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Representations of Black Motherhood and Incarceration in *Orange Is the New Black*

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Introduction

The United States currently has the largest prison population in the world, and while men constitute the majority of inmates, the female prison population is growing with alarming speed, and African American women continue to be incarcerated at much higher rates than white or Hispanic women.¹ One of the most damaging consequences of this is the effects that it has on the African American family and, in particular, black motherhood. Indeed, the particular sociopolitical context of the United States has resulted in a disproportionate number of African American women struggling as single mothers, dealing with the stigmas of imprisonment, or fighting to retain their parental rights behind bars. According to many, the United States penal system is a modern form of enslavement that aims to oppress, control and own black bodies, comparable to antebellum slavery.

Despite the high rates of incarceration in the United States, prison remains a predominantly unknown experience to the majority of Americans who are largely informed by media representations. While prison has been a popular theme on the big screen since the era of silent films, images of incarceration remain rare on the small screen. Crime dramas and criminal justice television shows typically conclude with an arrest or

a court room conviction, with just brief images of prisons and jails sprinkled in.² In 1997, the first successful American television show about maximum security prison, *Oz*, debuted on the cable television network HBO. Although the show received high praise from audience members, academics were skeptical about the depictions of violence and depravity which could easily mislead viewers and reinforce negative stereotypes about incarcerated individuals.³ Despite the criticism surrounding *Oz*, the spectacle of prison as a “playground”⁴ for vicious criminals was commercially profitable and other network television shows, such as *Prison Break* (Fox, 2005), continued to focus on the brutality of prisons.

While successful television programs, such as *Oz* and *Prison Break*, were criticized for their unrealistically brutal depictions of murderous inmates and corrupt guards, many people failed to recognize the lack of female representation. Despite the popularity of female prison television series in other parts of the world,⁵ American television networks were apparently uninterested in depicting prison life for women, or in portraying the particular problems that incarcerated women face. Indeed, it wasn't until 2013, and the release of *Orange Is the New Black*, that the incarceration of women was directly addressed by an American television series. This show portrays the barriers that prison life imposes on women and girls and underlines the adversities that incarcerated women face. Maternity, in particular, is a recurring theme on *Orange Is the New Black*, and almost all of the characters have some sort of connection to motherhood. The show depicts pregnant inmates, abortion, teenage mothers, a transgender mother, absent mothers, overbearing mothers and loving mothers. While the show should be praised for acknowledging the complications of mothering and being mothered while behind bars, the representations of black motherhood are quite alarming. In fact, despite the vast array of mother figures on *Orange Is the New Black*, African American motherhood remains inadequately represented on this television show.

This paper will begin by examining the socio-political circumstances which have historically denied African American women equal access to motherhood and which have constructed an oppressive image of black women as inadequate mothers. Next, I will argue that *Orange Is the New Black* has contributed to this perspective by refusing to

incorporate meaningful images of black motherhood. Finally, I will explain how this lack of representation can present damaging consequences for the African American community.⁶

Historical and Theoretical Perspectives

Following the abolition of slavery and the adoption of the 13th amendment, mass incarceration was developed in the United States and became a new racial caste system which continued to exploit the unpaid labor of black men and to control the reproductive rights of black women. Indeed, in antebellum America, a matrilineal society, enslaved women were considered mere breeders and they suffered constant sexual abuse, notably from white men in positions of relative power.⁷ When slave labor was ruled unconstitutional, the narrative on black reproduction shifted dramatically and African American women faced forced sterilization as the eugenics movement convinced the general public that the white, Aryan race was “superior,” and that, consequently, “unfit” members of society should be eradicated. This ideology was gradually incorporated into sociopolitical policies that condemned black motherhood and denied African American women equal parenting rights.

The most infamous example of shaming black mothers is, of course, Daniel Moynihan’s 1965 report entitled “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” The “Moynihan Report,” as it is more commonly referred to, not only claimed that African American women were responsible for poverty within the black community, but this report also insisted on stricter drug laws, which directly resulted in the incarceration of more and more African Americans.⁸ Prison, thus, became a new way for American society to oppress and control black motherhood, by maintaining the predominant discourse that African American women are unfit and inferior parents.

