual norms. The audience doesn't find out what happens to Mercy after she is released, but her last scene features her embracing her girlfriend and promising to wait for her to get out.

Piper does conform to the typical WIP narrative. Piper occupies the space of "pseudo-lesbian." Piper's deviance does correlate with deviant sexuality. Her life of crime coincided with her dating lesbian Alex Vause. She leaves her life of crime and lesbianism behind for a new life with her fiancé Larry Bloom. In this life she fully embraces a heterosexual upper-middle class law-abiding lifestyle. When she enters

prison her former lesbian lover once again seduces her. The series has not concluded, but it's likely that her release will signal a return to her fiancé and heterosexual norms.

### **Other Themes**

I have addressed only some of the themes present on *Orange*. Others include pregnancy, drug addiction, healthcare, suicide, prison corruption, sexual harassment, transgender issues, solitary confinement, recidivism, and education and work opportunities. Referring back to the list of real prison reform issues on pages 20-21, *Orange* addresses almost everything in some form. Two things I found it to leave out are mention of the huge prison population and the poor training and high turnover rate in corrections officers (though it could be argued that their poor training is implied in the show). The presence of nearly all the issues demonstrates the show's commitment to providing social commentary on the prison system.

## Media Response and Cultivating Legitimacy

When *Orange is the New Black* was released on Netflix most major news outlets released positive reviews of the “dramedy” TV series. There have been numerous articles published about the show, many of them related to its accuracy and realism. There are also many interviews with cast members, Piper Kerman, and Jenji Kohan. When articles do discuss the show’s realism they tend to endorse realism as far as the representation of prison but tend to reject realism in terms of the events of Kerman’s life. The section will analyze the media response.

### Rave Reviews

A review from the *New Yorker* described *Orange* as “smart, salty, and outrageous.”<sup>47</sup> A headline on a *Washington Post* blog proclaimed “Orange is the New Black’ is the best TV show about prison ever made.”<sup>48</sup> Almost every review published about the series touched on the show’s authenticity. Reviews that applauded the show’s realism focused chiefly on its accurate reflection of the prison system.

The *Washington Post* was more direct in its endorsement of the show’s authenticity. The *Washington Post* released an article that described *Orange* as “a tutorial on the prison-industrial complex disguised as a TV dramedy.”<sup>49</sup> They released another article with the headline, “Netflix’s ‘Orange Is the New Black’: Brilliance

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<sup>47</sup> Emily Nussbaum, “Vice Versa: Good and bad in ‘Orange Is the New Black’ and ‘Ray Donovan,’” July 8, 2013, accessed March 24, 2014, [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/television/2013/07/08/130708crte\\_television\\_nussbaum?](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/television/2013/07/08/130708crte_television_nussbaum?)

<sup>48</sup> Dylan Matthews, “‘Orange is the New Black’ is the best TV show about prison ever made,” *Washington Post*, July 17, 2013, accessed March 21, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/07/17/orange-is-the-new-black-is-the-best-tv-show-about-prison-ever-made/>

<sup>49</sup> Seth Abramson, “How ‘Orange is the New Black’ Humanizes Inmates,” July 26, 2013, accessed May 11, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-orange-is-the-new-black-humanizes-inmates/2013/07/26/d1559bac-f3e5-11e2-9434-60440856fadf\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-orange-is-the-new-black-humanizes-inmates/2013/07/26/d1559bac-f3e5-11e2-9434-60440856fadf_story.html)

behind bars.”<sup>50</sup> In that article the author writes, “As in “Weeds,” Kohan and her writers are obsessed with the million little details that form a believable and unembellished realm. Each episode contains fascinating revelations about the prison world, almost like a documentary report from within.” This endorsement seems overly overenthusiastic. The show is not presented like a documentary. While the creators did put thought into creating an accurate prison environment, there are many storylines that are embellished.

In the blog post, “Orange is the New Black’ is the best TV show about prison ever made,” writer Dylan Matthews outlines the details that the show got right. He highlights (in this order): racial demographics; no conjugal visits in federal prison; yoga in prison; existence of butch wings; trans women’s healthcare barriers and harassment; inmate work opportunities; and horrible SHU conditions. He does not compare the show to Piper Kerman’s memoir, but instead focuses on the accurate representation of the prison system. He also selects somewhat obscure plot points. For example, the butch wing is briefly mentioned in one line by the homophobic councilor, Mr. Healy. Mr. Healy says that he wanted all the butch women put in one wing, but that it didn’t gain traction with the prison administration. Matthews explained that a Virginia state prison actually did have a butch wing.

