Ballyhoo Behind Bars

Staging the Women's Prison as Spectacle:

A Bernaysian Reading of *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–2019) within a

Critical Cultural Studies Framework

Jelena S. Karras

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Department of English
Aalborg University

Marianne Kongerslev
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Abstract

The project is inspired by the harsh reality of mass incarceration in the USA and the stark contrast between that reality and how female incarceration is depicted in popular culture and news media. It applies Edward Bernays's theory of public persuasion to examine how *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix 2013–2019) appeals to audiences through emotional and symbolic strategies rather than rational arguments. Drawing on Freudian psychology and Gustave Le Bon's ideas on crowd behavior, Bernays defined methods for utilizing unconscious desires, symbols, and stereotypes to ensure easy recognition and elicit appropriate emotional responses.

bell hooks' work on the representation of marginalized bodies in cultural texts serves as a critical point of comparison, alongside Michelle M. Lazar's Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), which foregrounds the examination of discursive practices that sustain unequal social relations and naturalize power structures. Reading Bernays alongside hooks and Lazar reveals not contradictions but a complementarity: where hooks diagnoses the effects of mass-mediated culture on marginalized bodies, Bernays explains the mechanisms that perpetuate them, while Lazar's FCDA provides a framework for imagining more just gender and racial representation in popular media.

Building on this theoretical framework, the analysis examines how *OITNB* employs overt sexualization as a strategic device, sustaining audience attention. In this process, sexual excess functions as a smokescreen that obscures structural power relations while appearing to expose them. Moreover, the series normalizes female trauma and excuses the sadistic behavior of guards toward incarcerated women, framing abuse as inconsequential within the narrative.

Drawing on Bernays's recommendation to increase appeal through shortcuts in the form of stereotypes, the analysis also considers how racialized figures are staged within the narrative, simultaneously amplifying their appeal while perpetuating existing clichés under the guise of diversity. Black characters in *OITNB* defy traditional hypersexualized stereotypes, depicting

limited attempts to challenge systemic injustices or illustrating a commodification of Black suffering. Latina characters are portrayed as wild and exotic sexual objects reflecting bell hooks' concept of "eating the other" or as expendable figures who are disposed of once their narrative function is fulfilled. Maritza Ramos exemplifies this logic, with her storyline functioning as a cautionary tale at the intersection of immigration and incarceration, ultimately reinforcing contemporary discourses that frame immigrants as illegal and criminal.

The redistribution of Otherness preserves its persuasive function and ensures easy consumability, maintaining the efficiency of stereotypical representation. In Bernays's terms, it reduces cognitive effort by relying on familiar images that trigger recognition, moral clarity, and predictable emotional responses.

While claiming to present multiple perspectives and diverse representations, the series continuously privileges its white protagonist, Piper Chapman, positioning her as an ideal model for other characters to follow. Finally, the series treats her incarceration as a moral mishap, granting her a clean slate after release, which contrasts sharply with the harsh realities faced by ex-felons in the U.S. justice system.

Contents:

Introduction

"We are so saturated with images of crime and criminality that incarceration has become a routine part of our daily consumerist practices and political assumptions, yet actual prisons and prisoners remain virtually invisible in television news and entertainment"
(PCARE, 2007).

Building on this observation, scholars associated with the Prison, Communication, Activism, Research, and Education (PCARE) identify debunking the spectacle surrounding the Prison Industrial Complex as one of three key strategies to challenge it. This involves critically examining how cultural narratives reinforce dominant ideologies and shape societal understandings of crime, responsibility, and punishment. In a media environment shaped by consumerist fantasies of criminality, incarceration becomes normalized, while the realities of prisons and the harsh truths of the PIC remain hidden. This "limitless artificiality" (20) diverts public attention from the systemic violence and control wielded by state and corporate powers, masking the true nature of mass incarceration.

The Reality of Mass Incarceration

The age of mass incarceration in the United States can be traced back to Ronald Reagan's 1982 *War on Drugs* campaign, officially framed as a response to the crack cocaine crisis (6). Michelle Alexander's seminal work, *The New Jim Crow* (2010), critically examines how this campaign, while framed as race-neutral, disproportionately targeted Black and Brown communities through racial profiling when enforced (230). Alexander further exposes a system where non-violent drug offenders face harsh sentencing for minor offenses and often return to impoverished neighborhoods with limited opportunities, resulting in repeated imprisonment and a persistent criminal label that is difficult to escape. This cycle perpetuates mass incarceration, deepens racial segregation, and enforces social stigma (185-202). As an effect,

a new “racial caste system” (3) is created: Once labeled criminals, individuals can legally be denied voting rights, housing, employment, and public benefits (2). Mass incarceration thus perpetuates exclusion and marginalization similar to the Jim Crow era. Alexander argues that mass incarceration must be understood as a symptom of broader structural forces, including racial hierarchy and the expansion of global capitalism (*Preface* 38). With the rapid growth of the prison population in the United States, incarceration became a profitable enterprise, leading to the emergence of what is known as the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC).

The PIC refers to the interconnected political, economic, and institutional interests that profit from the growth of incarceration, positioning imprisonment as a tool of social control rather than a response to crime (Davis & Shaylor 2). The expansion of global capitalism has contributed to the dismantling of welfare systems, where programs providing housing, healthcare, and economic support have been reduced or eliminated. As a result, incarceration has become the state’s primary method of addressing poverty and social marginalization. Instead of tackling structural inequality, the prison system has absorbed populations formerly supported by welfare institutions, disproportionately affecting poor women and people of color. Thus, imprisonment functions not as a solution to social problems but as a means of managing and containing them, turning social neglect into a source of institutional and corporate profit (2–3).

In the case of female imprisonment, these systemic issues manifest in particularly harmful ways. Women in prison face a range of structural and institutional abuses that extend beyond the mere loss of freedom. Prisons are environments where routine violence is embedded in daily life, as women are frequently subjected to sexual coercion, harassment, and abuse by staff, resulting in the normalization of such abuses within prison hierarchies. Women are further subjected to degrading conditions, including violations and the denial of bodily autonomy in form of invasive searches (15–16). Medical neglect is pervasive, with insufficient

access to essential healthcare and reproductive services (9). Many women develop mental health problems because of incarceration, including depression and trauma, while those entering prison with pre-existing vulnerabilities often deteriorate. Inadequate medical care, along with prolonged confinement and isolation intensify these mental health challenges (7–9).

Representations of Incarceration in Popular Culture and News Media

Despite the harsh realities of women's imprisonment, the media industry produces sensationalized images that divert attention from the actual violence of the PIC. Within popular culture, these representations appeal to the voyeuristic desires of the white bourgeoisie, fostering fascination with prison life as "forbidden" and "exciting," as seen in prison pornography and cop shows (Do Valle, Huang & Spira 136). At the same time, mainstream news media spreads fear by constructing racialized enemies such as Black men, immigrants, and welfare recipients and promotes the idea that prisons provide safety (133). This media-driven culture of fear supports punitive measures under the guise of protection and sustains myths like the American Dream, which implies equal opportunities for all and frames crime as an individual moral failure rather than a consequence of systemic injustice (134). Together, these forces sensationalize and normalize incarceration while masking brutal realities and social consequences.

Alexander notes that during the 2016 election, a new form of mass stigma emerged, targeting "brown-skinned" immigrants from Latin America, whom Donald Trump described not as "Mexico's best" but as criminals, drug dealers, and rapists (*Preface* 15). Much like the rhetoric of the War on Drugs, which popularized figures such as the "crack addict," the "crack baby," and the "welfare queen," this discourse mobilizes fear through racialized stereotypes rather than facts. In both cases, stigmatization functions as a political tool, legitimizing punitive responses that culminate in mass incarceration or, in the latter case, mass deportation.

Alexander clearly asserts: “The fact that Trump’s claims were demonstrably false did not impede his rise, just as facts were largely irrelevant at the outset of the War on Drugs” (ibid). This dynamic reflects the persuasive power of popular culture, aligning closely with the techniques prescribed a hundred years ago by Edward Bernays, the father of modern public relations. Bernays argued that in mass communication, facts often matter less than how information is framed and the emotions it evokes.

So, how exactly does the father of PR fit within cultural theory?

Public Relations (henceforth PR) theory is based both on Communication Theory, which examines the transmission of information and its methods, and on the analysis of PR practices conveyed in the past (Butterick 5). The field of PR can be defined as managing communications between organizations and the public (Grunig & Hunt 1984, in Butterick 7), or simply as obtaining media publicity for a client or company (Butterick 6). Traditionally, PR has been closely linked with the social sciences, which provide a systematic foundation for its methods and practices. The theory and practice of PR are mutually reinforcing, each shaping and advancing the other. With the world’s largest and most established PR industry, the United States has not only developed and exported much of modern PR practice but also built a long-standing academic community in the field (8).

Although some roots of PR emerged at the end of the 19th century, its theory and practice were formally established in New York through the works of Ivy Ledbetter Lee and Edward Bernays. While Lee emphasized PR’s creative and innovative practice, Bernays sought to define it as a ‘scientific’ method of shaping public perception, drawing on the psychological theories of his uncle, Sigmund Freud (9). For this and his attempt to systematize PR, he earned the nickname the “father of public relations” (12). Although his intentions may have been well-meaning, he is often cited as an example of the darker side of PR practice, as he believed

shaping public opinion was necessary in a society governed by the unpredictable impulses of the masses (12). Nonetheless, this did not diminish his success or his enduring influence in the field of public relations.

The logic of Edward Bernays is relatively straightforward. In the early twentieth century, faced with overproduction driven by new technologies and expanding mass production, businesses needed to sustain sales by finding new consumers. Bernays's solution was to convince people to purchase goods they did not need. Rather than focusing solely on product value and use value, in Marx's terms, it became necessary to incorporate symbolic value: what a product signifies, how it affects one's self-image, how it makes one feel, or if it is a symbol for something else on an unconscious level. Consequently, consumption becomes tied to prestige, social image, and emotional gratification.

Moreover, the PR's influence extends across domains, ranging from the most intimate aspects of private life to the operations of governmental policy. Bernays opens his *Propaganda* (1928) in a way that might read like a dystopian novel or conspiracy theory to contemporary readers, contending that public opinion is shaped intentionally by a small group of experts who understand the public's "mental processes and social patterns" (38). These "invisible" elites govern society through their "natural leadership, their ability to supply needed ideas, and by their key position in the social structure" (37). Their guidance is essential to the smooth functioning of democratic society, which, without such direction, could descend into "chaos" (ibid.) During his lifetime Bernays applied this concept successfully in the political sphere, as demonstrated in the presidential campaign of Calvin Coolidge (Lynn 48) and in efforts to shape favorable American public opinion toward Lithuania (Bernays, *CPO* 41–43), and most controversially in a prolonged propaganda campaign on behalf of *the United Fruit Company* that framed Guatemala's president Jacobo Árbenz as a communist threat, leading to the 1954 coup that overthrew him (Tye 156–168).

His propaganda logic suggests that these techniques are effective wherever audiences readily consume images and ideas. As for its tools, PR can employ any available medium to reach the public, including print media, mail, advertising, film, lecture platforms, and radio (Bernays, *CPO* 73, 86). Building on this and considering Bernays's prescription that PR must stay responsive and adapt strategies to evolving political, economic, and social circumstances (73), the proliferation of new media platforms today inevitably opens expansive horizons for the deployment of his techniques**.**

The fact that propaganda operates on an intimate, everyday level and reaches virtually everyone (29–30) already raises ethical concerns, as there is little escape from its influence. Yet, this pervasive reach is precisely what makes Bernays's theory relevant beyond the sphere of advertising and applicable to cultural production more broadly. His understanding of persuasion as the shaping of desires, values, and emotional responses anticipates what later Frankfurt School theorists, such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer would describe as the *culture industry*. In their view, cultural products present themselves as democratic, individual, and diverse, while remaining standardized, conformist, and deeply commercialized (Baker and Jane 58). Such commodified mass culture demands little effort from its audience and exists primarily to be consumed, rather than to challenge or enrich its viewers (57).

Like Bernays's model of propaganda, the culture industry functions by embedding ideological messages within familiar forms of entertainment, making them appear natural and unquestionable. Media texts such as *OITNB* thus do more than reflect social realities; they actively shape perception, desire, and consent. Reading Bernays alongside Frankfurt School theorists reveals not a contradiction but a complementarity: where they diagnose the effects of mass-mediated culture, Bernays explains the mechanisms that produce them. In this sense, Bernays's work can be understood as a practical blueprint for the very processes of manipulation that these theorists sought to expose.

As Bernays explained in *Propaganda* (1928), the entertainment industry is one of America's largest sectors and a prime site for his tactics (106), making his theory especially relevant to this project. Moreover, he predicted that as audiences grow more sophisticated and discerning, propaganda would become increasingly subtle and refined, adapting to evolving commercial demands (168). If the tactics Bernays described have not only persisted but evolved, it is valuable to explore how contemporary mediated persuasion operates through narrative framing and affective engagement. This theoretical framework thus offers a crucial lens for analyzing how shows like *OITNB* engage audiences and reflect broader cultural and social processes.

Orange Is the New Black: From Piper Kerman's Memoir to the Netflix Series

In her memoir *Orange Is the New Black* (2010), Piper Kerman reflects on her year in a federal women's prison in Danbury, Connecticut, offering a first-hand account of a penal system that functions less as a site of rehabilitation than as a mechanism of social and racial control. Kerman explicitly acknowledges her own racial and class privilege, contrasting her experience with that of less advantaged inmates, noting that she benefited from legal representation and social capital unavailable to most incarcerated women (157, 338). She situates this disparity within a broader critique of a justice system that disproportionately punishes poor and marginalized populations, particularly for nonviolent drug offenses. Through her interactions with other inmates, Kerman observes that many had limited education, few legitimate employment opportunities, and no stable support networks upon release, underscoring how structural inequality shapes incarceration and recidivism (247).

Echoing the patterns identified by Alexander, Kerman observes that many inmates had returned to prison multiple times (108) and lost meaningful ties to the outside world (126). Moreover, Kerman observes that rather than preparing individuals for reintegration, the prison offered little more than symbolic gestures toward rehabilitation. She describes superficial

training programs and a performative job fair that functioned less as genuine opportunities than as bureaucratic rituals masking systemic neglect (284). Upon release, inmates received virtually no transitional support, leaving them ill-equipped to survive outside prison walls (338). Kerman admits that she sometimes feared for those being released, believing they were safer inside the prison than in a society that offered neither stability nor protection (281). Through these observations, she exposes a penal system that punishes without rehabilitating, reinforces social inequality, and fails to address the structural conditions that produce incarceration in the first place.

Kerman's memoir served as the basis for the Netflix series, with many characters and episodes adapted while retaining their core traits and experiences. The series follows the events described in Kerman's memoir, beginning with the involvement of her fictionalized counterpart, Piper Chapman, in the criminal underworld through her former lover, Nora (Alex Vause in the series). Kerman becomes Nora's accomplice, traveling internationally and ultimately transporting drug money from Chicago to Brussels. Disillusioned and frightened, Piper severs all ties with Nora and returns to California (15), where she leads a carefree life for the next decade until federal agents inform her of an indictment for drug smuggling and money laundering. She is sentenced to fifteen months in federal prison and assigned to a federal correctional institution in Danbury, Connecticut (33). In the series, the first five seasons are set in the fictional Litchfield Penitentiary, a minimum-security prison in upstate New York. The final two seasons shift to a maximum-security Litchfield facility and additionally depict an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention center for undocumented immigrants.

However, Kerman's original narrative is primarily confined to the first season, with sporadic events and backstory details appearing in later seasons. The rest of the series is largely fictionalized, with a prolonged focus on Piper's lesbian relationship with her ex-lover Alex, rather than following her original path of marrying her fiancé, Larry. More importantly, the

show shifts from the memoir's singular personal narrative to a multi-layered storytelling approach, using flashbacks to explore the diverse backgrounds of its ensemble cast. Each character's history reveals the complex and often tragic circumstances that led them to incarceration.

Orange Is the New Black (Netflix, 2013–2019) has been widely praised in popular media for reshaping contemporary television. As one of Netflix's first original series, it helped establish the platform's model of prestige streaming and binge consumption. Critics highlight its innovative blending of comedy and drama, as well as its groundbreaking representation of race, gender, sexuality, and class (Nicholson). The series has also been recognized for its sustained political and emotional depth, with *Vanity Fair* describing it as one of Netflix's most influential original productions (Saraiya), and *TIME* naming it one of the most important television shows of the decade for challenging dominant cultural narratives (Berman).

On the other hand, academic critics argue that despite its progressive aspirations, the series ultimately falls short in several key areas. By framing incarceration through a dramedy format, it domesticates prison life rather than critically interrogating the structural causes of mass incarceration (Schwan 473–474). Moreover, the strategic deployment of intersectional representation serves to maximize audience reach, suggesting that political critique remains secondary to commercial imperatives (DeCarvalho and Cox). At the same time, despite its surface-level diversity, the show reinforces forms of "colorblindness" and white and Black "monoculturalism," thereby limiting its engagement with systemic racism and class inequality (Belcher). The series fails to sustain a critique of neoliberal capitalism, focusing instead on individual struggles while showing that characters face unequal outcomes depending on their social and economic capital (Pramaggiore 550). Consequently, the central character, Piper Chapman, is described as "increasingly unsympathetic" over the course of the series (Schwan

483), an "anti-hero" (Belcher 496), and ultimately a "privileged tourist in the 'criminal' world" (O'Sullivan 405).

