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COMMRC 1122: Media Criticism

Representation of Race and Gender in *Orange is the New Black*

*Orange is the New Black* was a groundbreaking Netflix television show because of its unique outlook on the injustices of the American criminal justice system. My focus is on the intersectional representation of race and femininity in *Orange is the New Black* specifically. There are numerous contradicting opinions throughout varying academic articles on how *Orange is the New Black* represents race and femininity in the media. Although *Orange is the New Black* gives opportunity for a diverse spectrum of characters to be represented through media, there are critiques on the lack of exposure of the systematic racism embedded in our criminal justice system which contributes to the color blindness in the show. In contrast, there is vast positive discourse about the representation of femininity within female incarceration, with the focus on Sophia Burset's transgender character. Most academic articles infer Burset's character actively helps relieve transgender stereotypes and transphobia as well.

Academic articles also denote how important it is to study these issues because not only do television shows such as *Orange is the New Black* promote activism but also focus on issues, such as the injustices faced by minority races in our prison system and the changing dynamics of femininity, that are very prevalent in our society today. While analyzing *Orange is the New Black*, one cannot ignore the connection between Poussey's death and the recent death of George Floyd. This episode was filmed before the tragic death of George Floyd, yet the character dies at the hands of a correctional officer in the same manner as Floyd. Consequently, it is apparent that the issues which *Orange is the New Black* focuses on are still ongoing in our society today, making this a critical television show for ongoing analysis. Additionally, *Orange is the New Black* is unique because everyone in our society should be concerned about the issues addressed and therefore the television show appeals to the masses.

Most of the academic sources researched fall into three categories. The first category includes sources which critique the show's dependence on the white, upper class main character Piper in order to give the more diverse characters screen time which one source claims silences the original intent of the Black Lives Matter movement. This includes the articles written by Enck and Morrissey, Petermon and Spencer, Schwan, and Belcher. The article written by Enck and Morrissey praises that the television show *Orange is the New Black* uniquely assembles a diverse group of characters which rarely are afforded media attention. The article simultaneously criticizes the television show's dependency on its white, upper middle class protagonist who is used in order to give this diverse cast a voice. The article further explains that the show's focus on the main character Piper Chapman, especially in the first season, allows for stereotyping and myths of a world with color blindness. The article concludes with a criticism of the show's ability to depict systematic racism only with the reliance on color blindness therefore warning viewers this may engulf into a larger problem later in the series. In totality, this article both praises and critiques *Orange is the New Black* by recognizing its diverse cast and intricate storylines while simultaneously acknowledging that depending on a white narrator ignores the perspectives of other minorities in the television show.

Corroborating this critique of color blindness is the article written by Belcher which explains that the television show *Orange is the New Black* does not critique neoliberalism and therefore does not effectively critique the prison system. The article further explains that the focus on "interracial class-based conflict allows for the perpetuation of color blindness" within the television show (Belcher 491). Therefore, the article critiques the factual aspects of the television show and claims it to be more fictional, based in a fantasy land where race does not define people in prison. The article concludes with the further critique that the focus on the

white, middle class with the outlook that they can “save” the underprivileged undermines the simple concept that humans should all naturally value diversity.

A vast amount of critiques surrounding the television show focus on its refusal to depict the intricacies of systematic racism within our prison system, which affects the depiction of movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement. More specifically, the article written by Petermon and Spencer argues that television shows like *Orange is the New Black*, whose audiences are majority white, create a “gender and sexuality-neutral background” surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement (339). The article further explains that this neutrality effectively silences the original intentions of the movement, with the roots of Black Lives Matter surrounding queerness and intersectionality. Therefore, this article is a critique at the dilution of the complexity of the movement in order to make Black Lives Matter more digestible for broad audiences. Consequently, it could be said that *Orange is the New Black* does not effectively give an accurate diverse perspective to media like it portrays to. The article concludes by determining that the media ignores the roots of the Black Lives Matter movement in order to dilute its possible leftist politicalness and make it easier for consumption to a wider audience.

