

The Idolatrous Enjoyment of Prison: the Multivalent meanings of Cult in Orange Is the New Black's Third Season.

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ABSTRACT

The Netflix series, *Orange Is the New Black*, based on the bestselling memoir by Piper Kerman, has become something of a cult phenomenon. The show has received both praise and criticism for its representation of prison life—at times overly romantic and upbeat, at others, an incredibly dark and insightful portrayal of capitalism's effect on women in relation to the prison industrial complex. I will explore how the show recruits the many, often interweaving, meanings associated with the concept of cult, in order to disrupt the enjoyment of audiences on several registers. First, the show critiques itself as a cult phenomenon—that is, the enjoyment and following which is created by an, at least at times, highly idealized portrait of incarceration. Second, the show tries to expose the worship of the prison industrial complex and the patriarchal violence that undergirds it. Third, it suggests that prison has many of the features of a cult and implicates the audience in this arrangement of power as it watches. Fourth, the show presents an actual cult following and, its eventual collapse, as a concrete instantiation of these motifs: just as the cult of Norma provides temporary relief for the inmates until it collapses and is shown to be toxic, the dark humour of prison life is also shown to be a destructive fantasy that is as temporary as Norma's following. It is difficult, therefore, to separate the levels from one another because the multivalent metaphors are the interpretive key to the season's meaning. In contrast to the nihilism, the storyline of inmates Boo and Pennastucky suggests persons who show feminist resilience, and who also demonstrate compassion and forgiveness, may still temporarily disrupt the cult of patriarchal violence.

KEYWORDS

1.
Cult, Orange Is the New Black, Feminism, rape, Heterosexism

Introduction

The Netflix series, *Orange Is the New Black* (2013-present), based on the memoir by Piper Kerman, has become something of a cult phenomenon. The show has received both praise and criticism for its representation of prison life—at times overly romantic and upbeat, at others, an incredibly dark and insightful portrayal of capitalism's effect on women in relation to prison. The show takes place in Litchfield correctional facility, which is a chronically underfunded, poorly regulated, and poorly managed prison. Despite considerable displays of humanity, a major point of the show is that the prison guards, like the inmates, also live under conditions of constraint, and so they often fail to implement the expected ideal of law and order within the prison. This show chronicles the experience of Piper Chapman, a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant convicted of drug-trafficking, who gradually realizes the darker side of her nature, as she is influenced by the environment of prison life. The show has become a success because of the ways in which it portrays the struggles of marginalized women with humanity, pathos, and humor. Like Piper, the audience realizes that there is good and evil in everyone. By dint of this realization, it is enjoined to criticize itself. In particular, also like Piper, the audience is asked to question the relationships of privilege that perpetuate the prison industrial complex, as it witnesses the effect of these relationships upon intersectionally marginalized women.

In this article, I will explore the dynamics of good and evil, particularly how these concepts work to produce a self-reflexive audience, in Season Three of the series. Specifically, I will explore how *Orange is the New Black: Season Three* recruits the many, often interweaving, meanings associated with the concept of cult, in order to disrupt the enjoyment of audiences on several registers. First, the show, within the storylines, critiques itself as a cult phenomenon—that is, the enjoyment and following which is created by an, at least at times, highly idealized portrait of incarceration.. Second, the show tries to expose the worship of the prison industrial complex and the patriarchal violence that undergirds it. Third, it suggests that prison has many of the features of a cult and implicates the audience in this arrangement of power as it watches. Fourth, the show presents an actual cult following, and its eventual collapse, as an instantiation of these metaphors representing new religious movements. It is difficult to separate the levels from one another because the multivalent motif of cult is the interpretive key to the season's meaning.

Season Three focuses on the perils and pitfalls of female bonding by highlighting women's struggles against patriarchal oppression and their desire for companionship to make sense of the violence they experience. My paper will analyse the cult of Norma in this season and its relationship to the overall theme of the trials all the female prisoners endure. Norma is a mute and timid elderly prisoner who rises to prominence precisely owing to her meek and nondescript nature. The prisoners can project whatever desires they may have onto Norma because her pseudo-guru status renders her generically maternal. Yet, when she is revealed to be both powerless and corrupt, both the prisoners and the audience experience the truly abject nature of patriarchal power.

Two other inmates, Boo and Pennastucky, previous philosophical diametrically opposed enemies become close friends in response to sexual violence that occurs in the prison. This development, which I shall explore further, demonstrates that compassionate feminist resistance has the power to momentarily alienate the audience's investment in patriarchal violence. As this paper will show, Boo and Pennastucky resist the violence of rape, and ultimately overcome it through forgiveness, whereas Norma compounds patriarchal violence through a fantasy of religious power that allows her to foster horizontal acts of aggression against other women. Boo and Pennastucky achieve a measure of freedom through solidarity and mercy, whereas Norma is fettered by her investment in the prison system and all its social ills. Thus, though the plot structure and cinematography of the show makes the audience urge to be like Norma quite strong, the ultimate message of Season Three is to resist the enjoyment of patriarchal prison and follow the path of Boo and Pennastucky.