These reviews of the show reinforce that when viewers watch *Orange* they are seeing the real prison experience. It should be noted that the authors of these articles have never been incarcerated, but still qualify themselves to speak honestly to the realism of *Orange*. Reviews from the *Washington Post* even

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<sup>50</sup> Hank Steuver, “Netflix’s ‘Orange Is the New Black’: Brilliance behind bars,” *Washington Post*. July 11, 2013. Accessed March 21, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/tv/netflixs-orange-is-the-new-black-brilliance-behind-bars/2013/07/11/d52f911e-e9aa-11e2-8f22-de4bd2a2bd39\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/tv/netflixs-orange-is-the-new-black-brilliance-behind-bars/2013/07/11/d52f911e-e9aa-11e2-8f22-de4bd2a2bd39_story.html)

compared the clearly dramatized show to a documentary. These reviews further legitimize *Orange's* narrative about prison.

### **The Real Piper Kerman**

In an article published a month after the series was released, the *New York Times* focused on the show's dramatization of real events in an article titled, "Prison, Real Life and Onscreen."<sup>51</sup> This article featured Piper Kerman's perspective on prison life interwoven with comments on the show's authenticity. The article argued that the show dramatized rather than adhered to reality. It carries the subhead, "The Netflix show "Orange Is the New Black" takes artistic license with many details of prison life." However, the examples of artistic license the article provides seem trivial when compared to the show's overarching message about prison. This article shows that when writers chose to frame *Orange's* realism in terms of the prison system they endorsed the show's realism, but when they framed the realism in terms of specific details in Piper's life they rejected the realism.

The first paragraph of the article describes the beginning of the show: "[Piper Chapman] asks her fiancé to keep her website updated, and when she walks into the penitentiary, she's carrying a burrata sandwich. Of course, the story was different for Piper Kerman, whose memoir of the same name inspired the show. The sandwich she brought was foie gras." This lede is meant humorously, but also seems to exemplify the article's message. While the article nit-picks at small inconsistencies between show and memoir it seems to endorse a larger sense of authenticity within the show.

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<sup>51</sup> Aimee Ball, "Prison, Real Life and On Screen," *New York Times*, August 2, 2013. Accessed March 25, 2014. [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/04/fashion/prison-life-real-and-onscreen.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/04/fashion/prison-life-real-and-onscreen.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

The article points out that Kerman didn't actually serve her sentence with her ex-lover as the fictional Piper does: "The dramatic arc of the series revolves around the character's relationship with her former lover, who is in the same prison on drug charges. In real life, Ms. Kerman saw her nemesis only when they both appeared in court and has never heard from her regarding the memoir or TV show." While this sentence seems to clarify, it actually misinforms readers. It's true that Kerman did not serve most of her sentence in the same prison with Nora (a pseudonym her real life lover), but their paths did in fact cross in prison when Kerman was extradited to Chicago for a trial at the end of her sentence. They were seated together on a prison transport airplane and even shared a cell. This encounter with Nora was a big moment for Kerman in the book, forcing her to take responsibility for her crimes and let go of blame she had for Nora.

The news story commends *Orange* for its empathetic and inclusive portrayal. "But "Orange" also presents characters almost never portrayed, at least not with much empathy, in Hollywood. The prison population is not a monolith of incorrigible rogues; everyone has a painful back story, and many of them made life-altering choices when they were far too young." The story highlights the accurate and humanizing depiction of prisoners on *Orange*. Kerman is then quoted expressing the compassion and solidarity she felt with her fellow inmates:

Most treasured are photographs of the women with whom she served, women who, despite the counsel of her lawyer to remain aloof, became friends. As she reviewed them, she mentioned sad details: one who was bipolar, another who got pregnant shortly after being released. "The backgrounds of women in prison include physical abuse, addiction and mental health issues..." she said.



Kerman's reflection on her time in prison resonates with many of the themes presented in the show. In the show one inmate kills herself, two experience pregnancy in prison, and many characters suffer from drug addiction. While the show is often presented as comedy, there are moments where the depressing reality comes through. At one point, Piper Chapman says to her fellow inmate Nicky, "In the morning when I wake up there are these few seconds before I realize where I am and then I do realize and then I can't breathe and I want to cry and throw shit and kill myself. When does that end?" Nicky solemnly replies, "I'll let you know."

