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## All in the (Prison) Family: Genre Mixing and Queer Representation

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# All in the (Prison) Family

## *Genre Mixing and Queer Representation*

KYRA HUNTING

In the last episode of the third season of *Orange Is the New Black* (*OITNB*) Piper's brother, upon seeing her new tattoo, remarks, "Your prison mistress gave you a prison tat. You are turning into a trope" (S: 3 E: 13). Initially, *OITNB* appears to contain some of the oldest tropes of lesbian representation drawn from the "women-in-prison" genre, tropes that have often been pressed into homophobic or exploitative service (Fratini 2008; Shai 2013). However, *OITNB* reimagines these tropes in novel ways, drawing out the queer, feminist, and revolutionary possibilities present in earlier "exploitation" texts identified by scholars (Mayne 2000). It achieves this by building on the more feminist evolution of the women-in-prison genre, seen in *Bad Girls*, while also departing from key genre elements, taking up instead tropes and thematics from an entirely different set of texts that belong to an emerging genre I call the "Lesbian Family Program." Through the combining of key genre elements from the women-in-prison genre with influences from the Lesbian Family Program, *OITNB* is able to expand on the queer elements of the women-in-prison genre and more substantively fulfill its potential for "homonormative" (Herman 2003) representation. Moreover, it illustrates the way in which examining the potential for genre mixing (Mittel 2004) can reveal genre's potential to impact the ideological and representational possibilities of television texts.

In order to identify the patterns among the texts that provide *OITNB*'s genre influences, I compare three women-in-prison dramas, *Prisoner: Cell Block H* (Australia, 1979–1986), *Bad Girls* (UK, 1999–2006) and *Wentworth* (Australia, 2013–), and four "lesbian family programs," *The L-Word* (U.S., 2004–2009), *Sugar Rush* (2005–2006), *Exes & Ohs* (U.S./Canada, 2007, 2009) and *Lip Service* (UK, 2010–2012). Using content analysis, this study tracks

lesbian representations and genre attributes, and uses textual analysis to assess the larger narrative and formal dimensions of each series. These series were drawn from four countries to provide a sufficient number of relevant series to look for patterns and to place *OITNB* in a global context, addressing the critique that analysis of lesbian representation has frequently been U.S.-centric (Beirne 2007, 7).

### Television Context

The inclusion of non-U.S. series in this analysis is also important because of the history of the women-in-prison narrative in which *OITNB* can be situated. *OITNB* is often framed as groundbreaking in the U.S., and it does constitute the first sustained fictional representation of women-in-prison on U.S. television. However, it follows significant women-in-prison series in the U.K. and Australia. The women-in-prison genre on Anglophone television dates to the 1970s with U.K.'s *Within these Walls* (1974–1978), focused on prison staff, and the Australian *Prisoner: Cell Block H* (1979–1986). *Prisoner* can be considered a forerunner to the *OITNB* for its focus on the prisoners' lives both in and outside of the prison and the limited, and often offensive, depiction of lesbian characters. The U.K.'s *Bad Girls* premiered twenty years later in 1999, marking the first television iteration of the genre to place a lesbian character and relationship centrally and positively in the narrative. *OITNB* marks a continuation and revival of the genre alongside Australia's *Wentworth* (2013–), released two months prior to *OITNB*, a modern reworking of *Prisoner*.

While the earliest television women-in-prison dramas were established overseas, America provided the earliest entry into the lesbian family program "proto-genre": the *L-Word* (2004); the first series where the bulk of the main characters were lesbians and where relationships between gay women were central to the plot. The centralizing of lesbian characters and communities continued with *Sugar Rush* (U.K., 2005–2006), following a fifteen year old's tempestuous and lustful relationship with her best friend; *Exes & Ohs* (U.S./Canada, 2007, 2009), and *Lip Service* (U.K., 2010–2012), both about a group of friends pursuing love, lust, and careers. While the stylish homes, bars, and offices of these series may seem far removed from the cells, yard, and cafeteria of Litchfield Penitentiary, the way in which these series construct women's communities, friendships, and romantic relationships are important for understanding *OITNB*.

Both of these genres have been significant touchstones for queer representations (Beirne 2009, 26) and queer audiences (Pratt 2007, 143; Millbank 2004, 177), and *OITNB* shares distinct features of both genres, drawing and departing from each in ways that shape how *OITNB* depicts women at the

margins of society. Criminal justice scholar Dawn Cecil, in "Looking Beyond Caged Heat" (2007), criminal justice scholar Dawn Cecil argues that "the media images about women-in-prison are an important source of storytelling and information" because they are rare and most viewers have such little personal knowledge of the experience of women's prisoners (304). A similar case has been made for the significance of gay and lesbian representations, which often have to stand in for personal experience with gay and lesbian individuals (Gross 2001). *OITNB*, with its broad diversity of central lesbian characters in a prison context, thus takes on a double burden of representation. It succeeds, in large part, due to its status as a generically doubled text drawing on ideologies and tropes from both the women-in-prison drama and lesbian family program to aptly depict both a fictionalized prison experience and the lives of lesbian women.