1. Theoretical Perspectives and Context

Although Iver B. Neumann's (2012) intriguing research concerning representations of Mormons on the television show *Battlestar Galactica*, and David Scott Diffrient's (2010) commentary on the short lived television comedy *Andy Richter Controls the Universe* are interesting pieces of work, neither of these articles analyse *Orange is the New Black*, nor do they take a psychoanalytic approach. In Lynn S. Neal's (2011) comprehensive survey of cult portrayals on television (spanning from 1958-2008), the author does not give adequate weight to portrayals of the more realistic instances of trauma, admittedly rarely seen on television, that members of new religious movements may experience. Nor does she address the psychodynamics that support the cult ideology and how these dynamics increase the pleasure and (dis)identification experienced by viewers when they witness portrayals of cults, as this paper intends to address. Lastly, David Feltmate (2011), demonstrates how cult stereotypes and fears over cult brainwashing are simultaneously disseminated and diffused through mass media by dint of humour, but he does not consider the tragic comic dimensions of such humour and how this humour, while being funny and fanciful, can also expose more biting and poignant social commentary. In order to accomplish this task, using *Orange as the new Black* as my example, I believe that it is useful to use Slavoj Žižek's interpretation of Lacanian psychoanalysis against the backdrop of Berthold Brecht's theories concerning socialist drama.

In brief, I have four reasons for this choice of frameworks. First, Žižek and Brecht are concerned with the relationship between emotional projection and economic conditions. Thus, by combining psychoanalysis and Marxism, they correct the deficiencies in both. Second, these thinkers are keenly aware that ideology operates more powerfully on the level of disavowed enjoyment than it does on the level of explicit statements. Such an analytical framework is helpful for a show about women's prison because it allows us to see the underlying problematic messages of the show that are often concealed by its compassionate veneer. Third, both thinkers are acutely cognizant of visual presentations' functions in conveying ideology. Fourth, both thinkers invite readers to explore the connection between sex, violence, and enjoyment (Brecht 1965; Žižek 1991, 2008).

2. Prison as cult

2.1. *The multivalent meaning of cult*

To re-till what may be familiar ground for some readers, the English word cult is derived from the past participle of the Latin verb *colere*, meaning to tend. Because of the Roman connection between agriculture and worship, cult came to mean veneration of a particular phenomenon, person, place and/or deity (Harper 2001). This is why the term shares a root with the English word culture. 'Cult' has lost this technical definition in the common imagination and parlance, however, and it is now generally used pejoratively to describe one of the following. First, cult often denotes a phenomenon with unmerited insular or popular appeal, for example, "*Orange Is the New Black* has become something of a cult phenomenon". Second, it denotes a thing of which the writer and/or society at large ought to disapprove, in spite of its ubiquity, for example, "the cult of androcentric violence is systemic in contemporary media; it is particularly exemplified by prison dramas; and this violence has socially deleterious consequences". Third, cult denotes a nonnormative religious or ideological movement of social deviants, whose leader is often thought of as authoritarian (Harper 2001).

While not agreeing with the use of this word to characterize new religious movements from a sociological perspective, I employ it to understand the complex and ambiguous ways in which the idea of cult is used on the show as a popular, and not a scholarly, construct. Stereotypical treatment of new religious movements notwithstanding, the idea of cult is a powerful metaphor with which to mount social critique, precisely owing to its instability and ability to weave together disparate registers of meaning. I will show the loom-like quality of the word cult by demonstrating how it ties together the different threads in *Orange Is the New Black's* third season.

2.2. *The cult of privilege*

In order to appreciate the above, it is first necessary to appreciate the prominence of the prison industrial complex in American life and popular culture, how this phenomenon reinforces relationships of privilege, and how the show criticizes it. German playwright Berthold Brecht's 1965 theories regarding socialist drama are useful for understanding the politically progressive content in *Orange Is the New Black*. For Brecht, the drama appropriate to the modern age ought to produce enjoyment in audiences by combining pedagogy and alienation (Brecht 1965, p. 196). In contrast to traditional models of tragedy predicated on identification with noble heroes and emotional catharsis experienced by the audience when these heroes are punished for offending social norms, Brecht instructs writers to exploit the increased modern capacity for empathy by shifting the audience's attention from the plight of characters and their personality traits to the circumstances that produced their difficulties (1965, p. 184). This technique requires close attention to socio-historical processes that place constraints upon characters agency and contribute to their actions. Yet this should not result in further compassion alone. Instead, this empathy should promote action. This call to action is accomplished through alienation. For Brecht, alienation is accomplished by actively disrupting the fantasy involved in viewing

visual entertainment, particularly by implicating the audience in the social relations they have come to abhor throughout the course of the production (1965, p 197).