Kerman is quoted: "The thing about being incarcerated is that many of your struggles are internal. You're thinking about what landed you in this wretched place, which is hard to dramatize. So external conflict, which any sensible person in prison is trying to avoid, is really important for television." It's true that *Kohan* uses external conflict and drama to move the plot forward in *Orange*, but interestingly this statement made by Kerman resembles the statement by Chapman in "Bora Bora Bora." Chapman says, "I was somebody before I came in here. I was somebody with a life that I chose for myself... The scariest part about coming to prison isn't other people, Dina, it's about coming face to face with who you really are."

Overall, this article leaves readers with a mixed message on the show's authenticity. On the one hand it states overtly that the show dramatized Kerman's life, but when it provides concrete examples seems to demonstrate the show's honesty in depicting prison life. The article overall could do a lot better at contextualizing its claims.

## Expert Opinion

Both the *Huffington Post* and *Washington Post* published articles written by people who interact with prisoners, further adding legitimacy to their articles. The *Washington Post* published an op-ed by a former public defender with the headline, “How ‘Orange Is the New Black’ humanizes inmates.”<sup>52</sup> In this article the Seth Abramson affirms the show’s realistic portrayal of inmates, writing, “Piper’s experiences make for pretty entertaining TV — and offer the most realistic portrayal of convicts the small screen has ever seen.” He goes on to say that the show’s characters resemble the people he defended: people whose tough life circumstances led them to commit their crimes. He also blames television’s emphasis on courtroom justice for the public’s lack of empathy for prisoners. He says “We should not confuse a TV program with a criminology course, but “Orange Is the New Black” goes a long way toward narrowing the gap between our perceptions of convicts and the sometimes surprising reality.”

The *Huffington Post* also published an article by a prison reform advocate. Written by Jesse Lava of the organization Behind Bars, the article was titled, “What *Orange Is the New Black* Gets Right About the Prison System – And What It Leaves Out.”<sup>53</sup> Lava says *Orange* accurately depicts sentencing disparities, corrupt prison staff, and difficulties inmates face upon release. He says *Orange* omits the size of the prison population, racial bias, and the devastating effects of mass incarceration on

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<sup>52</sup> Seth Abramson, “How ‘Orange is the New Black’ Humanizes Inmates,” *Washington Post*, July 26, 2013, accessed May 11, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-orange-is-the-new-black-humanizes-inmates/2013/07/26/d1559bac-f3e5-11e2-9434-60440856fadf\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-orange-is-the-new-black-humanizes-inmates/2013/07/26/d1559bac-f3e5-11e2-9434-60440856fadf_story.html)

<sup>53</sup> Jesse Lava, “What Orange Is the New Black Gets Right About the Prison System -- And What It Leaves Out,” *Huffington Post*, August 12, 2013, accessed November 14, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jesse-lava/what-orange-is-the-new-bl\\_b\\_3745687.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jesse-lava/what-orange-is-the-new-bl_b_3745687.html)

communities. Despite these omissions, Lava writes “The show demonstrates a solid commitment to generating empathy for prisoners and exposing the systemic problems that plague criminal justice in the United States.” These experts provide their insight into flaws in the prison system and ultimately endorse the show’s message about prisoners. Their expertise gives them further credibility with the audience to interpret *Orange*’s accuracy.

### **Critical Voices**

Not all articles praised *Orange*. This section will analyze criticisms the show received. Most criticisms of *Orange* focused on its representation of race. On the *Daily Beast* Allison Samuels wrote that she wouldn’t be watching *Orange* because she does not want to watch another show about people of color in prison. She raises concerns about the limited roles available to people of color. She writes:

For decades, television networks routinely aired shows with few cast members of color, no matter how absurd. *Friends* was set in New York City, but rarely bothered to show a face of color walking by. The list of similar shows over the years goes on and on and on with both comedies and dramas failing to showcase minorities in the core of plot lines.

Oddly enough, those same network producers, writers, and executives would never dream of casting any show related to prisons without featuring people of color in prominent roles. In shows that pertain to the criminal-justice system, particularly those held behind bars, black people are suddenly “must haves.” At least they are if the storyline is to be “real” in any way.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Samuels, Allison. “I Don’t Watch *Orange* is the New Black.” *Daily Beast*, August 19, 2013, accessed on November 14, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jesse-lava/what-orange-is-the-new-bl\\_b\\_3745687.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jesse-lava/what-orange-is-the-new-bl_b_3745687.html).

