

# If Orange Is the New Black, I Must Be Color Blind: Comic Framings of Post-Racism in the Prison-Industrial Complex

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*The acclaimed Netflix original series, Orange Is the New Black (OITNB) assembles a cast of characters representing a large swath of the population normally excluded from popular, mainstream television, including women of color, lower-class women, and queer/trans\* women. Within the “tribal” organization of the fictitious Litchfield prison, the show’s protagonist, Piper Chapman, naively struggles to understand the overt racialization of her new surroundings. Deploying a Burkean understanding of the comic frame, we argue that the first season of OITNB encourages audience identification primarily through the show’s white, educated, upper-class central figure. Specifically, through Piper’s animation of a comic corrective, OITNB enables poignant but limited critiques of U.S. post-racial fantasies (including myths of color blindness and racial equality) that so powerfully buttress the Prison-Industrial Complex.*

*Keywords:* Orange Is the New Black; Prison-Industrial Complex; Post-Racial Color Blindness; Feminist Critique; Comic Frame; Whiteness

In July 2013, Netflix aired the debut episode of its original series, *Orange Is the New Black (OITNB)*. Written and produced by Jenji Kohan (of *Weeds* fame), this comedy drama follows the show’s protagonist, Piper Chapman, into the alienating scene of the Prison-Industrial Complex (PIC). Adapted from Piper Kerman’s 2010-acclaimed memoir by the same name, the show has inspired much conversation about the role of the media in reflecting and affecting social consciousness about race relations and the PIC.<sup>1</sup> Evidence of *OITNB*’s popularity can be intimated by the fact that the show captured 13 Emmy nominations in 2014, notably winning the award for “Outstanding Casting for a Comedy Series” and was honored with a 2013 Peabody Award for excellence in quality storytelling.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, *OITNB*

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has maintained a 93% approval score across the first three seasons on the popular media-ranking database, Rotten Tomatoes. In what follows, we heed The Prison, Communication, Activism, Research, and Education Collective's (PCARE) (2007) call for communication scholars to challenge cultural presumptions that undergird the PIC. As Novek (2009) rightly posits, interrogating media representations of incarceration is especially important because these representations "reinforce the legitimacy of mass incarceration as a remedy for social deviance" (p. 377; see also, Hartnett, Wood, & McCann, 2011). Rather than simply allowing media texts such as *OITNB* to stand as insulated representations of incarceration and those who are incarcerated, in what follows, we analyze color blindness as a rhetorical mechanism that helps sustain the PIC, and we trouble racialized tropes associated with televisual prisoners in *OITNB*.

Much of the response to *OITNB* has been favorable, with critics applauding the show's representation of incarcerated women from a wide range of life's paths. As one critic notes, "The buzz has been increasing about the show's varied portrayals on-screen, ranging from racial and sexual diversity, to trans<sup>3</sup> characters and beyond" (Walkley, 2013). Similarly, others herald the show for bringing "incarcerated women into America's living rooms, where viewers can embrace the characters as people with strengths and flaws" (Gwynne, 2013). Despite largely positive acclaim, *OITNB* has also incited concern for its dependence on worn racial and class stereotypes and its reliance on an upper-class, white protagonist to bring the stories and concerns of women of color to the fore. For example, Yasmin Nair, co-founder of the queer political organization, Against Equality, laments *OITNB*'s "deeply flawed representation of women and the PIC" (Doyle, 2013) and Charlton (2013) fears the show's "depictions of Black and Latina women constantly threaten to veer into all too familiar tropes and stereotypes." In an interview with NPR's *Fresh Air*, Kohan acknowledged such concerns, suggesting that she sees Piper<sup>4</sup> as her "Trojan horse," enabling more complex conversations about race, gender, class, and sexuality in a medium that would typically preclude such topics and characters. Kohan elaborated:

You're not going to go into a network and sell a show on really fascinating tales of black women and Latino women and old women and criminals. But if you take this white girl, this sort of fish out of water, and you follow her in, you can then expand your world and tell all those other stories. But it's a hard sell to just go in and try to sell those stories initially. (Gross, 2013)

As Gray (1995) observes, television "constructs and privileges white middle-class audiences as ideal viewers" (p. 71). Indicative of how television privileges whiteness, Piper is a familiar face that white viewers can more comfortably follow into a prison scene, and a character who Kohan identifies as crucial to communicating the narratives of racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities to a more privileged audience.