One sees these theories applied by the ways in which *Orange is the New Black* portrays incarceration in the United States of America and the flaws in Corrections departments there. The United States of America has the highest per capita incarceration rate in the world (Belknap 2015, p. 1). High incarceration rates are caused by the privatization of the correctional system and inadequate access to vital services, such as education and healthcare, for citizens most likely to come into conflict with the law (Belknap 2015, p. 2). Once one considers that factors constituting oppression are multiple and intersecting, especially in relation to law and the criminal justice system, this statistic becomes all the more disquieting. The circumstances further marginalize already disadvantaged women, such as, those heading single-parent families, those who receive social assistance, drug users, women of color, disabled women, transgendered women, and lesbian/bisexual women (Bernard 2012; Burges-Proctor 2006; Crenshaw 1991). In addition to these problems, stringent parole requirements and/or difficulty in securing gainful employment owing to the stigma of a criminal record make further legal conflicts probable, especially if a woman is already marginalized by another devalued identity (Belknap 2015, p. 3).

This creates a vicious cycle of incarceration and generational trauma that is very profitable to those in the private prison industry. Of all the subjugated identities worthy of comment within the show, my analysis will focus on sexual and gender variation. This is not because I believe it to be the most important dimension. It is because it most clearly exposes heterosexist and patriarchal oppression within the United States correctional system. Owing to this fact, instances of female companionship on the show most clearly revealed the hypocrisy and futility of the Norma cult.

One of the messages of *Orange Is the New Black* is the humanity and complexity of the women who find themselves in conflict with the law: the prisoners are mothers, daughters, sisters and friends that come from all walks of life and socio-economic groups. Nevertheless, we also see the specific challenges facing marginalized women in the United States and why a disproportionate number of them find themselves in the prison system. We learn that prisoners often struggle with substance use problems and mental wellness issues both in and outside the correctional system, and that these are not properly redressed, owing to insufficient funds (McDonald, 2013, pp. 295). We see the regrettably all-pervasive culture of patriarchal sexual exploitation in female correctional facilities. We see the difficulties parents confront and the resulting trauma that children experience regardless of their social location and or identities (McDonald 2013 p. 236). By showing the sad circumstances of these women's lives, therefore, the writers accurately portray the dismaying consequences of venerating traditional white, male, heterosexual, cisgendered, (that is those persons whose ascribed gender corresponds to their outward expression of it and or perceived/ internalized psychological identity) upper-class, and able-bodied privilege, and they implicate the audience in this cult when they watch the show.

2.3. *The cult of voyeurism*

Another way in which the cult motif appears is through techniques of discipline and patriarchal voyeurism; these are obviously stereotypes associated with incarceration and cults. Panopticism, discussed in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975) is useful for elucidating *Orange is the New Black*. Foucault's now famous elaboration of Jeremy Bentham's structure, which allows a prison guard to potentially see into every cell while not being seen himself, describes the modern (incarcerated) subject's tendency to regulate her conduct as though she is always being watched (1977, pp. 202-3).

In Foucault's account, the guard receives immense pleasure from his ability to see, regulate, and subjugate his wards. And I believe that this love of seeing is facilitated by the style of the television show. Indeed, through many shower/bathroom and lesbian erotic scenes, the audience of *Orange is the New Black* assumes the position of an ultimate prison guard, whose eyes have access to things most prison guards do not, at least when these persons comply with the law in prison. By identifying with the ultimate power that the prison guard has and the women's subjugated position simultaneously, the audience vacillates between the position of patriarchal divine master and feminized and all too human inmate. Once again, it is apparent why the concept of cult is a very useful, if unstable, metaphor for understanding season three and the show's broad appeal. The word and/or metaphor of cult simultaneously invokes our deepest fears while pandering to our most perverse enjoyments. As does the word and/or metaphor of prison.

2.4. Subverting disciplinary gazes and fantasies

According to Singer & Lalich (1995, p. 63–64) some cults do the following things: conceal a behavioural modification regime, implement a rigorous schedule, foster dependency and fear in members, discourage undesired behaviour and attempt to change a member's world view, and espouse reasoning that is not falsifiable. While it is not helpful to make a distinction between emerging and established religions on these grounds because all have the potential to become authoritarian, Singer & Lalich offer a useful set of criteria for defining the cult stereotype. Furthermore, I believe that both Litchfield prison and the cult of Norma, which emerges as a response to patriarchal violence within and outside prison walls, exhibit the characteristics Singer & Lalich describe. Norma cannot be proven wrong; she makes her followers more dependent; she uses coercion; and she discourages dialogue. All of these things, in addition to the frequent unjust application of force, are true of the prison guards as well.

Additionally, the work of Slavoj Žižek — who combines Marxism and psychoanalysis to critique the contemporary fantasies of neoliberal discourse — is particularly helpful for understanding the potential and pitfalls of Season Three. For Žižek (1991, pp. 2-10, 230-4), ideologies work best when we practice a degree of cynicism toward them. When ideologies are not explicitly avowed, they have a much greater capacity to structure our fantasy life; for we are more susceptible to the hidden enjoyment that is at their core. The audience consumes a simulacrum of prison without actually becoming incarcerated.

They can identify with the experiences of the women, all the while being cynical — as the characters themselves are — that real systemic change is possible.