Therefore, this thesis will examine how in Bernaysian fashion, *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013–2019) stages a voyeuristic, hypersexualized prison spectacle, turning a dehumanizing space into a consumable cultural product under the guise of a quirky feminist dramedy. In doing so, it trivializes the realities of incarceration and the systemic injustice while normalizing female trauma. Moreover, it manipulates narratives to elicit emotional responses and to ensure the easy recognition of racial stereotypes, all while privileging a white-centered perspective under the claim of diversity.

The thesis will proceed with a presentation of the relevant theoretical concepts, namely Bernaysian theories of public manipulation, drawing on the writings of Sigmund Freud and Gustave Le Bon. To situate the analysis within contemporary cultural theory, bell hooks'*: Race and Representation* (1992) will be consulted for insights into media representations of marginalized groups, and Michelle M. Lazar's Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) article will be employed both as a methodological tool and to inform a more critical gendered and racial approach. The specific, relevant concepts will be further elaborated during the analysis.

Theory: Edward L. Bernays on the backs of Sigmund Freud and Gustave Le Bon

From *Propaganda* to *Engineering of Consent*

The profession of public relations originated in the use of propaganda during World War I, when leaders in Western democratic governments realized the power of public opinion (Bernays, *Intro* 4–5). During that time, Edward Bernays worked for the Committee of Public Information, promoting the idea of war to the American public under the slogan "Make the World Safe for Democracy," where he had the opportunity to apply his knowledge of human

psychology for the first time (Butterick 12). After the war, Bernays continued his propaganda work in New York, working in both the political and commercial spheres. At that time, mass production created an oversupply that forced businesses to constantly invent new demands rather than meet existing ones. To do this, they relied on two main strategies: *continuous interpretation*, projecting a consistent desired image, and *dramatization*, exaggerating key features to grab attention. To remain relevant in a constantly evolving market, they may even need to "overemphasize an already exaggerated emphasis" (98), providing the sense of novelty to consumers.

As he stated in *Propaganda*, "Good government can be sold to a community just as any other commodity can be sold" (120), and he run numerous successful campaigns that applied insights from persuasion and mass psychology to political and corporate objectives, often linking social causes to product sales. In this worldview, everything was for sale, and Bernays knew exactly how to capitalize on it. A prime example is his campaign "Torches of Freedom," sought to break the prevailing social taboo against women smoking in public. Drawing on Freud's theory of symbolism, in which the cigarette functions as a phallic object, Bernays reframed women's public smoking as a gesture of equality with men and a sign of social liberation. By linking cigarette use to women's newly acquired political rights, he opened a new market for the tobacco industry and contributed to doubling its sales (Butterick 12; Lynn 48).

Edward L. Bernays defined the profession of *public relations counsel* in his 1923 book *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, the same year he taught the first course on the subject at New York University (*The Annals* 115). He grounded its theoretical framework on the latest findings from psychology, sociology, and journalism. At the same time, his expertise was grounded in observation and practical experience, having already carried out numerous campaigns by then (Bernays *CPO* 25–26). He defined the profession as a middle field between the leaders and

public, correcting maladjustments between the two (116). Over his lifetime, Bernays redefined the profession by shifting its terminology from *propaganda* to *engineering of consent*, thereby emphasizing an evolved scientific precision and careful planning of his work (*Intro* 3–4).

In his introductory chapter in the book *The Engineering of Consent* (1955), titled "The Theory and Practice of Public Relations", he specifies the function and the end goal of the field after years of practice: "Public relation is the attempt, by information, persuasion, and adjustment, to engineer public support for an activity, cause, movement, or institution" (3–4). *Adjustment* is a two-way process between individuals and groups or organizations, aligning attitudes and actions so that they can function smoothly together. *Information* and *persuasion* refer to the use of communication media and complex techniques toward a specific goal (ibid.), which usually entails prompting a particular response from the public: "When the public is convinced of the soundness of an idea, it will proceed to action" (*The Annals* 120). Once consent is attained, the desired action follows, often triggering a chain of related events and ultimately producing a cumulative effect (*Intro* 22-24).

In this context, the term *engineering* signifies a carefully planned operation designed to achieve lasting impact. It implies an active role for PR counsel, which sometimes involves not only convincing the public of an idea's validity but also creating newsworthy events, since "Newsworthy events involving people usually do not happen by accident. They are planned deliberately to accomplish a purpose, to influence our ideas and actions" (*Intro* 23; *The Annals* 119). As Bernays explained in *Propaganda*, it was no longer enough simply to provide the right stimulus to elicit the desired reaction or to repeat and emphasize the idea being 'sold.' Instead, persuasion involves neutralizing resistance and cultivating an environment where the public is ready to internalize and adopt the promoted idea as its own (78). His illustrative example flaunts this shift: instead of the seller saying, "Please buy a piano," the purchaser has to say, "Please sell me a piano" (79). With this, Bernays reached a new level of influencing the

public, arguing that the role of PR counsel is not merely to respond to and adjust existing needs, but to actively create new ones. This progression is reflected in his writing, shifting from addressing the public's established desires, to engaging with the "assumed human needs" (*CPO* 1923, 137), and ultimately to the creation of entirely new, previously non-existent needs tailored to his clients' demands (*Propaganda* 1928).

Although Bernays developed what he termed 'scientific' methods of persuasion, his philosophical justification for mass manipulation is flawed, as will be demonstrated below. To begin with, he extends the logic of rational argument, reframing persuasive manipulation as a natural extension of democratic freedom.

Bernays famously asserted that "the engineering of consent is the very essence of the democratic process, the freedom to persuade and suggest" (*The Annals* 114). In his 1947 article "The Engineering of Consent", Bernays extends the U.S. Bill of Rights' guarantees of freedom of speech, first to the right of persuasion, and then, considering the contemporaneous expansion of media, to the right of any individual to shape the opinions and behavior of their fellow citizens (113). He describes the United States as possessing "the world's most penetrating and effective apparatus for the transmission of ideas," which "provide open doors to the public mind" (ibid.), noting that mastery of this system constitutes the primary method of operation for leaders in American democracy. Apart from being an opportune extrapolation of freedom of speech, this reasoning opened the door to ethically dubious practices once Bernays applied the then-revolutionary insights of psychoanalysis and social psychology. Moreover, the fact that PR "must create news" (*Annals* 119) by producing events that compete with factual ones reveals yet another convenient distortion of press freedom and undermines the credibility of journalism as a profession.

Rather than fostering healthy democratic debate, Bernays envisions a model of communication in a democratic society where the PR expert is active, creative, and capable, while the public is seen as passive, intellectually limited, and in need of guidance. Ideally, his function as "a constructive force in the community" is intermediary: "He helps to mould the action of his client as well as mould public opinion" (Bernays *CPO* 74). Moreover, he must remain attentive to changing political, economic, and social circumstances, and adjust his policy accordingly (73). A PR counselor possesses tools for disseminating the client's ideas to the public, as well as proven, experience-based techniques developed over years of practice. As already mentioned, on occasion, he must also actively stage external circumstances and create newsworthy events (70, 210).

Bernays describes the public as an amorphous mass composed of individuals lacking independent reasoning and agency, who are readily swayed by a leader or an idea. The problem extends even further: it lies in Bernays's reliance on the public's unconscious desires as a means of shaping opinion, based on the writings of Sigmund Freud. It also involves his use of insights into inter- and intra-group behavior, along with the belief that collective thinking should be guided by influential authorities, both of which are drawn from Le Bon's *The Crowd*. These two central influences on Bernays's thinking will be examined in the following section.

Unconscious Persuasion

Bernays acknowledges the findings of Freud's psychology as particularly useful for the work of PR counselors. Since, according to Freud, individuals suppress many of their desires out of shame or social obligation, the PR counselor's task is to uncover and appeal to those hidden impulses. As Bernays explains, "A thing might be desired not for its intrinsic worth or usefulness, but because he has unconsciously come to see in it a symbol of something else, the desire for which he is ashamed to admit to himself" (*Propaganda* 75). He maintains that "men are rarely aware of the real reasons which motivate their actions" (74) and that "the successful

propagandist must understand the true motives and not be content to accept the reasons which men give for what they do" (75). Bernays claims that by understanding these unconscious desires, a propagandist can exert control over modern society (75–76).

It is worth noting that, by incorporating individuals' unconscious impulses into persuasive techniques, Bernays bypasses their conscious consent, shifting influence from the rational to the subliminal level. This mechanism resembles Antonio Gramsci's concept of *hegemony by consent*, a form of control maintained not solely through force but through the subtle securing of popular acquiescence (Baker & Jane 75–77). Bernays's conception of consent as operating largely beneath conscious awareness, shaped by elites who, with the assistance of public relations experts, structure the social environment to facilitate the assimilation of ideas, helps explain how Gramsci's notion of hegemony accounts for the persistence of ideological dominance without the need for overt coercion. Moreover, a myriad of unconscious mechanisms Bernays employs in persuasion can account for the efficacy of Gramsci's concept of hegemony by consent. These include irrational impulses, desires shaped through associations with social aspirations, group norms, stereotypes, and prejudices, all of which largely operate at a subliminal level. To clarify how these unconscious mechanisms function in practice, it is therefore necessary to briefly outline the key Freudian concepts that Bernays adapts in his theory of persuasion.

Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis

Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis is considered today as one of the classical theories in the field of psychology, both due to its uniqueness and significance. It encompasses concepts and principles that Freud defined, and which many of his successors have adjusted and refined up to the present day (Gammelgaard 153).

The three main concepts usually associated with Freud's psychoanalytic theory are *the theory of drives*, *the developmental theory* (where Freud emphasizes the importance of childhood in later psychological development), and *the theory of the unconscious*. With his focus on human sexuality and unconscious impulses, Freud was one of the radical thinkers belonging to the Viennese intelligentsia at the turn of the 20th century, contributing significantly to the broader modernist movement in literature, music, and architecture, among others. By confronting the rationalism and moralism of the 19th century, Freud and others opened themselves to a subjective world: the irrational, the psychological, and the sexual (154). This gave rise to a wealth of ideas that have continued to influence thought throughout the 20th century and into the present.

Freud's most revolutionary concepts, and the two most influential for Bernays, are his theories of the drives and the unconscious, and they will be presented briefly here in that order.

Theory of Drives

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Sigmund Freud describes the regulatory, homeostatic function of drives, which psychoanalytic theory sees as attempts to eliminate unpleasant tension, either by avoiding the pain it causes or by releasing the tension itself (1). The so-called *pleasure principle* functions to restore balance and eliminate discomfort while protecting the human organism from potential dangers in the environment. In contrast, the *reality principle* represents the capacity to delay gratification or temporarily endure discomfort for the sake of long-term satisfaction (5). The reality principle restrains certain instinctive impulses until their fulfilment is more appropriate; however, some impulses become so deeply repressed (or forgotten) that they may produce lasting distress or even neuroses instead of the intended pleasure.

When discussing drives, Freud focuses particularly on the *sexual drive* as a fundamental force shaping human thoughts, emotions and behavior. He challenged the then-prevailing view

that sexuality is limited to reproduction or develops only at puberty, introducing instead a concept of *infantile sexuality*. More importantly, he defines the drive as a psychological source of internal stimulation and motivation (*libido*), distinct from biological instincts for survival and reproduction. For instance, while sucking the mother's breast serves the purpose of nourishment, thumb sucking is driven by pleasure rather than necessity. In this way, the sexual drive builds upon natural instincts but develops into an autonomous psychological force (Gammelgaard 158–9). The libido, sexual instincts and Eros are corresponding terms for the life force in general: "Thus the Libido of our sexual instincts would coincide with the Eros of poets and philosophers, which holds together all things living (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 64). Freud defines the sexual instincts as encompassing self-preservation and the conservation of life, expressed through the striving for safety, protection from the external world, and reproductive instincts. Furthermore, libido may be directed either narcissistically (toward the ego itself, as in the self-preservation instinct) or toward external objects (50).

In addition to the life instincts, Freud introduces a second, opposing force: *the death instincts*, which are inherently destructive (79). Yet, it is important to understand the death drive (as Freud later termed it) not as a biological instinct toward physical death, but as a psychological principle that offers insight into human pain, suffering, and various mental disorders such as depression, as well as everyday emotions like envy (Gammelgard 162). Freud describes the death drive as a primal force of destructiveness within the human psyche, manifesting through various forms of aggression and destructive behavior, opposing the unifying energy of the life drives. While the life drives seek to preserve and create, the death drive tends toward dissolution and return to a state of stillness (Thwaites 54).

Freud hypothesized the existence of the death drive based on various phenomena that could not be fully explained by the pleasure principle, such as war neuroses and recurring nightmares. These phenomena offer no relief but instead compulsively and senselessly repeat

the patterns of trauma and terror, resisting the economy of the pleasure principle (Thwaites, *Eros and the Death Drive*). He further supported this idea through the logic of impermanence: all living beings are driven toward a return to an inorganic state, making death and destruction inevitable forces that counterbalance the life drive. In this sense, the drive toward death represents a regression to the original, pre-life condition (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 47). It may seem paradoxical that humans strive both for safety and procreation (life instincts) and for dissolution and destruction (death instincts), yet this duality becomes coherent once death is understood as the natural conclusion of individual development (Goethe 1883, in Freud (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 59).

The unconscious

Though the concept of unconscious existed before Freud, he systematized it as the foundation of his theory and therapy. It refers to forces beyond conscious awareness that shape our behavior, thoughts, and emotions. Because it cannot be directly observed or expressed in language, we infer its presence from its manifestations. The unconscious follows a logic different from rational thought: time does not exist, contradictions are tolerated, and its activity is symbolic and figurative. It expresses itself through displacement, metaphor, metonymy, and other symbolic mechanisms, often surfacing in dreams, slips of the tongue, and everyday mistakes, as well as in neurotic symptoms (Gammelgaard 176). This was a revolutionary idea at the time, as Freud challenged the dominance of rational thought and the reliance on observation and introspection as the sole means of understanding the mind. Freud views the unconscious as a paradoxical realm, influencing desires, fears, and drives that shape identity while remaining inaccessible to conscious control. He famously described it as an "internal foreign territory," enigmatic but central to who we are (Thwaites, *Introduction: Borders*).

Although Freud's theory of the unconscious lost influence in later 20th-century psychology, at the time Bernays was writing it was still revolutionary, and he leveraged it to

shape public opinion by influencing people without their conscious awareness. Since people are often motivated by unconscious desires rather than rational thought, he crafted campaigns that appealed to hidden drives such as status, belonging, sexuality, power, and security. Instead of promoting a product's function, he sold its symbolic meaning (Bernays *CPO* 61), treating the public as a collective psyche influenced through symbols, emotions, and associations. A classic example is already mentioned promotion of cigarettes as symbols of female emancipation.

The conceptual connection between Bernays's manipulative techniques and the appeal to the unconscious was easy to draw, in large part because of his family ties with Sigmund Freud. Yet another seminal work set Bernays's approach in motion, treating the public not as participants in a democratic process but as amorphous masses to be molded and guided.

The Psychology of Crowds

The emerging field of mass psychology, first articulated in Gustave Le Bon's monumental *The Crowd* (1895), was a clear influence on Bernays while writing *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923) and *Propaganda* (1928). In *Propaganda*, Bernays refers directly to Le Bon's work, while also citing other theorists such as journalist Walter Lippmann and sociologist Wilfred Trotter, both of whom were similarly influenced by Le Bon and Freud's ideas. Trotter outlined the notion that an elite must master the instincts of the masses, whereas Lippmann emphasized the power of images to capture and steer popular imagination in desired directions, most notably through cinema. Hollywood exemplified this power by clearly and easily defining who the heroes were to be admired and who the villains were to be opposed (Tye 95). In this regard, Bernays's ideas were not entirely original; rather, he was an opportunist who skillfully combined and utilized existing concepts, transforming theories into

practice (98). To understand the foundations of Bernays's approach more deeply, it is important to examine the central ideas of Le Bon's work and how they connect to Bernays's thinking.

Gustave Le Bon's *The Crowd*: *A study of the Popular Mind* (1895)

As revolutionary as Freud's theory was for psychoanalysis, Le Bon's *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895) was equally ground-breaking in the field of social psychology. Although today it can be viewed as racist and elitist, *The Crowd* illuminated a pattern in human behavior: simply assembling around a common idea triggers the emergence of traits that people otherwise do not exhibit individually (5). Essentially, Le Bon identified recurring patterns in crowd behavior through a systematic examination of diverse events and periods of historical change, whether political, religious, or cultural. In this book, Le Bon explores the mental constitution of crowds and examining their prevailing sentiments, motivations, and the external factors that prompt people to action. He explores the types of behavior that can be expected from such *psychological crowds* and identifies the characteristics of the leaders they are willing to follow.