Although many articles critique the show’s depiction of race, there is large praise on the television’s shows outlook on female incarceration pertaining to gender and femininity. The article written by Schwan explains that the television show *Orange is the New Black* subtly critiques female mass incarceration while being an ally within the misrepresentation of female prisoners in media. By analyzing *Orange is the New Black*, Schwan effectively renegotiates the boundaries of female prisoners in media by focusing on the character progression of the white, middleclass Piper with a slow, but poignant transition towards other more diverse characters. In doing so, the article argues that *Orange is the New Black* effectively gives a voice to a more

diverse group therefore eclipsing all angles of what being a female in prison may look like. This article concludes with a plea for a combination of the analysis of academia and critics of media to provide a true representation of female incarceration.

The second category includes sources which focus on the analysis of Burset's character and her alleviation on transphobia. This includes the articles written by Thomas; McLaren, Bryant, and Brown; and conference papers from the International Communication Association. The article written by Thomas analyzes the transgender character, Sophia Burset, on *Orange is the New Black* to claim that the television show stays away from the typical dehumanizing tropes in which media usually relies on when portraying transgender characters. The article further explains that Burset's narrative serves in order to portray a "nonthreatening transgender character in order to alleviate transphobia" (Thomas 519). Furthermore, because Burset's character is in the aggressive setting of a prison there is an acceleration in the alleviation of transphobia because of the contrasting nature of her calm actions in comparison to the aggressive actions of some of her prison mates. The article concludes with the hope that Burset's character can help break down the walls of oppression between a transgender character and a mainly cis and hetero audience.

Corroborating the evidence that Burset effectively diminishes transgender stereotypes is the article written by McLaren, Bryant, and Brown which investigates how more modern shows such as *Orange is the New Black* depict transgender individuals in a less stereotypical and therefore more accurate light. Within this analysis, McLaren, Bryant, and Brown found that the character Sophia Burset shows a more positive representation of a transgender character in media consequently showing a possible upward trend in the decrease of stereotyping. Within this article it is emphasized that Burset's character and the lack of stereotyping associated with it was very

intentional. This article concludes with a warning that this upward trend in media is a complex and dynamic change that producers and directors need to highly focus on in order to maintain its trajectory.

Not only do academic sources examine the dismantling of stereotypes as a direct effect of Burset's character within the television show, but connect this character development to the alleviation of transphobia as well. The conference papers from the International Communication Association explain that the transgender character, Sophia Burset, in *Orange is the New Black* provides a deeper insight into the breakdown of transphobia by offsetting the other inmates who are cisgender as aggressive and uncivilized while Burset is non-threatening. The article further dives into the ability for Burset's non-threatening nature to make her race almost invisible to viewers therefore dismantling even more stereotypes. Additionally, the article emphasizes that Burset's position in the prison, being the hairstylist for all the women, further breaks down stereotypes due to the feminine nature of the work and the personability it requires. The article concludes with the focus that Burset consistently faces a battle between her own morality or figuring out what being a woman in prison means to her and societal norms which tell her how she should feel and act.

The final category focuses on the academic articles which simply emphasize the television's shows promotion and encouragement of social awareness and political consciousness in order to emphasize the lack of general progress in our prison system to incite a dire need for change. This includes articles written by Fernández and Menéndez, Artt and Schwan, and McHugh. The article written by Fernández and Menéndez explains that the television show *Orange is the New Black* provides necessary critical discourse about life in a female prison by using Lois McNay's feminist ideas about female agency derived from Foucault's concepts while

exploring power and resistance (534). The article further explains that this discourse is unique because it allows for the characters to actively transform therefore making them more human and three-dimensional. Additionally, the article identifies that the television show *Orange is the New Black* is effective in making this diverse cast three-dimensional due to its focus on each individual character's storyline at the beginning of each episode. The article concludes with the praise of active resistance against the institution within the television show due to the ability for these statements to raise political consciousness in their viewers.

