

“Representational codes work together to encode a preferred meaning, yet at the same time to present the illusion of naturalness” (Victoria O’Donnell, “Representation and Its Audience,” p. 163).

Over the next several days, you will be asked to consider how televisual signifiers (sounds and images) mediate reality and codify representational discourses related to femininity, masculinity, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and social class. After reading assigned texts and watching specific episodes of Netflix original programming (including *Orange Is the New Black*, *Dear White People*, and *On My Block*), you should make your own arguments about these TV series’ foregrounding of gendered, ethnic, racial, and/or sexual identities. In particular, you will need to think about the nature of these shows’ representational politics, and whether the main and supporting characters within them either conform to culturally entrenched stereotypes or depart significantly from earlier images of socially disenfranchised groups (women, racial minorities, LGBTQ individuals, working class, etc.). Keep in mind these programs’ relationship with dominant ideologies (capitalism, white hegemony, patriarchy, heteronormativity, etc.). Do those characters subvert hegemonic norms within the constraints of commercial American television? Are the renderings of these characters “positive” in the sense of destabilizing traditional notions of racial and/or sexual alterity (or “otherness”)?



QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Before 10:00pm, June 26, you should post your final reading response on CANVAS, addressing the arguments put forth by the authors of your assigned readings: Brittany Farr’s “Seeing Blackness in Prison” and Maria San Filippo’s “Doing Time: Queer Temporalities.” Although Farr applauds creator Jenji Kohan’s *Orange Is the New Black* (OITNB) for carving out a space for “sympathetic portraits of incarcerated women” (a topic rarely broached in U.S. TV programs prior to the 2013 launch of this Netflix series), she takes this prison narrative to task for its less-laudable representations of *blackness*, an “overdetermined symbol” in American popular culture that bears the weight of decades of racist stereotypes related to aggression, criminality, sexuality, etc. How does Farr develop her argument, and what does she have to say about OITNB’s images of diversity within the prison population? Why are the issues of security and surveillance so central to her thesis and to Netflix’s ability to profit from the representation of socially vulnerable individuals? Do you agree with the author’s claim that OITNB presents a “mostly sanitized view of life in prison”? By playing prison violence for “laughs,” does this TV series do injustice to the many real-life women — particularly women of color — who suffer inhumane conditions within a profit-driven prison industrial complex?

In your response, be sure to provide specific examples from your recent viewing of *Orange Is the New Black*, and explain how flashbacks function in the program. Besides Piper Chapman, the show’s main character (who is a kind of “Trojan Horse” device), which of the other inmates at the fictional Litchfield Federal Penitentiary did you find most compelling as figures of “difference”? What does San Filippo say about the queer reception of the program (among LGBTQ viewers), and does OITNB’s “conflation of criminality with lesbianism” seem problematic to you? What lays behind Piper’s reluctance to name herself as “bisexual,” according to the author?

NOTE: You do not need to answer ALL of these questions, but you should answer MANY of them in a thoughtful, sophisticated way. This is, after all, your final READING RESPONSE and it should be the one that BEST REPRESENTS your intelligence and critical objectivity as both a reader and a spectator.