Owing to indecisiveness and the ways in which it makes light of unjust social systems, therefore, *Orange Is the New Black* could be construed as an intensely oppressive cultural artifact. On the level of explicit discourse, we are exhorted to emancipate women, whereas the fantasy that structures the show counsels the opposite. The audience is metaphorically placed in the role of prison guard, even as it is taught to identify with the prisoners. Viewers gain the power of the guard: there is nothing about these women that remains hidden from their disciplinary gaze. Bluntly, like most prison dramas before it, *Orange is the New Black* seems to perpetuate patriarchal rape culture by playing on the fantasy of a peep-show.

Viewers are, therefore, drawn into the cult of prison. They become part of the oppressive state apparatus they are explicitly instructed to repudiate. To elaborate, while the show meets some of Brecht's criteria for socialist drama, insofar as it provides many details that highlight unjust social systems, thereby calling the audience to action, it invests the viewer with the patriarchal power that is a large part of these problems in the first place.

3. Norma as an incarnated cult metaphor

3.1. *A dangerous remedy*

In what follows, therefore, I shall analyze the cult of Norma, how it fosters the enjoyment of the audience, and how this enjoyment is disrupted by traumatic interventions of The Real. The miracles and power of Norma do not have an auspicious beginning; they are immediately linked to the opium of Litchfield, when heroin enters the prison, and Norma becomes associated with this highly addictive drug. Norma's mystique begins when recovering inmate Angie embraces Norma and makes a silent birthday wish (Episode Two Season Three). Unfortunately, she discloses — after she and another inmate find a hidden stash of heroin — that what she had used Norma's positive energy for was, in fact, more drugs. She also interprets her ability to hide the drugs without getting caught as the miracle afforded by Norma's power. Yet this power is destructive. It leads to Angie's relapse. In short, Norma is presented as a hollow and highly addictive drug that only masks the problem of patriarchal violence (Episode Three, Season Three).

Nevertheless, despite, or, indeed, because of, this context the cult of Norma begins to take hold. Many female inmates come to her for her famous "touch and stare." where Norma does nothing more than wordlessly looks into the inmate's eyes and touches their shoulders. Though the inmate's express feelings of tremendous contentment after this touch and stare, the audience is not sure why: Norma's actions seem rather mundane, indeed, even perfunctory. This is highly significant. Norma is a mute. She, therefore, offers a screen onto which the women can project their desires. The inmates express themselves with devotion, saying tragic/comic things, such as, "she just understands me;" I just feel "free when I am around her" (Episode Four, Season Three, Leanne, So-So). Her stare and touch is so powerful that it often brings people to tears. Humorously, one inmate notes that "she always makes

me cry” (Episode Four Season Three); yet the audience understands this inmate (who has no name) is known as the inmate that always cries. This underlines the actual emptiness of Norma’s power. The pathos of this situation is palpable. It is clear that the inmates are searching for meaning in what is ultimately a meaningless situation (Episode Nine Season Three). They are also hungry for a feeling of feminine connectivity in a society that routinely exposes women to violence.

I believe the cult of Norma is intended to disrupt this process of voyeuristic identification by exposing what Lacanian psychoanalysis calls The Real underneath this fantasy. The Real has two principal and related manifestations. It can either be a trauma so terrible that it cannot be assimilated into a person’s symbolic (the formal rules which make sense of reality) or imaginary (the images we used to express these rules) orders. The traumatic intervention of The Real can occur with any experience of violence, particularly the ones that the inmates have experienced in the past and continue to suffer in the present. These, in turn, may affect a crisis of meaning, after which the subject frequently latches onto a new fantasy to reorient herself and to restore a measure of psychic equilibrium. Norma’s power is precisely such a fantasy born of trauma. Fantasies are short lived, however (Žižek, 2001, pp. 50-7).

Rape is horrendous and traumatic on a physical and ideological level precisely because it dehumanizes perpetrators and victims. Most human beings generally take justified pride in law and order. Sexual assault is odious because it shows some human beings to be creatures of desire and force, and it makes audiences, especially men, wonder whether we all are those creatures. In addition to causing feelings of moral condemnation, therefore, the idea of sexual assault in prison is especially existentially disquieting because it perverts notions of justice and what many believe about the humanist subject (Heath et al 2011; Mostler and Jeglic 2009).

Sexual assault is an example of The Real because of its intense ideological cathexis. It intersects crucial modern concepts, such as, freedom, sexuality, responsibility, accountability, reason, and passion. But when one sees instances of explicit sexual assault, they only highlight the disavowed fantasy of male violence that undergirds much contemporary media. As I will discuss below, *Orange Is the New Black* offers a painfully accurate depiction of rape and its psychological consequences. This particular instance of rape is only an acute manifestation of the culture of violence to which the female inmates are subjected. They are constantly taunted, groped, and sexually harassed by the male guards, in order to maintain the guards’ monopoly over legitimate violence. The cult of Norma arises as a response to this culture of sexual exploitation, but her medicine is born of the same poisoned and patriarchal spring as the guards’ justice.