The ability to insight political consciousness in its viewers gives responsibility to the actresses within the television show as well, with their followers expecting them to be leaders and activists. Expanding on this idea, the article written by Artt and Schwan aims to continue past research on the television show *Orange is the New Black* regarding "the treatment of race, sexuality, and class in relation to the prison system" (467). The article claims that this diversity of a spectrum within a television show is the reason for the extensive amount of research on the subject, due to its groundbreaking nature. The article further explains that *Orange is the New Black* has had an extended influence on activism due to the actor's presence on social media because having actors that are intrinsically involved in the subjects that their television show tackles allows their followers to pursue interest in those topics as well. The article concludes with the critique that the ongoing conversation within the *Orange is the New Black* sphere leaves out the voices of real prisoners therefore preventing public discourse to break any real boundaries.

The ability for *Orange is the New Black* to encourage deep analysis of the messages integrated into each episode allow for the critique of our prison system to be accepted and explored. Corroborating this idea, the article written by McHugh explains that the flow of each

episode in *Orange is the New Black* emphasizes the lack of progress within our system, therefore criticizing prison settings in the United States. The article further examines how *Orange is the New Black* forces viewers to understand and sympathize with women they would otherwise never encounter. Consequently this article examines a transition between a privileged versus non privileged demographic rather than a fiction versus nonfiction world. This viewpoint present in *Orange is the New Black* is unique within the media sphere due to the contrast of the treatment of minorities within the prison system rather than the focus being on outlandish prison theories and fictional plots. The article concludes by stating that *Orange is the New Black* effectively uses the concept of female togetherness to open up a discourse rarely seen in the media consequently bringing together the diversity within the television show as well.

Alongside the arguments these articles have already made, making the current connection between the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement after George Floyd's death and Poussey's death is important to explore. The episode where Poussey died aired around 2016, while George Floyd's death occurred in May of 2020. Both Poussey and Floyd died at the hands of a police officer, with the officer kneeling on their neck area effectively cutting off oxygen flow. Both Poussey and Floyd also audibly screamed out in pain before they passed away.

Additionally, these recent events emphasize the urgency needed to focus on issues tackled in *Orange is the New Black* while the academic articles conclude a few main points as well. First, there is vast color blindness within the television show. Although *Orange is the New Black* gives representation towards a diverse cast that normally is not afforded attention in the media, these academic articles argue the television show represents an idealized version of comradery within prison systems. Within *Orange is the New Black*, all the races interact, sympathize, and befriend one another. This perpetuates color blindness because outside of fiction

most humans are influenced by racial prejudices, whether they are subconscious or not. Although it would be effective for *Orange is the New Black* to examine the active effort to eliminate these prejudices, the critique of the show comes from its inability to admit these prejudices exist to begin with.

On the other hand, many academic articles praise the idealistic outlook on Sophia Burset's character within the television show. The collaboration of the female prisoners is used to represent positive and less stereotypical aspects of womanhood as opposed to the frequently shown cattiness of girls typically portrayed in media. More specifically, Burset is praised frequently within the academic articles as a character that helps to alleviate transphobia by assimilating her with the other female prisoners. In contrast to the topic of race, by rarely mentioning Burset's differences from the other prisoners *Orange is the New Black* allows viewers to conceptualize Burset's character similarly to any other female prisoner on the show.

It is important for the research on *Orange is the New Black* to be updated with current events. Although systematic racism and the injustices within our prison system have been prevalent since our country was conceptualized, there has not been such wide scale support for the Black Lives Matter movement ever in this country's history. Consequently, it is important to continue to conduct research on how the television show's policies and outlook on activist movements corroborates our current social landscape. Since *Orange is the New Black* was a very progressive television show, it will be interesting to investigate if these views stand the test of time. Therefore, my research question aims to answer if *Orange is the New Black* will continue to have grave influence on its viewers, due to its progressive nature, over time or if the topics in the show will cease to reach impressionable audiences as society becomes more knowledgeable on racial and gender issues.

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