Le Bon's findings, though not based on a prior theoretical framework (5–6), suggest a connection between crowd behavior and Freud's concept of the unconscious. He observed that unconscious dynamics often override individuals' conscious actions within crowds (5), warning of the dangers of this reversal. Bernays treated this book almost as a manual of human behavior in general, at times closely mirroring Le Bon's findings in his own writings. However, he overlooked some fundamental differences between *the crowds* Le Bon described and the ordinary *public*.

Writing in a time of socio-political transformation marked by the collapse of traditional religious, political and social structures and the rise of modern, industrial society (14), Le Bon described the late nineteenth century as "the era of crowds" (13). He observed that as the voices

of the popular classes came to dominate political life, collective power began to replace the authority once held by monarchs and elites (15). From his elitist perspective, Le Bon viewed this rise of mass influence as a symptom of civilizational decline, arguing that while small intellectual elites build civilization, crowds, driven by unconscious and primitive impulses, can only dismantle it (19–22). Bernays too recognized the growing power of the masses and regarded them as a potential danger to civilization, describing public opinion as "an ill-defined, mercurial, and changeable group of individual judgments" (*CPO* 77). Yet, while Le Bon sought to understand the irrationality of crowds, Bernays aimed to exploit it, treating it as a gateway into the human mind and an instrument through which public opinion could be shaped and directed.

Le Bon sees the psychological crowd as "a provisional being formed of heterogeneous elements" (30), yet manifesting new, crowd-specific traits. Being a part of a larger group brings both a sense of empowerment and a diminished sense of responsibility due to anonymity. A crowd's behavior is further characterized by suggestibility and a willingness to follow the group, along with a hypnotic "contagion" (33), spreading of emotions and actions that set aside personal interests. Le Bon concludes that crowds are intellectually weaker than individuals, and their actions can be better or worse, solely depending on the suggestions they receive (37). To explain the causes for such an inferiority of thoughts, Le Bon turns to unconscious phenomena that he considers to be hereditary, hidden, but mighty powerful in directing human actions (31–32). When emphasized in this way, the crowd's irrationality, suggestibility, susceptibility to words and images, and tendency to be instigated into action by sudden emotions or ideas make it clear how Le Bon's writings inspired Bernays to recognize the potential for influencing mass/public behavior.

Moving forward, Le Bon observes that in a crowd, individuals feel empowered by sheer numbers, losing the inhibitions that would restrain them when alone, and may act on violent or destructive impulses they would otherwise resist (42–43). Crowd sentiments are most often simplified and exaggerated, spreading and intensifying rapidly while giving individuals a sense of collective power and immunity. In this state of heightened primitive instinct, crowds do not respond to rational persuasion but rather to emotional appeals (56–58).

Regarding morality, he noted that it can go both ways: crowds are too impulsive and excitable to respect usual social conventions and may exhibit ordinarily repressed, animalistic instincts. On the other hand, even individuals of questionable character, when part of a crowd, may temporarily display a heightened sense of morality and act honorably and even heroically. As Le Bon observes, "How numerous are the crowds that have heroically faced death for beliefs, ideas, and phrases that they scarcely understood!" (64–65). Appeals to glory, honor, and patriotism are especially likely to move individuals within a crowd, leading them to disregard personal interests and sacrifice their lives for national sentiments.

Along with extreme feelings come absolutes in thinking: crowds either accept an idea as absolute truth or absolute error, with no middle ground or discussion. Le Bon calls this the *conservatism of crowds*, describing them as governed by very basic cognition rather than nuanced reasoning, and by simple, absolute ideas (59–60). Crowds readily respect and submit to strong authority when imposed upon them, displaying submissive obedience to force. On the other hand, they show little regard for kindness and are quick to revolt against weakness (61). Bernays echoes this logic, portraying the public as incapable of self-direction and responsive only to firm, strategic guidance from leaders. Both Le Bon and Bernays view democracy more as a form of social disorder, emphasizing the volatility of crowds, the potential

for violence, the limited cognitive capacities of the masses, and the consequent need for strong, authoritative leadership.

The Role of Leaders in Shaping Public Opinion

When examining the crowd's susceptibility to leadership, Le Bon's writing reflects the late-19th-century zeitgeist shaped by Darwinian thought, likening humans to animals with an instinctive need to follow a leader. Le Bon maintains that elite, knowledgeable men are necessary to guide the masses (72–73). Though this view may appear derogatory today, it reflects both the intellectual context of his time and his elitist disdain for ordinary people: "A crowd is a servile flock that is incapable of ever doing without a master" (134). He argues that even a simple provocateur can set a crowd in motion, provided they embody the group's core values. Such leaders are typically men of action rather than thinkers, their conviction and willpower grant them the authority to command others, as crowds instinctively seek guidance from those who appear resolute (134–35).

Therefore, a leader must be authoritarian, as without firm direction a crowd quickly dissolves into chaos (137). Bernays reflects this insight when he argues that the most effective way to secure public compliance is to employ an authority figure relevant to the campaign's field: "A leader, a fighter, a dictator" (Bernays *Propaganda* 110). Beyond mere worship of authority or fear of power, leaders seduce the public by invoking vivid images and symbols rather than relying on logical arguments (Le Bon 74).

Consequently, Bernays asks: "If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, is it not possible to control and regiment the masses according to our own will without their knowing about it?" (*Propaganda* 71). He goes on to affirm that the existing knowledge in both individual and mass psychology is sufficient to provide a positive answer to this question (71–72), emphasizing the crucial role leaders play in the process: "If you can

influence the leaders, either with or without their conscious cooperation, you automatically influence the group which they sway" (73). Democratic leaders thus have a responsibility "to play their part in leading the public through the engineering of consent to socially constructive goals and values" *(The Annals* 114). The *new propagandist*, as he names this occupation, must therefore know how to employ authoritative figures within a group—those whom others are naturally inclined to follow *(CPO* 113).

Although he admits that media manipulation can be dangerous and even exploited by demagogues (115), Bernays argues that public relations professionals can judge whether media use serves positive social purposes, positioning himself and his colleagues as the ultimate arbiters of the ethical and social value of the campaigns they endorse. He addresses the ethical dimension of the profession, though not very convincingly, sounding instead as if he were offering strategies for overcoming the public's reluctance to trust promoters of unpopular ideas (Horowitz 13; Bernays, *CPO* 223–30).

Images, Symbols, and the Mechanisms of Influence

Le Bon contends that crowds are drawn to vivid images and are motivated more by appearances and symbols than by facts or logic. As he states, "To know the art of impressing the imagination of crowds is to know at the same time the art of governing them" (80). The literal meaning of words matters less than the images they evoke. Terms like "liberty" and "democracy" inspire strong emotions and unite diverse hopes, gaining power from their vagueness and mystery (117–18). Likewise, prestige, whether earned or inherited, imbues ideas and individuals with influence. Symbols such as judges' robes or a soldier's uniform naturally evoke fear, admiration, or respect for authority (149). It does not matter whether people are educated or uneducated; in crowds, they all operate on a prelinguistic, image-driven level and accept mental images as reality (45–47).

Le Bon identifies repetition, association, and emotional contagion as the primary mechanisms of lasting influence. Leaders spread even irrational ideas by reducing them to simple slogans and repeating them until they become unconscious truths (141–47). He argues that crowd reasoning is limited, relying on basic associations such as analogy, succession, and generalization (73), as well as imitation through example. As a result, individuals in crowds rarely engage in complex reasoning or independent judgment. Bernays builds on this insight by emphasizing repetition and associative appeals that evoke emotion (*Propaganda* 67), noting that such simplified methods work because the public tends to accept familiar presentations rather than actively seeking out facts (*CPO* 155). This insight parallels Bernays's strategies to enhance a product's appeal and promote its sale, while meeting the public's emotional needs through simplified narratives, symbols, and stereotypes (*Propaganda* 122).

Prejudice and Personal Attack Supersede Logic

Drawing on his understanding of crowd psychology, Bernays identified motives such as the desire to belong (the gregarious motive), the tendency to follow a leader within one's own group, stereotypes and prejudices toward other groups, as well as rivalries, contests, and competitions. These motives can be employed to mobilize both intergroup and intragroup emotions and drives. *The gregarious instinct*, together with the central importance of the leader, is particularly valuable for the PR counsel, as groups tend to follow their leader even in matters unrelated to the leader's original purpose (176).

Individualism functions as the opposing instinct, reflecting the ongoing tension between the desire to belong and the desire for individual expression, including the need for self-display (177). As Bernays noted, people readily accept the beliefs of their own group while showing intolerance toward opposing views, allowing prejudices to override their reason. This intolerance stems from difficulty in understanding alternative perspectives, as well as from the assumption that 'others' are inherently hostile (*CPO* 77–83). Moreover, people are frequently

unwilling or unable to make allowances for opposing viewpoints, a tendency illustrated by the example of a scientist who, despite his expertise, refuses to make the effort to understand a position contrary to his own (82). He further argues that personal attacks often override logic as individuals tend to attack the character of an opponent rather than engage with their arguments (81).

Concluding Remarks on the Theoretical Framework

Freud's concepts of unconscious drives were a prerequisite for Bernays to develop his techniques of molding public attitudes not only by appealing to their conscious desires and needs, but also to their unconscious impulses, without their knowledge or consent. In this sense, Freud unwittingly provided the material and the conceptual foundation for Bernays' work. Yet while Freud's aim was to help his patients alleviate their symptoms, Bernays redirected these insights toward the healthy population, transforming therapeutic understanding into a tool of mass persuasion (Tye 97).

Similarly, Le Bon and other social psychologists writing on crowd psychology sought to understand events in which the crowd played a decisive role in historical change. In those writings, Bernays once again saw an opportunity to treat the population as a collective marionette in his hands. The difference is that Le Bon explicitly wrote about the crowd as a teleological group of people gathered around an idea in very specific circumstances (Le Bon 5, 18, 26), as most of his observations concern crowds involved in historical revolutions, and similar occurrences. Bernays once again extrapolates from this, applying Le Bon's observations to the everyday lives of people in periods of social stability. At times, Bernays' writings almost literally mirror Le Bon's phrasing and structure. Both authors share an elitist, superior tone in their treatment of the public, presenting crowds as objects to be observed, analyzed, and, in Bernays' case, guided.

Methodology

To operationalize Bernays' theory of public relations, it is necessary to take a closer look at the appeals he uses to trigger human desires. Conveniently, in Chapter III, "Techniques and Methods," of *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923), Bernays defines some of the universal human needs, such as the need for self-preservation: health, safety, hunger, and sex, as powerful motives that can be transformed into limitless appeals due to their universality (167). The influence of Freud's theory is evident here, as the instinct for self-preservation roughly corresponds to Freud's libido, or sex drive, or, more poetically, to Eros.

Influenced by Freud's concept of suppressing or substituting socially unacceptable content, Bernays relied heavily on the use of symbolic representations when appealing to the public. Due to their concreteness and their ability to be deployed across different modes of presentation, such as auditory and visual channels, symbols, particularly of sexual content, are exemplified in advertising campaigns. For instance, he cites the slogan of Woodbury's Soap, "the skin you love to touch" (168), which invokes a desire for intimacy. Moreover, he employed this appeal through phallic symbolism in the famous "Torches of Freedom" campaign, as well as in other advertisements for the American Tobacco Company, where he explained that because a cigarette is a phallic symbol, it cannot be offered by a woman to a man (Tye 42).

Furthermore, Bernays appropriates from the then-popular *Instinct Motivational Theory* of William McDougall (1908) the seven basic instincts along with their accompanying feelings: the desire to *flight* or fight in response to *fear*; the instinct of *repulsion* in response to *disgust*; natural *curiosity* accompanied by a sense of *wonder*; the need for *self-display*, which leads to *elation*, and its opposite, *self-abasement,* leading to *subjection*; *parental love*, which invokes feelings of *tenderness*; and finally, instinctual *pugnacity*, accompanied by the sentiment of *anger* (169). Bernays elaborates extensively on the final pair, treating pugnacity as one of the most frequently exploited human drives, explaining the PR's use of staged "combats" or

"battles" to rally public support (*CPO* 170). In other words, Bernays presents humans as hardwired for conflict and justifies the strategic use of controversy, contests, and framing of an evil antagonist to attract attention. He further recommends the use of warfare terminology, for example in public-health initiatives such as "kill the germs," arguing that "[t]he public responds to a battle in a way that it might not respond to a plea to take care of itself or to do its civic duty" (ibid.). Although immensely interesting and traceable in *OITNB*, these motives and emotions will not be included in the following analysis, primarily due to the limited scope.

Apart from identifying innate needs and emotions, Bernays underscores the effectiveness of so-called shortcuts for shaping the human mind, including stereotypes (178), symbols (*CPO* 190, *Intro* 17), and play (181). These devices exert psychological influence by quickly and universally triggering human responses: symbols such as a national flag activates a range of motives, feelings, and thoughts (*Intro* 16–17), while play engages the innate human drive for amusement.

Already at the beginning of the twentieth century, Bernays recognized the potency of the entertainment industry, including film, for influencing public opinion, as it constituted one of the largest economic sectors in America (*Propaganda* 106). The above array of motives, combined with his view of visual narratives as a powerful medium of influence (*CPO* 73, 86, 219), underscores the relevance of the said motives for analyzing media content, a relevance that extends to contemporary streaming services.

To specify, sex-related drives will be employed in the first chapter, as they constitute one of the most prominent visual and narrative tropes in the series, as well as the tension between sex and the death drive, which manifests in aggressive behavior, including rape and sadistic behavior. The second chapter will explore the use of racial stereotypes as shortcuts in appealing to the public, examining whether they function to challenge or reinforce these portrayals within media culture.

In addition to extracting these motives as analytical guidelines for a close textual analysis, it is essential to situate the analysis within its contemporary context and to adopt a method appropriate for examining such material. For this purpose, Michelle M. Lazar's Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) and bell hooks' *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992) will be consulted.

Foundations of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA)

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis links feminism and Critical Discourse Analysis through a shared commitment to exposing and challenging the discursive practices that sustain unequal social relations, examining how power and ideology operate within communicative practices to reproduce socially and hierarchically gendered structures, with the broader aim of contributing to social transformation and justice (141).

According to Lazar, FCDA proves particularly relevant in contemporary contexts, where issues of gender, power, and ideology have become increasingly multifaceted and nuanced. This complexity is heightened by the intersection of gender with other social identities, including sexuality, ethnicity, class, age, ability, and location, as well as by the ways patriarchal ideology interacts with other systems, such as consumerist and corporate structures (141–142). The goal of FCDA, therefore, is to reveal the complex and often subtle ways in which taken-for-granted gender assumptions and power relations are produced, maintained, negotiated, and contested across different contexts (142).

Feminist CDA examines both explicit meanings and more nuanced, implicit cues to reveal the subtle ideological assumptions and power relations embedded in contemporary communication (151). Lazar emphasizes everyday texts, such as consumer advertisements, which are often dismissed as trivial but merit careful analysis because they expose how power and ideology operate, for example "how feminine (hetero)sexuality is constructed as a form of women's power" (156).

For practical purposes, Lazar recommends an active reflection on one's own assumptions and biases when analyzing and interpreting discourse. This involves being aware of how perspective, background, and methodological choices can shape the reading of a text. Such reflexivity requires caution against uncritically adopting Western, white, neoliberal frameworks that assume uniformity among all women (153). In addition to outlining how to examine discursive practices that sustain unequal social relations, Lazar's theoretical framework introduces concepts that will be taken up and elaborated upon in the following analysis.

Her work offers a nuanced account of how power and gender operate in late modern societies, where overt sexism is officially delegitimized while gendered power functions through subtle, normalized discursive mechanisms that appear natural rather than explicitly oppressive. This distinction is particularly relevant here, as outlined in the introduction, incarceration restores forms of domination and bodily control that are officially rejected in broader society, making the oppressive operation of gendered power within carceral institutions especially visible. While this framework informs the whole project, it is particularly relevant to the section of the first chapter dealing with the commodification of female trauma.

Moreover, Lazar's notion of *marked inclusion* will be taken up in the final chapter, where it is applied to the character of Piper Chapman. This concept proves useful in avoiding the tendency to default to a taken-for-granted WASP perspective when representing diversity across race, class, and age. It allows for a more critical examination of how inclusion operates within the series, particularly given *OITNB*'s widespread praise for its seemingly progressive and diverse representation.

FCDA is highly applicable to *OITNB* because the series depicts a deeply structured, closed environment in which multiple power dynamics intersect, regarding gender, race, and authority. Due to the strictly regulated interactions between constituents, shaped by

asymmetrical relations and prescribed social practices, and colored by institutional oppression of women in prison, the series is a rich site for examining how ideology and power are produced, reiterated and contested.

bell hooks' *Black Looks: Race and Representation*

In addition, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), bell hooks critically examines the representation of marginalized racial groups in popular culture by situating it within consumerism, capitalism, and white patriarchal hegemony. Concepts such as "eating the Other" are central to this analysis, as they reveal how racial difference is transformed into a consumable spectacle. To resist hegemonic systems of representation, hooks notes that the visibility of marginalized women is not enough; existing stereotypes must also be challenged (4, 72). This critique is crucial for the second chapter of this project, which focuses on racial stereotypes in *OITNB.*

Having established the theoretical foundations for this paper, it is now relevant to consider how Bernays' techniques of persuasion persist in contemporary media forms. Netflix's *OITNB*, when set against the memoir on which it is based, reveals a continuation of his ideas of influence within modern television narratives.