Investigating the operation of power and social scapegoating as it functions through mediated discourses, various Burkean scholars propose that we can explicate public attitudes about pervasive social disparities with attentiveness to dramatic frameworks (see, e.g., Ott & Aoki, 2002; Singer, 2011). In this essay, we extend a similar

critical approach, using a Burkean understanding of the comic frame, to argue that the first season of *OITNB* encourages white audience identification primarily through the show's protagonist who, by providing a comic frame, also enables critiques of post-racial fantasies that so frequently reify existing U.S. social relations.<sup>5</sup> As Rossing (2012) suggests, "Postracialism animates contradictions and tensions that offer fertile ground for humor, and humor, in turn, directs attention back to often overlooked discrepancies and social failings" (p. 45). It is the productive and inventive capacity of humor as a mechanism for highlighting the failings of post-racial U.S. culture that draws us to this project. In the section that follows, we briefly discuss the post-racial media landscape and Burkean rhetorical framework that grounds our analysis. Next, we explore how *OITNB*, working within a comedic frame, develops characters and storylines that invite white audiences to engage with contemporary racial politics and the PIC. We conclude by discussing how media (generally) and *OITNB* (specifically) can work in the interest of social justice and evaluate the possibilities and limitations of these beliefs.

### **Prisons, Whiteness, and Color Blind Racism**

Although the specter of incarceration is a staple in U.S. mediated culture, few television programs have highlighted life in prison in a sustained manner. Aside from reality shows exposing "real life" criminals behind bars (e.g., National Geographic's *Lockdown*, MSNBC's *Lockup*), HBO's *Oz* and Fox's *Prison Break* stand out as two of the only contemporary scripted television dramas set against the backdrop of mass incarceration. Both shows were situated in all-male, maximum-security prisons, and both emphasized the violent brutality of life behind bars. To this point, *Oz* was described by one critic as a show with "elements of Greek drama (including eyes being gouged out)" (Smith, 1999). True to the tragic form, *Oz* offered ongoing narrative and visual "proof that the [racial and economic] underclass will always revert to their 'natural' proclivities toward violence and savagery" (Yousman, 2009, p. 279).

*OITNB* provides viewers with a different vantage on prison life inside its fictionalized Litchfield Penitentiary. Aside from the shift in optics from a men's maximum security prison to a women's minimum security prison and a shift away from the spectacle of violence featured in most other prison programming, we argue that *OITNB* also operates under a different dramatic orientation: the comic frame. In general, Kenneth Burke's dramatic framework highlights the human drive toward social hierarchy, urging critics to study humans' symbol-using strategies in an effort to help ameliorate our most damaging cultural divisions. Typically, writes Burke (1937/1984), crime narratives are socially situated within tragic frameworks of understanding wherein the terminology of criminality indicates a "conflict with established values" (p. 39). As such, Burke suggests that the trope of crime often invites audiences to seek fitting punishments to restore social order.

In shifting to a comic perspective, narrative trajectories are made more complex, and emphasize at least temporary symbolic bridging devices "whereby one 'transcends' a conflict in one way or another" (Burke, 1937/1984, p. 224). As Carlson (1988)

suggests, although the figure of the clown may be punished in the comic frame, it is through such disciplining that “dialogue can begin, eventually leading to a rapprochement” (p. 312). Thus, as critics, we investigate how narratives of discipline in *OITNB* can open dialogues about prison reform, even though such conversations might be limited in the depth with which they engage U.S. race and race relations.

Television media has long been recognized for influencing how race is understood within culture (Gray, 1995; Hall, 1981; Rossing, 2012; Squires, 2014). Specifically, television programming often creates “a fictional colorless world in which the ideology of the *American dream* dictates that anyone can succeed with hard work, and as such promotes the idea that racial inequalities have no structural or institutional origin or solution” (Hasinoff, 2008, p. 330). Discourses of color blindness and post-racism function powerfully to construct and maintain racial hierarchies that continue to privilege whiteness and marginalize people of color (see, e.g., Goldberg, 2009; Hasinoff, 2008; Jones & Mukherjee, 2010). Goldberg (2009) explains that within post-racial America, “racism is reduced in its supposed singularity to *invoking* race, not to its debilitating structural effects or the legacy of its ongoing unfair impacts” (emphasis in the original, p. 360). As we will argue, while participating in such racial narratives, *OITNB* also helps render some of the institutional and structural inequalities of race visible.