Samuels brings up important points about what stories media corporations allow to be told about people of color. While *Orange* provides nuanced roles to women of color they still only exist within the prison setting. Samuels also touches on realism. While realism might not be questioned in other genres with no people of color, the prison genre demands a diverse cast to be considered realistic.

Aura Bogado wrote for the *Nation* comparing *Orange* to slave narratives of the late 1800s. “The white practice of verifying the lives of black fugitives who were skillfully plotting their own liberation has changed in circumstance and in medium—but the role of white people at its center has not.”<sup>55</sup> She argues that stories about people of color are constantly framed and authenticated through the white narrator’s experience. She also argued that *Orange* still presents women of color within stereotypical images and racist tropes. She does raise important criticisms. There are memoirs of prison written by female women of color<sup>56</sup>, yet it’s one written by a white woman that gets turned into a TV series. In addition, there is a lot of racially based humor and there could be arguments that this humor is restrictive and degrading.

It’s true that Piper Chapman’s story is at the center of *Orange*, and Chapman’s interactions with other inmates link viewers to their backstories. Jenji Kohan was completely aware of this, calling Piper a “gateway drug” for the other characters in an interview with Indie Wire. “I don’t think I could have sold a show about black and Latina and old women in prison, you know? But if I had the girl next door coming in as my fish out of water, I can draw a certain audience in through her that can identify with

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<sup>55</sup> Aura Bogado, “White is the New White,” *The Nation*, August 16, 2013, accessed November 7, 2013, <http://www.thenation.com/blog/175786/white-new-white>

<sup>56</sup> Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. (Westport, Conn: L. Hill, 1987)

her, and then I can tell all of these stories once she's in, once we've signed onto this journey. She's just a great entry point for a lot of people."<sup>57</sup> This once again brings up questions about which stories the mass media allow to be told.

*Salon* published several articles criticizing *Orange*'s representation of race. One article titled, "'Orange Is the New Black': Just an edgier version of 'The Help'" argues that the narrative has the white person's experience at its center. Elissa Strauss writes, "Though her fellow inmates are complicated and nuanced characters, there is little reflection, by Piper or the show, on the cycles of poverty and violence that land many women in prison in the first place." Strauss even compares the show to slum tourism, implying Piper is the tour guide for a white audience to observe inmates of color in the prison environment.

Jennifer Pozner wrote an article for her "Cringe or Binge" column, both complimenting and criticizing *Orange*. She argues that the show actually perpetuates the idea that prisoners belong in prison and that the show makes light of prison rape.

Jennifer Pozner of *Salon* writes:

By attempting to highlight racial tensions in the prison system without actually delving into racial and economic injustice, Kohan and "OITNB's" writers unintentionally reinforce the conservative fantasy that life in prison may be brutal, but if you're in jail you deserve it because of your own guilty-as-sin backstory. A Guardian writer described the series as "a fairly accurate portrayal of prison," yet none of the scenes of inmates' pre-prison lives featured a woman who took a plea deal because she couldn't afford a competent lawyer to prove her innocence, for example, or a battered wife who killed her husband in self-defense, despite the abundance of such cases in real life. Certainly, it's not for lack of artistic potential that these all too common tales were left untold in Season 1: What could provide more drama and pathos than

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<sup>57</sup> Allison Willmore, "Interview with Jenji Kohan." IndieWire July 8, 2013. Accessed November 15, 2013. <http://www.indiewire.com/article/jenjikoanintervieworangeisthenewblack>

a woman falsely convicted, or someone unfairly behind bars because she finally mustered the courage to stop her abuser from hurting her? But that kind of uncomfortable, eye-opening realism isn't what *Kohan's* going for, so every one of the characters who earned a flashback episode did the crime for which she's doing the time.<sup>58</sup>

This reading of the backstory device contains some issues. The backstory device, which is used multiple times in each episode, is there precisely to show what circumstances land women in prison. The backstories are meant to create empathy for the characters and show the complexity of the decisions they faced. It's inaccurate to say that the "guilty-as-sin backstory" means the inmates deserve prison. The backstories show that despite their crimes they are human and that they are paying a perhaps too heavy price for their mistakes. Showing guilty yet likeable characters is a departure from women-in-prison films, which tended to focus on wrongly convicted women to gain the audience's sympathies. I argue the perceived realism of the show would have been undermined had *Kohan* decided to focus on innocent women in the show. What would a show about prison be if all the characters were innocent? The vast majority of people in prison are guilty of a crime (though there is definitely some error.)