## Genre

*OITNB* is a dual-generic text, belonging simultaneously to the women-in-prison genre and what I am terming the lesbian family program "proto-genre." I use "proto-genre" here to refer to an emerging cluster of texts that share a number of thematic and formal elements and are discursively linked but for which there is not yet a sufficient number of texts to constitute a genre. The generic definition of *OITNB* has been particularly fraught, leading to debate even at the most basic level; exemplified by the conflict over *OITNB*'s genre designation at the Emmys where it competed as a comedy in 2014 and was ruled a drama the following year (Andreeva 2015). In the contention of Netflix Chief Content Officer Ted Saranos that the series "always defied genre" (Andreeva 2015), we see an emphasis on the instability of *OITNB*'s genre designation whose comedic, dramatic and sexual and political elements shift and mingle. While genres may not be stable or inevitable, this does not make them insignificant. Rather, the textual norms, discursive frames, and reception and production practices surrounding a genre can be significant to the ideological dimensions and cultural circulation of the texts.

The reception and production contexts of the women-in-prison and lesbian family genres share important features. The prison genre has been considered significant and problematic for queer viewers and queer representation (Russo 1987), for featuring both "unparalleled queer eroticism and rampant homophobia" (Wlordaz 2005, 70). Contemporary iterations of the genre have garnered significant lesbian fan followings (Millbank 2004) and lesbian family programs have also been touchstones for extensive LGBT fandoms (Pratt 2007, 143). *OITNB* follows in this tradition—garnering particularly close coverage by the lesbian pop culture website AfterEllen.

These series also share the presence of a female creator. Every women-in-prison series following *Prisoner* has a female creator—*Women in Prison* (Katherine Green), *Bad Girls* (Maureen Chadwick and Anna McManus), *Wentworth* (Laura Radulvich)—as do most lesbian family programs—*The L Word* (Ilene Chaiken), *Sugar Rush* (Katie Baxendale), *Exes and Ohs* (Michelle Paradise), and *Lip Service* (Harriet Braun). *OITNB*'s Jenji Kohan follows this tradition. This is particularly notable given the relative paucity of female creators, with only 20 percent of all television series of any genre created by women in 2013 (Lauzen 2014, 2). This production context is significant because it suggests that both of these genres are currently spurred by women's voices, and arguably some of the evolutions in the representation of women-in-prison dramas can be attributed to this change.

While women-in-prison and lesbian family programs share attributes, each genre also has distinct traits. Ann Ciasullo (2008) lays out the standard features associated with the women-in-prison narrative including key character types (the naïve protagonist roped into a crime, the lascivious and sadistic guard, aggressive prison lesbian, benevolent male figure) and stock narrative features (shower scenes, catfights, a minor character's death, and often the protagonist's release to reunite with a man) (197). The lesbian family program's core features generally include the following: a group of lesbians including a promiscuous character, a young or emerging lesbian, a stable couple building a family, and a focus on romantic relationships, friendships between queer women, and familial dynamics. This proto-genre often also includes the inclusion of sex scenes, a playful engagement with sex toys and performance, depictions of homophobia, and politicized female communities.

*OITNB* highlights key features that the two genres share: a strong focus on the lives of women and a close homo-social environment (Pratt 2007, 139). It also takes and eschews elements from both genres in ways that are ideologically significant. For example, the series displaces the features of the sadistic or lascivious prison matron onto male guards and depict male officers who appear to be a "savior" as revealing themselves to be weak or destructive. Most significantly, *OITNB* stands alone amongst women-in-prison series in that it does not feature a single sexually coercive or violent lesbian character. While Big Boo and Nicky can at first appear to fill this role by being sexually "aggressive," pursuing sex voraciously and even competitively, they differ from this traditional predatory "prison lesbian" in crucial ways; neither woman uses the threat of violence to obtain sex, they do not substantially pursue women who are uninterested in homosexual sex, and they do not pair physical intimidation with their advances, avoiding linking sex with terror in prison. Conversely, the series incorporates features from the lesbian family program like regular sex scenes, using familial language (family, mom, daughter) to

describe friends, and a diversity of lesbian characters with different attitudes to relationships and sex.