Many whiteness scholars, concerned with how whiteness is discursively constructed, managed, and disciplined, have explored how the “discursive center of whiteness” (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995) makes use of color blindness to retain its social privilege (see, e.g., Haney-López, 1996; Jones & Mukherjee, 2010; Sue, 2010). As Flores, Moon, and Nakayama (2006) note, “This larger discourse of tolerance and multiculturalism helps to create a social vision of a society that has finally come to terms with, and perhaps even embraced, its racial diversity” (p. 183). Such an attitude, however, protects an ongoing system of racial inequality and stands in contrast to the insidiousness of white micro-aggressions that continue to associate negative characteristics with people of color (Holling, Moon, & Nevis, 2014). Recognized by race scholars as a new form of racism, color blindness does the damaging work of suggesting that discrimination is a thing of the past and that race does not impact an individual’s or group’s social location or mobility. Giroux (2003) elaborates:

Colorblindness does not deny the existence of race but denies the claim that race is responsible for alleged injustices that reproduce group inequalities, privilege Whites, and negatively impacts on economic mobility, the possession of social resources, and the acquisition of political power. (p. 198)

Alexander (2012), highlighting the relationship between color blindness and racism, describes the mass incarceration of people of color as a new caste system akin to the earlier days of U.S. racial discrimination, noting, “The colorblind public consensus that prevails in America today—i.e. the widespread belief that race no longer matters—has blinded us to the realities of race in our society and facilitated the emergence of a new caste system” (p. 11). Color blindness and post-racial narratives describing the United States as having moved beyond racial discrimination function to recast/

reframe racism in new ways (see, e.g., Enck-Wanzer, 2011; Mukherjee, 2014). Giroux (2003) suggests that the threat of post-racial discourse “deletes the relationship between racial differences and power” (p. 199), such that whiteness comes to serve as an “affective gauge” against which people of color are measured and evaluated (McIntosh, 2014, p. 155). Within the context of *OITNB*, however, post-race, color blind fantasies are potentially interrupted as Piper’s efforts to collaborate with fellow inmates of color (by presuming a social position equivalent to theirs) are met with humiliation consistent with her framing as a comic fool.

### **Piper as the Comic Fool**

Although tragic frameworks of crime and criminality *may* invite identification with the criminal rather than a demand to purge those labeled as criminals, Burke (1937/1984) suggests that we would be better served if we moved toward a higher level of “humane enlightenment” by shifting from the tragic mode of criminality to the comic frame of “stupidity”; from this perspective, we are invited to view “people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*” (p. 41). Whereas the tragic frame frequently hinges on depicting the protagonist as heroic, and promoting narratives of good overcoming evil, the comic frame encourages us to see the world *doubly*, to “dwarf” otherwise magnified situations, and promote a spirit of humility rather than humiliation (p. 43). Carlson (1988) notes the comic frame’s “clown” figure has great potential to challenge the social order and established hierarchies. Carlson states:

The clown is created not to serve as an enemy, as in tragedy, but as an example. The clown embodies all the problems of the social order, but even as s/he is separated from the herd, we recognize a “sense of fundamental kinship,” a knowledge that everyone “contains [the clown] within.” (p. 312)

The show’s creators use Piper as a comic fool to provide audiences with a path into the PIC and the endemic racial politics of a punitive criminal justice system, ultimately reflecting back to viewers how new racism circulates in contemporary U.S. culture.

Much of *OITNB*’s success stems from the audience’s connection to the show’s lead character, Piper—a “nice, white lady” who finds herself in prison after being caught and convicted for her role in an international drug cartel a decade prior to her prosecution and incarceration (*OITNB*, “I wasn’t ready”). Piper’s participation in this criminal underworld is characterized as a “bad choice,” made in the fog of youth, and as a result of getting involved with people who were “different” from her, namely her college girlfriend, Alex Vause (Laura Prepon; *OITNB*, “WAC pack”). The intersection of Piper’s race and class privilege (and consequent naïveté for how the “real world” works) is often used in *OITNB* as comic relief, in a manner that, while re-centering whiteness, calls into question post-racial narratives of color blindness.