Analysis

The analysis will proceed in two chapters: the first focuses on the use of women-in-prison genre conventions and the commodification of female sexuality and trauma, while the second examines the deployment of racial stereotypes across Black and Latino characters, the manipulation of narratives to ensure their recognition, and concludes with the privileging of the white perspective embodied by the main character, Piper Chapman. Discussions of the effects and consequences of these representations are embedded throughout, with relevant cultural theories applied to interpret and contextualize the findings.

Chapter I: Commodification of Female Sexuality and Trauma in *Orange Is the New Black*

Erotic Appeal: From a Strict No-Contact Rule to Voyeuristic Hypersexual Spectacle

The series is a hypersexualized spectacle, marked by an abundance of sexually explicit scenes encompassing a wide spectrum of sexual activity: consensual and coercive, heterosexual and homosexual, romantic and transactional, tender and violent. This persistent emphasis on sexuality as a central aesthetic device reflects the personal creative vision of Jenji Kohan, the showrunner of *Orange Is the New Black*, who stated, "I love graphic sex, the more sex the better" (Blistein). As a meta-justification for the show's emphasis on sexual content, the series features a revealing exchange between Tasha Jefferson "Taystee" and Suzanne "Crazy Eyes" Warren. When CO Birdie rejects Suzanne's story as too vulgar for her drama class, Taystee encourages her to keep writing. Suzanne, confused that Chang's gory, bloody story was acceptable while her sexual writing was censored, is met with Taystee's pointed remark: "That's because this is America. Violence is all good and fine, but sex? Lord, no!" (S3 E7 13:10–14:23). This scene highlights the series' self-awareness by critiquing how society tolerates violence but stigmatizes sexual expression. By emphasizing sexuality, the show challenges this double standard.

This representation diverges sharply from Piper Kerman's memoir, where sexual contact between inmates is explicitly forbidden and almost non-existent (272). Kerman only indicates some "sexin'" after the Senior Counselor Butorsky was replaced by a more lenient, i.e., too lazy to inspect the dorms, Finn (145), and she mentions rumors about a guard-inmate relationship that ended with the inmate being taken to the infamous Solitary Housing Unit (the SHU) (242). Aside from these scattered incidents, which read more like gossip than everyday reality, Kerman explains that prisoners would occasionally sneak pedicures or foot massages as substitutes for genuine intimacy and as small acts of disobedience against strict rules (210,

250). Interestingly, at the very beginning, Kerman notes being “struck” by the absence of “lesbian activity” (85), while in the pilot episode of the series, Chapman witnesses a sexual encounter between Nicky Nichols and Lorna Morello in the shower (47:25–47:39).

Paradoxically, the institutional rule of ‘no contact” and “no touching’ is repeatedly restated in the series, which makes the abundance of sexual encounters among inmates even more pronounced. It suggests a deliberate erotic spectacle rather than fidelity to the memoir or internal consistency within the show’s own narrative. In Season 1, Episode 9, Piper begins crying while Sophia washes her hair, having forgotten what it feels like to be touched by another person (02:50–03:30). In the series, this scene stands in stark contrast to the pervasive hypersexualized atmosphere present throughout most of the show.

Beyond highlighting the series’ fictionality, sexual content also acts as a salient feature that attracts attention and engages viewers, aligning with Bernays’s understanding of how powerful stimuli capture public attention. Moreover, in terms of Freud’s homeostatic theory, the excessive sexual activity in the series might serve as an overcompensation of the libido against the constant presence of death anxiety in the harsh prison environment. The severity of the setting intensifies the death drive, while the sex drive acts as a counterforce, restoring psychic balance and preserving vitality and agency. This explains why sexual encounters often appear forced, aggressive, impulsive, or mechanical, and why sexuality is instrumentalized beyond intimate purpose, functioning as currency, reward, or a competitive tool.

The Overexposed Lesbian: Genre conventions

Given the institutional setting in which the narrative unfolds, it is unsurprising that lesbian sexuality emerges as a prominent feature of *OITNB*, as the all-female prison makes same-sex relationships narratively expected. As a result, lesbian desire becomes both a recurrent form of intimacy and a frequent visual motif, aligning closely with established women-in-prison genre conventions (Schwan 475–476). This dynamic is explicitly

acknowledged within the series itself, as when Nicky remarks, “Gay for the stay, straight at the gate” (S6E8 54:00–54:15), framing same-sex desire as situational necessity. The show’s emphasis on sexuality operates in line with Bernays’s principle that recognizable imagery generates immediate audience engagement. In doing so, the series reinforces well-established genre conventions such as scenes of lesbian intimacy, communal shower scenes, and the “new fish” trope (Schwan 478), presenting lesbian intimacy both as a product of the carceral setting and as a marketable feature of popular representation.

One of the most recognizable genre conventions employed in the series is the recurring *shower scene*. The pilot episode opens with alternating images of Piper showering with her former partner, Alex, and bathing with her fiancé, Larry, accompanied by sensual music, establishing from the outset the centrality of nudity and sexuality to the narrative. This sequence then abruptly shifts to a prison shower, punctuated by a blaring alarm, signaling a transition from private intimacy to institutional control (S1E1 0:11–0:35). The motif reappears in Season 2, Episode 5, where communal shower scenes foreground the exposure and regulation of female bodies. In one moment, Maritza urges another inmate to hurry, then forcibly pulls her from the shower by pinching her nipple and dragging her out (01:20–02:00). Another recurring image typical of the prison genre is a row of naked women of varying body types and racial backgrounds, ordered by guards to turn around and bend over for a cavity search (S2E1 22:54–23:27). Together, these scenes mobilize familiar visual conventions of women-in-prison narratives, emphasizing surveillance, vulnerability, and the institutional control of bodies.

Another genre convention is the depiction of *female masturbation*. This motif is introduced early in the series, when Galina Reznikov “Red” complains to Sophia Burset about the scarcity of vegetables, remarking: “I’m missing half my zucchini. These girls don’t realize I’m here to provide food, not dildos. I’m all out of cucumbers, carrots, beets. God knows what

they're doing with those. Can't hang on to anything cock-shaped" (S1E3 31:42–32:00). Later in the same season, Carrie "Big Boo" Black is shown masturbating with an improvised sex toy made from a screwdriver (S1E4 49:52–50:26). In the final episode, this motif is revisited humorously when Nicky and Alex refer to their former group of inmates as a "band" that has broken up, joking about a possible reunion tour featuring their greatest hits: "Squat and Cough," "Foot Fungus," and, most notably, "Anything Can Be a Dildo If You're Brave Enough" (S7E13 1:03:25–1:03:50).

The show not only makes liberal use of women-in-prison genre conventions and reinforces the associated stereotypes, but it also does so on a meta-level: when Piper's fiancé, Larry, is interviewed on a radio show as the partner of an incarcerated woman, he repeats all the familiar clichés about female prisons—sexual abuse, consensual sex, and rape as an ever-present threat (S1E11 49:00–50:20). Piper later confronts Larry for making the inmates sound like criminals, yet she does nothing to contradict the rumors about sexual activity in prison, thereby silently reinforcing them.

In several moments, *OITNB* stages lesbian sexuality in ways reminiscent of pornographic imagery, reflecting a postmodern interplay between high and low culture. Its explicit depictions and commentary on lesbian sexual practices sometimes function almost like instructional manuals (e.g., Nicky teasing Piper about Alex, S1 E10 01:59–02:11; Nicky and Lorna having sex on a toilet seat while Big Boo instructs Nicky on how to perform more efficiently, S2 E3 39:53–40:17). Other scenes are especially graphic, such as Nicky and Lorna having sex in the shower (S2 E3 34:19–34:39) and Nicky attempting to comfort Brook Soso in a full-frontal scene set in the chapel (S2 E4 50:29–51:43). This can be understood as a response to the historical hegemony of heterosexual representations in media, which often assumed that sexual intimacy was impossible without male genitalia (Castle), a notion the series directly challenges through its portrayal of a wide range of Lesbian sex.

This overt (homo)sexuality marks a significant departure from the historical context in which Bernays formulated his theories. Nevertheless, the series exemplifies Bernays's principle that persuasive communication must remain attuned to the dominant socio-political climate (*CPO* 128). Because it must be commercially viable, the show necessarily appeals to prevailing public interests while simultaneously shaping them. Within the context of contemporary American media culture, *OITNB* can thus be understood as a liberal adaptation of Bernays's techniques, aligning itself with prevailing values of sexual openness and tolerance. Contemporary media platforms such as Netflix operate under far fewer restrictions regarding sexual representation than those that existed in the early twentieth century. Combined with Jenji Kohan's preference for provocative imagery, this permissiveness eliminates the need for indirect or symbolic representations of sexuality. Instead, the series presents explicit sexual content directly, including imagery featuring both male (S5E1 14:53; S5E3 47:53) and female genitalia (S1E6 01:26, 42:56). As a result, symbolic mediation of sexuality becomes largely unnecessary, replaced by overt visual representation.

From the perspective of contemporary theory, the series exemplifies a postfeminist approach to sexuality, where romantic love is often subordinated to sex. As Nicky meta-comments near the series' end: "Prison is just not as romantic as all those '70s exploitation movies made it seem. I want my money back" (S7 E13 1:03:12–1:03:19). This reflects a consumerist view of sex as a commodity to be exchanged, where women's sexual pleasure and agency are encouraged as part of a consumer lifestyle and attitude (Schwan 476). Certain queer characters align closely with this consumerist approach: Nicky's compulsive eroticism and Big Boo's butch lesbian identity are repeatedly presented as spectacles inviting viewer amusement, while Piper's bisexual desire is framed through a 'novelty' trope that renders queerness itself a source of intrigue. Together, these portrayals position queer sexualities as exoticized resources for narrative and visual consumption, exemplifying the commodification of

difference that bell hooks identifies as central to dominant cultural production—an issue further explored in the following chapter on racial representations.

One episode in which the show pushes its use of lesbian sexuality to the point of absurdity occurs when Nicky and Big Boo establish their own competition, "The Bang-Off," to see who can accumulate the highest number of sexual encounters. They create rules, assign points, and recruit inmate Chang to keep score. The contest spans two episodes (Season 2 E5 & 6), showing them pursuing both inmates and a female guard, bending rules and cheating, until they eventually call it off when the score ends in a tie. Immediately afterward, they shift to an eating contest after noticing the Valentine's Day cookies. In doing so, the series reflects Bernays's insight into the human drive for competitiveness intertwined with consumerism, while simultaneously juxtaposing sex as a competitive sport with the love-centered holiday. Apart from presenting sexual activity as independent from intimacy, the shift from sex to cookies illuminates a consumerist logic in which bodies and food are treated as interchangeable commodities.

The voyeuristic male gaze functions as another form of spectacle crafted for entertainment, where lesbian sexuality is eroticized to appeal to heteronormative fantasies. For example, when Tiffany "Pennsatucky" Doggett approaches CO George "Pornstache" Mendez about Alex and Piper dancing provocatively, she says, "That's lesbian activity," to which he responds with a smile, "It sure is," watching with predatory eagerness (S1E9 12:15–12:26), even though physical contact between inmates is explicitly prohibited and elsewhere punished. In this and similar scenes, the camera aligns with a heterosexual male spectator, framing the women's dancing as an erotic show, thereby turning their intimacy into a spectacle for consumption. Similarly, in Season 6, Gloria and Maria are punished by being forced into objects of the male gaze: they are subjected to water jets and then tied together, forced to kiss with tongue while guards Hellman and Garza watch with visible enjoyment (S6E1 32:10–

35:08). Even Warden Caputo orchestrates a moment where Piper and Doggett hug, then prepares to masturbate but ultimately refrains (S2E3 43:55).

This dynamic illustrates how postfeminist representations can simultaneously portray female empowerment and visibility while reproducing patriarchal modes of visual pleasure, thereby blurring the line between genuine agency and commodification (Schwan 478).

Systems of Commodified Sexuality

Beyond its function as spectacle or genre convention, sexuality in the series operates as a form of social currency. It becomes a means of negotiation, power exchange, defiance and strategic positioning, where intimacy is less about connection and more about securing status, leverage, or survival within the prison hierarchy. In this context, sexuality is commodified and traded, reflecting broader dynamics where bodies are objectified and instrumentalized for social and power gains.

As a symbolic act of defiance, sex is frequently used to challenge institutional authority. In Season 1, Big Boo masturbates using an appropriated screwdriver (S1E1 49:52–50:26), transforming a tool of coerced labor in the prison's electrical shop into a means of individual pleasure. The prison chapel also becomes a site of sexual activity, as in Nicky and Lorna's encounters (S1E5 03:50–05:00, 49:49–50:29), further subverting religious and institutional norms. Through these acts, the series highlights the tension between individual desire and the constraints imposed by prison, emphasizing moments of symbolic resistance.

Sex functions as a form of currency in *OITNB*. For instance, CO Pornstache exchanges drugs for sexual favors in the mop closet (S1E5 53:00–53:13), a dynamic later confirmed by Poussey (S4E3 31:45–31:50). Similarly, Nicky trades sexual favors with a female guard for heroin (S4E6 57:15–57:42). During the brief stay in the Chicago prison (S2E1), Piper offers a guard a hand job in exchange for passing a note to Alex, but he refuses, instead asking for her dirty underwear. Seizing an opportunity while working for *Whispers*, Piper repurposes extra

fabric to create her business *Felonious Spunk* (S3E7 38:45–39:40), a moment that serves as a meta-commentary on the series itself, monetizing sex (Schwan 482). When *Felonious Spunk* faces threats, Piper readies a hand job for CO Bayley to convince him to remain their mule transporting inmates' panties for distribution (S3E12 31:10–32:30). A similar power exchange occurs later when Piper and Alex fantasize about a burger from their favorite restaurant and plot to persuade a guard to smuggle it in by offering a sexual favor. As Piper reflects, "Because society has conditioned me to see female sexuality as currency," to which Alex responds, "Right! And now it's time to spend a little in exchange for a burger" (S4E9 34:48–34:57). This exchange highlights how female sexuality operates as a form of currency within the prison system, while also functioning as a meta-commentary on broader societal systems of exchange.

This type of meta-commentary, where the series both critiques and exploits the very subject it addresses, is described by postmodernist Linda Hutcheon as a "complicitous critique" (Hutcheon in Schwan 476). *OITNB*'s success depends on globalized media distribution networks even as it critiques corporate power. Similarly, the show capitalizes on lesbian sexuality by providing it for the male gaze, while simultaneously promoting its visibility and affirming female agency. However, while recognizing the postmodern self-reflexivity throughout the show, this thesis argues that the strategic deployment of sexual experiences primarily serves to maximize audience reach, suggesting that political critique remains secondary to commercial imperatives, aligning with the argument of DeCarvalho and Cox (504). More importantly, the show masks the crude realities of prison by amplifying and exaggerating its sexual elements to stage a spectacle.

Everything revolves around sex, including the moral opposition expressed by characters such as Counselor Sam Healy and Doggett. Both characters are homophobic and conservative; yet even as they condemn same-sex desire, the narrative remains focused on their objections to 'lesbian activity' and their efforts to catch inmates engaging in it. In Season 1,

Doggett tattles to Healy that Alex and Piper are dancing provocatively (S1E9 12:40–13:18), which prompts an enraged Healy to throw Piper into the SHU for "an attempted rape". The season concludes with Healy walking away from the fight in which Doggett is clearly about to hurt Piper (S1E13 56:50–57:25), to punish her for her involvement with Alex, despite having warned her from the very beginning to 'mind the lesbians.'

In the penultimate episode of the following season, Doggett and Healy sit in his office, where he once again warns her about her Big Boo, calling her the most dangerous lesbian in the prison: "You should stay away from her… That's how they get to you. Being cool, doing cool things, and before you know it, you're part of their agenda." He then recommends she read *The End of Men*, explaining that men will become irrelevant because of some kind of lesbian conspiracy. Yet, even Doggett pushes back, saying, "No offense, but, uh, men being in charge has never done me any good" (30:25–31:40). Later in the same episode, Doggett asks Big Boo whether she can become part of the lesbian 'agenda', and Big Boo mockingly explains the supposed rules to her. Ironically, in the following seasons, Doggett and Big Boo develop an unexpected friendship, leaving Healy all alone in his lesbian-witch hunt.

Here, the use of irony and humor entertains the show's audience while strategically enhancing its marketability by aligning with progressive values. However, this approach risks creating a false sense of awareness among viewers, who may feel enlightened about issues of race and gender, whereas the show all along softens the harsh, systemic realities faced by incarcerated individuals. In this way, the series monetizes these struggles rather than offering genuine social commentary.