Each of these shifts are ideologically significant. By erasing the cruel female prison guard and the male savior while increasing the presence of familial language, the value of female community is intensified. Disassociating lesbian characters from coercive sex and including consensual sex scenes creates a more positive image of female sexuality. The prison setting allow *OITNB* to address issues of race and class diversity and power that lesbian family programs often lack (Pratt 2007). What becomes apparent here is the way in which *OITNB*'s incorporation of features from both genres allows it to address gaps and ideological problems present in the women-in-prison narrative.

The place of the women-in-prison narrative in the queer canon is a complicated one. It provides some of the earliest prolonged images of lesbian characters (Beirne 2007, 3) and the closed homo-social environment of the prison provides a context for both queer subtext and for lesbian characters. However, these texts were often structured and harnessed for male titillation and the image of the "prison lesbian" as masculine, violent, and sexually aggressive reinforced negative stereotypes. Nonetheless, according to media scholar Andy Medhurst (2009) these texts were embraced by queer audiences who found opportunities for complexity and camp within them in their reception practice and fan engagement (54, 84). For example, Glyn Davis and Gary Needham (2009) note that the theme song of *Prisoner* was remixed and played and in queer clubs and the stars appeared in LGBT venues (84). Despite these limitations, the stock elements of the women-in-prison genre: the closed women's community, absence of men, prison lesbian, and secret relationships provided the raw material for series like *Bad Girls* and *OITNB* to rework the genre in more feminist directions.

### *Homonormativity in OITNB*

These two genres share an investment in tight homosocial communities. While some scholars have critiqued *The L-Word* for its focus on friendships exclusively between lesbians and bisexuals (Lee and Meyer 2007, 235) for others, the depiction of a distinct lesbian community was not only part of its representational value, but facilitated the building of community around it and similar series (Peters 2011, 201; Pratt 2007, 139–140). Both genres allow for a deeper engagement with the challenges of women and the bonds, both platonic and sexual, that they share because of closed homo-social communities, whether chosen and structurally enforced.

This homo-sociality of these series become an important bridge to what Didi Herman (2003) identifies as the homonormative potential of the women-

in-prison series. Herman argues that *Bad Girls* is a homonormative text, similar to series like *Queer as Folk* in its construction of “lesbian and gay sexuality” as “both unremarkable and, potentially, desirable” (143) and notes five primary ways “in which *BG*’s lesbian lens is highlighted: “diversity of representation, sexual agency, the portrayal of an erotically-charged love story with a happy ending, an insider commonsense, and the representation of family” (148). Problematically, Herman ignores or dismisses some of *Bad Girls* limitations in this respect, in particular the extent to which lesbian relationships are largely sexless either by circumstance (Nikki’s girlfriend is a prison official) or in practice (another pair, Denny and Shaz, are never shown having sex). *Wentworth* has similar problems, intensified by the fact that the most significant lesbian character in the the series is depicted as violent and manipulative. While imperfectly enacted in *Bad Girls*, the concept of homonormativity is significant to understanding the way in which a text’s structures and thematics can explore lesbian relationships as central and normalized. Homonormativity can also be applied as a salient concept for understanding the lesbian family program, where lesbian characters take primacy and have both sexual and romantic agency.

*OITNB* builds on the potential observed in *Bad Girls* for a homonormative text, embracing not only the possibility of lesbian relationships and supportive homosocial relationships, but placing them as the driving source of the series. At the most surface level, *OITNB* is marked as a homonormative text at its outset as viewers are invited to enter the world of Litchfield through the character of Piper. At first blush Piper appears to be the archetypal sweet, vulnerable, heterosexual girl who was implicated in a crime not of her own design (Ciasullo 2008, 197) but quickly it becomes clear that Piper is neither sweet or heterosexual, a point driven home in the first episode by the depiction in flashback of sex with her girlfriend at the time, Alex (1.1). While we (literally) enter the prison through heterosexual characters who are, or become, mothers in *Wentworth* and *Bad Girls*, we are explicitly offered a bisexual character as our first point of identification in *OITNB*. Furthermore, the first sex scene of the series that is depicted as satisfying is a same-sex one. Piper previously initiates sex in the pilot with her fiancé Larry, but she stops to cry and describes it unappealingly as “spank bank material” (1.1). As a result we are offered a bisexual woman as not only our key identificatory subject but also as a desiring and desirable subject. It is normal for lesbian family programs to focus initially on a lesbian or bisexual woman’s perspective, often emphasized through voice over (*Sugar Rush*, *Exes and Ohs*), and most also feature a sex scene in their first episode; however, both features are unusual for a women-in-prison drama.