As Jenji Kohan’s proverbial “fish out of water,” Piper blunders through episodes of *OITNB* reminding viewers at every turn that she surely does not belong in this environment. In a flashback to Piper and Alex’s first meeting, viewers witness Piper dropping off her resumé at a local bar. Calling Piper “Laura Ingalls Wilder” (a

reference to the wholesome *Little House on the Prairie* series of stories), Alex chides Piper's resumé, laughing at Piper's description of herself as a "Smith grad with excellent listening skills, passionate about making diners feel good" (*OITNB*, "Lesbian request denied"). Scenes like this are peppered throughout the first season of *OITNB*, and establish Piper as full of buoyant naïveté resulting, in large part, from the class and racial privilege she enjoys. Importantly, the intersection of Piper's race and class privilege position her as a "good (white) girl"—a status she is able to achieve by acquiescing to and complicity reproducing the authority of whiteness (Moon, 1999). Specifically, Piper gains credibility among a white viewing audience through her production of this "good (white) girl" identity in which she embodies "White middle-class normative affect" (Calafell, 2010, p. 243). Moon (1999) explains, "White women's credibility within white communities is deeply intertwined with and dependent on, their 'respectability' or production as 'good (white) girls'" (p. 182).

Ultimately, Piper's framing as a "good (white) girl" foreshadows her struggles to grasp the apparent chaos and discomfort that undergird the prison system. Emphasizing Burke's notion of "perspective by incongruity" that is characteristic of the comic frame, much of *OITNB*'s plot and humor hinges on juxtaposing familiar elements with unfamiliar settings. Frequently highlighting Piper's "trained incapacities" wherein her "very abilities ... function as blindness" (Burke, 1954, p. 7), Piper is placed in an ongoing state of learning how to navigate this strange and different world, as she finds that her race and economic privilege often work to her detriment within the climate of incarceration.

Piper's ongoing prison education is apparent when she is assigned to work in the electrical shop for 11 cents per hour. Invoking her race and class privilege, Piper comments that her talents are not fit for this position of manual labor, and questions why she was not assigned to the educational program, noting with pride, "I was a T.A. in college." Joel (Matt Peters), the bumbling alcoholic who runs the shop, stares blankly, asking, "What's that—tits and ass?" (*OITNB*, "Imaginary enemies"). In the prison electrical shop, like most spaces within Litchfield, Piper's prior training is unintelligible and she, like the other inmates, must perform at the whims of a seemingly aimless system that is unconcerned about women's feelings of worth, dignity, or purpose. Similar to her laughable preparation for a job as a tavern waitress just after college, Piper once again faces a job for which she is woefully under-qualified because of the intersections of her race and class privilege.

Despite the fact that the United States boasts the highest incarceration rate in the world (The Sentencing Project, 2014 "Facts"), the normative assumption of this series is that audiences will be drawn to identify with Piper's experience of *strangeness* while navigating the politics of the prison system. The narrative and staging of *OITNB* works to naturalize Piper's exasperated confusion about how the prison operates and how other inmates interact with each other—a sort of confusion that viewers are expected to identify with. Yet, even while the audience is positioned to empathize with Piper's experiences of prison as being idiosyncratic and prejudicial, viewers are also invited to laugh at Piper's foibles as a well-intentioned but utterly clueless rich white woman "on the inside." In this way, the comic positioning of Piper as the

Burkean fool hinges on an expectation that viewers will understand why the prison environment is so alienating to Piper in particular. As Burke (1937/1984) stresses in *Attitudes Toward History*, “Comedy warns against the dangers of pride,” with an emphasis on our shared moments of cultural *stupidity* (p. 41). Throughout *OITNB*, there are countless moments where we are invited to cringe at Piper’s social position within the prison, as we realize that her race and class privilege work against her in this environment, emphasizing her fundamental difference as a wealthy and educated *white* woman behind bars.

