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Orange is The New Black: Queering New Media

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Abstract

This paper examines the emergence of queer stories and the subsequent normalization of queer media in popular culture through the analysis of four primary characters from the Netflix original drama *Orange is The New Black.* The show is based on a memoir written by Piper Kerman and focuses on her experiences and the experiences of other female inmates at the fictional Litchfield Penitentiary. The narrative closely follows the inmates as we learn about their histories, their crimes, and their experiences together within the four walls of a correctional facility. Many differences exist between the novelization of Piper Kerman's story and the events portrayed in the show, but both have been critical representations of queer space and have garnered a great deal of attention from casual viewers and critics alike. Despite being well-written, issues of intersectionality are sometimes ignored in favor of a less complicated plotline. Even so, the show tackles extremely difficult material with sensitivity through the development of dynamic female characters. *Orange is The New Black* is often hailed as authentic and gritty while continuing to emerge as one of the first truly accessible representations of queer experience in popular culture.

1. Introduction

In Jenji Kohan's mediated world, women break the rules. She imagines characters who are dynamic, complicated, and full. Her reputation as provocative storyteller has garnered a significant amount of praise from both creative communities and a much broader audience of television viewers who seek strong female leads in contemporary media. Kohan and her stories fill a pressing need in a society that is quickly shifting away from dichotomous gender roles and domestic expectations. In *Weeds*, Kohan's first series creation, Nancy Botwin takes responsibility for her family by accepting great risk in the drug trade while exploring her entrepreneurial interests and sexuality. *Gilmore Girls*, another female-fronted show produced by Kohan, subverts traditional gender roles through the story of Lorelei Gilmore and her continual rebellion against the privileged lifestyle attached to her name.

Kohan's most recent creation, *Orange is The New Black*, is arguably her edgiest work to date. The critically-acclaimed series premiered on Netflix in July 2013, utilizing an internet-based broadcast model for content deemed too controversial for cable. The show is based on a memoir of the same name and was written by Piper Kerman, who serves as inspiration for the show's protagonist. Kerman's experience as a well-educated, privileged white woman with a fluid sexual identity gave her a unique perspective and situated her to write about and analyze the various populations within the fictional Litchfield Penitentiary.[1] While there are distinct differences between the novelization and the show, both are crucial to popular media representations of queer experiences with the show noticeably bolstering queer visibility.[2] Despite being relegated to internet audiences, *Orange is The New Black* has risen to cult-like popularity, especially among women searching for strong queer characters. The stories presented within the walls of Litchfield are relatable and sincere, resonant with longing, despair, and an unflinching hope for a better life on the "outside." The women of Litchfield are an immediate and tangible representation of a shifting

cultural landscape in which gender boundaries are blurred and sexualities can be fluid. *Orange is The New Black* is one of the first reasonably authentic representations of queer experience in popular media, and as a nascent genre with limitless potential, the continual existence of the show is paramount to increasing queer visibility in a world that is consumed with binaries and boundaries.

2. Sexual Fluidity and Bisexuality

Piper Chapman, the protagonist of the show, is a privileged white woman with a fluid sexual identity. Piper ends up at Litchfield because she was part of a drug smuggling operation run by her ex-girlfriend, Alex. Though she had broken ties with Alex years ago, the drug ring was eventually discovered and Piper was named during trial. She was forced to leave her comfortable, upper-middle class lifestyle and her fiancé Larry to serve 15 months in a low-security women's prison. Piper's sexual identity becomes a point of contention when she reunites with her former lover and partner-in-crime Alex. She and Alex still have feelings for one another and rekindle their romance in Season One. Although Piper could be perceived as bisexual, she never explicitly self-identifies as such. She seems to understand that sexuality is a fluid and changeable and she does not problematize the fact that she is attracted to both men and women. Her friends and family, however, have difficulty understanding this. They privilege monosexuality and are confused by Piper's ability to share emotional and physical connections with both men and women. Her fiancé Larry rationalizes her identity by saying that she "used to be a lesbian" but no longer holds that identity. When Piper rekindles her romance with Alex in prison, Larry is bewildered and asks if she has become a lesbian "again." He is unable to comprehend that Piper does not have to be either gay or straight; she simply does not fit within these categories. In the prison environment, Piper faces similar misunderstandings because sexuality is seen through the same binary—women are categorized as either lesbian or straight. Piper is subsequently perceived as a lesbian even though her sexual identity is much more complicated. Unfortunately for Piper's character development, bisexuality is never explicitly addressed in the show.