Consequently, it is important to apply psychoanalysis to television shows like this one: doing so helps one better understand how pervasive the culture of sexual violence really is and what techniques are used to propagate and/or resist it. This relates to the cult of Norma in three ways, as will be discussed in further detail below. First, Norma is a victim of sexual and physical assault from her husband, but she cannot effectively deal with this trauma and eventually commits murder motivated by repressed rage. Second, the followers of Norma are attached to her as a maladaptive coping strategy against

patriarchal violence. Third, the only characters who are able to break the cycle are the ones who directly confront the devastating reality of rape.

In many ways, the other manifestation of The Real is quite a bit more disconcerting. Rather than terror from the experience of trauma, The Real can also be born of the sheer contingency of existence and the clumsiness of humankind's linguistic systems in conceptualizing this finitude and absurdity. Such finitude and absurdity act as a constant bar to our desires' complete fulfillment. The inability to fully satisfy our desires suggests that reality — at least as humanly construed — is always already ideological and a simulacrum (Žižek, 2001, pp 58-65).

Norma is interesting because she is a failed matriarchal Messiah. The women attach to Norma in a vain attempt to make meaning out of a meaningless experience. Norma appears to give them the healing and restorative justice that corrections is ideally thought to offer. Many women project their desires for maternal affection onto her, and their desire for female affection ultimately leads many inmates to believe that her gifts will liberate them. When liberation does not come, however, and conditions in the prison deteriorate, Norma is shown to be a fraud. Furthermore, many inmates come to see her as worse than a fraud because she participates in the kind of violence used by the prison guards. Norma subtly encourages her followers to degrade one another, particularly through social ostracism; though she does not encourage sexual humiliation, there is an analogy between Norma's coercion and the shame used by the prison guards. Her followers' discovery of Norma's fraudulence and misplaced faith brings about the kind of nihilistic ennui that Žižek believes to be most characteristic of subjects when they confront The Real.

In this confrontation with The Real, the show breaks with any trace of optimism. In so doing, it challenges viewers to disrupt their narcissistic (dis)identification with the inmates. Initially, the cult of Norma appears quite humorous, and even though it is depicted as ridiculous, it is heartening because it gives the prisoners a sense of power. They finally develop a way to improve their situation, and they experience and receive superficial feelings of maternal caring that many of them desire and/or lack. The cult of Norma minimizes patriarchal violence and makes the correctional system more palatable to audiences. Yet its collapse creates alienation and despair, which are the desired emotions of socialist tragedy à la Brecht. Paradoxically, from such despair, there emerges a genuine critique of the contemporary United States prison system, and a valuable emotion from which one may begin to contemplate activism, rather than simply passively experience entertainment.

3.2. The rise and demise of Norma's cult

Disturbing as we may find the above, their vivid brutality highlights the extent to which the prison industrial complex subjugates women, (Morag McDonald 2013, 293-303, Holly Harner and Suzanne Riley 2013) robs them of dignity and, in turn, causes them to commit horizontal acts of oppression. We see this most forcefully in the rise and collapse of the Norma cult. Norma experiences a dramatic rise in prestige and power among the disaffected women of the prison. Norma's influence becomes so great that even Red, a fellow inmate, who is known for her stalwart commitment to pragmatism, is almost

swayed by Norma's power when she is reinstated as head of the kitchen, her coveted position after seeking Norma's help. Even though Norma's cult status is established with this event, we also have insight into how hollow her miracles actually are.

As with the heroin miracle, this is not as it seems. Red has been made head of the kitchen, but the new regime has brought in pre-packaged food. The true nature of Norma's power is illustrated when warden Caputo turns to Red and says, "You don't think that I would have put you in charge if you had any actual power, did you?" (Episode Eight, Season Three). Owing to a malevolent stare from Norma, the audience understands that Norma thinks that she has given Red the evil eye, since the latter dared to mistreat her and cast aspersions on her abilities. Hence, if Norma's power is real, it is not a force for good. The episode ends with Norma entering the chapel, followers awaiting her arrival. She anoints the women in the same manner that her guru had anointed her, suggesting that she believes in her power. No longer content with seeing her as simply a healer and a confidant, the women elevate her to the Messiah of the prison, deferring to her on all matters spiritual, practical and moral. Their experience of Norma is so absolute that many begin to see apparitions of her in everyday objects all over the prison. Though Norma silently protests, her expressions and gestures make it clear that, over time, the power of absolute leader corrupts her absolutely: she accepts trinkets and food from her followers and eats peacefully as they are cruel to other members. Indeed, the followers of Norma become so serious that they try to delineate doctrine and enforce orthodoxy. They try to make something out of the teachings of a woman, remember, who never speaks, to get full recognition from prison staff as a legitimate religious movement. This depiction is consistent with the findings of Ward (2010, p. 908), who notes that disaffected members of new religious movements often remember their experience in these groups as creating forced immaturity by means of absolute trust in the leader's authority.