### Framing Post-Racial Color Blindness

*OITNB*’s Litchfield Prison is broken up “tribally”—“White, Black, Hispanic, Golden Girls, Others” (*OITNB*, “WAC pack”)—and many of Piper’s missteps occur when she transgresses these tribal boundaries or fails to demonstrate appropriate respect for the hierarchy within her own tribe of white women. When Piper is first introduced to her cellblock, fellow inmate Lorna Morello (Yael Stone) offers Piper a toothbrush; Piper is effusively grateful. Lorna assures Piper, saying, “We look out for our own.” Piper, shocked by this intimation of racial solidarity, asks with bewilderment, “We look out for our own?” Lorna defends her preferential treatment, imploring Piper to not “get all P.C. . . . It’s tribal, not racist” (*OITNB*, “I wasn’t ready”). Some viewers might read the show’s tribes as support for naturalized racial divisions that deny social constructions of race and systemic racism. However, because viewers *see* race on the bodies of the various groups/tribes, veiled color blind remarks demonstrate how the structural inequities embedded in racial divisions are often willfully ignored in society.

Created and popularized within a post-racial U.S. context, *OITNB* counters the normative narrative of American color blindness by highlighting race and racial divisions within Litchfield Prison. Ongoing attention to Piper’s status as a financially privileged white woman, and comedic framings of her efforts to maintain color blind diplomacy, challenge new racism and the color blind consciousness of viewers such that the show becomes funny because viewers are invited to “get the joke” that race cannot simply be ignored. Within the United States, evidence of color blind logics and new-racism abound, providing the context in which *OITNB* circulates. Unlike other discourses that instantiate post-racial attitudes, however, *OITNB* uses humor to highlight the farce of color blindness (at least as it circulates within the fictional world of Litchfield).

When Piper first arrives at the prison cafeteria, she is reminded about the institution’s tribal (racial) divisions. Gina Murphy (Abigail Savage) sweeps the floor and surveys a frightened looking Piper as she walks into the mess hall. Gina directs Piper to a table, “Okay, go sit there. She’s a nice white lady.” Their table is soon populated by other white women, including Sister Ingalls (Beth Fowler), a nun who was sentenced for chaining herself to a nuclear site, and Nicky (Natasha Lyonne), a drug-addicted lesbian who immediately calls Piper out for emitting a “Sapphic vibe” (*OITNB*, “I wasn’t ready”). When Red (Kate Mulgrew), the prison cook, offers the white women cups of yogurt, Piper asks what she needs to give her for it. Red

responds, “You’re new. You’re one of us. Consider it a gift.” The ways this diverse group of women identify as racially white highlights the complexity of whiteness and the performance of what Frye (1992) has called “whiteness.” She explains:

I do not think whiteness is just middle-class-ness misnamed. I think of whiteness as a way of being which extends across ethnic, cultural, and class categories and occurs in ethnic, cultural, and class varieties—varieties which may tend to blend toward a norm set by the elite groups within a race. (p. 159)

Indeed, Piper’s white femininity intersects with social class in ways that set the norm and are familiar to white viewing audiences who look to her for cues for understanding the racial politics of Litchfield that inscribe both inmates and the guards.<sup>6</sup>

Piper’s confusion about how to negotiate racialized prison politics continue when she goes to the in-house hairdresser, Sophia Bursett (Laverne Cox), to acquire lotion and is immediately chided, “J Crew is around the corner.” With her usual advantages rebuked, Piper offers to pay Sophia later when she is able to access her commissary money, only for Sophia and fellow Black inmate, Taystee (Danielle Brooks), to laugh uproariously. Taystee delights in this moment of turned tables, pronouncing: “Credit declined!” (*OITNB*, “Tit punch”). Such interactions function to remind Piper that the cultural politics of respectability that inform her post-racial “good (white) girl” attitude will not go unnoticed or unchecked in this environment and subsequently, by laughing along, the white viewing audience becomes aware of Piper’s unspoken race and class privileges.

