

Session 123: CRITICAL DIALOGUE: Talking Poverty in the Classroom: Navigating the Personal and Political in Privileged Settings

Organizer: Dolgon, Corey [cdolgon@stonehill.edu]

Co –Sponsored Sessions

Session 45: Introducing Class in Class: Teaching About Economic Inequality in Schools. [Educational Problems]

Organizer: Pineros Shields, Thomas [pinerosshields@comcast.net]

Session 51: CRITICAL DIALOGUE: Introducing Environmental Issues to the Classroom. [Environment and Technology]

Organizer: Trivette, Shawn Alan [trivette@latech.edu]

Session 66: Teaching Social Problems: Globalization and Transnationalism [Global Problems and Social Problems Theory]

Organizer: Pineros-Shields, Alexandra [apineros@miracoalition.org]

Session 86: Labors of Love or Temp Slaves? Issues Impacting the Academic Work of Graduate Students and Adjunct [Labor Studies]

Organizer: Harvey, Daina Cheyenne [dharvey@holycross.edu]

Session 103: CRITICAL DIALOGUE: Teaching Intersectionality/Teaching [Racial and Ethnic Minorities]

Organizer: Harris, Michelle A. [MICHELLE.HARRIS@NAU.EDU]

Session 109: Teaching Sexualities, Genders, and Identities [Sexual Behavior, Politics, & Communities]

Organizer: Jungels, Amanda [amanda.jungels@gmail.com]

Orange in Black and White: Teaching About Race, Gender and Sexuality on TV



By Hepzibah Strmic Pawl, Coastal Carolina University

It wasn't long after the Netflix series, *Orange is the New Black*, premiered this past July that I noticed a lot of buzz about the show. From *The Christian Post* to *Huffington Post*, widespread commentary lit up the on-line third estate. But I soon noticed a lot of sociologists joining the conversation. On Facebook and Twitter my colleagues applauded the show for breaking race, class, gender, and sexuality boundaries. After all this hoop-la, I decided I had to watch the show myself. Was it really groundbreaking? If so, could I use the show as a teaching tool?

I watched the first two episodes. Intrigued, I watched two more episodes, but soon began to lose interest. Colleagues and friends told me I *had* to watch the rest of the season. So, I watched ridiculous episode five

on “The Chickening.” Then my friends and colleagues told me that was the *one* bad episode and I *had* to watch the full season before coming to any conclusions. So I did.

Now, having watched all of season one, I admit there is some entertainment value and perhaps a few, “teachable moments,” but as a sociologist I find nothing groundbreaking or incredibly redeeming. Thus, if we are going to use the show as a teaching tool, I suggest we teach students how to use an intersectional approach to reveal how the show eventually reaffirms the same racialized, gendered, and stratified class lines that media usually produce.

A majority of the commentary I’ve read focuses on the racial aspects of the show; see Bogado’s *White is the New White*, Maxwell’s *Why We Love ‘Orange is the New Black’* and Samuels’ *I Don’t Watch ‘Orange is the New Black’*. As a scholar of race and racism, I was curious about how the show would address race. I remain skeptical. The main characters, Piper Chapman (Taylor Schilling) along with her two partners, Alex Vause (Laura Prepon) and Larry Bloom (Jason Biggs), all of whom are White, have the most screen time. Now, I admit that the series does attempt to depict authentic biographies of Piper’s fellow inmates such as Janae (Vicky Jeudy), the Black former track star who succumbed to peer pressure, and Aleida (Elizabeth Rodriguez), the Latina woman who allows her boyfriend to deal drugs from her house. Yet the most intimate and interesting details are revealed about the other *White* inmates. The Black and Latina women in the series are in the background to make Piper’s time in prison more interesting and “diverse.” And, as Bogado mentions in her *Nation* piece, racist clichés abound: Black women who are good singers and who love chicken and Latina women with sexy, fiery dispositions who crave hot sauce. Shouldn’t we be beyond such racial and ethnic tropes at point?