Piper also plays a significant role in suggesting that prison is not only a place that includes lesbian inhabitants and relationships, a feature of *Bad*



*Girls* and *Wentworth*, but rather that the closed homo-social dynamic allows for the clearer discovery and evolution of lesbian identity and behavior outside of the norms of femininity. In Season 1 Piper confesses to a young visitor from Scared Straight, "I'm scared that I'm not myself in here and I'm scared that I am" (1.10). Here Piper suggests prison functions similarly to the L.A. queer scene in *The L-Word*, a space and community that allows for a character who has adhered to traditional femininity and sexuality (Jenny in *The L-Word*) to explore the more complicated truth of their identities.

Piper is just one way in which *OITNB* expands and deepens the homo-normative possibilities of the prison genre. For the remainder of this essay I will consider the key ways in which *OITNB* functions in line with Herman's concept of the homonormative text (2003) and how its combination of genre elements from the women-in-prison and lesbian family programs facilitates its unique representation of queer women and homosocial relationships.

## *Diversity of Representation*

One of the crucial elements for homonormative lesbian representation is to provide a diversity of representations. In earlier periods of lesbian representation, lesbian characters frequently appeared as "token" characters that served the evolution of heterosexual characters and their narratives (Becker 2006, Dow 2001, 131, Lee and Meyer 2007, 236–237). These images ranged from lesbian characters appearing as the perpetrators of violent crimes on crime dramas dating back to *The Asphalt Jungle*'s "The Sniper" (1961) and continuing in present day crime dramas like *Law & Order: SVU* to the more sympathetic coming out of a number of family members (*All in the Family*, *Mad About You*), exes (*Friends*, *Chicago Hope*) and friends (*Roseanne*, *Designing Women*, *The Golden Girls*, 90210). As a result, a deeper and more complex representation of lesbianism demands not only a central lesbian or bisexual character, but a multiplicity of LGBT characters. This is an area in which *OITNB* succeeds particularly well. Over the course of their first three seasons *Bad Girls* and *Wentworth* have six or fewer significant characters that are depicted as lesbian or bisexual, with some of these characters primarily interested in men. *OITNB*, on the other hand, features eleven lesbian and bisexual characters with a twelfth character, Morello, dis-identifying as lesbian but engaging in same-sex sex. This number is rivaled only by *The L-Word* which features at least 20 narratively significant recurring lesbian characters in the first three seasons. That *OITNB* includes as many or more lesbian characters than the bulk of lesbian family programs is significant because it serves to normalize lesbianism, a point that is underscored by the fact that the majority of the young white inmates in the series are depicted as lesbian or bisexual.

The remaining white characters are mostly either sympathetic but much older, or part of a group of young but unsympathetic white meth-addicts led by the initially intensely homophobic Pennsatucky, both groups are desexualized. By depicting lesbian characters as numerous and spread throughout the different racially divided subgroups in the prison, *OITNB* presents a variety of lesbian experiences and “types.” *The L-Word* has been critiqued for the privileging of whiteness, middle/upper class uniformity, and femme-performance in its depiction (Douglas 2007; Pratt 2007), a critique that is somewhat addressed as its ensemble cast grew. The large number of lesbian characters in *OITNB* help to diversify its representation, with characters ranging from the self-identified butch Boo to the eye liner-donning femme Alex. There are lesbian characters of every race on the series, except for Latina women; and while the lesbian characters tend to come from more upper or middle class backgrounds than the bulk of the prisoners, class diversity is depicted. The prison context of the series facilitates this in a way that is somewhat difficult in lesbian family programs, because the structure of prison affords a logical context for women from extremely different backgrounds to meet one another.

This multiplicity is impacted by intersectionality in *OITNB* where lesbian characters are often separated from one another through the prison’s social structure that groups inmates by age and race. This is particularly significant because it allows the series to simultaneously provide images of lesbian community without the implication that sexuality alone is sufficient to bond people. This presents a challenge for many series. Lesbian family programs like *The L-Word* have been critiqued for their focus on a nearly exclusively lesbian community that does not provide many images of interactions with heterosexuals (Lee and Meyer 2007, 24) while *Bad Girls* has been lauded for having its lesbian inmates exist in non-intersecting social spheres (Herman 2003, 149). However, elsewhere the extent to which lesbian characters traditionally have not existed as part of a lesbian community, true of *Wentworth* and *Bad Girls*, has long been a critique of lesbian representation (Dow 2001, 131). *OITNB* manages to leverage its groups of lesbian characters to enact both dynamics. Piper initially finds her place in a group of primarily lesbian and bisexual women in her white dorm, while simultaneously having nothing but dislike for Soso and extremely little to do with Poussey, an African American lesbian whose best friend is the heterosexual Taystee and who has little patience for queer Suzanne. In this way, *OITNB* is able to combine the size of their lesbian ensemble, consistent with lesbian family programs, with the unique social dynamic of prison to achieve both images of lesbian community and a rejection of the “heteronormative assumption that all lesbians have some connection” (Herman 2003, 149).