Although Ward's analysis draws on the experience of former disaffected members of new religious movements and, must be, therefore, taken with a grain of salt, he does seem to describe some, though by no means all, new religious movements. Furthermore, it is not that foreign to the everyday experience of prison. Because of the structured nature of prison life, it can often engender a feeling of learned helplessness, both while in incarceration and while on parole. These behavioral patterns can hinder reintegration into everyday society (Souza et. al. 2015). Incarceration is by definition forced immaturity. By committing a crime, a convict forfeits her right to autonomy. She must be re-socialized, so that she lives up to the expectations of adulthood and does not, thereby, come into conflict with the law.

As stated above, there are several added dimensions of paternal power because, by and large, men are subjugating women, Caucasians are subjugating persons of color, and the sexual and gender conforming are subjugating queers. In an enlightening scene, the followers are once again in the yard communing in a circle and shouting. Their desire to be the "favourite" of Norma leads their comments to escalate, as they exclaim, "Norma is my mother, Norma is my Jesus, and Norma is my grandmother" (Episode Eight, Season Three). This quest for a nonexistent purity become so extreme that Norma's

most devout follower, Leeann, expels another member owing to heresy, just as she was shunned from the Amish community (Episode Ten, Season Three).

Just as the prison seeks to correct inmates' behaviour through routine (sexual) violence and intimidation, the cult of Norma begins to use what Ward (2010, p. 906) calls spiritual bullying. It uses threat of expulsion and loss of Norma's supposed benefits to mandate doctrinal conformity. Subject to multiple vectors of oppression, Norma and her followers begin to use their erstwhile emancipatory strategy to subjugate their fellow women. This process is also analogous to the dynamic experienced by the audience.

Although the season begins in a lighthearted tone, eventually the viewer is implicated in this oppressive context by his enjoyment in watching the cult collapse. It is possible to draw another parallel between disaffected inmates and disaffected members of new religious movements. As Ward (2010, p. 907) comments, at the beginning of their membership in new religious movements, disaffected members are able to suppress their individuality and emotional pain, but often find this experience damaging over time. Likewise, many inmates begin prison with a brave face but find this front unsustainable as their sentence progresses.

While it is very easy to say that Norma's exploitation of the women's helplessness is objectionable, the audience learns that Norma too is helpless owing to patriarchal violence. In fact, she is simply practicing what she knows. We learn through flashback that she too was a member of a new religious movement, led by a male in the 1960s. He used his teaching to justify sexual exploitation of his female followers, of which Norma was the most loyal disciple (Episode Nine, Season Three). We learn that Norma's silence is not a sign of profundity. Instead, it is a sign of her timidity: she has a stutter and so does not speak to avoid embarrassment. As the flashbacks progress, followers leave Norma's beloved husband and he begins to lose faith in his mission (Episode Seven, Season Three). But Norma certainly does not: repeated scenes show her staring at him adoringly as he laments the failure of his religious mission and lot in life. Now the deposed and bankrupt leader of the two person religious movement, he routinely insults and abuses Norma, until one day, after years of repression, she pushes him off a cliff in a fit of rage (Episode Seven, Season Three).

3.3. Disaffected cult members and audience alienation

Inevitably, Norma's power becomes ineffective. As usual, happiness is mixed with disturbing tragedy. We witness a suicide attempt in the prison, from So-So, an expelled heretic from the Norma movement (Episode Nine, Season Three). She charges into the group and tells Norma how the group is bullying her: "I thought that you stood for something, but you are just a bunch of chicken shits... congrats on nothing" (Episode Eleven, Season Three). She demonstrates the absurdity of both the cult and the emptiness of Norma. As Coates (2013, p. 799) notes, upon leaving an insular religious group, members can experience profound despair and suicidal ideation because they wonder where they may go or what they may do upon departure. Pronounced emotional investment can create an environment so

totalizing that the member lacks or forgets social skills necessary for coping with life outside the cult. As another form of totalizing environment, prison often deprives inmates of essential coping skills for the world outside and because of this, like So-So, they experience depression while in custody and while on parole.

This event cements the destructiveness of this false prophet. Regrettably, the group is not as quick to renounce their belief in Norma despite the obstacles. So desperate are they to believe in Norma's power that they create a miracle out of a piece of toast that seems to have Norma's face etched on it, erecting a shrine to venerate the icon. Meanwhile, Norma sits serenely nearby. When Poussey, a member of the cult, finds out that the other cult members have built a shrine to Norma from the toast, she tells them about So-So: "You took this and turned it into a cult. The whole point was to escape our shitty reality". She then throws the toast on the floor, saying, "Miracles aren't real and you ain't shit" (Episode Eleven, Season Three). Poussey's experience of utter disillusionment is as heartbreaking as it is accurate. Poussey feels used and abused. She confronts the hollow nature of her fantasy with the phrase "miracles aren't real". She blames herself because she was seduced by Norma's power, much like Pennastucky blames herself for being seduced by the guard's charms and candy. She realizes that Norma's appearance of justice is worth less than nothing, in the same way that Pennastucky loses all faith in patriarchal protection. In short, they both confront The Real on both its violent and nihilistic register. What distinguishes the two women, however, is concrete action and compassion. Through such action and compassion, Pennastucky is able to integrate the trauma of The Real, whereas Poussey remains within the fantasy structure of penetrative violence.