The use of humor to highlight the absurdity of racial color blindness is brought into starker relief when Piper speaks with her mother in the prison’s visiting room. Piper’s mother (Deborah Rush) demonizes Alex for stealing Piper’s future and robbing her daughter from her rightful place on the outside shopping for wedding dresses and giving her grandchildren. Piper responds very deliberately: “I am in here because I am no different from anyone else in here. I made bad choices. I committed a crime. And being in here is no one’s fault, but my own.” Her mother protests in an exasperated tone, insisting that Piper does not belong “in here”—“Sweetheart, you’re nothing like any of these women. . . . Darling, you’re a debutante” (*OITNB*, “WAC pack”). The momentary juxtaposition of the Piper’s orange prison jumpsuit and Litchfield’s stark institutional visiting room with the imagined excess of debutante balls and wedding gowns is jarring, and the comparison laughable. Such a contrast helps reveal Piper as far more relatable than her mother whose exceptional race and class privilege (and complete lack of reflexivity) is portrayed as completely daft. Through this encounter and other such scenes with Piper’s affluent yet out-of-touch family and friends, viewers are invited to identify with Piper while laughing at her family’s racial and class ignorance. Having watched Piper fumble through her experiences at Litchfield, white audiences are primed to understand better that race and class cannot possibly operate without systemic privileges.

In a U.S. cultural environment that celebrates citizens’ post-racial attitudes and openness to (certain kinds of) diversity, the visibility of race relationships (and racial tensions) that encompass *OITNB*’s characters is especially pronounced.



Within this larger cultural context where personal responsibility and social mobility are supposedly available to all citizens, structural inequalities are eclipsed to the detriment of raced individuals who continue to be systemically disenfranchised (Hasinoff, 2008). Noting the impacts of this system of inequality, Goldberg (2009) explains that “racism is reduced in its supposed singularity to invoking race, not to its debilitating structural effects or the legacy of its ongoing unfair impacts” (p. 360). In this way, people of color, grossly overrepresented within the PIC, as well as within the fictional world of Litchfield, are the casualties of post-racism. The discriminatory social circumstances that inscribe the lives of people of color are eclipsed by Piper’s narratives of a post-racial color blindness. Instead of providing a critique of racial injustices, color blind narratives typically place responsibility for circumstances back on the individuals who are already disenfranchised, and they reflect a neoliberal version of U.S. incarceration in which individuals are responsible for their own successes and failures.

Within *OITNB*’s narrative, Piper regularly grapples with racial tensions and racial politics, and is often called out by other inmates for her racial and class privilege. These moments of interpellation, we argue, can operate to highlight how structural and institutional racism function and thus have the potential to interrupt post-racial fantasies of color blindness. Throughout the first season, the systemic and institutional advantages of Piper’s privilege (and her naïveté) remain a constant plot point in the show’s narrative. In “The Chickening,” for example, Piper generates tremendous (and absurd) excitement on the cellblock when she claims she saw a chicken in the prison yard. This proclamation leads to the various tribes scheming over how to capture the mythic chicken, leading to an eventual cellblock lockdown by Litchfield’s corrections officers. As the chief chicken sighter who riled everyone into a chicken-hunting frenzy, Piper is called into the office of the inmate counselor, Sam Healy (Michael Harney), who has consistently extended her preferential treatment. Piper is flustered, certain she will be sent to solitary confinement because others have been isolated for far lesser transgressions. However, Sam assures her he is not “going to send her down the hill.” He continues by affirming, “You made a mistake. You’re new.” Piper’s capacity to avoid the more consequential punishments of her fellow inmates and this preferential treatment from Sam does not go unnoticed by other inmates. Piper’s privilege to benefit unfairly from systems and institutions that protect/preserve upper-class whiteness is here represented by her making naïve mistakes, whereas the involvement of her Black and Latina peers is assumed to be racially endemic (see, e.g., Holling et al., 2014) and requiring punitive measures.

The chicken chase is not the first time Piper has benefited from Sam’s fondness for her. In fact, Sam’s affinity for Piper begins on her first day at Litchfield when Sam seems genuinely dismayed that Piper was prosecuted for a decade-old transgression. Sam shares his own frustrations with the peculiar logic of prison sentences and offers advice about what he suspects is her biggest fear about being incarcerated: “And there are lesbians. They’re not gonna bother you. They’ll try to be your friend. Just stay away from them. I want you to understand. You do not need to have lesbian sex” (*OITNB*, “I wasn’t ready”). Since the audience already knows that Piper is no stranger to lesbian sex, her commentary is laughable and points to a

