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“Locked Up and Left Out:” A Critical Analysis of the Representation of Asian American Characters in Orange is the New Black

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Michel Yannick Kindler BEd

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Ass.-Prof. Mag. Dr. Maria Katharina Wiedlack

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1. Introduction

In modern society, people are frequently categorized into groups based on social categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and class. These classifications often lead to hierarchies that significantly affect an individual's social standing. The media, particularly film and television, can have a significant influence on these structures by portraying certain narratives that either reinforce or challenge them. Ever since the emergence of Netflix in 2007, streaming platforms have changed traditional television by making diverse narratives more accessible and visible. With promoted genre categories such as “Strong Black Leads,” “United in Pride,” and “Featuring a Strong Female Lead,” as well as Netflix original series such as *The Queen’s Gambit* (Scott Frank, Netflix 2019) and *Sex Education* (Laurie Nunn, Netflix 2019-2023), the streaming service seems to be increasing the representation of diversity by including the stories of characters of various ethnic, sexual, and gender identities “who are otherwise under- or misrepresented in the media” (Builder).

One Netflix original series that is said to symbolize a radical shift in the portrayal of women on television is *Orange is the New Black*, which tells the story of and is based on the 2010 autobiography of Piper Chapman titled *Orange Is The New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison*. The seven-season show was created and produced by Jenji Kohan and Liz Friedmann and released to the streaming service in 2013. Since its release, the series has been widely recognized for its influence on the portrayal of women on television. In fact, it has frequently been called “the most important TV show of the decade” (Berman), having “changed female narratives” (Bernstein) and “is unprecedented and downright groundbreaking for such a popular series,” as it is “comprised of an all-female cast that also shows rich intersectional diversity in terms of race and sexuality” and “challenges the normal hegemonic idea of whiteness and heterosexuality” (C. Kim 78). The series features a wide range of African American and Latin American characters, who all seem to defy stereotypes and ethnic tropes and are portrayed in a “refreshingly complex spectrum,” which is “rare and unparalleled for a popular television show” (C. Kim 78).

The popular television series follows Piper Chapman, a white woman in her early thirties who committed a drug trafficking crime ten years prior and is sentenced to 15 months in Litchfield Federal Penitentiary, an all-female minimum-security prison. *Orange is the New Black* reflects the experiences, obstacles, and difficulties that Piper Chapman faces in prison. In addition to Piper Chapman’s story of imprisonment, almost every episode also features a flashback to the life stories of the main supporting characters before their time in prison and what led to their

incarceration. While Piper Chapman is the main character and narrator of the story that follows her incarceration, many other characters also have significant and complex roles. In fact, the producer, Jenji Kohan, describes Piper Chapman as a “trojan horse” (Kohan qtd. in P. Gupta). This means that the producer uses Piper Chapman to attract a larger audience, even though her character is not the series’ selling point. However, the fact that the series relies on a white, upper-middle-class woman to present the more significant problems of various ethnicities is already problematic in itself and is critically examined in this work.

Nevertheless, there is a remarkable ethnic diversity in the cast of Netflix’s *Orange is the New Black* and the series manages to rethink the representation of various characters of different ethnicities. One ethnicity, however, seems to be neglected in *Orange is the New Black*, and is said to be included only for the sake of ridicule and the amusement of the viewer (C. Kim 78). Asian American characters, of whom there are only two in the entire series, appear to have been created solely based on racist stereotypes. Various articles claim that “the only two Asian inmates [...] are, at best, underdeveloped, and at worst, common stereotypes of Asian women in popular media” (Builder). The series allegedly portrays the ethnicity in question by reinforcing existing stereotypes and not giving its Asian American characters roles as significant as those of other ethnicities. Despite rethinking female gender issues and shattering various stereotypes of different ethnicities, *Orange is the New Black* is accused of upholding racist tropes towards Asian Americans, as it “reinforces racist ideologies through its poor representations of [said ethnicity]” (C. Kim 78). To determine whether these claims are substantiated, it is necessary to analyze the history of Asian and Asian American representation within US American media to understand how past stereotypes have influenced contemporary representations and whether *Orange is the New Black* reinforces or challenges these patterns.