As Healey (2011, p.17) found through interviewing ex- members of new religious movements, the emotions participants can experience upon exit often give them a strong negative bias toward anything positive they may have experienced. Because Poussey placed so much faith in Norma in order to cope with the oppressive context of the prison, Norma's hypocrisy is especially jarring. Poussey believed Norma to be different from the male oppressors; she was the miracle that was going to deliver them all. Yet, this miracle was illusory, like the guards' appearance of justice, and their prospect of deliverance seems slight as a result.

In the final episode, chaos spreads in the prison, since maintenance workers leave a portion of the fence open. After a walk out of full-time staff, the prisoners are able to run to freedom through the fence. It is Norma that first sees the opening and runs through it to the lake. Yet she fails to actually "cleanse herself". She stops at the sand as the others run into the water. For everyone but Norma this moment is a kind of baptism: the women have a moment of happiness, and they endeavor to make themselves clean. Norma's failed attempt at redemption reinforces the fact that she is a pharisaic religio-political leader, and salvation is nowhere near at hand for the women of *Orange Is the New Black*. Thus, both she and the other women satisfy Brecht's criteria for tragic characters. They are women constrained by unjust social circumstances. What makes them modern tragic figures, however, is the way in which the audience identification, both with and against them, is disrupted by the collapsing parallel disciplinary systems of Norma's movement and the correctional system. As the women and the

audience lose faith in Norma and the liberatory potential she seems to represent, so too do we also lose faith in the criminal justice system. Both Norma and the prison guards exercise power that is unjust, coercive, and empty. Hence, the audience is implicated in the enjoyment of both. This revelation of our true enjoyment is a manifestation of Žižek's interpretation of Lacan's dyadic Real, which is extremely violent and meaningless. In confronting this Real, however, one begins to destabilize ideology.

4. Feminine equality as an antidote

In contrast to Norma's inauthenticity, the audience is introduced to the story of Boo, how she comes into her lesbian identity, how her identity is opposed by her parents, and how her quest for autonomy — and resulting loneliness — leads her to prison. As I will discuss below, Norma does not defend what she believes in in a constructive way; she does not foster female equality, and she is ultimately selfish. To make a very concrete comparison, Boo is perhaps the loudest and most brazen character on the show, whereas Norma is silent and falsely meek. A central plotline of Season Three is the developing friendship between Boo and Pennastucky. This is an unlikely friendship because Pennastucky is a stereotypical "white trash" woman recovering heroin addict, who used substances to cope with her past trauma of sexual abuse and guilt over having abortions. It is also unlikely because Pennastucky developed a strident evangelical identity, in part as a response to her life's difficult circumstances (Episode One, Season Three). The writers of *Orange Is the New Black* create quite an odd couple, in order to demonstrate how feminine kindness can transcend imposed societal divisions and histories of oppression. Unlike the members of the nascent cult of Norma, Boo teams up with Pennastucky to resist patriarchy directly. Pennastucky reveals that she receives funds from pro-life advocates because she is in prison for being an accidental martyr for abortions. Boo realizes that if she pretends to be a 'lesbian on the road to recovery,' (Episode Four, Season Three) she could gain money from 'sympathetic' Christians.

After much preparation and effort, however, Boo cannot hide her true lesbian identity. She is unable to withstand the derogatory comments of the minister from whom she has requested funds on her road to recovery. He calls her a "thieving dyke" and tells her she must cover up her butch tattoo. Justly enraged she says, "Corinthians 69— suck my big fat dyke dick! You fucking hateful piece of shit, fuck you"; furthermore, as she is escorted out by the guard, she says, "Jesus was a fag, he said this is my body eat me" (Episode Four, Season Three). Though this incident is unapologetically vulgar and seemingly heterosexist, it is important to the plot of the show and the Norma cult because Boo, at least in this season, is the only character to explicitly resist patriarchy by queering it with lesbian feminism.

Rather than being passive like Norma and her followers, Boo appropriates the phallus for herself. She also points out the hypocrisy of institutionalized heterosexism and violence perpetrated against women, by calling attention to the rather queer and/or feminine aspects of the Christian god, comparing communion with Jesus to fellatio. She challenges the Christian cult of the patriarchal God and its historical legitimation of sexual violence. She refuses to participate in the cult(ure) of sexual

assault that characterize much of prison life, and she, therefore, resists what Rich (1980) calls compulsory heterosexuality, in favor of an authentically political lesbian existence. Whereas Norma and her followers female homosociality ultimately instantiate their subjugation, Boo denounces the rape of patriarchy. Her renunciation of the rape cult(ure) and its connection to prison life is made painfully clear in her response to Pennastucky's confession that she was assaulted by a prison guard. Rather than waiting for a female or male messiah to save her, Boo takes direct action, both for her own well-being and to defend those whom she loves.

