

THE BLINDSPOT

Asian Misrepresentation in Orange Is The New Black

CLARE KIM

AS OUR NATION AND SOCIETY ATTEMPT TO INTRODUCE THE NOTION OF POST-RACIALITY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY, IT BECOMES CLEAR THAT THIS IDEALISTIC VIEW OF RACE RELATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES CAN ONLY BE SEEN AS VALID WHEN WHITENESS IS CONSIDERED TO BE “NORMAL” OR “NEUTRAL.” THIS PRIORITIZATION OF WHITENESS CAN BE EASILY IDENTIFIED THROUGHOUT POPULAR CULTURE, ESPECIALLY WITH THE TENDENCY OF MAINSTREAM FILM AND TELEVISION TO WHITEWASH CASTS. HOWEVER, ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT SHOWS OF THE CURRENT AGE, *ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACK (OITNB)*, HAS A CAST THAT CHALLENGES THE BLINDLY ACCEPTED HEGEMONIC STANDARDS BY BRINGING MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES TO THE CENTER OF ATTENTION. WHILE IT SHATTERS MANY PRECONCEIVED STEREOTYPES DEALING WITH RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER THROUGH ITS DIVERSE ARRAY OF CHARACTERS, THE SHOW’S HANDLING OF ITS ASIAN CHARACTERS SEEMS ONLY TO PERPETUATE RACIST TROPES. THIS ESSAY EXAMINES WHY WE HAVE DEVELOPED A BLINDSPOT FOR ASIANS WHEN DEALING WITH RACE AND RACE RELATIONS BY USING *OITNB* AS A QUINTESSENTIAL MICROCOSM OF SOCIETY AT LARGE.

Since the show's release in 2013, *Orange Is the New Black* (*OITNB*) has become one of the most popular television series of the twenty-first century. Receiving countless awards and nominations, as well as being Netflix's most watched series, the show plays a major role in shaping the ideologies perpetuated by mainstream media today. It is unprecedented and downright groundbreaking for such a popular series to be comprised of an all female cast that also shows rich intersectional diversity in terms of race and sexuality. By featuring a cast that challenges the normal hegemonic idea of whiteness and heterosexuality, *OITNB* deconstructs dominant ideologies regarding race and sexuality that have become normalized by society and internalized by individuals. Although the show initially begins by following the narrative of a white upper-class protagonist, Piper Chapman, she soon disappears into the peripherals of the plotline as the rest of the racially diverse cast develops into interesting and multidimensional characters, rather than the familiar position of token minorities. With an extremely diverse cast the show plays an influential role in bringing the marginalized groups of society into the spotlight, and then deconstructing the oppressive stereotypes that society has normalized. *OITNB*, however, is problematic in the way that it reinforces racist ideologies through its poor representations of Asian Americans.

Upon Piper's arrival at Litchfield, a minimum-security women's prison, the viewers have no choice but to identify with her because she is the only person to which we have been exposed to. Since all of the inmates are introduced to us through Piper's perspective, we perceive them as she would—with the racial sightlines of a privileged and wealthy white woman. According to Guterl in *Seeing Race in Modern America*, racial sightlines are “a persistent and

THE ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACK LOGO (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

prescribed reading of an image sustained by the history of racism and race relations.”¹ Although the other inmates seem to reinforce these racial sightlines, the viewers' initial perceptions are challenged and deconstructed as the show progresses, and the characters are further developed into complex, multidimensional individuals.

A quintessential example of the show's shattering of preconceived notions of race and racial stereotypes is seen through Black Cindy, played by actress Adrienne Moore. Even her nickname, “Black Cindy,” marks her as an other. Another inmate named Cindy was already at the prison, so “Black Cindy” received her nickname—but why wasn't the other Cindy labeled “White Cindy” instead? As for her personality, Black Cindy is portrayed as a caricature-like embodiment of many of the stereotypes that society holds about black women. She is originally portrayed as a stereotypical black ghetto girl through her very loud personality, tough exterior, and seemingly lower class and uneducated background. Even when we learn about her background story as a young struggling mother, it does not do much to challenge her role as an embodiment of dangerous black stereotypes.

It is not until Season Three when Black Cindy begins her conversion to Judaism and undergoes a religious enlightenment that breaks her out of the conventional role that has bound her for the preceding seasons. Although her original incentive to convert was simply to be able to get the more appetizing kosher meals from the cafeteria, she undergoes an authentic religious enlightenment somewhere in the process. This unexpected turn of event allows us to empathize with Cindy and finally look past her character as simply a caricature. For the first time, the tough girl façade that Cindy has been upholding by masking her emotions with witty humor is dismantled as she gives an emotionally raw and tearful speech in the season Three finale. In that episode, “Trust No Bitch,” she explains how Judaism helped her find a purpose in life, which dramatically transforms Cindy from a stereotype into a complex human being.