As Rust writes in "Sexual Identity and Bisexual Identities," bisexuality is seen as a threat to monosexual identities. It is also perceived as being more complex and unstable than other identities, although it is no more complex than homosexuality or heterosexuality. Bisexuality emphasizes fluidity, which plays a crucial role in how Piper self-identifies.[3] In "Two Many and Not Enough," Rust explains bisexual potential and what bisexuality really means. The general guideline of bisexuality, as Rust writes, should be based on desire and feelings rather than sexual acts. One can identify as bisexual even if they have not had sexual relationships with both men and women. It is their desire and potential to engage in these relationships that makes them bisexual.[4] This concept is difficult for Piper's family to understand as they continually attempt to assign her to a straight or lesbian identity. The show fails to address bisexuality and this reflects Young's concept of "structuring silence."[5] Because bisexuality is primarily absent from literature, it is also notably absent in popular media. There are several reasons for this absence, one being that bisexuality is often not taken seriously and disregarded as "just a phase." The implications of not theorizing bisexuality include the homogenization of queer sexuality and reinforcing the binary while excluding other identities. *Orange is The New Black* reinforces the binary in this way by failing to acknowledge bisexuality.

3. Racial Intersections in Supporting Characters

Suzanne "Crazy Eyes" Warren falls uneasily upon intersections of race, disability, and sexuality. Suzanne's self-reported lesbian identity is readily overshadowed by her oblique and pervasive mental illness. She spent significant time in the prison's psychiatric ward prior to Season One. The significance of her return from the ward is reflected in the compromised integrity of her public life, which is often rife with conflicting feelings of triumph and shame. Her inability to regulate strong emotions is frequently exposed, thus threatening the perceived legitimacy of her reality and rendering her as Other in an atmosphere that prizes categorical conformity. In Robert McRuer's "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence," the idea of compulsory able-bodiedness demands that people with disabilities reaffirm that they would, if possible, prefer to be "normal."[6] The same expectation applies to people who identify outside of gender and sexual binaries because non-conforming identities are seen as intrinsically deficient, but within the walls of the prison, this specifically targets the acceptability of racially homogenous relationships. Suzanne's defiance of social norms furthers her ostracization from the general population and from the black community in particular.

Racial lines in Litchfield are of paramount importance to most inmates and this is especially resonant with Suzanne. As a child, she was compelled to consider the meaning of her black identity when she was adopted by white parents. The narrative surrounding her childhood does not explicitly confront the intersections of her developmental issues and race, but the viewer is given many examples of parents and children openly protesting her inclusion in social activities. Suzanne appears to have been exposed to a primarily white community that was largely unreceptive to her differences. Because of this, she desperately searches for intimate relationships with individuals and groups of people. She has an overwhelming need to feel like she belongs and is accepted, regardless of the future implications upon her well-being. Suzanne easily attaches herself to Piper at the beginning of Season One and seems to be entirely comfortable with the idea of an interracial coupling despite the overt racial segregation of Litchfield. She is unconcerned with prevailing social norms and continues to pursue Piper through the beginning of Season Two.

Poussey, whose story becomes more fully developed in Season Two, is a queer black woman who comes from a military family. Although she had a middle-class upbringing, she faces homophobia and racism both inside and outside of prison. During Season One her sexual identity is not a focal point of her story, although her friendship with another black inmate, Taystee, foreshadows an important plot line. When we reach Season Two, she clearly expresses romantic feelings for Taystee even though Taystee does not reciprocate the gesture. We also learn more about her history as a student in Germany while her father served in the military. She was in a clandestine interracial relationship with a white woman whose father ranked above her own. Homophobia and racism come into play as her girlfriend's father finds out about their relationship and relocates Poussey's family. She openly embraces her identity in Season Two and frequently faces homophobia from others, especially within the black community. Sexual identity is rarely discussed among the black women of Litchfield and Poussey's sexuality is viewed as something divisive within the context of the black "family." Another inmate, Vee, cruelly assures Poussey that Taystee will never return her affection and even attempts to destroy their friendship. Poussey's experiences reflect the conflict between race and queerness that Audre Lorde and Patricia Hill Collins frequently describe in their works.