Selling Suffering: The Commodification of Female Trauma

In *OITNB*, the oppressive prison setting is structured by a constant threat of violence, including fights, guards' abuse, and systemic oppression. Within this environment, the death drive is pervasive, manifesting inwardly through frequent suicides, often by drug overdose,

self-destructive behavior, and self-loathing, and outwardly through displaced anger, aggression, and inmate rivalries that turn violence laterally rather than against authority. The convergence of sex and death drives appears most clearly in the sadistic practices of the guards, including sexual abuse and humiliation. Violence hovers over every episode and is formally organized as spectacle. The series aestheticizes female trauma such as abuse and solitary confinement, transforming it into serialized, consumable content that allows viewers to symbolically channel anxieties about violence, control, and mortality without demanding political or ethical transformation.

As Bernays stated, everything is for sale, and it is the responsibility of public relations counsel to navigate the ethics of such transactions. Under the guise of being postmodern, self-reflexive, and ironic, the show chooses to capitalize on female pain, including the serious issue of rape. *OITNB* or narratively minimizes sexual coercion or abuse by male staff as normalized, excused, or left unresolved**.** In doing so, it ultimately perpetuates existing power hierarchies and patriarchal ideologies while presenting itself as progressive.

This aligns well with Lazar's comments about postfeminist culture, where depictions of women's sexual dominance create an illusion of power reversal. In postfeminist media culture, sexual power is redefined from women as passive objects of male desire to active, autonomous subjects who unapologetically claim sexual pleasure as both personal freedom and political strength (157). However, this notion of sexual empowerment remains confined to aesthetics, making it superficial, while obscuring the underlying realities. Applied to *OITNB*, Lazar's point indicates that texts framed as sexually explicit entertainment can be examined to uncover how ideology and power function through narrative, visuals, and interpersonal dynamics. Therefore, when *OITNB* appears to celebrate women's sexual agencies, this supposed empowerment might remain confined to the sexual realm. The previously mentioned scenes of nudity, strip searches, and sexualized interactions under institutional surveillance

demonstrate this, reproducing the male gaze and positioning even lesbian sexual encounters as spectacles for visual consumption. This dynamic is further illustrated in the sexual relationships between female inmates and guards, including Dayanara Díaz with COs Bennett and CO Mendez, and Tiffany "Pennsatucky" Doggett with CO Coates.

Sleeping With the Enemy: Pennsatucky and Dayanara

The male characters in subject are primarily COs, guards, and wardens, positioning them as figures of authority rather than potential romantic partners. Consequently, sexual encounters between female inmates and male staff are necessarily illicit. Due to the power imbalance, these encounters are marked by coercion, intimidation, aggression, self-loathing, and psychological or emotional harm.

The rape of Pennsatucky by Officer Coates (S3E10 57:40 –58:35) reveals how violence against women is narratively neutralized rather than condemned. His sexual assault is reframed partly as mutual affection, softening the abuse, and partly implying her own guilt, referencing her five abortions and her history of passive, submissive sexual behavior, as if she does not know any better (S3E10). Big Boo's character here functions as a foil character and a symbol of resistance to sexual violence, yet their outrage remains self-contained, while the overall narrative ultimately neutralizes rape trauma through a reconciliatory romance.

After the meltdown when Pennsatucky finally confronts the reality of Coates's actions in the previous episode, in Season 3 Episode 12, she dismisses all the excuses she had been making for him, and she talks with Boo about her limited options. Boo is vindictive, while Pennsatucky appears confused, passive and powerless. She considers telling Caputo, noting that Pornstache was fired for raping "the Spanish girl," but Boo predicts that no one will believe her over Coates, who will surely lie to protect his reputation and job, adding mockingly:

Boo: “We are liars and degenerates, and we deserve everything that happens to us.”

Doggett: “So I get fucked and now I’m screwed.”

Boo: “Yep, that’s about the short of it.” (S3E12 08:10–08:19)

After this exchange, Boo proposes that they plan their own revenge, “full-on *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*” style, which they partially execute at the end of the same episode, perpetuating the narrative of an ineffective legal system in cases of abuse and leaving vigilante action as victims’ only viable option. And while this would amount to a kind of poetic justice, Pennsatucky soon begins to soften toward Coates, explains his wrongdoing to him, and the narrative takes a romantic turn instead. During the riot, she escapes from Litchfield and seeks him out at his home (S5E12), after which the two spend several episodes together on the outside. Ultimately, she chooses to return to prison, bringing their brief romance to an end (S6E5). Boo, disgusted by Pensatucky’s emotional drift back toward her abuser, withdraws from her entirely, remaining the lone moral agent who refuses to excuse the abuse. This is especially troubling because the series portrays a victim who is offered help to act against their abusers but chooses not to. The narrative arc thus reinforces a sense of inescapability, a no-way-out logic that subtly nudges survivors toward forgiving their abusers while both the system and the abuser remain unaccountable.

Dayanara Díaz’s storyline is framed as a secretive, romantic affair with the mild-mannered guard John Bennett. It begins with flirtatious notes and a hidden meeting place, accompanied by soft, mellow music that signals intimacy and anticipation (S1E4 18:35; S1E5 19:04–19:29; 40:38–40:57), before developing into an illicit sexual relationship. Daya’s involvement is initially presented as playful and voluntary, later positioning her as sexually assertive and seemingly in control. Toward the end of Season 1, Daya’s pregnancy is revealed, catching both her and Bennett off guard.

Although Daya appears to hold power in the early stages, initiating contact and seducing Bennett (S1E5 24:37–26:28), this apparent control quickly erodes. Her family's intervention intensifies the situation: César confronts Bennett at home and announces the pregnancy (S1E10 02:50–04:22), followed by Aleida interrupting an intimate exchange to demand financial support (15:04–17:27). This collective family involvement reinforces stereotypes of Latina 'tribal' behavior and casts them as a unified group later blackmailing Bennett into smuggling contraband. When Bennett denies being coerced, he begins giving shots to Latina inmates to reassert control. Daya reacts angrily and dares him to give her a shot as well, articulating the structural imbalance between them when he denies: "But you could if you wanted to, right? Because you have a choice. You have the power. I'm an inmate. I have nothing" (S2E7 35:30–35:50).

When other inmates learn of Daya's pregnancy, they devise a plan to frame CO Pornstache as a sexual predator in a collective effort to remove him from the prison, sacrificing Daya for the benefit of all. Daya is initially depicted as passive, compliant, and inert, big-bosomed Latina, following the instructions of other inmates. She seduces both Bennett and Pornstache, mobilizing her sexuality, plump lips, and exotic ethnic features. This incident shows how sexuality becomes the only available form of agency for incarcerated women, offering a brief sense of control that ultimately reinforces existing male and institutional power. CO Bennett retains the ability to evade parental responsibility. Furthermore, CO Pornstache, is narratively promoted to raise Daya's daughter, stretching the institutional reach over inmates' lives.

Pornstache is presented as a despicable yet grotesque character. His sadistic control illustrates how men's bodies function as sites where institutional and patriarchal power intersect. When Pornstache urinates in Red's sauce (S1E9 23:40), the act elicits disgust and emphasizes the animalistic nature of his impulses, stemming from a sense of superiority. When

he orders Lorna to drive the prison van away from her usual destination to intimidate her into revealing Red's sources (S1E8 34:00), he again acts sadistically. His criminal behavior and cruelty are particularly disturbing: he smuggles heroin into the prison and stages Patricia "Tricia" Miller's suicide to cover up the drugs that led to her overdose (S1E10 41:15–41:30). Visually, he is frequently shot from a low angle, emphasizing his height and power and symbolically positioning him above the prisoners. Especially notable is his return after suspension in S2E9, accompanied by dramatic music and a low-angle shot as he walks confidently, firing random "shots" at inmates and reclaiming his authority, appearing as a giant caricature (05:45–06:30). His acts of aggression provoke visceral responses, aligning with Bernays's idea that primitive impulses can generate both emotional reactions and spectacle. Due to his cruelty, lack of respect for inmates, and arbitrary displays of authority, his behavior provokes plotting against him and the staging of Daya's rape case.

Pornstache also embodies the grotesque face of prison abuse, transforming violence against female prisoners into caricature and dark comic relief. The absurdity of his nickname signals a creepy figure, and he is frequently depicted lurking and spying on female inmates. This is sharply contrasted with the childlike, coddled persona he adopts in front of his mother. When she visits him in prison, he appears infantilized, calling her "mommy," while she affectionately refers to him as "sweet pea." He cries because Daya has stopped responding to his letters and insists, "I was not a rapist… with her. We made love" (S3E10 29:20–29:30). Pornstache thus embodies an absurd gap between the hypermasculine persona he performs as a CO and the pathetic figure he becomes in front of his mother, appearing sincere and hopeful. Although Daya's 'rape' was staged by other inmates, his sadistic behavior and rape admission remain troublesome.

The show's decision to present sexual abuse in a dark humorous way rather than sustained critique has unfavorable cultural consequences. This trivialization becomes even

more troubling due to his mother's complicit behavior. His mother had negotiated with Daya's family and, after Daya decides to surrender (S5E E8), agreed to adopt the baby to provide financial stability and secure her future. Particularly unnerving is a scene in the final episode of the series, where CO Pornstache is shown playing improvised drums with Daya's daughter (S7E13 1:24:08), highlighting the disturbing notion that such a figure would be left to raise a female child. The show's creators excuse his cruelty, framing the ending as a hopeful resolution, with his sarcastic portrayal overshadowing the full extent of the atrocities he committed. Moreover, they imply an unjust and ineffective system that leaves such acts unpunished.

Warden Natalie "Fig" Figueroa's handling of Daya's pregnancy is comparably disturbing. She confirms that sex between guards and inmates is criminalized due to the inherent power imbalance. However, earlier, after coaxing Daya into admitting she had encouraged Pornstache during a seemingly sympathetic conversation, Fig responds coldly: "Congratulations. You've officially ruined a man's life" (S2E10 27:30–28:40). This moment illustrates persistent androcentrism, which even women can perpetuate in social practices, discursively enforcing gender inequality (Lazar 147). The absurdity escalates in the next episode, where Fig brainstorms charity concert slogans with Caputo: "Rock Against Rape," "Rape and Roll," "Rape the Vote", while Caputo sardonically notes that the rape case "really works out" for her (S2E11 04:34–05:55). These scenes reveal how even sarcastic humor can reinforce male hegemony and normalize sexual violence, operating as a form of discursive power in service of institutional authority. Fig's PR-driven hypocrisy is further evident when Pornstache is arrested for sexual assault: she delivers a statement to reporters framing the case as evidence of zero-tolerance for misconduct and concern for the "vulnerable women" under her care, while safeguarding the institution's image (S2E10 56:55–58:05).

Early in the series, Fig represents corporate authority, entangled with her husband's position as governor, embodying what Lazar frames as reinforcing sexist attitudes and practices against other women within androcentric cultures (150). By the final season, Fig shifts her attitude and behavior, contributing to the kind of social transformation Lazar envisions. Influenced by Caputo's persistent resistance to corporate authorities and his dedication to inmates' well-being, she gradually critiques the PIC and condemns mistreatment of immigrants in the ICE center (S7E11 03:04, 04:45). Her shift toward female solidarity is evident in her aid to a detainee, Chaj, helping her obtain a pill to terminate a rape-induced pregnancy, while sacrificing her own IVF plans (S7E12 56:00–56:30). Fig's transformation reflects a shift from institutional loyalty toward ethical responsibility, absorbed gradually from Caputo's conduct and enacted, paradoxically, through the couple's' recurring sexualized encounters. In this way, her character shift is framed not as an ideological awakening but as an embodied process of learning to act differently within a sexist system.

While the show offers moments of apparent female empowerment and self-expression, these are constantly undermined by the broader visual and institutional framing, highlighting the tension between individual agency and systemic control. Despite presenting female sexual interactions as expressions of freedom or agency, *OITNB* ultimately reproduces familiar hierarchies. Across the series, from Healy's moral policing to the pervasive voyeurism of the COs, male authority persists beneath the surface of female 'freedom', exposing the illusion of female empowerment within institutionalized power relations. The problem with such representations, according to Lazar, is not only the appropriation of feminism for commercial gain, but that in the process, feminism political potency for social change is neutralized (152). Moreover, such discursive practices can change the way we perceive the real world: the convergence of patriarchal and consumerists system turn feminist ideas into marketable

images, while preserving the existing power order under the guise of female empowerment (Lazar 159).

Chapter II: Racialized Stereotypes under the Guise of Diversity

As Edward Bernays explains in *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923), stereotypes are grasped more quickly than detailed descriptions; therefore, the use of these 'shortcuts' reduces cognitive effort and ensures the rapid assignment of appropriate emotions. Drawing on Walter Lippmann's argument that people often perceive the world through culturally shaped, pre-formed images, Bernays highlights how certain single words such as "boy scout" effectively evoke fitting cognitive and emotional responses (113, 122). Visual media extends the reach of these associations by rendering them easily reproducible and widely circulating, reinforcing their impact through repetition and visibility. In line with this, *OITNB*'s portrayal of diversity relies on familiar cultural tropes and symbolic representations.

The starting point for the racial divisions within the Litchfield prison is Kerman's memoir, where she describes how female inmates of Danbury Prison formed their own 'tribes' based largely on race: "white, black, Latino, or the few and far between 'others'" (54–55). These groups supported newcomers by introducing them to both the official and unspoken rules and providing necessities. Prison counselors openly reinforced this segregation by assigning new inmates to different dormitories based on race, with nicknames such as "the Suburbs" for A Dorm, "the Ghetto" for B Dorm, and "Spanish Harlem" for C Dorm (75). The series uses this as a springboard to exaggerate the stereotypical representations of each group through constellation characterization, presenting them as clusters of recognizable features that become distinct and competitive in relation to one another.

Such reductions of racialized family formations align with Bernays's principles of mass persuasion: by relying on simplified, readily recognizable cultural patterns, the series maintains narrative efficiency and audience accessibility. However, to extend this analysis of racialized

representation and situate it within a broader cultural framework, the following section draws on bell hooks, whose work provides a critical vocabulary for examining how such images are rendered consumable within popular culture.

The Redistribution of Otherness (*bell hooks*)

In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks examines how the intersection of race, gender and capitalism is constructed and consumed in popular "white supremacist capitalist patriarchal culture" (22), especially in television, film, music, and advertising. She argues that representation in media is far from neutral: it actively shapes perceptions of race and reinforces stereotypical tropes, shaping cultural representations and the lived experiences of marginalized groups. hooks challenges dominant narratives and calls for alternative ways of seeing marginalized subjects, emphasizing the power of spectatorship and the *oppositional gaze* as forms of resistance. Her critique of commodified, stereotyped representation offers a useful lens to examine how *OITNB* frames its racialized characters. Drawing on bell hooks' idea that "the other" includes any marginalized identities made desirable through their difference (20), *OITNB* appears to redistribute traditional traits of otherness between Black and Latina characters.

Representation of Black Looks *in Orange is the New Black*

Black inmates in *OITNB* are often portrayed as desexualized, politically aware, street-smart, and humorous, serving more as moral commentators than objects of desire. This pattern appears to be a deliberate attempt to challenge stereotypes, though it risks overcorrection. Their desexualization functions not only as a repression of desire but also as a cautious effort to avoid invoking racist tropes of Black sexuality, such as the Jezebel or Sarah Baartman. Baartman was reduced to an exoticized, hypersexualized body, her exaggerated features turned into a spectacle for public display (hooks 62–63). Apart from traditional objectification, Black bodies are often treated as expendable within dominant power hierarchies, devalued and exploited as

disposable commodities rather than recognized as individuals. According to hooks, both the expendability and objectification of Black female bodies fail to challenge sexist and racist stereotypes (64), instead reinforcing exploitation and dehumanization while denying Black bodies beauty and humanity (71).

Black women in *OITNB* are portrayed as agents of social change who confront injustices within the prison system, exemplified by CO Birdie Rogers and Tamika Ward. Birdie Rogers, introduced in Season 3 as a counselor with a background in psychology, attempts to improve inmates' lives through therapy and a drama program but is quickly removed. Likewise, Tamika Ward appears in Season 7 as a principled CO who later becomes warden. She reinstates the GED program, closes the infamous Solitary Housing Unit (the SHU), and implements meaningful, research-based reforms, much to the dismay of the mostly white, male guards. Nevertheless, she is fired in the final episode, unable to withstand sustained institutional and collegial pressure. While these portrayals gesture toward more positive representations of Black women, they remain limited.

As hooks observes, the assumption that visibility alone challenges racist stereotypes is outdated, as Black women must be included in ways that ultimately reinscribe prevailing stereotypes (72). In *OITNB*, Black women are presented as resourceful and motivated to effect change; however, they are rarely given opportunities to demonstrate intellectual authority and agency. When such opportunities do arise, they are frequently framed through white-centered motivations, as when Linda Ferguson, Vice President of Strategic Planning at PolyCon, explicitly admits that Tamika was hired primarily to secure a lucrative "diversity grant" (S7E3 06:45–07:05).