The image of the “inferior” black mother also comes from a considerable misunderstanding of black motherhood. During the initial stages of the women’s liberation movement, for example, white, middle-class, college-educated women often cited motherhood as the source of women’s oppression. Many black feminists, however, did not agree with that argument, and bell hooks has claimed that “[h]ad black women

voiced their views on motherhood, it would not have been named a serious obstacle to our freedom as women.”⁹ In other words, according to hooks, when it comes to questions of motherhood, feminist theory is racially divided. Other black feminists, such as Alice Walker who coined the term “womanism”¹⁰ for black feminism in the early 1980s, or Nicole Rousseau who developed the “Historical Womanist Theory,”¹¹ would undoubtedly agree with hooks. The “Historical Womanist Theory,” as defined by Rousseau in her article “Social Rhetoric and the Construction of Black Motherhood,” analyzes the particular position of black women in America through a social, political and economic lens. Rousseau argues that, unlike white women, black women have been historically defined as instruments of production and that these women’s relationship to labor must be scrutinized. Black mothers, for example, can very often not afford to practice motherhood as a non-economically productive “occupation,” like many white, middle-class women who are “stay-at-home moms.”

According to Patricia Hill Collins, this economic perspective is just one of many significant ways that the African American construction of motherhood differs from the Eurocentric ideology of motherhood. In addition to the assumption that motherhood and an economic dependency on men are linked (“full-time mothers”), the assumption that mothering occurs in a private household is also less applicable to black families. African American families typically have fewer resources to support a private, nuclear family household, which results in mothers leaving the private sphere. Finally, strict gender-role segregation is less commonly found in black families than in white, middle-class households.¹² If the African American construction of motherhood diverges from the Eurocentric ideology, this is due to a distinct cultural tradition of motherhood. Mothers and motherhood are highly valued by and central to the African American culture, which recognizes that mothers are responsible for the physical and psychological well-being and empowerment of African American children. “The focus of black motherhood, in both practice and thought, is how to preserve, protect, and more generally empower black children so that they may resist racist practices that seek to harm them and grow into adulthood whole and complete.”¹³ Slavery, forced sterilization and the mass incarceration of the black population are all organized and systematic means of denying African

American women legal access to motherhood and, thus, means of disempowering the black community.

Representations of Black Motherhood in Orange Is the New Black

Incarcerated mothers consistently report that one of the most traumatic aspects of their prison experience is the physical separation from their children, as well as the emotional and financial strain that their imprisonment places on the entire family. Compared to white or Hispanic inmates, African American mothers disproportionately have their parental rights terminated upon incarceration, often because they are not correctly informed of their parental rights.¹⁴ Despite the fact that motherhood remains an overwhelming preoccupation for incarcerated women, the few American television shows that depict women's correctional facilities tend to overlook this important fact.

Orange Is the New Black, a series which was created by Jenji Kohan for Netflix in 2013 and which is based on the real-life experiences of Piper Kerman, does address certain questions of motherhood and incarceration. It can be argued, however, that this series fails to take into consideration the particular barriers that incarcerated black women face. Indeed, the storylines for the majority of the African American characters on the show have little or no references to motherhood and/or the discrimination that black incarcerated mothers face. Furthermore, among the main characters, very few black inmates actually have children. One of the exceptions to this tendency is Sophia Burset, a woman whose son struggles to accept her transgender identity, and who fights to maintain her parental responsibilities and successfully reconcile with her son. Sophia demonstrates that she is a concerned and attentive mother (biological father), even behind bars, when, for example, her son begins misbehaving and she prohibits him from spending time with his "trouble-making" friends. Even behind bars, Sophia manages to maintain a maternal authority over her son.

The only other black character who is depicted as a concerned mother is Alison Abdullah, a Muslim inmate who hides a cell phone in her hijab in order to communicate with her daughter, Farah. When Alison's backstory is revealed through flashbacks, spectators get a brief glimpse into her life as a devoted African American mother. Alison

resents when others refer to her daughter as a “princess” and prefers to say that she is “smart,” “strong,” and “beautiful.”¹⁵ As a black mother, she understands the importance of empowering young girls and providing strong role models. Despite her reluctance, Alison even welcomes a second wife into their home in order to give her family a more stable and satisfying life. While Alison first believes that Sahar is a beneficial addition to their family, she changes her mind when her role as Farah’s mother is threatened. When Sahar takes Farah to get her ears pierced, for example, Alison is furious and reminds her husband that Sahar isn’t Farah’s “real” mother.¹⁶ Although Alison makes an effort to set aside her feelings of resentment, she feels excluded in the end and is devastated to be deprived of her role as Farah’s mother.