Another of Pozner's criticisms is that the portrayal of sex between corrections officers and guards is damaging. Daya and Bennett have a romantic relationship, but it is very unlikely given the structure of power in prison that a CO would have a consensual relationship with an inmate. When Daya gets pregnant with Bennett's baby, Daya and her mother plot to frame Mendez ("Pornstache"), so that Bennett won't face charges of rape. They plan to trick Mendez into having sex with Daya so that he will lose his job for raping her instead of Bennett. Pozner writes, "For a show that manages

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<sup>58</sup> Jennifer Pozner, "TV can make America better," *Salon*, August 29, 2013, accessed May 11, 2014, [http://www.salon.com/2013/08/29/tv\\_can\\_make\\_america\\_better/](http://www.salon.com/2013/08/29/tv_can_make_america_better/)

nuanced storytelling when it wants...it is incomprehensible why Kohan chose to render actual prison rape invisible, replacing that devastating reality first with guard/inmate 'romance' and then, as Salamishah Tillet<sup>59</sup> sums up, 'reproduc[ing] stereotypes that women in prison are untrustworthy and lie about sexual assault.'" Sexual assault is a serious problem in prisons and *Orange* does not address rape in a realistic manner when it comes to staff and inmate relationships.

The combination of expert reviews, news media coverage, and viewer popularity make the show's message more powerful. Regardless of whether articles criticized or endorsed *Orange*, the writers opened a discussion about real prison issues. The mass media coverage of *Orange* overwhelmingly tries to educate readers on what to believe about *Orange* and real women's prisons. These articles open important discussions about prison reform, racial discrimination in the justice system, and media representations of race.

I think this shift in media discourse is important because the voices of prisoners are not typically heard in the mass media. An entertainment show has single-handedly opened up questions about our justice system that many television viewers would not think about if it weren't for their favorite TV character. It's easy to marginalize a group of people when they have no voice in the public discourse. When the discourse of incarceration focuses on the need to punish evil people, our society ignores the many human rights abuses that occur in U.S. prisons such as solitary confinement or limited healthcare access.

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<sup>59</sup> Salamishah Tillet, "It's So Not 'Oz': Netflix's 'Orange Is the New Black,'" July 23, 2013.

My interest in studying this show came from my participation in the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, a class that brings college students and inmates together to learn in a college-level course. I was surprised by the kindness and intelligence of my incarcerated classmates. I came away from the experience thinking we do individuals as well as a society a disservice when we condemn people to prison for long portions of their life with no chance for parole. The priority of the criminal justice system should be to rehabilitate individuals rather than to punish them. However, as long as television portrays prisoners as unredeemable monsters the public will have no inclination to support measures that help prisoners readjust to society. *Orange* puts forth an essential critical voice that counteracts most television depictions of incarceration.



## Creating a Platform for Social Change

Since the show's debut, the real Piper Kerman has given interviews to the *New York Times*, *Huffington Post*, *Salon*, and *NPR*. Her appearance helps clarify some of the disparities between her experience and the show, but it also gives her a platform to speak about real issues in the criminal justice system.

In interviews she debunks myths about her prison experience and also speaks about the real issues facing prisoners. In an interview with Terry Gross on *Fresh Air* she said that the violence in prison was her biggest misconception going in.

Kerman says, "In fact personally, I never witnessed an act of violence, an act of physical violence, while I was incarcerated; and I was in three different prisons during my time locked up. Some prisons in this country are very violent; very, very dangerous places. When you have a prison system as large as ours, in this country, of course there's going to be an incredible variety of institutions. But when I went to prison, you know, my fears of violence were misplaced."<sup>60</sup>

The real Piper is quite different in personality than the Piper depicted on the show. She was not quite as naïve and she seemed to come in with a better understanding of inequalities even if there were moments when she was surprised. In both the memoir and interviews she is humble about her experience and time in prison.

More importantly than the show's accuracy is the platform it has provided for Piper Kerman and the questions the show raises for viewers. People want to know which parts of the show are true, which has opened a conversation about incarceration and provided the public with a new way to see the justice system.

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<sup>60</sup> Piper Kerman, interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, August 12, 2013.