4.1. Breaking the cult of violence

Alongside the progress of the prisoners in overcoming their psychological trauma by dint of the cult of Norma, as well as more appropriate therapeutic care, there are much darker things on the horizon. In particular, Pennastucky is befriended by an inexperienced prison guard, who takes obvious delight in the authority he has over her body. Sadly, this unhealthy dynamic escalates, and the prison guard perpetrates a brutal sexual assault (Episode Ten, Season Three).

After this sexual assault, Pennastucky experiences waves of depression, anger, self-blame, and guilt. Someone she trusted and believed would save her from the violence of the prison abused this faith in the worst way possible. Thus, the show makes an oblique analogy between the cult of Norma and sexual assault. The guard gives Pennastucky candy and donuts; Norma is associated with narcotics. The guard exploits his power through coercion and humiliation; and Norma does likewise. Similar to the way in which the prison guards use the threat of solitary confinement to maintain control, Norma uses the threat of social ostracism to induce conformity. The guard attracts a vulnerable member of the prison population; Norma purports to liberate those with nowhere left to turn.

Initially, Pennastucky has difficulty understanding that what had happened to her was rape, since the guard feigns kindness toward her by giving her candy and other incentives. Eventually, however, Boo helps Pennastucky realize this through a staged lesbian advance under the same pretext. As the two continued to bond and gain self-confidence, they plot to drug and anally rape the offending prison guard with assorted phallic objects.

Yet in a display of humanity, when their plans come to fruition, they are unable to complete the act. They jointly decide that repaying violence with violence is not the best solution; for then they would become like their oppressor(s). Boo and Pennastucky, therefore, work together to discover a feminine strength that does not resort to violence against men and or horizontal violence against other women: Pennastucky begins the series as a strident caricature of a 'white trash' evangelical, vehemently opposed to same-sex eroticism, but the conservative Christian comes to see the humanity of those identifying as lesbian. And we also learn that Boo is not the hard-core and heartless lesbian she pretends to be. As the two friends negotiate their alterity, by means of a nurturing maternal friendship, they both actualize their humanity (Episode Eleven, Season Three).

Whereas Boo and Pennastucky's relationship is communicative and evolving, Norma's relationship with her followers is silent and static. Whereas Boo is selfless and caring, Norma is ultimately self-interested and cold. Whereas Boo and Pennastucky chose to end the cycle of violence, Norma perpetuates it for narcissistic purposes. Boo and Pennastucky's response is a productive way to move forward because they use compassion to overcome the trauma of violence. They are able to confront rape without falling into despair. They take action to remedy their circumstances, and so they end the cycle of male violence. Conversely, Norma becomes enthralled by this fantasy, and so is unable to liberate herself from the cycle of violence.

Conclusion

It is obvious that the show exploits stereotypes of 1960s new religious movements and their followers to construct the cult of Norma. Norma is a shy girl who is easily brainwashed by a patriarchal figure. It is also quite easy to take the tired Marxian-Freudian tack that Norma's veneration is an analgesic born of neurosis that hides the true reality of her powerlessness in a patriarchal system; for, as I have endeavored to show, the illusory power granted by Norma is always juxtaposed with the brutal realities of heterosexist violence and the exploitation of women by a patriarchal system, in which they experience both vertical and horizontal oppression constantly.

In a television show, such complexity is interesting in itself, but I think something far more subversive is actually being suggested, and that this may serve as a reminder for how to properly appraise new religious movements. It is true that many of the women in the prison committed horrible crimes. This does not, however, diminish their fundamental humanity. Moreover, they are part of a system that has predisposed them to criminal acts. This show is at pains to demonstrate that there is a potential criminal in every person, and that a significant number of American women have to negotiate this risk amid poverty and violence. If this is true, prison is a violent patriarchal cult, opposed to Norma's matriarchal movement. And, if this is true, the audience is placed in an ambiguous relationship of criticism and complicity when they watch the television show.

I have argued that cult is an ideological word with many meanings. Nevertheless, it is the metaphorical key to unlocking the richness of *Orange Is the New Black's* third season. First, it allows us to understand our enjoyment in and oppression by relationships of privilege. The audience can take pleasure in the fact that they are not these women; instead, the audience is comprised of the allegedly middle class viewer who can peer at the inmates' misfortune from the comfort his chosen device. Second, it allows us to interrogate our worst fears and pleasures regarding prison. Third, it shows how the American Nation-State and, specifically, the prison industrial complex, as one of its major ideological and repressive apparatuses, is implicated in the creation of two of the fantastic subjects that it has traditionally most reviled — the criminal and the cult leader. Though this may seem like a rather depressing message, there is still a glimmer of hope. In contrast to this nihilism, the storyline of Boo and Pennastucky suggests persons who show feminist resilience, and who also demonstrate



compassion and forgiveness, may still temporarily disrupt the cult of patriarchal violence. This disruption may be temporary; nonetheless, it is highly meaningful.

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