Even after attaining positions of influence, these Black women face persistent institutional and communal resistance that undermines their authority, causing them to either leave or be removed from these roles, ultimately rendering them what hooks terms

"expendable" (64): temporarily utilized in the name of diversity and then discarded by the narrative. Ultimately, these portrayals risk reinforcing the belief that women of color are inherently unsuited for positions of power.

Black Cindy: *Internalized Racism*

In her discussion of the commodification of racial differences, hooks argues that mass culture frequently frames racial identity as something consumable, turning Black bodies into objects of entertainment. In this context, Black Cindy's character transforms her Blackness into a form of spectacle for the audience, functioning as a visual and behavioral shorthand that reinforces reductive tropes. Black Cindy is initially depicted as a stereotypical African American, gospel-singing churchgoer (S1E13 24:14–24:40), before converting to Judaism to gain access to better food. This narrative move undermines and trivializes religious, reducing belief to a matter of convenience rather than conviction. Furthermore, Black Cindy's conversion simultaneously positioned Judaism as a marker of relative advantage within the prison's economy. This framing is reinforced when, as a newly converted Jew, Black Cindy confronts a Muslim inmate, Alison Abdullah (S4E2). The confrontation situates Black Cindy within a representational hierarchy where certain identities are framed as more compatible with dominant cultural norms: Judaism as the more legitimate or protected position, and Islam as oppositional or suspect. In this way, the series treats religion not as a matter of faith or ethics, but as a means of access and cultural legitimacy, ultimately framed as lightly entertaining.

More broadly, Black Cindy's conversion can be read as embodying what hooks terms "internalized racism" (3), as she repeatedly interprets the world through the lens of white supremacy and reproduces dominant racial narratives rather than challenging them. In this way, her character not only reflects but also reinforces prevailing stereotypes, diffusing critical consciousness and resistance by commodifying Black features (33).

Furthermore, she functions as a discursive excuse for racism itself. In a dialogue with Janae, when Janae argues that Black people cannot be racist due to their lack of structural power, Black Cindy responds:

> I'm gonna have to call bullshit on that. I'm sorry, look, we may not be able to act on our racism, like, put people in a ghetto, send them to shitty school…- kill 'em in the back of police vans.
>
> Janae: Mmm.
>
> Black Cindy: But we sure as shit can be racist as everybody else, 'cause this is America. Land of the free, home of the racist
>
> (21:35–21:56).

By framing racism as an inevitable and universally shared condition of American life, Black Cindy's statement normalizes it, and in effect, diffuses responsibility for white-dominant racism. At the same time, she corroborates that Black people lack the power to act on in any systemic way, thereby reducing Black racism to mere individual stereotypes without recognizing its structural limits. This narrative move aligns with what hooks identifies as mass media's role in sustaining and regulating white supremacist patriarchy (3), not through overt endorsement, but through normalization and deflection.

Consumable Tasha Jefferson, "Taystee"

Similarly, Tasha "Taystee" Jepherson's performative sassiness and streetwise demeanor function as instantly recognizable markers of Black identity designed for easy uptake. However, in the characters of Taystee, the anguish caused by racial treatment in the U.S. is portrayed more deeply than in any other character. Although Taystee is given significant narrative focus, she is rarely granted real agency, aside from a token appointment as Caputo's, and later Tamika's secretary, which serves more as symbolic inclusion than genuine empowerment. When Captain Piscatella asks Caputo how he picked up Taystee as an office

assistant, he states, “Between you and me? She’s the only semi-intelligent one that I’m only semi-attracted to” (S4E3 14:30-14:50). However, Taystee’s extended narrative presence allows viewers to witness her struggle, even as her calls for help remain unanswered and are gradually neutralized by the narrative.

Taystee’s story, compared to Piper’s, shows that while both experience the “story of American decline” (Loofbourow in Pramaggiore 550), some fall faster than others because they have less social and economic support. This can be illustrated by a stark juxtaposition of two scenes from Season 7: Piper struggles with her life outside prison as an ex-felon, failing to adhere to her probation by reaching for a bottle of tequila and a large cake. In contrast, the one of the following scenes shows Taystee attempting to hang herself from her own bed inside prison (S7E4 54:20–58:30), exposing the deep inequalities shaping their experiences and highlighting how privilege shapes one’s sense of hardship.

Taystee’s prolonged helplessness in the final two seasons stays in stark juxtaposition to Piper’s privileged life in New York City. Consistent with bell hooks’ broader cultural critique, this contrast illustrates how mass media sustains control over images of marginalized groups by reinforcing narrow and limiting representations (3). The gap between the two is further emphasized by Taystee being repeatedly sidelined by Piper’s intelligence, a dynamic that will be further explored in the chapter *All About Piper*. Namely, it is only after Piper’s departure that Taystee emerges as the truly inventive problem-solver: in S7E11, Taystee carefully calculates expenses for the average released prisoner (15:00–16:12, 23:40), discusses ideas about financial education and microloans for ex-convicts with Caputo (S7E12 44:50–46:05), and secures Judy King’s financial and promotional backing (S7E13 1:07:14–1:08:50). Although sentenced to life imprisonment, Taystee teaches financial literacy in prison in the final episode, preparing the first recipients of the *Poussey Washington Fund* to manage money upon release and avoid participation in illegal economies (S7E13 1:24:14–1:24:46).

Nonetheless, she remains incarcerated for life, the narrative trajectory that normalizes the position of Black subjects within the prison system.

In line with Michelle Alexander's argument, Taystee's character reflects how prisons function less as restorative institutions and more as mechanisms of racialized social control that reproduce precarity and recidivism rather than resolve them. Taystee explicitly articulates this structural trap in a dialogue with Poussey, explaining her return to Litchfield: harsh probation conditions, minimum-wage employment while burdened with a $900 fee owed to the prison, and the absence of stable housing. Outside, she has nowhere to stay, whereas in prison she at least has a bed and receives meals. As she explains, "Everyone I know is poor, in jail, or gone. Don't nobody ask how my day went. Man, I got fucked up in the head, you know? I know how to play it here. Where to be … and what rules to follow. I got a bed" (S1E12 46:00–48:54). After her initial release (S1E9), she quickly violates her parole not out of criminal intent, but because she lacks housing and social support. Later, during the riot, when other inmates express a desire for the uprising to end so they can return to their families, Taystee states: "Well, some of us ain't got a home outside. This is my home, and I'm gonna fight for it" (S5E6 33:08–33:12). In the same episode, her backstory is revealed: upon turning eighteen, Taystee gains the right to meet her birth mother, who had given her up for adoption. Taystee learns that her birth mother is ashamed and unwilling to acknowledge her existence to her new family, ultimately abandoning her once again after initially promising to take her in. This revelation retrospectively aligns with earlier scenes in which Yvonne Parker "Vee" recruits Taystee from the adoption system and later exploits her as a drug dealer (S2E2 01:20–04:16).

Taystee's character exemplifies how Black suffering can be consumed primarily for affective impact. In a pivotal scene where Taystee addresses journalists and receives praise from Janae and Alison (S5E5 53:54), she delivers a powerful critique of a system that privileges wealthy, white, and powerful individuals over "poor people and brown people and poor brown

people." She insists that someone must listen to these valid and urgent demands (56:50). This use of affect aligns with bell hooks' argument that Black suffering is often commodified for emotional consumption, while Edward Bernays's theories illustrate how pain can be strategically employed to generate emotional appeal.

The riot in Season 5 shows how mass media transforms political struggle and suffering into a consumable drama. Taystee, as the sole character in the riot explicitly demanding justice for Poussey's death, is punished with a life sentence (S6E13). Her commitment to brings justice for Poussey's death underscores her role as a moral and political conscience amid the chaos. Yet, despite Taystee's clear call for accountability, the series' engineering of consent subtly encourages viewers to accept this injustice as an immutable aspect of the system. This acceptance reflects the show's broader narrative strategy: presenting a surface-level commitment to social critique while ultimately reinforcing dominant power structures.

Rather than portraying the inmates' fight against the PIC and systemic racism, the show shifts focus to interpersonal divisions among the inmates. First, it depicts the private family struggles of Gloria and Ruiz, which lead to the release of the hostages before any demands can be fulfilled (S5E12 54:00–54:43), undermining Taystee's efforts. Second, Black Cindy betrays Taystee by testifying in court against her. Consequently, Season 6 focuses on Taystee's trial, transforming her storyline into a typical courtroom drama. The final season highlights Taystee's anguish and contemplation of suicide, serving to evoke emotional appeal. This portrayal aligns with hooks' concept of expendable bodies, emphasizing themes of suffering and the death drive. Taystee's struggle illustrate this, a dynamic that will be further explored through Poussey's character.

Expendable bodies: Poussey Washington

The most exploited Black body in *OITNB* is probably that of Poussey Washington. The narrative constructs her character to evoke strong audience empathy, portraying her as

exceptionally educated, speaking three languages, well-traveled, well-read, and morally upright tiny lesbian. Poussey is positioned as an innocent, vulnerable figure rather than a threat. When the MCC public relations team tries to frame CO Bayley's killing of Poussey as an act of self-defense by searching her social media to discredit her, they find nothing: "Okay, we hit a wall when it came to the inmate. Father's an army mucky-muck, nice family, educated, low-level crime, sweet face, healthy as a fuckin' horse" (S4E13 51:00–51:10), and then proceeded to shift the blame onto Bayley.

This portrayal sets Poussey apart from other Black inmates and highlights tensions within Black identity on the show. Apart from her backstory of living in Germany with her father, we primarily learn about Poussey through her relationships with Taystee and Soso. In the scene when Poussey confronts Taystee about dealing drugs for Vee and "behaving like a gangster," Taystee rebukes her by emphasizing their different upbringings and lived experiences: "You don't know where I come from. I ain't have no daddy in the army, parents looking out for me, and a fucking winter coat, you bougie bitch" (S2E10 19:15–20:20). Similarly, Brook Soso initially harbors assumptions about Poussey's background, imagining her as coming from a cycle of poverty and addiction. However, it is revealed that Poussey had a transient childhood due to her father's military career and that her mother held a master's degree in art history (S4E3 33:40–36:10). When Soso apologizes for her prejudices, admitting they were influenced by watching *The Wire*, Poussey challenges her: "Did you even listen when I talked? Like, what the fuck about me, besides the color of my skin, would indicate that I'm some indigent hood rat?" (S4E3 42:20–42:56). These scenes illustrate Bernays's observation that "prejudices supersede logic," demonstrating how the media relies on ingrained biases to captivate audiences and, in this case, heighten drama between characters, since Poussey does not fit into traditional racial mold.

She is repeatedly portrayed as one of the smallest inmates, yet with a remarkably brave heart. In Season 2, she is the only Black inmate to confront Vee, a maternal figure of exploitation, to protect her best friend Taystee. In Season 4, Episode 2, while observing overcrowded prison, Soso compares the tense environment to chickens pecking each other in cages. Poussey offers to protect Soso, who laughs and says, "You know, you're, like, one of maybe four people in this prison who actually might be smaller than I am," before they agree that Poussey has a huge heart to compensate for her petite form (54:56–55:58). This budding romance is strategically placed just before Poussey's death, raising the emotional stakes by using romantic love as a narrative trope. Furthermore, in the episode leading up to her death, Judy King, a celebrity chef, expresses enthusiasm about having Poussey as her assistant in the prison kitchen and offers her a job upon release (S4E12 23:20–24:00), making the loss of her future even more pronounced.

Poussey's character arc is carefully constructed to elicit maximum emotional empathy, reflecting the kind of strategic narrative manipulation Edward Bernays would prescribe. While the riot could have been sparked by any inmate at Litchfield, viewers' empathy is most effectively engaged through a character like Poussey. Beyond the intertextual resonance with the *Black Lives Matter* movement and the broader critique of systemic violence and institutional neglect in the PIC, Poussey's death fails to catalyze meaningful systemic change in the fictional world of Litchfield.

Instead of advancing the plot, her death becomes an excuse for Dionysian chaos among most of the inmates, effectively turning the entire Season 5 rebellion into entertainment. The absence of accountability, including the failure to prosecute the perpetrators and to address the inmates' demands at the end of the season, ultimately neutralizes the riot's potential for justice, both transformative and poetic. The series solidifies the status quo, as evidenced by the subsequent transfer of most inmates to maximum-security facilities in the following season.

This outcome perpetuates hooks' observation that communities of resistance are often replaced by communities of consumption (33), where critical consciousness is diffused and commodified rather than ignited in media representation.

The impact of Poussey's death is further diminished by the white-centered narrative, which positions the young and naïve CO Bayley as her accidental killer and even implicates Suzanne in the chain of events leading to Poussey's death. Bayley is portrayed as inherently good, easily frightened, but most of all ill-prepared and wrongfully placed in Litchfield. When Bayley expresses guilt over some guards staging a fight between inmates and reports it, Caputo warns Bayley that the prison "crushes anything good," urging him to leave and pursue a life elsewhere: "Go back to school, work at Home Depot, anywhere but here" (S4E12 29:48–31:24). By focusing on Bayley's inexperience, the narrative frames Poussey's death as the result of a combination of poorly timed and coincidental circumstances rather than institutional neglect. Furthermore, in line with hooks' critique, by balancing attention toward a white character, *OITNB* ultimately treats Poussey's marginalized body as less important and expendable.

Although *OITNB* rejects traditional hypersexualized images of Black women by portraying them as desexualized, it still reinforces certain stereotypes. In contrast, Latina inmates are depicted as loud, expressive, and stereotypically colorful, assuming the hypersexualized role historically assigned to Black women and serving as sites of excess, desire, and spectacle that drive the narrative.

Are Latinos the New 'Blacks'?

It could be argued that *OITNB* marks progress in the representation of Latina women on U.S. television, based on the numerical feature of the main Latina characters represented, their importance for the narrative in every season, and the presence and integration of the Spanish language into the series dialogue (Millette). While this increased visibility and linguistic

authenticity are significant steps toward inclusivity, the broader context complicates such optimism. Since the show is set within a prison, the prominence of Latinas simultaneously reinforces the association of these groups with criminality, limiting the progressive potential of their visibility. Rather than offering a neutral or even empowering portrayal, the series risks perpetuating racialized stereotypes under the guise of diversity, framing minority women as central figures only within a crime narrative. Notably, Kerman's memoir depicts an even higher proportion of Latina inmates, around half of the prison population (75), and later in the series, they indeed become the majority (S4E2 10:25–10:45). In other words, the sheer numerical representation in this narrative can be a double-edged sword: it might reinforce the already existing stereotypes while claiming to center marginalized voices.

The portrayal of the Latina prison group in *OITNB* is characterized by emotional intensity, volatility, shifting alliances, betrayals, romantic entanglements, and elaborate schemes, leaning heavily into melodramatic conventions reminiscent of telenovelas. All this mirrors Bernays's logic of employing familiar stereotypes to capture attention and ensure popularity. By drawing on recognizable imagery and emotional shorthand, the show uses familiar cultural tropes of fiery, passionate Latinas to instantly evoke visceral responses such as fear, excitement, or fascination, without needing to develop the characters through subtler narrative work. To maximize engagement, *OITNB* relies on precisely this kind of symbolic efficiency, as familiar representations of Latina women become a quick way to communicate drama, passion, and intensity while subtly reproducing the established racial stereotypes.

This dynamic is most clearly embodied in the character of Aleida Díaz, whose portrayal serves as a focal point for the show's construction of Latina identity. She is depicted as impulsive, manipulative, materialistic, and unable to take responsibility for her children or escape cycles of incarceration.

Aleida and Ceasar Díaz

Aleida Díaz embodies the stereotype of the temperamental, fiery, stark raving mad Latina. Her *Latinidad* is foregrounded through stark contrast with her daughter, Dayanara Díaz, and through her corresponding characterization alongside her Latino partner, Cesar.

In the early seasons, when Dayanara enters a relationship with CO Bennett and later reveals that she is pregnant, Aleida orchestrates a series of telenovela-style manipulations, including the staged sexual assault of Daya to remove Pornstache from his position of power. While Daya expresses guilt over sending him to prison, Aleida reassures her that events unfolded exactly as planned and urges her to escalate the situation by suing the government for being raped by a guard, as well as by seeking child support from Pornstache and extortion money from Bennett: "I'm telling you, this rape is the best thing that ever happened to you" (S2E11 23:30–25:15). Later, Aleida contacts Pornstache's mother to demand financial compensation not only for Daya and her child, but also for herself in her role as grandmother (S3E2 05:39–08:30).

In the final season, after spending time outside prison, Aleida's backstory is revisited in Episode 5. The episode reveals her dysfunctional family background, and her early effort to escape and become independent by performing sexual favors for an ice-cream truck driver in exchange for fifty dollars and unlimited ice cream (34:20–34:26). Moreover, Aleida is portrayed as already emerging from a prison in adolescence, only to become involved in drug dealing with her friend's brother(50:45–52:16). The episode also exemplifies a Bernays-style preparation of circumstances that anticipates Aleida's return to prison. Rather than presenting her re-incarceration as abrupt, the narrative frames it as the inevitable outcome of a long-established pattern. In the same episode, Aleida meets her thirteen-year-old daughter Eva's boyfriend for the first time. Upon realizing that he is twice Eva's age, she bluntly calls him "a fucking pedophile," to which he responds, "Damn. Your mother's a savage." Aleida escalates

the confrontation by issuing explicit threats of violence and ordering him to leave before she violates her parole (06:30–07:50). The sequence continues when she later locates Eva at the boyfriend's house and, in a state of explosive rage, storms the property, vandalizing both the house and a car she believes belongs to him, and indeed, violating her parole (50:00–50:43). This scene culminates with an industrial metal soundtrack featuring harsh, machine-like rhythms that intensify Aleida's affect. Its abrasive, sonic texture mirrors her fury, communicating loss of control and emotional overload, while reinforcing the sense of an inevitable violent rupture.