In addition to phenomenally deconstructing popular stereotypes regarding African Americans, *OITNB* does the same for the Latina population. By featuring eight different leading Latina roles, the series depicts a refreshingly complex spectrum of Latina women. It is rare and unparalleled for a popular television show to feature more than one Latina that is not a stereotypical trope of the commonly held view of Latina women as hypersexual and provoca-

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tive. Many shows such as *Modern Family* feature one Latina woman that directly plays into the hypersexual stereotype, reinforcing “the presumed ethnological texture of the single body with the supposed character of an entire race.”² Although almost every popular television series or movie features a cast made mostly of multidimensional white characters and their complex relationships with each other, this is seldom done with minority groups, especially Latinas. This lack of representation in mainstream media may explain why racial stereotypes follow “a story of persistence and consistency, of less change over time than we might expect or hope for.”³ However, by having multiple developed Latina characters, with their own complex backstory and personal narrative, *OITNB* does not allow the burden of representation to fall on a single woman. For example, one of the Latina inmates, Flaca, perfectly addresses the importance of Latina diversity while flipping through an underwear catalog. When another inmate comments on how none of the models seem to be Latina, Flaca responds, “If you’re talking about Latinas, there’s like twenty different countries that all look different. See this blond chick? She could be Latina. We just don’t know.”⁴ This line shatters the misconceptions of Latina women as one monolithic ideal, as well as showing off the agency and intelligence that Flaca, as a Latina character, asserts in this situation.

Although the show is inclusive and conscientious of highlighting many marginalized groups, including African Americans, Latinas, lesbians, and trans people, it fails to do so in its poor representation of its two Asian characters, Chang and Soso. Because Soso does not join the show until season 2, Chang was the only Asian character for the entirety of the first season. This lack of Asian representation is not an isolated problem that applies just to *OITNB*, but it is something that pervades the media. A study done at the University of Southern California examined the top 100 grossing movies of 2013 and found that only 4.4% of speaking characters were Asian.⁵ This underrepresentation is extremely detrimental because when individuals of a marginalized group do not see themselves represented in the media, it reinforces the notion that they do not matter. For example, a study published by Communication

Research examined the effects that underrepresentation has on children and found that “television exposure predicted a decrease in self-esteem for white and black girls and black boys, and an increase in self-esteem among white boys.”⁶

In the rare occasions when Asians are actually represented, they are often given tokenized and stereotypical roles. Chang, the single token Asian character for the first season of the show, reinforces the notion of Asians as perpetual foreigners. She hardly speaks and when she does, it is in a very thick accent. Chang is inarguably the show’s most underdeveloped character—we know nothing about her until halfway through Season Three in an episode titled “Ching Chong Chang.” Even the title of the episode is grossly racist, drawing upon a commonly used pejorative to mock the Chinese language, culture, and the people themselves. When I first saw the title, I gave it the benefit of the doubt in the hopes that the episode would reference it and challenge the racist ideologies that underlie it. Unfortunately, it seems to be just another joke made at the expense of Asians, which is seen frequently throughout the show.

Asians are often at the receiving of racist jokes, both in television and real life. Although society as a whole is gradually becoming more conscientious and aware of modern day racism, it seems that it has developed a blind spot towards Asians. Perhaps the myth of the model minority has instilled the ideology that Asians are highly successful and their degree of socioeconomic achievements somehow negates any other forms of oppression. This suggests the notion that Asians are not a marginalized group in many aspects, so racism towards Asians is neither offensive nor problematic. This is perpetuated in *OITNB* in many ways, but the most striking and blatant occurrence was in an episode from Season Three. In the electric shop, Piper asks Luschek, the electrical manager, if he ever worries about leaving the computers with the inmates, to which he responds, “Maybe if any of you were technically savvy. Or Asian. But, uh, we screen for that.”⁷ Nicky, one of the other inmates, then turns to Piper and pulls her eyes back to make them squinty. This scene served no

meaningful purpose to the plot, and was arguably added simply to insult and stereotype Asians. Even worse, neither Chang nor Soso were present in the scene to respond or defend themselves, thus denying them a voice in this reinforcement of racial prejudice.⁸

In some aspects, Soso's character initially seems to challenge the racism towards Asians that had been embodied and perpetuated through Chang throughout the first season, in that she is more multidimensional and complex than Chang's wallflower role. Her ethnic ambiguity, being Scottish and Japanese, combined with her progressive views, educated background, and very outspoken personality allow her to embody a matrix of complexities rather than remaining as a stagnant background role. However, she is quickly marginalized upon arriving at Litchfield. This process of othering begins in Soso's very first scene when she introduces herself to the other inmates. As soon as Soso says her name, one of the inmates, Lorna, instinctually laughs and says "No, no, no, I said what's your name?"⁹ This short and seemingly insignificant exchange lasts for about ten seconds, but is an extremely harmful microaggression that implies that names that are non European or Anglican are improper and up for ridicule. Another similar instance occurs later on in the same episode when Piper tells Soso that she cannot say her "name with a straight face."¹⁰ The subtlety of this bigoted and racist behavior goes easily unnoticed, normalizing and reinforcing the racist hegemonic ideas.