Essayist Audre Lorde explains that within black communities where racism is a living reality, differences can appear to be dangerous and suspect. Further, differences between black women, particularly sexuality, are also used to separate women from one another. Lorde argues that a perpetual fear of lesbians has led many black women into testifying against themselves. Heterosexism and homophobia are particularly resonant among black women and heterosexual black women often ignore the existence and work of black lesbians.[7] Lorde explains that black lesbians are seen as a threat to the black nation, much like how Poussey's sexual identity is seen as a threat to the black prison family. This is one reason why Poussey becomes alienated from the other black women in the prison during Season Two. In *Black Sexual Politics*, Patricia Hill Collins addresses similar issues within black communities. She encourages transformation of community politics and transformation of interpersonal relationships through honest discussions about gender and sexuality. She writes that black women should not have to choose between racial equality and gender equality, and black lesbians should not have to choose between gender equality and queer rights.[8] Poussey finds herself facing a similar conflict in Litchfield, as her sexual identity is perceived as incongruent with her racial identity. In terms of intersectionality, the study of intersections between systems of oppression, one of the most complex situational characters is Sophia Burset. Prior to arriving at Litchfield, Sophia completes the process of surgically transitioning from male to female with the reluctant support of her wife Crystal. Sophia's compelling need for body and gender congruence compels her to steal credit cards to pay for the sex reassignment surgery (SRS) that would have otherwise been inaccessible to her due to lack of access to insurance and financial resources. Her son Michael, unwilling to accept the fact that his father is transgender, alerts the police to her illegal activity in an act of defiance and revenge. It is from this point that Sophia's story at Litchfield begins.

Sophia has been incarcerated for two years at the beginning of Piper's tenure at Litchfield. In that time, she establishes a popular salon and gains a reputation for being one of the friendliest inmates of her ward. She is immediately set apart from the rest of the population because they refer to her by her first name and not by her last name or an alias. First name recognition is a marker of respect and reverence, as highlighted by the same usage with a first season character known as Miss Claudette.

Regardless, the other inmates seem to largely overlook the reality of Sophia's marginalized status—she is trans, black, and queer. Sophia's forced reliance upon institutional healthcare jeopardizes her health and gender expression in Season One when physicians decide to lower the dosage of her estrogen therapy. This action is in contradiction to the policy of the U.S. Bureau of Prisons which states that post-operative trans prisoners should be accommodated according to their assigned gender and the level of treatment received prior to incarceration.[9] However, it becomes apparent that the physician in charge of Sophia's care places a value judgment upon her identity and believes that a lower dosage of estrogen is appropriate maintenance of her gender expression. After extensive lobbying for her

cause, Sophia receives positive reception for her treatment plan, but only when a new physician takes control of her case. Sophia lacks agency in the ability to advocate for her treatment while incarcerated, but the implications of her situation are widely seen among correctional healthcare professionals. There is a dominant conception of the trans experience and part of that expectation is that trans individuals will want to surgically alter their bodies to express gender and biological sex congruency. Further, many healthcare professionals are not trained to handle the psychological care of trans patients. This frequently creates distrust and a palpable dissonance between provider and patient.[10]

Even as no particular aspect of her identity is emphasized among her peers, Sophia has defied classification in a social system that relies heavily upon gendered and raced relationships. She maintains feminine authority as a central provider of beauty services and relationship advice. Because she performs gender in a normative way, her gender is never seriously challenged as inauthentic. Her race also appears to be of little concern in terms of her place in the hierarchy at Litchfield. The viewer is often confronted with images of racial alliance among the prisoners and as a master status in mediating disputes between different groups. Sophia has very little allegiance, if any at all, to her racial cohort. She is often seen socializing with women from every group, making connections and business deals with whomever will most benefit her.

