Connecticut College American Studies Senior Seminar
“Globalization and American Culture Since 1945” Book Reviews

Author: Piper Kerman
Title: *Orange is the New Black*
Publisher: Spiegel & Grau, 2011
Reviewed by: Catherine Campbell

My bet is that you, like millions of others around the world, are a fan of Netflix’s new hit series *Orange is the New Black*. If this is the case, and even if it is not, I suggest you head out and pick up a copy of Piper Kerman’s memoir *Orange is the New Black*, which loosely inspired the television series. I say loosely because although the sexualized and violent plot of the show certainly makes for good TV, those who have read Piper Kerman’s enlightening chronicle will, unfortunately, struggle to see her story in the namesake television series.

As Piper Kerman explained in an interview with NPR, “The Netflix series is an adaptation… there are moments [from the book] that leap off the screen… but there are other moments of the show which are tremendous liberties and pure fiction.” Certainly some names and events remain the same from page to screen, but what is lost in translation is something much greater than basic plot points. What a shame too, for in distancing itself from Piper Kerman’s narrative, the show counteracts the point of her memoir: to break down the common misconceptions of prisoners and the prison system.

In writing her memoir, Kerman hoped to provide a “much more complete and complex picture about who is in the prison, why they’re there, and what happens within it” (319). The story of her own incarceration, as well as those of the women she meets while “on the inside,” were meant to help break apart the popular conceptions and prevailing narrative about prison that exists in America (318). Despite what popular
television shows, movies, books, and even government propaganda have led us to believe, Piper Kerman shows us that prisons are not the dens of violence, sex, and racism that popular culture depicts. As she points out, the “Prison [system] is a huge government entity that affects millions of Americans, and if the people who are most affected don’t have a voice” (319). Thus, her memoir took the prison narrative out of the hands of the media, and provided a voice to the prisoners who experienced the system first hand. How terrible is it then that Netflix’s adaptation of her memoir has only served to reinforce many of the very stereotypes that Kerman and her story intended to break down?

Advocates for the show will certainly point out its strengths and the many ways the show has broken certain boundaries, particularly among the LGBTQ community, who have praised the show for its open and unapologetic representation of lesbian couples as well as its representation of a transgender inmate on the show. These strides certainly cannot and should not go unnoticed. However, the show’s many representations of racial discrimination, sex and violence within the prison are problematic to say the least. Despite holding very little prominence in Kerman’s memoir, these three subjects consume the television show. Knowing from the opening titles that the show is based on a true story, viewers of the television show will likely take the show’s portrayals of prisons as truth and continue to see female prisoners as the violent, crazy, racist, lesbian stereotype that Piper Kerman was hoping to destroy.

So this holiday season, treat yourself and your loved ones to a good book and a television marathon, followed by a analytical conversation about whether the show aids or hinders Piper Kerman’s ultimate goal. Do as any good American Studies alumnus would, and question whether the show is breaking down barriers or building them up.