broader dearth of prudence among prison staff. As the season unfolds, Sam treats Piper as a confidant, as someone who might snitch on her fellow inmates. While paternalism, control, and homophobia surely strengthen Sam's interest in Piper, Sam's special affinities for Piper seem to hinge most strongly on her position as a "good (white) girl" who he can both protect and from whom he can learn. Specifically, Sam looks to Piper as someone whose high class and, therefore, presumably good taste might help him woo his wife. Sam later fixes an election, making Piper the official representative of the white prisoners on the Women's Advisory Council (WAC), even though appointments to this council are by election and Piper did not even wage a campaign. Notably, the WAC is reinstated in Litchfield because of bickering amongst the inmates—Sam insists they need to bring back the WAC because the "ladies need to start acting ... like ladies" and who better to be a "good influence" on the other women than Piper (*OITNB*, "WAC pack").

Throughout the first season of *OITNB*, Piper's character develops in relationship to others in ways that highlight both her attempts to identify naïvely with her fellow inmates, for whom a lack of access to race and class privilege has hindered them disproportionately, and her efforts to disidentify with the privileged positions of her family, friends, and prison administrators. Notably, through carefully crafted backstories about Piper's fellow inmates, *OITNB* uses narratives of contrast, identification, and disidentification to provide important insights into the wide range of institutional disadvantages that so often ensnare women of color in the clutches of the PIC (e.g., poverty and homelessness, sexual abuse and domestic violence, interventions by Child Protective Services and the foster care system, and the War on Drugs). As Burke reminds us, the critical ability to "see around the corner of [the] everyday usage" of symbols can be emancipatory (1941/1974, p. 400). In capturing disjunctions through incongruous perspectives, *OITNB* helps to accentuate vast differences in opportunity and access where normally we are trained to expect similarity (e.g., through myths of color blindness and equal opportunity). Within a social order that is inclined toward divisiveness, the comic framing employed by *OITNB* offers symbolic bridges to imagine the human divide(s) differently, at least temporarily (Burke, 1937/1984).

## Conclusion

Piper's comedic encounters as a "good (white) girl" within the PIC offers viewers of *OITNB* a critical view of contemporary race relationships and the farce of racial equality in which viewing audiences in the United States participate. Burke (1984) notes, "The comic frame should enable people to be observers of themselves while acting. Its ultimate [objective] would not be passiveness, but maximum consciousness" (p. 171). As audiences relate to Piper and come to sympathize with other women of color, they are led to question some especially harsh realities that stem from systemic racial/class discrimination and that are protected within powerful discourses of color blindness. Specifically, viewers of *OITNB* are invited to observe how these tenets of post-race America are negotiated by the women in the show, and through the

comic framing, are compelled to look upon all of the characters as not inherently evil, but as mistaken. In other words, it is not just Piper who made a mistake worthy of social punishment, but viewers are encouraged to see all of *OITNB*'s inmates as having similarly made mistakes within a system that is predisposed to see them as criminal and deviant.

Television, particularly influential in shaping attitudes about racial formation and perpetuating post-racism and color blindness (Nilsen & Turner, 2014), is a regular source of information about the U.S. cultural climate for viewing audiences. By unabashedly addressing U.S. race relations in its storyline, *OITNB* encourages audiences to see the injustices of the current racial system. However, because *OITNB* takes place in a prison (that audiences only gain access to as a result of their connection with the white protagonist), the power of the show's social critique of the PIC and the systemic nature of racism and discrimination is inherently limited. To be sure, while the prison system is especially pronounced in its racist treatment of individuals, families, and communities, it is the PIC's co-dependence on systems of inequality (raced/classed/gendered/heteronormative) that make mass incarceration function so efficiently within U.S. public culture. It is this macro landscape that tends to get lost in this show; as such, the potential for *OITNB* to influence meaningful social critique is limited in its more microscopic focus on how individuals are hurt through incarceration.