Aleida's character embodies what bell hooks terms the "wild woman" (68), and possessing a wild, animalistic sexuality (69) that capture both her untamed emotional intensity and overtly sexualized behavior. This dual wildness reflects cultural stereotypes of Latina women as impulsive, unpredictable, and uncontrollable, as well as inherently sexual. Aleida's fierceness in protecting her family, combined with her unapologetic expression of desire and aggression, situates her within hooks' framework of marginalized femininities that are simultaneously feared and fetishized. This wildness recurs several times throughout the series. Beyond her confrontation with Eva's boyfriend, there is a scene in which Aleida visits Daya to accept an offer to resume smuggling drugs after initial reluctance. Seen through the visitation glass, her face is heavily made up and her expression resolute. The scene is underscored by the gradually increasing volume of *The Lion Sleeps Tonight* by The Tokens, whose jungle-themed onomatopoeia: "A-weema-weh, a-weema-weh…", accompanies the lyrics: *In the jungle, the mighty jungle / The lion sleeps tonight…* (S6E9 57:13–58:00). The jungle motif further corroborates hooks' observations, as it auditorily reinforces Aleida's construction as a figure of primal, animalized strength. Her harshness and outward directness are further revealed in an exchange with CO Hopper, who suggests taking her out; she retorts, "What do you mean? Like kill me or out on a date?" (S6E8 44:40–44:45). In her relationship with Hopper, Aleida

exemplifies precisely what bell hooks identifies as the “sexual savage”, utilizing her body to seduce and dominate men (68), while simultaneously engaging in occasional, uninhibited sexual encounters with her former partner, Ceasar, who in turn is unfaithful to his partner, Margarita (S7E1 26:50–28:38; S7E5 47:53).

When CO Hopper first sees Aleida, she fulfills what hooks terms the fantasy of white men regarding the ‘Black’ female as a wild, sexual savage. In Season 5, Episode 7, after Daya admits to shooting CO Humphrey and surrenders, Aleida watches her being led away in handcuffs outside the prison. She then calls Gloria, attempting to deceive her into affirming that Daya is safe. When Gloria, unaware of Aleida’s intentions, confirms this, Aleida erupts, creating a public scene by shouting at Gloria in front of assembled relatives of other inmates, reporters, and guards. Throughout this encounter, CO Hopper observes Aleida closely, his gaze lingering on her body. When Aleida demands to know why he is staring, Hopper replies, licking his lips, “You are magnificent” (22:40–24:13). This moment situates Aleida not as a desperate mother but as an object of predatory sexual appraisal, thereby reinforcing hooks’ critique that marginalized women are frequently depicted through spectacles of excessive, animalized sexuality rather than granted moral or emotional legitimacy. Aleida is indeed constructed as the epitome of spectacle within *OITNB*. This construction is further emphasized through her relationship with Ceasar.

Ceasar is depicted as a hypersexualized, macho Latino whose characterization relies heavily on visual and racialized markers that align his sexuality with spectacle. As bell hooks explains, racialized masculinity is often represented through figures of masculine “failure”, men who are portrayed as psychologically destabilized, dangerous, violent, and sexually excessive (89). Structural barriers within capitalist economies prevent many men from attaining masculine legitimacy through wage labor and household provision. As hooks argues, masculine power is shifted from economic dominance to the phallus, with sexual conquest

replacing material success as a marker of masculinity (94). This phallocentric model allows even unemployed and marginalized men to claim masculine legitimacy.

As a result, men turn to violence as a means of control (98) and engage in raw sexual encounters in relation to female bodies, who are depicted as immoral and incapable of reason (104). hooks' description resonates strongly with the sexual triangle involving Aleida, Ceasar, and Aleida's relationship with the white man, CO Hopper:

> Both black woman and black man are unable to respond fully to one another because they are so preoccupied with the white power structure, with the white man. The most valued black woman "belongs" to a white man who willingly exchanges her sexual favors in the interest of business. Desired by black and white men alike (it is their joint lust that renders her more valuable, black men desire her because white men desire her and vice versa), her internalized racism and her longing for material wealth and power drive her to act in complicity with white men against black men. (hooks 104)

Aleida indeed exchanges sexual favors with Hopper, who provides her with a home, while she uses him to smuggle drugs into Litchfield. In one conversation with Ceasar, while planning their future, she calls Hopper "Mr. Clean" (S7E5 48:33) and admits to using him only as long as necessary for her own purposes. Ceasar, on the other hand, is frequently in and out of prison throughout the series, unable to provide or care for their extended family. His only tool of power is his sexuality, which is underscored when he even has sex with Daya while Aleida is imprisoned. In a moment of absurdity, he compares Daya's breast size to her mother's, to which she responds that she must have inherited them from her father (S1E5 49:47–50:20).

Ceasar is portrayed as a wild, uncontrollable man. In Season 1, Episode 10, he barges into CO Bennett's apartment to inform him that Daya is pregnant, frightening Bennett for the first time (02:50–04:22). Later, when CO Bennett visits Ceasar in Season 3, Episode 2 (38:00–43:00), Ceasar pulls a gun on one of his children to force him to eat reheated fries (42:25–

43:00). The scene is particularly unsettling given that CO Bennett subsequently disappears without explanation, leaving Daya alone.

Ceasar's hypersexuality is showcased in his final dialogue with Aleida in the series. She compliments his looks, acknowledging what seems to be his only real asset, and he responds by explaining: "Yeah. I got one of those Peloton bikes. Sometimes, I do the workouts. Sometimes, I just jerk off to the hot instructors. I consider that exercise" (53:04–53:25). Then he asks what happened to Aleida, referring to her return to prison. She replies: "What happened? I'm a mother and I'm Latina. He messed with my kid. Boom" (53:30–53:39). This scene, by using racialized sexuality as spectacle, exemplifies what bell hooks calls "eating the other" (35), a dynamic that shapes the portrayal of Latino characters throughout the series.

Other Latinos: bell hooks' *Eating the Other*

As hooks notes, encounters with "Otherness" are portrayed as exciting, intense, and threatening, combining pleasure and danger. This commodification enlivens mainstream white culture, using racialized bodies to satisfy desire and reinforce dominant identities (21–26). While such portrayals grant visibility and narrative weight to Latina characters, they often rely on exaggerated traits that reproduce familiar, reductive media stereotypes rather than meaningfully challenging them.

Even Gloria Mendoza, one of the more grounded figures in *OITNB* and the Latina group's *mami*, is eroticized. In Season 6, she leads a dance class using Latin merengue rhythms, eliciting arousal from CO Luschek with her sensual movements (S6E8 49:30–50:10; S6E9 13:00–14:35). This sequence reinforces the conflation of Latina corporeality with raw, animalistic sensuality. Moreover, her exoticism is emphasized by her role as a Puerto Rican *santera* performing spiritual rituals, invoking the stereotype of the mystical or superstitious Latina woman (S2E13–S3E2).

Blanca Flores is Othered through her wild, primal sexuality combined with extreme stubbornness and an untamed temperament, fulfilling stereotypes of Latina women as excessively emotional and headstrong. Blanca, another figure cast as a 'wild Latina', is shown in flashbacks engaging in rough sexual encounters with her heavily tattooed boyfriend Diablo (S4E9 43:30–44:10). The scene draws on Blanca's Dominican background and her deliberately emphasized primal, hairy appearance to reinforce their construction as an unruly hypersexual couple. As bell hooks argues, such representations objectify racialized bodies by attaching narratives of deviant sexuality that are positioned outside whiteness (62).

Blanca's rebellious nature is highlighted at the end of Season 4, when she defiantly stands on a cafeteria table for several days (S4E9 50:00–55:15). In the same season, as a form of resistance against racial profiling, Blanca exploits the stereotype that Latina individuals have a peculiar, unpleasant odor by refusing to shower for days and deliberately applying sardine oil behind her ear to amplify the odor, aiming to avoid random searches by guards targeting Latina inmates.

In Season 7, she is shown instrumentalizing stereotypes to her own advantage, pretending to be overwhelmed by seeing a computer because, supposedly, in her village back home only the mayor had access to one, and apologizing for her and her people being "so loud." After losing her permanent residency because of participating in the prison riot, she learned to avoid direct confrontation with power. As she explains to Karla, a detainee who helps her with her case, this is one lesson she learned from prisons: "That you learn to deal with a rainbow of assholes and their power trips (…) I tried to stand up to them once. It made it worse. All I got was beaten and fucked up even more." She goes on to explain that when you are treated like an animal, survival depends on acting as though you are being tamed and not biting the hand that feeds you (S7E7 44:30–48:05). While Blanca's behavior can be read as strategic submission, it also exemplifies what bell hooks describes as containment, where survival

within coercive systems requires managing and suppressing one's resistance. Seen this way, her learned accommodation risks slipping into internalized racism, as domination becomes not only imposed from outside but partially absorbed as a means of endurance.

These portrayals frame Latina bodies as consumable and novel, illustrating hooks' concept of commodified difference in popular culture. While Latina characters provide a wild and exotic experience for viewers, they are simultaneously presented as inferior, primitive, and submissive to the dominant white culture. Beyond being sexual objects, Latina characters are also depicted as expendable, objects to be consumed and discarded. Maritza Ramos exemplifies this logic, as her storyline functions as a cautionary tale, positioning her character at the intersection of immigration and incarceration.

During the riot, as other inmates throw objects at Linda after discovering that she is the head of MCC Purchasing rather than a fellow inmate, Maritza in a dialogue with Marisol "Flaca" Gonzales recalls an episode from a visit to her family in Bucaramanga, Colombia, where she claims to have witnessed a man being lynched by an entire town for stealing a purse. Flaca adds that the same supposedly happens in Mexico and concludes that it is good they do not live there, since, being criminals themselves, they would have been "super lynched." Flaca further suggests that, because the two of them are "super cute," they would not need to resort to crime at all but could instead secure survival by marrying a drug boss or a similarly powerful man (S5E12 35:40–36:13). The exchange depicts Latin America as violent and unlivable, implicitly presenting the U.S. as the only place for a tolerable life, reinforcing the series' recurring U.S. superiority narrative.

In Season 7, while Maritza faces deportation in ICE, Flaca's desperate search for her mother reveals that Maritza was born in Colombia and does not have a U.S. birth certificate, a fact her mother had hidden from her (S7E4 25:40–26:40). When Maritza learns about this lie, she says, "But I never lived anywhere else" (S7E4 39:58–40:00), intensifying viewer empathy

by framing deportation as exile to an unknown and threatening ‘elsewhere.’ At the same time, her backstory as a con artist who steals cars and manipulates wealthy people with her looks is used to reinforce her criminal image (S4E5). Her popularity and charm generate sympathy, yet her past actions ultimately serve to excuse her removal. While the series appears to critique harsh immigration policies, Maritza’s deportation is framed as justified, reinforcing contemporary government discourse that portrays Latino immigrants as criminals and legitimizes their deportation. She was thus ‘consumed’ within capitalist white patriarchy as an exotic, cute, charming body of the Other whose experience served as an illustrative example confirming dominant ideological narratives (hooks 46).

This Otherness is further shaped in Season 7, where Latina characters are repeatedly framed as existing meaningfully only within the United States. When Maritza is deported, detained immigrants from various Latin American countries are shown fading from the frame one by one (S7E5 57:40–58:44). The sad, solemn music and visual staging create a metaphor of erasure, suggesting that the scene critiques U.S. immigration policy, which, by removing marginalized people, effectively makes them disappear from public concern. However, it can also be seen as a manifestation of American exceptionalism: once removed from the U.S., these individuals effectively cease to exist, as their lives are considered significant only within the country.

A similar dynamic appears when Blanca Flores arrives in Honduras to reunite with Diablo, who immediately asks her in English: “Why would you come to the murder capital of the world to live in a shack?”, and adds in Spanish, “It’s crazy!” He then casually references the dangers posed by local gangs (S7E13 1:22:35–1:23:15). The romantic reunion is here overlaid with local color of poverty and the anticipation of threat once they are out of the U.S. Using bell hooks’ framework of the commodification of difference, these scenes exemplify how cultural “otherness” is stripped of historical context and viable social worlds (31). Through

"a process of decontextualization" (ibid.), the series reduces existence to a narrow, U.S.-centered perspective. Furthermore, read through Bernays' framework of affective persuasion, emotions of fear are evoked by portraying other countries as dangerous and scary, perpetuating the idea of U.S. comfortable superiority. In other words, it creates conditions that make imperial assumptions appear as common sense rather than ideology.

Closing Remarks

Seemingly showcasing diversity and pluralism, the Other is transformed into a commodity that gains visibility in mainstream culture, creating the appearance of progress and inclusion (hooks 25). However, this visibility is achieved by recycling established stereotypes rather than genuinely challenging dominant representations (26). The racialized portrayals in *OITNB* do not subvert stereotypes but strategically reallocate them, preserving their persuasive power and ensuring consumability.

This logic aligns with Bernays's theory of persuasion, in which audience engagement and commercial success rely on the use of stereotypes to quickly differentiate racial groups in a televisual format, maintaining audience comfort and acceptability. Together, these portrayals of Black and Latina characters shape audience perception through culturally recognizable markers and create associations between racial groups and specific emotions.

By reinscribing fantasies of Otherness that reduce marginalized groups to consumable spectacle and fuel nostalgic longing for the "primitive" (hooks 32–33), cultural texts often position marginalized lives as a backdrop for narratives centered on white subjects—in this case of Piper Chapman.

All About Piper

Michelle M. Lazar's *Marked Inclusion*

According to Lazar, any representation of diversity should remain critically aware of its own ideological standpoint rather than assuming a 'neutral' position based on abstract sameness.

Lazar's concept of *marked inclusion* (155) describes how efforts to include marginalized groups often end up emphasizing their difference, while the dominant position remains unmarked and normative. Although developed in relation to academic discourse, this concept proves equally applicable to cultural representation. *OITNB* has the potential to reproduce this dynamic by presenting women of different ages, bodies, and racial or ethnic backgrounds as a collective defined by shared oppression within the prison system. While the series includes multiple backstories and perspectives, its narrative ultimately centers on Piper Chapman, through whom *OITNB* negotiates complex issues of race, privilege, and power. As a result, the show produces *marked inclusion* or, as bell hooks sharply terms it, "the lens of white supremacy" (1), where the white subject remains the normative point of reference. By centering Piper's storyline, the series risks reducing other characters to mere context or support.

Piper Chapman functions as the narrative's primary anchor for audience identification. Keeping her as the main character for more than two seasons—roughly coinciding with the show's departure from the memoir—functions not just as a narrative choice but as a practical one. In the words of the show runner, Jenji Kohan:

> In a lot of ways Piper was my Trojan Horse. You're not going to go into a network and sell a show on really fascinating tales of black women, and Latina 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 of those other stories. But it's a hard sell to just go in and try to sell those stories initially. The girl next door, the cool blonde, is a very easy access point, and it's relatable for a lot of audiences and a lot of networks looking for a certain demographic. It's useful. (Kohan in Gross 2013)

The show creator's comment reveals that the primary goal of *OITNB* was, not surprisingly, commercial: to create a product that could be sold to networks and their target audiences. It

also reflects Bernays's principle that the product must negotiate between client interests and public desires, in this case aligning Netflix's objectives with the expectations of its viewer demographics. Piper is framed as a relatable entry point for viewers, with her WASP "girl next door" persona serving as a lens through which the audience navigates the prison world, filtering stereotypes, cultural cues, and narrative conflicts through her perspective. From a Bernaysian perspective, Piper presents the prescribed use of an authority in the field to sway public opinion in a desired direction. She experienced prison firsthand, which is presumably a rare occurrence within Netflix's audience, and moreover, her fictionalized persona serves as an accessible, emotionally resonant figure capable of appealing to the public in ways that maximize commercial viability. Her expertise is formally recognized through her role as executive consultant on 42 of the show's 91 episodes (IMDb), lending credibility to the series' portrayal of prison life. Within this context, it is crucial to examine how the narrative contributes to this alignment, especially in the way Piper's role creates a hierarchical arrangement of voices that positions her as the primary point of orientation for the other storylines.