This diversity is significant because it allows *OITNB* to avoid the idealized “respectable” lesbian and the stereotypically dangerous “prison lesbian”

extremes that emerge in other women-in-prison dramas. *Bad Girls* evidences this dichotomy with politically engaged business owner Nikki on one end of the scale, and violent, mentally unstable and sexually predatory “Mad Tessa,” on the other. *Wentworth* has a similar dynamic with Franky, who, while not idealized and a sometimes violent drug dealer—is smart, literate and strategic, contrasted with sexually predatory and wantonly violent “Juicy Lucy.”

The throwback stereotypes of Tessa and Lucy, who evoke the aggression and unwanted sexual advances of Franky in *Prisoner*, are somewhat tempered by primarily directing their unwanted advances on characters that have been shown or implied to engage in consensual sex with another women making it clear that it is their advances, not lesbian sex itself, that is undesirable. However, the threat of violently coercive sex is disturbing and rendered frighteningly dangerous because these characters are infected with HIV and Hepatitis C, respectively, drawing on older homophobic associations of lesbianism and contagion (Butler 2005, 142, Ciasullo 2008, 203).

Franky and Nikki’s status is problematically achieved largely through the politics of respectability garnered in part from their preference for romance and collaboration with prison officials rather than other prisoners. *OITNB* resists the politics of respectability by dismantling the initial appearance of Piper as an emblem of middle class respectability and by placing her attempts to deploy this image at the root of some of her problems. In *OITNB*, lesbian characters do not exist statically on a scale of respectability nor do they conform to the idea of “user-friendly lesbian” (Dow 2001) who is celibate, feminine, and non-threatening. Rather, these characters are shown to be able to play with and strategically use the politics of respectability, exemplified by Poussey and Taystee playfully putting on upper class mannerisms for their entertainment.

This rejection of respectability is particularly significant in relationship to the ways in which lesbian characters are often proposed as the moral center in *OITNB*. This is an important element of homonormativity because using a lesbian character as the voice of reason or moral center encourages identification with that character and presents them as a positive feature of the larger community. This aligns it with the lesbian family program where, since the bulk of characters are lesbian or bisexual, they are also the voice of reason or moral center in almost every scenario.

That Nikki presents a strong moral center in the prison in *Bad Girls* is an important element of the series’ homonormativity for Herman (2003, 144) normalizing and valorizing lesbian representation. But this feature is unevenly deployed in the women-in-prison genre, given that the moral center of *Wentworth* is made up of heterosexual characters who are also mothers, and in *Bad Girls* Nikki is the only lesbian character functioning as a moral center and she shares that role with other older women who are heterosexual.

*OITNB* diffuses the role of the moral center at different times across the series. Piper often takes up this role when speaking to the administration and initially appears to position herself in this role. However, we can see that just as Piper can function as a moral center and advocate for prison reform, she can also act unethically and selfishly; allowing another prisoner to go to solitary for her mistake and actively taking steps to put or keep ex-lovers Alex (2.13) and Stella (3.13) in prison both as revenge and to satisfy her own needs (3.13). Often it is not Piper, marked by the politics of respectability, who is the moral center for the group of white women but drug addict and promiscuous Nicky—whose appearance and lascivious language has rough edges but who consistently provides the most rational advice to other inmates. In the group of African American women, Poussey shares the role of the voice of reason with her heterosexual best friend Taystee. When Vee comes to the prison in Season 2 and tries to take control of the group of African American women and become top dog of the prison, it is Poussey who stands alone to resist her. Poussey and Nicky are both depicted as imperfect, particularly when they fall pray to their respective alcoholism and drug abuse, and can become decentered from this role shifting the moral center.

This structure, where lesbian characters function as moral centers in some contexts and are led astray in others, and where the moral center shifts from character to character, is consistent with the lesbian family program. While *Bad Girls* and *Wentworth* tend to frame their lesbian characters as either productive or disruptive, lesbian family programs and *OITNB* resist this classification. Rather, these series share the moral center role amongst lesbian characters, and occasionally heterosexual characters, de-centering it in a way that undermines simplistic notions of good/bad characters. In these series, lesbian characters articulate crucial moral values for their community, while enacting a morality that is complex and contextual, illustrating that characters do not have to be “model minorities” to be likable.

