Stories from inside

by Kathryn Reklis in the October 16, 2013 issue

This is not Oz," the prison counselor tells Piper Chapman (Taylor Schilling) during her intake interview, referring to the hyperviolent HBO drama on prison life titled Oz. Piper has just entered a low-security women's prison to serve a 15-month sentence for carrying a bag of drug money across an international border ten years earlier. She is a blond, naive, thirtysomething Smith graduate from an upper-class New England family; she does not fit the usual image of a prison inmate.

As the counselor's quip suggests, the Netflix series *Orange Is the New Black*, which follows Piper's story behind bars (and is loosely based on Piper Kerman's memoir of the same name), does not fit any stereotypes about prison dramas. It is so refreshing, honest, gritty, funny and moving that "prison drama" is hardly the right category.

That is not to say that the show makes light of prison or the difficulties of life "inside." Since we first see this world through Piper's eyes, what strikes her strikes us too: the invasion of privacy at every level, the loss of freedom (in simple things like when to shower and in more profound things like how long you can hug a visitor) and the reduction of a life story to a last name.

Piper encounters these hardships, and her fellow inmates, with trepidation and occasional panic. But even in her fearful uncertainty, she wears her race and class privilege like a protective cloak.

At times that privilege is visible to all: prison staff assign her lighter workloads and appoint her to special committees. More often it is expressed through her incredulity: nothing in her life has prepared her to be monitored and controlled by powers beyond herself, and she is baffled, if not outraged, to be subjected to such treatment now. She enters prison like an anthropologist or a college senior on a "service week"—believing that with enough determination and a positive attitude, she can survive among the natives.

Because Piper's story is the entry point and common thread weaving through the series, we cannot help pitying her struggles and cheering her on as she navigates this strange world, even as we are aware of her naïveté and sense of entitlement.

But the show would get very old quickly if it only chronicled the disequilibrium of a "Martha-Stewart-in-prison" experience. Luckily for us, it is a brilliant ensemble narrative peopled by women of every age, class, race and background.

Borrowing the successful structure of *Lost*, each week the show flashes back in time to tell an inmate's story. One week we see how social ostracism turned an immigrant housewife into "Red" (Kate Mulgrew), the Russian inmate who rules the prison kitchen with an iron fist. The next episode considers how a transgendered woman's wife and son struggle to accept her transition. Another installment features a middle-aged Haitian woman who will do anything to protect the young Haitian and Dominican girls who work for her cleaning service, since she herself was sold into domestic labor by her impoverished family. Piper's is just one of many stories, and often the least interesting.

Orange made me viscerally aware of how much race and class function as tokens in most of my weekly viewing. The frank discussion of race by different inmates is unlike anything I've seen on television. Perhaps these conversations work on the show because they are also far funnier than such conversations tend to be: in a recent episode, two black inmates do a hilarious parody of white yuppie recreation.

With zany, often irreverent comedy, the show manages to critique the prison-industrial complex without sounding preachy. Offhand remarks are made about the inconsistency of sentencing ("a crack dealer gets nine months, and a woman who

accidentally hit the mailman with her car gets four years") and the mandatory sentencing under drug laws. (Piper herself pleaded to 15 months because a judge would have had no choice but to sentence her to seven years if she had been convicted in court.) But the most powerful critique comes in the storytelling itself.

Our penal system depends on assigning an ontological status to "criminals," reducing them to some state of being different from those of us on the outside. *Orange* reminds us that every woman behind bars is also a mother, daughter, sister, wife, aunt or friend. An inmate is the product of forces and circumstances beyond her control but also a creative improviser struggling in and against those circumstances.

Most of these improvisations in *Orange* are devised by the women to survive the dehumanizing circumstances of institutionalization itself—which can be disgusting (Piper is sent a tampon sandwich when she steps out of proper prison decorum), hilarious (the auditions for the annual Christmas pageant are worth the series alone) or moving (women donate food and "toilet hooch" to grieving friends when one inmate dies)—and often all three.

If *Orange* isn't *Oz*, it is not *The Shawshank Redemption* either. That is to say, it is not about being trapped in a flawed system or about the ability of the human spirit to rise above the constraints of evil. It is about a lot of flawed women caught in a flawed system, all trying, in the words of womanist theologian Delores Williams, to "make a way out of no way."

Watching these women navigate their lives behind bars together suggests that one way they "make a way" is by insisting on their own and each other's humanity. It is a privilege and a joy to affirm that humanity with them.