With the exception of Sophia and Alison, *Orange Is the New Black* fails to depict a convincing image of black motherhood behind bars. Furthermore, the absence of positive representation negatively contributes to the overwhelming stereotypes about African American women as inadequate caregivers. In American society, black women have long been scrutinized for their maternal shortcomings. Starting with the slave mammy (who couldn’t take care of her own kids), the Jezebel (over-sexualized), the matriarch (over-powering) or the Welfare Mother (lazy and poor), black women have consistently been criticized and excluded from traditional (white) definitions of motherhood.

Black Cindy, for example, from *Orange Is the New Black*, was a teenage mother who refused to accept her parenting responsibilities. Flashbacks reveal that Cindy’s mother is raising the girl and Cindy is depicted as an impulsive and immature “big sister” figure who is never able to prioritize her daughter’s well-being. For Monica’s ninth birthday, Cindy takes her out for ice-cream, but ends up leaving her in a car for hours when she runs into an old friend who just got out of jail. Although Cindy and Monica both treasure their relationship, Cindy also seems to understand that she could never provide a stable life for the young girl.¹⁷ Instead of focusing on this family’s model of mothering as normal and healthy for Monica, the show seems to imply that Cindy is simply an irresponsible individual who has no interest in the more challenging aspects of motherhood. This type of representation, which may seem incidental, is part of a much larger media trend to depict black women as “bad” mothers. In her essay, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black

Female Spectators,” black feminist bell hooks explains that African American women have struggled to find themselves in media representations which idealize and normalize white womanhood. She states:

[w]hen most black people in the United States first had the opportunity to look at film and television, they did so fully aware that mass media was a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white supremacy. To stare at the television, or mainstream movies, to engage its images, was to engage its negation of black representation.”¹⁸

Orange Is the New Black refuses to understand or to empathize with Cindy as a teenage mother, thereby participating in the criminalization of black motherhood.

Another African American mother figure who contributes to the image of the “bad” black mother in *Orange Is the New Black* is Vee, a manipulative sociopath who develops maternal relationships with younger black girls and women in order to use them (on the outside) as runners in her drug business, and (on the inside) as part of her prison gang. She is a mother figure to Tasha “Taystee” Jefferson, an African American inmate who looks up to Vee as a role model and is easily influenced by her. As a child, young Tasha Jefferson meets Vee at an adoption fair where the woman baptizes her Taystee and encourages her to join her “family” drug-dealing business. As a teenager, Taystee eventually begins working for Vee and is welcomed into her home, where she discovers a warm atmosphere, disposable income and family dinners.¹⁹ When the two women reunite in prison, Taystee is initially relieved to have her “mother” protecting and defending her. However, when Vee feels that her business is threatened by Taystee’s prison friends, she doesn’t hesitate to abandon her. This betrayal is deeply painful for Taystee who claims, “you said you would protect me. You said it was me and you together.”²⁰ Taystee mourns the loss of the only mother she ever really knew while Vee appears unmoved by this rupture. Indeed, viewers later learn that Vee bribed a corrupt police officer to kill one of her other “children,” RJ, who was threatening her business.²¹ The image of Vee in *Orange Is the New Black* further contributes to the misconception that black women are immoral, corrupt and selfish mothers.

Instead of urging spectators to question the economic, political or social factors which made Cindy or Vee mere products of American history, *Orange Is the New Black* relies on oppressive stereotypes about black motherhood. In other words, these women are dismissed as “true” mothers because they fail to uphold their maternal responsibilities and they are criminalized for their actions. But the criminalization of Cindy and Vee directly relies on ideologies of racism and classism; any fictional representation which depicts a mother “choosing” criminal activity over her child denies the particular structural and cultural circumstances which many African American women are subjected to.

The lack of representation for incarcerated black mothers in *Orange Is the New Black* is all the more alarming when compared to the considerable representation of white and Hispanic motherhood. Red, for example, is a Russian-American immigrant who develops extremely intimate maternal bonds with several of the inmates. She uses her resources within the prison to help protect her surrogate daughters, to whom she is extremely loyal. Red is the antithesis of Vee and provides many of the white inmates with a stable maternal figure. Finally, the most compelling representations of motherhood can be found among the Hispanic population of the prison. There are two pregnancies, a biological mother-daughter duo, and even a Hispanic inmate who attempts artificial insemination with a syringe. More than any of the other characters, these women demonstrate the strength of the maternal bond and the particular hardships that incarcerated mothers face on a daily basis. Like the African American mothers, these female characters also make mistakes, but because their maternal roles are much more developed within the series, spectators are able to sympathize with them more easily. Instead of just mentioning, for example, that Gloria Mendoza has a son, the series develops their relationship and describes his hospitalization after a school fight. The fact that Gloria is willing to risk everything to try and go see him before his operation makes her character’s violent actions understandable. In comparison, the majority of the black inmates are not developed as mothers and the show seems disinterested in promoting a positive, alternative model of black motherhood, a fact which can have extremely damaging consequences.