### *Sex, Violence and Family Ties*

One of the clearest ways in which *OITNB* departs from the other women-in-prison series, aligning itself with the lesbian family program, is the way it organizes interpersonal relationships and power structures within the prison. While all the series depict close interpersonal friendships and romantic and sexual relationships, each balances the significance of violence, sexuality, and familial relationships in their depiction of how the prison operates and the ways in which characters resolve issues within the prison.

Violence is overwhelmingly more common in *Wentworth* and *Bad Girls* than it is in *OITNB*. While there are memorable moments of violence in

*Orange Is the New Black* they are rare and momentous, marking an important shift in a character or relationship. Conversely, in *Wentworth* and *Bad Girls* violence is not momentous but mundane; it is part of how the prison normally operates and from the first episode is a central and regular feature of the plot. *Wentworth's* first two episodes include a prison riot, a stabbing, and an inmate intentionally burned in a steam press. *Bad Girls'* first four episodes follow a young woman who is badly beaten, threatened and driven to suicide. By contrast, *OITNB's* first four episode's incidences of violence are: a mother who briefly slaps her daughter in the face, and brief wrestling between two inmates (without real potential for injury) over access to something in the break room. In *Wentworth* and *Bad Girls* violence is an important way in which the women address grievances and exert power and the prison is depicted as a place of regular violence. This is consistent across the series; 68 percent of *Wentworth* episodes feature violence inside of the prison and 64 percent of *Bad Girl* episodes feature violence committed by one prisoner against another, more feature prisoner/guard violence, and this violence is often extreme, even lethal. However, only 28 percent of *Orange Is the New Black* episodes feature violence of any kind and this number drops to 18 percent if we exclude light violence not intended to do real harm—for example a prison food fight or when Daya's mother slaps her for getting arrested.

In *OITNB* violence is more frequently depicted outside of the prison than inside of it. Inside the prison serious violence takes two forms: violence that is an outgrowth of homophobia, memorably an extremely violent fight between Piper and Pennsatucky that is the culmination of ongoing conflict spurred by Pennsatucky's homophobia (1.13) or transphobia (3.12) and a sequence of violent actions in Season 2 spurred by a new prisoner, Vee, whose bringing of violence to the prison is depicted as such a violation of the normal dynamic of the prison that the women cross cultural lines to facilitate her expulsion from the prison community. Both of these instances reinforce Litchfield as a homonormative and positively homosocial place, with violence as a violation of the prison community's norm rather than essential to its operation. This is particularly notable given the depiction of both violence and rape committed outside of the prison's walls by prison guards, intimate partners, and business partners. It is individuals, primarily men, outside of the prison and hiding behind the power offered them as prison officials that are the primary source of violence and threat. *OITNB* highlights the brutality women face outside the prison rather than defining the prison itself as a place of violence, the strategy of *Bad Girls* and *Wentworth*. *OITNB's* reduction of the role of violence in the women-in-prison genre also is a rejection of the stereotypical association of lesbianism and violence (Lee and Meyer 2007, 237). The crimes of many of the lesbians in *Wentworth* (assault, rape) and *Bad Girls* (murder, manslaughter, arson) are violent; the lesbian characters in *OITNB* crimes are

all non-violent (drugs, theft, fraud). Those inmates in *OITNB* who are violent are invariably heterosexual; divorcing violent criminality from its stereotypical association with lesbianism.

Rather than violence, Litchfield appears to operate through bartering, withholding of access to desired objects and spaces, and through tight friendship groups, "prison families," and sexual relationships that facilitate sharing within groups and negotiations with other groups. As a result, violence is not the form of physical activity that drives the series; rather physical affection (both platonic and romantic) and sex scenes are far more common and significant for *OITNB*. The presence of explicitly depicted, and narratively rich, sex scenes is a key factor that distinguishes *OITNB* from other women-in-prison series. While *Wentworth* and *Bad Girls* "normalize" lesbian sex by depicting it, they only do so rarely; only 11.7 percent of *Wentworth* episodes show or clearly imply same-sex sex and *Bad Girls* depicted it only once. *OITNB* regularly depicts same-sex sex scenes, including them in 36 percent of episodes, successfully making this sex visible and "everyday" (McCarthy 2001, 609). Sex scenes serve a variety of purposes in the series, marking shifts in relationships, providing humor, and even forming a multi-episode story arc focused on a sexual competition between Boo and Nicky (2.5–2.6). *OITNB*'s regular depiction of same-sex sex and its use of it as significant to the narrative is consistent with lesbian family program's *The L-Word*, *Lip Service* and *Exes and Ohs* which all have similarly explicit and narratively significant sex scenes in over half the episodes of the series.