OITNB harmfully reinforces stereotypes about Asians through the sexual dimensions of both Chang and Soso's characters. According to a research study done at the University of Michigan, "the Asian or Asian American male is perhaps best known for his absence in the colonizer's sexual hierarchy" which "strikes a sharp contrast to the colonizer's perception of the Asian female as an embodiment of excessive sexuality."¹¹ Chang's physicality is particularly masculine, emphasized by her short spiky hair and lack of makeup. This masculine gendering and her Asian background intersect as she is depicted as asexual, playing off of the commonly held view of Asian men as desexualized. Chang also seems to evoke the stereotype of "the Asian male as sexually impotent voyeur or pervert" as she takes the role of the scorekeeper for two inmates'—Big Boo and Nicky—competition in sexual pursuits.¹² Because she seems to lack any of her own sexual agency, she does not participate in the game, but clearly derives some sort of pleasure in overseeing it.

In stark juxtaposition, Soso's character embodies the other end of the spectrum of representations of Asian sexuality as Big Boo and Nicky quickly fetish her and compete to see who can have sex with her first in their "Bang-Off." Big Boo objectifies Soso as she labels her as "the hot one of the Asian persuasion," reinforcing the often fetishized portrayals of Asian women in the media.¹³ This hyper-sexualized depiction of Asian women upholds the phenomenon of what is often referred to as "yellow fever", which is largely problematic in that "it doesn't see [Asian] women as fully-formed individuals, but as the living embodiment of offensive stereotypes."¹⁴ Big Boo becomes very predatory in her pursuit of Soso, who is clearly exhibits her discomfort when around Big Boo. In this way, *OITNB* fails to challenge the recurring trend in television and film of either desexualizing or fetishizing Asians.

OITNB's very poor representation of Asians on-screen translates into the promotional marketing of the show as well. Not a single promotional photo of the very diverse cast includes either Chang or Soso. It would be understandable if they were left out of the group photo for season 1 as Chang is far from being a developed character and Soso was not even at Litchfield yet, but neither of the subsequent seasons' promotional photos include them. In one of the chapters of *Seeing Race in Modern America* titled "Platoon Harmonics," Guterl analyzes the importance and functionalities of the multi-racial nature of the mixed platoon. A group's racial diversity is emphasized as the individuals are "arranged in complementary racial sequence" where "every racial part has a purpose."¹⁵ The image of the platoon has become so familiar and expected that it is "possible to see any unmixed pairings as backward and even racist."¹⁶ If the whole purpose of a platoon is to highlight racial inclusivity and diversity, then it is oddly contradictory and racist for *OITNB* to exclude both of its Asian cast members.

When analyzed from a contemporary racial context, *Orange Is the New Black* acts as a microcosm for society at large. Recent events, such as the immeasurable accounts of police brutality rooted in the racial profiling of African Americans as dangerous criminals, have helped start a much needed conversation about race, as well as create a more knowledgeable and racially conscientious society. Activist movements such as Black Lives Matter have especially helped bring issues like deeply rooted institutional and systemic racism to the forefront of society, while progressively paving a path towards eradicating racism by fostering a culture of knowledge. However, society seems to

have developed a blind spot for Asians and Asian Americans, as seen in *OITNB*. Amazingly enough, the show both underrepresents and misrepresents the Asian characters, embodying two very different but equally insidious stereotypes. This ignorance is reflected in the media as well. In *Rolling Stone's* list, "25 Best TV Shows of 2015," the writer mixes up the two Asian characters, accidentally referring to Soso as Chang. A prominent blog, *Angry Asian Man*, highlights how absurd it is that someone actually confused Lori Tan Chinn, a Chinese American actress in her sixties, and Kimoko Glenn, a multiracial Japanese American in her twenties by writing, "I guess people can handle one Asian on a TV show...but if you put two, there will be confusion."¹⁷ Although *OITNB* phenomenally shatters many antiquated stereotypes about race, gender, and sexuality, it regresses when dealing with Asians and Asian Americans.

ENDNOTES

1. Guterll, *Seeing Race in Modern America*, 5.
2. Guterll, *Seeing Race in Modern America*, 36.
3. Guterll, *Seeing Race in Modern America*, 3.
4. *Orange Is the New Black*, "Ching Chong Chang," 2015.
5. Smith, Choueiti, and Pieper, "Race/Ethnicity in 600 Popular Films: Examining On Screen Portrayals and Behind the Camera Diversity," 2015, 5.
6. Lee, "Study Examines Television, Diversity, and Self-esteem," 2015.
7. *Orange Is the New Black*, "Empathy Is a Boner Killer," 2015.
8. Builder, "How 'Orange Is The New Black' Fails Its Asian Characters," 2015.
9. *Orange Is the New Black*, "Hugs Can Be Deceiving," 2014.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Kee, "(Re)sexualizing the Desexualized Asian Male in the Works of Ken Chu and Michael Joo," 2015.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Orange Is the New Black*, "A Whole Other Hole," 2014.
14. Matthews, "Here's What 'Yellow Fever' Really Means," 2014.
15. Guterll, *Seeing Race in Modern America*, 106-7.
16. Guterll, *Seeing Race in Modern America*, 123.
17. Yu, "All (two) Asians Look Alike on 'Orange Is The New Black?'" 2015.

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