We can also point students toward how the show handles sex and sexuality. There have been other articles on the series’ openly queer dialogues and the laudable incorporation of a transgender woman, but I’m critical of the proliferation of LGBTQ cred the show is receiving. The main character, Piper, was in a lesbian relationship with Alex before going to prison and falls for Alex once again in prison. The show depicts their relationship with intimate moments, both sexual and deeply personal. The audience also witnesses an explicit scene between two White women, Nicky and Morello, early on in the season. OK, kudos to the show’s producers—we’re breaking ground here by showing women having sexual desires for each other. However, it is *White women* who are in these scenes. It seems as though their Whiteness makes it sanitary, acceptable, and perhaps even enjoyable to watch. The sex scenes with the Latina women are with men, notably a graphic scene between Daya (Dascha Polanco) and Officer ‘Pornstache’ Mendez (Pablo Schreiber). There are few, if any, sexualized scenes with the Black inmates. Are the writers, perhaps, afraid of our response should we see Black lesbian love?

This lack of attention to the sexuality of the characters of color and the focus on White lesbian love provides an opportune moment to discuss the QPOC (Queer People of Color) movement with our students. Similar to how the first two waves of feminism were dominated by White women, we see the same pattern in LGBTQ movements, with White men and (fewer) women dominating queer discourses and agendas. Thus, rather than challenging the audience with a diversity of sexuality, *Orange is the New Black* follows the pattern of such shows as *Will and Grace*, *Modern Family*, and *Grey’s Anatomy*, whose gay characters are White. For some alternatives to White dominated gay movements I introduce students to the [The Audre Lorde Project](#) and [The Brown Boi Project](#).

When it comes to how the show handles class, well, er, um, it doesn't really. *Orange* largely ignores differences in class status. We hear some lip service with inmate nicknames like Piper's being called "College," but otherwise, class differences disappear. At one point the inmates even discuss their prison life as analogous to high school. I doubt that the opportunities and antics in high school are the same as those in prison. Prison is not an equal opportunity venture, yet one would not know this when watching this show. The vast majority of the women seem to have mistakenly fallen into a bad way, prison as result of individual, bad choices. In reality, we know that poor socio-economic communities are heavily policed and constantly under surveillance thus creating a deep, cyclical relationship between low SES and imprisonment. *Defending Justice* notes that only 33 percent of prisoners have completed high school. Furthermore, a classist (and racist, sexist) society systematically creates disincentives for defendants to demand their right to a trial, which leads to more than 90 percent of criminal cases resulting in plea bargains.

I think *Orange is the New Black* provides a great opportunity for us to teach our students how to use intersectional analysis in order to see the patterns of oppressive representational politics that the show reproduces. However, I also think what is most distressing about *Orange is the New Black* is the rather benign representation of the prison system. If (minimum security) prison entails dance parties, sex, and drinking, then many might think it's not such a bad place to be. If getting a running track returned to operation were as easy as placing a minor threat against administration, there would be more change. In a time when the U.S. is in dire need of criminal justice reform, I fear that this pop culture show about prison is injurious to the movement and a misleading representation of the criminal justice system for our students to see as reality. So I suggest the next time we find ourselves drawn into a conversation about *Orange is the New Black*, we also steer the conversation towards the real issues confronting us: 1 in every 107 people are in prison or jail, there is a disproportionate amount of people of color in prison, and the number of women in prison is a population that is growing at double the rate as that for men.

Democracy and Engaged Education: Students Teaching Students



By Christopher Wetzel, Stonehill College and Hailey Chalhoub, Stonehill College '13

"This class forced me to look inside of myself more and therefore look into others more. Knowing that everyone at Stonehill has their own story has really inspired me to seek to learn more about those I come in contact with."

The premise behind democratic education is to create highly interactive environments where students can learn directly from the wisdom and experiences of their peers. In doing so, the goal is that students will become more engaged in their own educations and begin to grasp the myriad connections between life on and off campus.

As we contemplated how best to organize democratic education project at Stonehill College, we researched the innovative programs that have been established at both public institutions like DeCal at the University of California, Berkeley and DemTex at the University of Texas, Austin as well as private institutions such as the Experimental Colleges at Oberlin College and Tufts University. We were particularly intrigued by the prospect of small classes that were motivated by big questions.