Arguably, the representation of same-sex sexual interaction is political in and of itself but in the context of *OITNB* it is at times presented as explicit resistance. The first time we observe Piper and Alex have sex in "real-time," it is expressly framed as an act of defiance. After being placed in solitary simply for dancing with Alex, when Piper is released she goes directly to find Alex and leads her to the chapel to have sex (1.9). This is a powerful and multi-layered moment. Piper's expression of defiance for her mistreatment and her act of freedom is to embrace her desire for Alex in a space, the chapel, that is both a normal space for sex in the prison but can also be considered subversive, a violation of the cultural taboos she represents in her "nice blonde lady" persona. This moment also speaks to the way in which same-sex sex reorganizes the spaces of prison. Recounting the restroom sex scenes of *The L-Word*, Catherine Jonet and Laura Williams observe that "lesbian desire also reconfigures heteronormative spaces, such as public restrooms" (156). Because there is no private space in the context of the prison sex in *OITNB* takes this disorganizing potential of sex further, reframing almost any space—the library, bathroom stalls, the chapel—as a space for lesbian desire. Further, in a prison context same-sex sex is given additional value because it represents a kind of escape from coercion and confinement.

Sex and sexuality are also used in a way to reimagine the prison dynamic. In *OITNB* physical affection between inmates is common and is used as gestures of support, comfort, and to express friendship and desire. It is not uncommon for physical affection to deliver information to other characters and viewers and it often follows or replaces violence. While violence is harmful in other series, *OITNB* focuses on "light violence" (slapping someone across the face) between two people who care about each other and quickly evolves into affection like hugging, indicating a strengthened relationship (2.12). Sex also often stands in where violence may be expected. A particularly telling example comes early on where a screwdriver goes missing, leading the guards to fear that it will be used as a weapon. The construction of the narrative encourages the viewer to believe that Boo will use it against her ex-girlfriend who is getting out, only to discover that her true purpose for it is as a sex toy (1.4). Sex and violence are sometimes linked, for example angry at one another Alex and Piper have extensive angry rough sex (3.2, 3.3), but it is consensual and desirable for both partners. This mirrors *The L-Word*, in which Bette and Tina engage in violence-inflected sex (1.14), a trend in lesbian family programs where sex is used for self discovery and problem solving. *OITNB* presents sex as an alternative to violence as a potential solution to conflict and by reimagining objects that are framed as weapons by the patriarchal voice of the prison as tools for pleasure.

### *Homosocial Families and Heteronormative Failure*

This emphasis on physical affection and intimacy takes its most frequent form in platonic gestures; a hug, a squeeze of the hand, holding them as they cry. That this is the primary physical gesture in *OITNB*, over and above violence, is important because it supports the significance of familial intimate relationships as the core of the series. I have defined *The L-Word*, *Lip Service*, etc., as lesbian family programs, because they take on many of the features of the traditional family drama but focus not on a biological family but on women who create a family of choice (Weston 1991). While choice may not be a fair descriptive for *OITNB* where women literally are assigned to live with other women, *OITNB* shares the focus on the non-biological family as an important source of support and guidance.

Herman (2003) argues that this feature exists in other women-in-prison series, stating that "BG constructs an environment ... where the community of women inmates function as a real family, providing the warmth, support and ... mothering that the prisoners have not experienced on the outside" (152). I argue that in *Bad Girl* and *Wentworth* this potential is undercut because of the emphasis on violence and power struggles that lead women

to more frequently re-organize their allegiances than on *OITNB*. These series also cycle in and out characters more frequently and rarely evoke the language of family. *OITNB* on the other hand, shared with *The L-Word* and *Lip Service* the persistent utilization of the language of family. Familial organization is formalized in Litchfield, each racial group has a “mom” who looks out for and controls the other women in her group and the women often refer to each other as family, at times extending to their future lives outside (3.2). The persistent use of this language is notable because it functions as an insistence on the legitimacy of these families. While there is no doubt that other women-in-prison series have equally significant homo-social relationships (in *Bad Girls* one inmate stays in jail to be with her dying friend [2.8] while another returns to jail because she feels her friend cannot be without her [3.4]) they are unique to these women. *OITNB* differs in that it presents these constructed families as central to the organization of the prison itself and a pivotal part of these women’s lives within it.

