

# The Color Orange?

Social Justice Issues in *Orange is the New Black*

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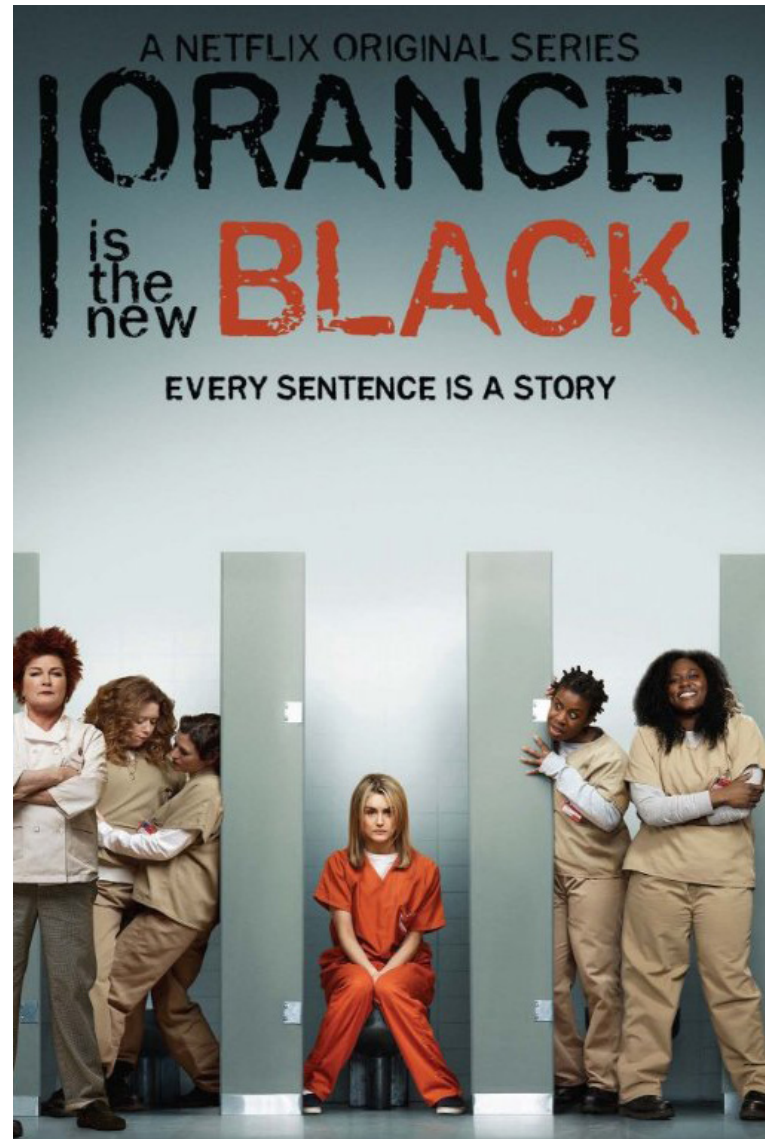
1250 University Hall

*Orange is the New Black* is a popular 2013 series produced by Netflix and based upon the memoir of a stereotypical “presumed innocent” protagonist, Piper Kerman. Kerman is a 34 year-old, white, upper-middle-class, straight-looking and now heterosexually-engaged-to-be-married Smith graduate, who unwisely a decade earlier, got involved in the drug trade via a former lesbian lover. Kerman ended up serving just over a year in a minimum security Federal Prison and was then incarcerated in harsher conditions in Chicago for about a month. The memoir is thoughtful, taking some account of Kerman’s race and class privilege and the social injustices that pervade prison and the larger society. The Netflix show is clearly derived from the memoir, but takes quite a different tone, for example by including broad racial and class stereotypes and incorporating a great deal of sex and violence.

This talk provides an intersectional analysis of both the memoir and television show, drawing upon an analytic frame provided by criminologist Beth Richie, Director of the Institute for Research on Race and Public Policy at the University of Illinois. Riche (*Arrested Justice*, 2012) defines the United States as a “prison nation,” built upon criminalization of poor people of color and ensuring that violence is directed against the most marginalized individuals at personal, community and state levels. While the memoir and the television show address social injustice for the incarcerated, they also paradoxically present these women (often in flashback) as having made “bad decisions” that ended them up in jail. This neoliberal interpretation will be contrasted to one based in social justice, as outlined by Richie, and others who offer critical race, gender, and feminist criminological perspectives.

Portrayals of inmates in the memoir are respectful if bland, while those in the television series are vivid stereotypes as the TV show settles into the “women’s prison genre,” a staple of sex-and-violence type exploitation pop culture. I compare *Orange* to several of these and also to *Upper-Bunkies Unite* (another memoir of time in Danbury, but this time by a middle-class African-American attorney), as well as two black-authored women in prison films, *The Stranger Inside* (2001) and *Civil Brand* (2002).

Jane Caputi, Ph.D., is Professor of Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies and Communication & Multimedia at Florida Atlantic University. She is the author of several books, most recently *Goddesses and Monsters: Women, Myth, Power and Popular Culture* and wrote and appeared in an educational documentary, *The Pornography of Everyday Life*. She is currently working on a new film *Green Feminisms: Discovering the Earth Mother/Lover/Other*.



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