Kerman now has name recognition and is mentioned in several prison reform-related things along with *Orange*. For example, she published an op-ed in the *New York Times* opposing the relocation of inmates from Danbury Correctional Facility in New York to a correctional facility in Alabama, arguing that it would separate inmates from their families.<sup>61</sup>

Another cause has also benefited from *Orange*'s popularity: transgender rights. Sophia's narrative has helped illuminate some of the real issues trans women face. Laverne Cox, the transgender actress who plays the character of Sophia Burset, said prior to her role as Sophia she was relegated to playing sex workers because that is the dominant media narrative of transgender women. In an interview with Michel Martin on *Tell Me More* Cox said, "Different folks from the trans community have written me and said that they're so proud of this portrayal and they've been so profoundly moved. A beautiful blog was written [by a woman who said she didn't] approve of the transgender thing and had all these misconceptions about trans people, and Sophia's storyline changed that for her."<sup>62</sup> This is one example of an attitude change that *Orange* inspired.

Cox has utilized the popularity of the show to advocate for transgender rights, including drawing attention to a transgender woman named CeCe McDonald who was incarcerated in a men's prison for defending herself against a violent attack.<sup>63</sup> Cox and Kerman's success at bringing attention to prison and transgender issues could mean that *Orange* cultivated new beliefs in its audience.

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<sup>61</sup> Piper Kerman, "For Women, A Second Sentence," August 13, 2013, *New York Times*.

<sup>62</sup> Laverne Cox, interviewed by Michel Martin, *Tell Me More*, August 7, 2013.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*,

## Conclusion

In this thesis I analyzed the mass media narratives about women's prisons and female prisoners. This thesis brought together research on media effects theories, the prison industrial complex, representation of female criminals, and the women-in-prison genre. Since most of the population has never experienced prison, they rely solely on mediated messages to form their understanding of prisons and inmates.

This study has analyzed the dominant media narratives about women's prison in three shows: *Lockdown*, *Beyond Scared Straight*, and *Orange is the New Black*. No show about women prisoners has reached the widespread popularity of *Orange*. Unlike *Lockdown* or *Beyond Scared Straight*, *Orange* criticizes the corrections system rather than endorsing it. I argue that *Orange* fundamentally changes the entertainment media's narrative about prisons and prisoners by humanizing inmates and criticizing the corrections system. *Orange* rejects the message of the prison industrial complex that crime is an individual choice rather than a social problem.

*Orange* has spurred articles in most major publications pertaining to the show's realism and prison issues. The news media has also given a platform to Piper Kerman and Laverne Cox to speak about prison issues and transgender rights. The attention from the news media has cultivated the show's legitimacy as a realistic prison narrative and pushed that message beyond the show's viewing audience. Even when articles criticized *Orange* they still opened discussion about the real problems in the justice system. *Orange* has created a new popular discourse about prison while generating excitement for the stories of inmates, a demographic that is typically silenced by the mainstream media.

### *Future Research*

This thesis has provided a thorough analysis of the dominant narratives about women's prisons in the mass media. To advance the study of the show's cultivation effects future research should include studies about viewers and non-viewer's attitudes towards prison reform and their perceptions of prisoners. This research would reveal which of the narratives outlined in this thesis were cultivated with viewers and which were not.

Further research could also examine the social media response to the show as well as analyze viewer response to reviews. In negative reviews of *Orange* many commenters refuted the reviewers' claims. Stories that dealt with *Orange* also provided a space for people who were formerly incarcerated to offer up their experience. Many commenters expressed the ways their experience of incarceration resonated or was different from both the fictional and real Piper's experience.

Further research is needed on the racial and sexual identities represented on *Orange*. Some media sources criticized the representation of race. I left out a thorough study of ways the use of racial humor reinforces or subverts racial stereotypes. My study was oriented towards the prison genre, but the show could also be contextualized in terms of representations of race in the mainstream media as well as sexual orientation. The public attitude and media depictions of homosexuality have shifted a lot over the last decade and *Orange* is representative of that. I also did not provide a thorough analysis of the transgender character Sophia Burset. Her character has completely revolutionized the depiction of transgender women in the mainstream media.

Another area that could benefit from further research is the role of the entertainment media in creating social change. Is entertainment more effective than documentary at changing a culture's beliefs? Are viewers more receptive to media billed as entertainment than to documentaries? These questions would enhance the study of cultivation theory.

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