These families are often depicted as *better* than biological families. That Daya often prefers her prison mom over her biological mother, who is inside with her, is a powerful factor in the privileging of homo-normativity in the series. Heterosexual nuclear families are primarily shown as damaged, destructive, and even abusive, with the most positive examples (Piper’s) simply being cold and judgmental. While most women-in-prison series valorize maternity, depicting pregnancy and motherhood as redemptive (as is the case with Zondra in *Bad Girls*) or validating her moral stance, mothers are particularly problematic figures in *OITNB*. While many appear to try their best for their children, they are depicted as unable to provide the support and understanding that is possible in the prison families. That there are no fathers in these familial units can be understood as particularly disruptive to the heteronormative ideal.

Herman (2003) suggests that these types of representations also undermine heteronormativity by making heterosexuality “largely unappealing problematic” (153). This is a common thread across all the series included in the study. Physically or sexually abusive heterosexual relationships are depicted in *OITNB*, *Bad Girls* and *Wentworth*, and past sexual abuse looms large in *The L-Word*. While the figure of the “prison lesbian” threatening coercive sex is removed in *OITNB*, *OITNB* (like *Bad Girls*) features guards who barter for sex and rape prisoners. When heterosexual relationships appear to be with kind men, we see that even these “good men” often cheat or abandon their partners when difficulties arise. While Piper enters prison with an apparently satisfying heterosexual relationship, he quickly appears to be both unfaithful and perfectly willing to use her for his own ends without regard to its affect on her and her life in the prison.

While the unreliable and threatening image of male partners under-



mines the romanticization of heterosexuality in these series, female sexuality is also depicted as problematic in a heterosexual context. A key case in *OITNB* is the character of Morello who is initially shown in a sexually satisfying and emotionally supportive same-sex relationship with Nicky that she ends because of her fiancé (1.5) Morello appears to be an icon of heteronormativity, with an obsession with her femme appearance and her wedding. However, we later discover that her “fiancé” is actually a man whom she stalked after he rejected her after one date; spying on him, threatening his fiancé, and even putting a bomb under his car. Far from an idealized romance, her heterosexual relationship is purely fantasy and leads to violent and criminal behavior. This stands in stark contrast to the comparatively healthy lesbian relationship with Nicky that she rejected.

While all these series share a suspicion of heteronormative relationships and nuclear families, *OITNB* persistently undermines the possibility of such relationships being successful for women-in-prison. *Bad Girls* and *Wentworth* each temper their negative images of heterosexuality with a heterosexual couple (an inmate and prison handyman in *Bad Girls* and two inmates in *Wentworth*) that is loving and romanticized. Moreover both these couples are productive, leading to pregnancies within the first three seasons. *OITNB*, on the other hand, like *The L-Word*, *Lip Service* and *Exes and Ohs*, does not depict any stable heterosexual couples, with the exception of one pair of guards whose relationship appears positive but is only seen in brief glimpses.

The depiction of heteronormative romance and families as unsatisfying and deeply flawed is significant paired with the affectionate and supportive prison families and the same-sex scenes in the series. By comparison, lesbian relationships appear as not only possible and normal but as potentially desirable. At one point *OITNB*'s Red and Gloria joke about the possibility of becoming gay (3.6) given its clear advantages, in the prison context. While this possibility is brushed aside as impossible it remains an important moment for the way in which it highlights the “prison lesbian” as reworked and reimaged in *OITNB* as not only desiring but *desirable*, both as a subject and a status.

## Conclusion

Most episodes of *Orange Is the New Black*, *The L-Word* and *Wentworth* contain or begin with flashbacks. This shared formal convention is important because they draw attention to the fact that the characters have a *history* and that both criminality and sexuality do not exist in a vacuum. *OITNB* also does not exist in a vacuum; it fits into an important history of both lesbian representation and representations of women-in-prison. I have argued here

that the history of the women-in-prison genre is a troubled one providing both queer possibilities and homophobic images.

However, *OITNB* is not solely a member of the women-in-prison genre, and I have demonstrated here that its incorporation of features from the lesbian family program has allowed it to build-on and transcend both genres to complicate and improve images of lesbian characters and relationships, to create a text that privileges and normalizes lesbian sexuality and homonormative relationships. These representations cannot just be understood as an improvement on the women-in-prison drama. Rather, as fellow inmate Cindy winks at when she refers to Piper as “The L Word” (3.13), this text also fits into the history of lesbian family programs and draws from and expands on its themes and ideological investments.

When Piper appears in prison it is as a “nice blonde lady” with a passion for homemade soap, whole foods, and her fiancé. This surface appearance is broken down as the series evolves and we discover that Piper is far more sinister, complex, and queer than that. Similarly, we need to peel back the surface appearance of *Orange Is the New Black* to discover its complex generic resonances and the deeper representational possibilities it’s double-genre attributes facilitate behind and beyond the bars.

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