Conclusion

Misrepresentations of black motherhood can have a damaging effect on the African American community. First of all, we must not forget that the United States remains largely segregated and many members of mainstream society who lack exposure to diversity gather their information about marginalized groups of people from the media. In other words, not every spectator is able to distinguish between racist, stereotypical images and realistic depictions of minorities. Adding to this is the lack of diverse models of black motherhood. Black mothers are still significantly underrepresented in the arts and, when they are present, they are generally categorized as silent/absent, desperate or incompetent. This lack of variety serves to reinforce the prevalent idea that these fictional representations are reality. It is possible that the creators of *Orange Is the New Black* were aware of the dangers of misrepresenting black motherhood behind bars. In 2016, they released a three-part mini-documentary series about incarcerated women. This series enables real inmates (and former inmates) to talk about their own experiences and, among the black women interviewed, motherhood and family is a prevalent theme. While Hollywood continues to demean and disappoint black female audience members, African American artists elsewhere are empowering black motherhood and forcing society to remember the particular social, economic and political factors that too often exclude black women from fulfilling mainstream maternal expectations.

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NOTES

¹ Despite the fact that the rate of imprisonment has been decreasing for African American women, this population is still incarcerated at a much higher rate than white women. According to the Sentencing Project, the incarceration rate for black women in 2017 was 92 per 100,000. This was nearly double the rate for white women (49 per 100,000).

² Cf. Bougadi, "Fictional Representation of Prison in Films and TV's Series Genre: Public and Academic Perceptions of Prison"

³ Cf. Boyce, *The Spectacle of Punishment: Cinematic Representations of the Prison-Industrial Complex*, p 29

⁴ *Idem*

⁵ *Within These Walls* is a British television series (aired from 1974-1978 on ITV) which followed the lives of correctional officers in a fictional women's prison. *Bad Girls* (aired from 1999-2006 on ITV) was a successful British drama which portrayed the harsh realities of prison life for incarcerated women. *Prisoner* is an Australian soap opera (aired from 1979-1986 on Network Ten) which portrayed life in the high-security wing of a fictional women's prison.

⁶ Although it would be interesting to explore how American television series have represented the stigmas that single black mothers with incarcerated boyfriends or husbands face, this presentation will focus solely on the representation of imprisoned mothers.

⁷ Cf. Kaushik, "Mass Incarceration and its Effects on Black Motherhood"

⁸ Cf. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes and Black Women in America*, p 93

⁹ Cf. O'Reilly, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, p 4

¹⁰ Alice Walker first used the term "womanism" in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983). Although she claims that the "garden" is a place of universal acceptance where all flowers are free to bloom, she also constructs the black female experience in opposition to (and as superior to) the white female experience.

¹¹ Nicole Rousseau develops this theory in her book *Black Woman's Burden: Commodifying Black Reproduction* (2009) and in several articles, such as "Social Rhetoric and the Construction of Black Motherhood" (2013) for *Journal of Black Studies*.

¹² Cf. O'Reilly, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, p 9

¹³ *Idem*. p 4

¹⁴ Cf. Jones and Seabrook, "The New Jane Crow: Mass Incarceration and the Denied Maternity of Black Women"

¹⁵ "She's not a perfect, pretty princess. She's a smart young woman. She's strong. She's beautiful. We gotta use empowering words. Not cute and princess." From: "Litchfield's Got Talent" *Orange is the New Black*, Season 5. *Netflix*. 9 June 2017. (8:30-8:45)

¹⁶ "I don't remember her in the delivery room pushing that melon head out...She's my child" From: "Litchfield's Got Talent" *Orange is the New Black*, Season 5. *Netflix*. 9 June 2017. (34:05 - 34:25)

¹⁷ Cf. "Comic Sans" *Orange is the New Black*, Season 2. *Netflix*. 6 June 2014

¹⁸ Cf. hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectatorship," p 117

¹⁹ Cf. "Looks Blue, Tastes Red" *Orange is the New Black*, Season 2. *Netflix*. 6 June 2014

²⁰ Cf. "It Was the Change" *Orange is the New Black*, Season 2. *Netflix*. 6 June 2014. (12:00)

²¹ *Idem*