Much popular analysis has suggested that *OITNB*'s reliance on a white female protagonist to tell the story of women of color undermines the value of the social and/or racial critique that the show could produce. For example, Najumi (2013) questions the show's reliance on a white protagonist amidst a series of women of color with "their own deeply moving stories," questioning, "Were the stories of WoC [women of color] not interesting enough alone? Why are WoC not protagonists in a show where they drive the humor and the most gripping emotional storylines?" Similar critiques have circulated broadly in online commentaries about *OITNB*, but Kohan maintains that Piper's character was developed to provide presumably white, middle-class audiences an entry point into the structures of contemporary racism with which people of color are already deeply familiar. In an interview, Kohan explained this rationale further:

Piper's a gateway drug. 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 her. (McIlveen, 2013)

Metaphors of Piper that describe her as a "gateway drug" or a "Trojan horse" imply that her sanitized, upper-class whiteness is one mode of identification (albeit problematic and limited) for many viewers who may not otherwise even be exposed to alternate racial realities.

Because *OITNB* circulates within the public sphere, broad and diverse audiences engage with its characters, content, and critique and may be prone to alternate readings of the show. Even though this is the case, we argue *OITNB* is still replete with cultural and racial commentary that is woven into the storyline and made palatable by the

show's comedic framing. To be sure, the laughter that Piper's foibles inspire—and the affection this causes white audiences (especially) to have for all of the characters—calls viewers into a critique of post-racial structures. This works such that the audience's amusement watching Piper's struggles at Litchfield endear them to her, while also exposing her color blindness as a profound naïveté. Although all members of a general audience may not see themselves reflected back in Piper's actions, nor engage in a critical self-reflection of their own attitudes toward race, we argue that the comedic framing of the show nevertheless encourages a level of engagement with post-racial critiques that might not otherwise occur. For these reasons, a critical reading of *OITNB* that explores how its comedic framing works can help to account for the show's popularity and expose the critiques of color blindness and structural racism embedded in its narrative and character development. Indeed, as Rossing (2012) has argued, “humor functions as a critical, cultural project and site for racial meaning-making that may provide a corrective for impasses in public discourse on race and racism” (p. 45).

By focusing on how *OITNB* organizes and expresses “matters of concern” with regard to racial difference and the PIC within U.S. public culture, we have localized “the thingness of racism as a practice and affective materiality that takes form in bodies and feelings whose deployment, intensity, and effects we can detect, measure, and map” as critical communication scholars (Gray, 2013, p. 257). Responding to discursive logics within a post-racial America that perpetuate the “unremarkability” of race and racism, Gray speculates that the critical aim of television scholarship might productively move from questions of “identity, parity, visibility, [and] authenticity” to more “explicit concerns about security, risk, vulnerability, danger, [and] accountability” (p. 257). As such, we have worked here to orient our analysis of *OITNB* within critical analyses of who is offered visibility and in what ways (see, e.g., Brouwer, 1998), imagining how this show might allow viewing audiences an opportunity to recognize systemic racism, fueled by post-racial attitudes of color blindness and achieved equality, as a matter worthy of their concern. In the words of Alexander (2012), in the context of the PIC, “Seeing race is not the problem. Refusing to care for the people we see is the problem” (p. 317).

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### Notes

1. We should note that Piper Kerman has garnered increasing attention as a prison reform advocate and has used the success of her memoir and this show to elevate her critiques of the PIC to broader audiences. Kerman advocates actively to improve the living conditions for incarcerated women and to push the PIC to attend to the deleterious effects that imprisoning mothers has on families and localized communities.

2. Netflix is not evaluated by Nielsen ratings, which are only designed to measure advertising-based television.
3. We use “trans\*” to “metaphorically capture” a range of identities “that fall outside traditional gender norms.” In an explicit effort to build alliances and solidarity, “trans\* might help transcend the gender binary and provide more space for people who are in the middle, who move back and forth, or who don’t identify with the binary at all” (Ryan, 2014).
4. As feminist scholars, we have chosen to identify all characters by their first names (rather than their last names, which are often used in the prison context) in an effort to recognize individual identities within the PIC.
5. For the sake of space, we specifically focus on the introduction of *OITNB*’s characters during the show’s first season. We acknowledge that many of the same rhetorical framing devices carry over into *OITNB*’s second and third seasons. Notably, the second season spends more screen time invested in the back stories and character development of many of the women of color.
6. Conspicuously, all of *OITNB*’s featured prison personnel in the first season are racially white and frequently act in a manner that is both capricious and domineering, reflecting personal ambition that is stifled by limited upward mobility opportunities.

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