4. Complications in Latina Sexuality

There is a scene in Season Two where two Latina inmates, Flaca and Maritza, share a kiss. Both characters present as heterosexual up until this point, when they move beyond friendship into a moment of intimacy. After the kiss, both women laugh about the encounter and dismiss it as nothing more than experimentation. Though Flaca and Maritza do not identify as queer, they see temporary romantic potential in one another and clearly take comfort in each other's company. Their kiss reflects the fluidity of sexuality, but their reaction to the act itself reinforces the underlying strength of heteronormativity within the Latina community. They are not able to interpret the kiss as anything more than frivolous experimentation because homosexuality and fluidity have never been legitimate options for them. As Acosta writes, queer Latinas are often perceived negatively by their communities.[11] The importance of maintaining family ties often leads queer Latinas to downplay their sexual identity and deny non-binary sexualities. They are often rejected by their families and are forced "back into the closet" if they want to remain part of their communities. The dilemma for queer Latinas emerges when they must choose between embracing a true identity, most likely at the cost of losing family support, or hiding an identity to maintain family ties. Within Latina communities, heteronormativity is heavily reinforced and extreme stigma is attached to queer identities. This may be one of the reasons why Flaca and Maritza feel that a romantic relationship is not an option for them, regardless of the intimacy they experience. Their prison family reinforces heterosexuality and rarely discusses spectrum identities. Family becomes central to their security and overwhelmingly important to them because of the racism that they face in greater society. Community and solidarity are crucial, but this leaves little room for expression of sexual identity that varies from what is considered "normal."

5. Erasure and Problematizing Privilege

It is important to be aware that even though *Orange is The New Black* is groundbreaking in its portrayal of queer women, the narratives surrounding race and class are inherently flawed. The show has often been critiqued by women of color as white authentication of the experiences of people of color. Mohadesa Najumi, writing for the Feminist Wire, argues that the show is problematic in its portrayal of women of color. Even though stories of women of color are told, they are contingent upon the white protagonist. Mediated representations of marginalized people continue to center around white women in order to make their stories "more appealing."[12] The show also relies upon racial stereotypes to characterize Latina, Asian, and black women. Latina women are especially hyper-sexualized and character development relies primarily upon one-dimensional sexual identities. The Feminist Griote, a feminist blogger, notes that the demonization of black women acts as "a long racist tradition of white media centering the stories of whites and using people of color as colorful minstrels."[13]

Unfortunately, the show fails to stray very far from the hegemonic lens of Piper's white privilege.[14] Class continues to be a prevailing factor at Litchfield despite the appearance of equal access to goods and services. This is most apparent in administrative favoritism toward white inmates, most notably Piper. Jenji Kohan has defended Piper's central position on the show by explaining that she is a kind of Trojan horse. Kohan believes that the diverse

stories and characters on the show would be more palatable with a white protagonist in the center. This defense, however, only serves to highlight OITNB's inability to adequately address race. Although the cast is extremely diverse, the reliance on a white protagonist is a significant drawback in terms of intersectional queer representation.

6. Conclusion

Despite its weaknesses, *Orange is The New Black* remains a critically important example of queer cultural representation. The show portrays diverse, dynamic characters and explores the importance of intersectional identities. There is tremendous breadth in the issues it addresses, from pervasive sexism to the imposing presence of the prison-industrial complex. Though it does not fully elucidate the complexities of racism and classism, these issues are explored through the lived experiences of incarcerated women. The portrayal of queer women is wholly progressive because queer women are rarely humanized in popular media. The continuance of queer visibility, especially for women, is just one of the intrinsically vital factors that make the show so important. *Orange is The New Black* skillfully de-centers men and instead focuses on developing the stories of the women of Litchfield. Though male characters are significant to plot development, they are mostly located along the periphery. Ultimately, the show moves beyond theory and the restrictions of academia to reach audiences who so desperately need honest representations of women's lives. The narrative-based format is easily approachable and makes queer characters and queer stories accessible to a larger audience. Very few shows have elicited such a loyal following and *Orange is The New Black* will soon prove to be classic among the emerging genre of queer media.

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