Even when the show turns to social issues that fall outside Piper's main narrative arc, these issues are nonetheless mediated through her perspective. In two episodes (S2E6–7), as Piper applies for a furlough to visit her gravely ill grandmother, the elderly and cognitively impaired inmate Phyllis Dill repeatedly mistakes her for her own granddaughter. The series uses this moment to present Piper as exceptionally compassionate, depicting her as the only inmate who listens to Phyllis's delusions, responds with patience, and helps her cut the tough meat in the canteen (S2E7 16:52–17:30). This ultimately positions Piper as the audience's empathy anchor, shifting attention from the serious issue of neglecting elderly inmates and releasing them from prison to face imminent death under what is termed "compassionate release" (S2E7 50:29–51:30) toward the individual virtue of the white protagonist.

Next, when Piper is granted a furlough, the other inmates are furious because no one has ever received one before. Poussey remarks with biting irony, “Man, I tried for six months to get a furlough. Clearly a dead Black mom ain’t no competition for a sick, old white granny” (S2E8 42:42–42:50). As inmates condemn the situation as a ‘new Jim Crow’, suggesting that Piper receives special treatment because of her race, and some imply she secured the furlough through sexual favors with Healy, Piper delivers a mawkish speech in the canteen emphasizing her love for her grandmother (43:43–44:35). The show satirizes this racist rhetoric as Suzanne throws food into Piper’s hair after the speech, and later through Piper’s ‘accidental’, almost comic alignment with White Pride inmates (S4E5 54:13–56:20). However, this moment reflects a broader pattern throughout the series, where Piper’s white privilege is embedded within her personal narrative. By ultimately permitting her furlough, the show centers her individual story while upholding a system that renders whiteness the default, unmarked standard against which all other racial identities are compared (O’Sullivan 402).

Notably, the show here departs from the memoir, in which Kerman was not granted furlough, using Piper’s speech to illustrate how whiteness can be rationalized. As the primary audience identification point, Piper offers viewers ideological reassurance: she acknowledges racial privilege while softening its implications by presenting it as something beyond her control. Essentially, the narrative affirms Poussey’s remark that Piper’s love for her grandmother outweighs that of others for their parents, a hierarchy that in the later seasons carries over into the prioritization of her love relationship with Alex over more structurally significant subplots.

Beyond functioning as an affective anchor for the audience, Piper is repeatedly framed as the narrative’s locus of reason and competence. This framing reproduces a familiar representational logic in which whiteness is associated with rationality, creativity, and moral

authority, while her incarceration is rendered as a situational misplacement, despite having committed a more serious crime than many of the inmates around her.

Most notably, in Seasons 3 and 4, she is depicted as a capable entrepreneur who launches her own prison lingerie business, *Felonious Spunk*, demonstrating both strategic insight and the capacity to implement her ideas effectively. In Season 5, rather than being fully embedded in the collective upheaval, she maintains a separate romantic storyline and engages with the protest only to display her intellectual authority, creativity and valuable moral commentary. In Episode 6, she joins other protestors when they discover that the Governor Hutchinson attempted to bribe them into surrendering the hostages with Takis, Cheetos, and tampons, positioning herself as a moral gatekeeper who articulates why such an offer is unacceptable (32:45–33:45). In Episode 7, Piper again inserts herself into Taystee's efforts, prompting her to pursue a "constructive" course of action that results in the creation of a memorial for Poussey, implicating that every meaningful action requires Piper's instigation (06:44–09:45). Finally, during the negotiations, when the group is forced to decide whether to surrender Daya as the one who shot CO Humphrey or to preserve the riot and the promised impunity, Piper explains a classical ethical dilemma illustrated through the train experiment, once again positioning herself as the educated authority (31:00–32:20).

Throughout Season 2, Piper collaborates with journalist Andrew Yates to expose corruption at Litchfield, including Figueróa's embezzlement and the guards' misconduct (S2E7 7:30–9:45). After obtaining documentary evidence, Piper is discovered by Caputo and placed in the SHU in the penultimate episode of the season (S2E12 55:55–57:03). Nevertheless, the narrative continues to position her as exceptionally capable: she provides Caputo with the information that enables him to expose Figueróa, remove her from power, and ultimately replace her as warden (S2E13). In the same season, Piper also persuades Healy to approve a prison newsletter as a spur-of-the-moment, brilliant solution to mask her investigative activities

into the prison's malpractices (S2E6 31:30–33:05). Founding, leading, and editing *The Big House Bugle* further reinforces the series' tendency to frame her as unusually competent and resourceful, effectively giving the final voice to the white woman's perspective within the prison's complex social dynamics. Her intellectual authority is reinforced when she acts as the final arbiter in a language dispute between Lorna and Flaca (S2E7 28:40–29:45).

Symbolically, it is only after Piper's departure in Season 7 that Taystee emerges as the truly inventive problem-solver: In the final season, Taystee demonstrates initiative and resourcefulness by developing plans for financial education and reintegration support for formerly incarcerated people, securing funding and institutional backing to create meaningful pathways toward life after prison. Yet despite Taystee's agency in this case, the series' last season remains centered on Piper's love triangle with Alex and Zelda, granting them disproportionate narrative attention and emotional focus.

After her release, Piper is shown living a glamorous life in New York City. Meanwhile, Black Cindy ends up homeless, Doggett dies from an overdose, Taystee struggles with suicidal thoughts after being sentenced to life in prison, and the Latina inmates face the harsh realities of ICE detention in the final season. As Alexander explains in *The New Jim Crow*, most felons face lifelong discrimination. They often lose the right to vote, are denied public housing, face landlord discrimination, cannot get food assistance, and must reveal their convictions on nearly every job application (118). In contrast to this harsh reality, the designation of "criminal" does not appear to adhere to the real-life Piper, who benefits from her incarceration (O'Sullivan 406), nor to her fictional counterpart, who is granted "a clean slate" (1:25:35) at the conclusion of the series, being shown securing employment, pursuing an education, living independently in an apartment, and visiting Alex in prison.

This stark contrast highlights the series' neglect of Lazar's guidelines, which emphasize that representations of diversity must maintain critical awareness of their ideological

positioning. Instead, bell hooks' insight is confirmed, as marginalized characters primarily serve as background to the dominant white hegemonic storyline. Furthermore, such narrative choices illustrate Bernays's concept of managed consent, requiring audiences to accept the maintenance of dominant voices within a hierarchically framed heteroglossic narrative. Ultimately, the show legitimizes white hegemony while promoting diversity and, in exchange for this acceptance, offers a glimpse of the American Dream ideal demonstrated in Piper's after prison life. To further illustrate the heightened importance of Piper's character in the series, it is useful to juxtapose her portrayal with that of María Ruiz, whose narrative arc is marked by very different circumstances.

Engineering Characters, Ensuring Stereotypes: Piper Chapman vs. María Ruiz

Season 4 depicts a business rivalry in which María Ruiz is caught by guards following Piper's intrigues. When confronted by Piscatella, Ruiz accuses Chapman of starting the business, but he laughs it off and instead accuses Ruiz of running a gang, calling it her "family business" (S4E6 51:11–53:10). The prospect of facing three to five years added to her prison sentence provokes Ruiz, who escalates to smuggling drugs. Ironically, Ruiz, who is in prison for selling counterfeit jeans (S7E6 21:20–22:00), is here reinvented as a drug queenpin and a thug. Meanwhile, Piper and Alex, who are in prison for participating in an international drug-import, remain removed from drugs throughout the series. Beyond the possibility of interpreting Ruiz as unpredictable, volatile, or contradictory when read at a surface level, her character can be understood as engineered in a Bernays-type of manipulation. She is positioned as Piper's antagonist precisely when the narrative requires Piper to undergo a major moral trial.

Throughout the first 3 seasons, Maria Ruiz's character is depicted as a vulnerable new mother. In Season 2 she breaks down crying at the prospect of being transferred farther from her baby (E12&13), only for the show to resolve this with a sentimental reversal (S2E13 16:24–18:40). Moreover, in Season 3, Ruiz is still portrayed as nurturing mother: while helping Daya

through labor, she expresses anger and frustration that Daya considers giving her baby away (S3E11 34:20–36:25).

Then, in Season 4, her characterization takes a sharp turn. Episode 2 introduces Ruiz's Dominican drug-kingpin family background, material that functions as a clear narrative setup for her impending transformation. The show highlights that she spent her life resisting her family's criminal expectations and nationalist pride. Yet in Season 4, surrounded by a large Dominican cohort inside Litchfield, her sense of nationalist identity is amplified. Ruiz aligns herself with Blanca Flores, and by the end of episode 2, she plans a long-term gang war (S4E2 47:40; 57:20–57:55), only to slip even more into crime in Season 5 by becoming one of the leaders of the riot (S5E2 10:40–13:20). This backstory does more than provide depth: it operates as a clear narrative framing device. Much like Edward Bernays's tactic of staging events to predetermine public perception, the show foregrounds Ruiz's Dominican criminal heritage, priming the audience to see her subsequent turn toward violent leadership as inevitable. The show strips María Ruiz of her initial identity as a devoted mother, making her transformation feel more like a narrative engineered to confirm stereotypes.

Piper Chapman's trajectory, by contrast, reveals a strong bias compared to Ruiz's. Although she engages in comparably harmful actions, e.g., jeopardizing Alex's parole (S2E13), aligning herself with white-power inmates (S4E6) and orchestrating Stella's transfer to maximum security as retaliation for stolen money (S3E13 1:06:00–1:07:40), her reintegration is framed as a matter of personal growth, remorse, and emotional vulnerability, culminating in her early release from prison (S6E12). Meanwhile, Alex is shown killing the hitman Aydan, who comes after her in prison (S4E1 44:00–45:20), dismembers him with the help of Frida and other Golden Girls, and buries him in the garden (51:00–52:10). Although Alex's actions are framed as a necessary survival strategy, she ultimately let another inmate, Lolly Whitehill, take the blame (S4E11 57:08–58:42). After these developments, both Piper

and Alex return to a relatively ordinary prison routine, choosing to maintain a low profile (S4E11 11:55–12:24). Their extraordinary actions and encounters with violence do not permanently redefine their characters; instead, they are portrayed as capable of acknowledging mistakes and navigating consequences. In Season 4, Episode 9, they are shown engaging in the mundane act of craving burgers (08:28–09:25).

Overall, the show not only ignores the original reasons for Piper and Alex's incarceration, but easily recuperates them, aligning them with the good side of the moral spectrum. Meanwhile, Ruiz fulfills the predetermined role of a criminal reinforced by her Dominican heritage rather than maintaining her identity as a caring mother. By the end of the series, Maria's portrayal circles back to the maternal role emphasized earlier in the narrative: she is shown reading a storybook to her daughter through the visitation (S7E13). This trajectory underscores the steep and punitive narrative arc she had to endure to reclaim her humanity.

After Piper experiences racism, exploitation, and institutional violence at close range, she has a privilege to return to comfort and self-actualization, a transition the series frames as narrative closure. Piper emerged enriched by the experience, which aligns with bell hooks' concept of 'eating the other,' as prison operates as an exotic, transformative space from which she learns and evolves.

Other inmates, by contrast, serve primarily as colorful background figures who provide emotional depth and cultural texture to her journey, after which she seamlessly reintegrates into her former privilege and receives a second chance. While the series, like Piper, acknowledges systemic injustice, it ultimately chooses exit over confrontation, an option unavailable to most incarcerated people. For others, prison remains a harsh and unforgiving reality shaped by economic precarity and limited opportunities.

Conclusion

Following Edward Bernays's principle that persuasion works most effectively through affect and symbolic appeal rather than rational argument, *OITNB* builds its narrative on sensation and dramatic exaggeration. In this sense, any social commentary embedded in the series is secondary to its dominant logic of spectacle-driven persuasion and commercial appeal. The show stages a hypersexualized spectacle, often designed for the male gaze, featuring explicit sexual content and prominent lesbian sexual interactions. Through this overt sexual content, the series follows women-in-prison genre conventions, fulfills viewers' expectations, and reflects a postfeminist culture in which romantic love is often displaced by sex and narratives of female agency. However, it also reflects a consumerist view of sex, in which queer sexualities are rendered spectacles for narrative and visual consumption, from Nicky's compulsive eroticism to Big Boo's butch identity. The series pushes this logic to an absurd point by presenting lesbian activity as a competitive sport, reinforcing a consumerist framework in which bodies are reduced to commodities.

While the show offers moments of apparent female empowerment and self-expression, they are sexual in nature, short-lived and undermined by male authority, revealing empowerment as largely illusory. Dayanara's character appears to hold power over two guards, but this power is solely sexual in nature and not long-lasting, since she is incarcerated and they are the only ones who retain real choice. As Lazar argues, such representations neutralize feminism's political potency by transforming it into a marketable discourse that reshapes perception while leaving patriarchal power structures intact.

The series commodifies female trauma, and its handling of rape cases remains deeply unsatisfactory. In Pennsatucky's case, sexual violence by a male authority figure is shaped by a power imbalance, yet the narrative reframes the assault in ways that soften its impact and redirect focus toward romantic reconciliation. The storyline normalizes forgiveness of the

abuser and reinforces a sense of inescapability for the victim, while both the system and the perpetrator remain unaccountable.

The series treats a sadistic male guard, Pornstache as a grotesque object of ridicule, transforming abuse of power into dark comic spectacle. Rather than holding accountable, the narrative ultimately rewards him by allowing him continued institutional influence and the role of raising Daya's child, framing this outcome as a form of resolution. In parallel, the character of Fig exemplifies how women can participate in and reinforce androcentric culture through bureaucratic cynicism and humor. Together, these arcs reveal how the series trivializes sexual violence and sustains male dominance by masking it as irony, satire, or narrative closure.

Black women in *OITNB* are often desexualized, politically aware, and morally conscientious, positioned as agents of social change but ultimately expendable within the narrative; characters like Poussey and Taystee highlight both the commodification of Black suffering and the limits of agency under systemic oppression. Black Cindy embodies internalized racism and reproduces dominant narratives, while Taystee's story emphasizes structural precarity and systemic injustice. The series builds Poussey's character to heighten audience attachment, making her death a moment of maximum emotional resonance. Some portrayals of Black guards suggest potential for positive representation, yet these roles are limited and often selected primarily to fulfill white-centered 'diversity' goals.

Latina characters, in contrast, are portrayed as hypersexualized, expressive, and exotic, inheriting traits historically assigned to Black women; this redistribution of otherness frames them as objects of desire and spectacle, ultimately reinforcing reallocated racialized tropes.

The numerical representation of Latina characters within a prison context risk reinforcing their associations with criminality. Latina characters are depicted as emotionally intense, volatile, manipulative, and hypersexual, ensuring that traits like passion, aggression, and trickery are central to their representation. Aleida Díaz embodies the 'wild woman'

stereotype, presented as impulsive, exotic, and hypersexual, her behavior and relationships constructed as a spectacle of excess and primal intensity. Her partner, Ceasar, similarly embodies hypersexualized, uncontrolled masculinity, reinforcing racialized tropes while highlighting the series' reliance on familiar stereotypes for dramatic and emotional effect. Gloria Mendoza is grounded yet eroticized, combining sensuality with mystical Puerto Rican spiritual practices. Blanca Flores is portrayed as stubborn, emotionally intense, and sexually primal. Maritza Ramos is charming and cunning, her criminality and deportation framed to evoke sympathy while reinforcing current discourses that criminal immigrants. Through these portrayals, *OITNB* exemplifies bell hooks' ideas of "eating the Other" and expendable bodies: Latina women are depicted as objects of fascination, eroticism, and spectacle, granting excitement but largely preserving white-centered cultural power and commodifying racial difference.

The series repeatedly frames countries outside the U.S. as violent, unsafe, and chaotic, presenting Latin America as a space of danger and threat. This portrayal instills fear of 'others' in viewers while implicitly reinforcing a narrative of U.S. superiority, suggesting that safety, opportunity, and order exist only within American borders.

In *OITNB*, Piper Chapman's perspective serves as the central lens through which all other characters and stories are experienced, keeping her as the normative point of reference and exemplifying Lazar's concept of marked inclusion. The series emphasizes her intelligence, creativity, moral authority, compassion, and entrepreneurial skills. Marginalized characters, including Black and Latina women, primarily function as background to Piper's story, reflecting bell hooks' observation that the 'others' exists to support white-centered narratives. By comparison, Maria Ruiz's character is engineered in a Bernays-style to emphasize her Dominican heritage and fit stereotypes, while Piper and Alex are constantly privileged, occupying most of the narrative, with their crimes excused or neutralized and framed as

opportunities for personal growth. The suffering of others becomes narrative texture for Piper, functioning as a backdrop to her personal growth and romantic fulfillment.

These portrayals influence viewers' perceptions of incarcerated women, highlighting the need for more nuanced, diverse, and structurally informed representations. While *OITNB* increases numerical representation of marginalized characters, it fails to challenge entrenched ideologies. From a Bernaysian perspective, however, it succeeds in increasing mass appeal and audience engagement. The positive aspect is that the series' sensationalist appeal and widespread popularity may draw more readers to Piper Kerman's memoir, which critically examines the PIC and systemic injustice, potentially sparking curiosity and awareness among audiences. While Bernays viewed the public as passive recipients of manipulation, this outcome suggests that viewers can engage critically and seek deeper understanding. The challenge remains, however: meaningful change requires navigating the distortions and ballyhoo of popular media before audiences can fully engage with structural critiques.

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