The marginalization of Asians and Asian Americans in the media is not an isolated issue but is rooted in a long history of systemic exclusion and racial prejudice. The institutionalized discrimination against Asian immigrants in the history of the United States of America can be traced back as far as the 19th century. The first significant example is the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to 1960. This law not only contributed to the growing anti-Chinese sentiment in the United States of America but also led to a legacy of discrimination against Asian Americans in general (Ramasubramanian 3). This institutionalized discrimination was further fueled by “World War II propaganda against Japan, especially after the Pearl Harbor attacks,” which led to “a peak in anti-Japanese feelings” (Ramasubramanian 3) as well as laws that prohibited interracial marriages between people of Asian descent and white Americans, such as the 1917

Immigration Act. This legal discrimination had a significant influence on the persistence of various stereotypes, such as the Perpetual Foreigner who will never properly integrate into American society.

However, this trend of discrimination and stereotyping is not limited to areas such as politics and law. In fact, Hollywood and the television industry have significantly contributed to the creation and reinforcement of stereotyping against Asians and Asian Americans. The history of stereotypical portrayals of Asians and Asian Americans in Hollywood is marked by a long period of biased representations that have perpetuated harmful stereotypes. These representations have evolved over time, but their impact remains evident in contemporary media. Three of the most persistent representations are those of “the invisible,” “the exotic,” and “the mysterious.” Furthermore, from the “Yellow Peril,” dating back to the late 19th century, to the “Fu Manchu” and “Dragon Lady” stereotypes in the early 1930s, Asians and Asian Americans have been portrayed through a limited set of recurring stereotypes. These stereotypes have heavily influenced the portrayal of Asians and Asian Americans in the media and shaped perceptions over time. The following sections analyze these stereotypical representations in detail and explore their development and persistence in film and television.

One of the most common ways the media misrepresents Asians and Asian Americans is through invisibility. While minorities have always been rendered invisible due to their underrepresentation in both Hollywood films and television, there has been an upward trend toward increasingly positive representations of ethnic and racial minorities since the beginning of the 21st century. African Americans, for example, “seem to be the one nonwhite group to have overcome the marginalization on network television” (Tung 89) as well as the film industry with highly successful movies such as *Black Panther* (2018) and *Get Out* (2017) as well as shows such as *Atlanta* (Dan Glover, *FX* 2016-2022) and *Insecure* (Issa Rae, *HBO* 2016-2021). However, while African Americans seem to have gained great significance in film and television, “Asians or Asian Americans are often left out in the picture and seem ‘invisible’ most of the time” (Tung 89). According to a major study that analyzed 1300 popular American films from 2007 to 2019, only 7,2% of speaking characters were of Asian descent, while 65,7% were white and 15,7% were black. Furthermore, only 3,6% of the directors were Asian or Asian American (Smith 15-23). When Asians and Asian Americans do appear in film and television, they are still “invisible in narratives [...] playing trivial roles without much depth or substance” (Ramasubramanian 4) and are often confined to portraying “a limited range of media figures who resemble their physical features, and when these figures/characters do exist they are usually villains, martial artists,

submissive, gardeners, restaurant workers, and convenience store owners with a thick accent” (Iwamoto and Liu 214).

When Asians and Asian Americans are represented on screen, however, they are often portrayed as exoticized figures, an idea that is mainly applied to Asian and Asian American women, defining them as “foreign and out of the ordinary” but “having the charm of the unfamiliar” (Aoki and Mi 430). This stereotype not only objectifies Asian and Asian American women but also reinforces the idea that they exist primarily for Western consumption. It is a stereotype that turns Asian American women into a spectacle (Lu 44), is frequently fetishized, and depicts them as sexually desirable, passive, submissive, compliant, and eager to please (Abrams 30), leading to the “widespread perception of Asian women as inherently, exotically sexual” (Yamamoto 50). Due to this, a way to “achieve acceptance and recognition in Western cultures is to fit into [the] ultra-feminine, exotic, and hypersexual ideal,” meaning that Asian and Asian American women achieving “Americanization” is often seen as “being possible only through exoticization” (Kawamura and Rice 543). Film and television have contributed to the creation of this image of Asian and Asian American women and promoted the cinematic misrepresentation of Asian and Asian American women as exotic by reinforcing stereotypes such as the “China Doll” and the “Lotus Blossom” (Lu 16ff), which will be explained in more detail in this thesis.

Similar to the exotic image of Asians and Asian Americans, another frequent portrayal in the media is the idea of the mysterious Asian. “Because Asian people and their cultures seem so different from that of white America, writers have often exploited the unknown aspects of the community to paint them as mysterious beings – sometimes with strange, unexplained powers” (Aoki and Mio 426). This portrayal often overlaps with the perception of Asians as a foreign threat and reinforces longstanding fears and anxieties. This concept of Asians as mysterious has been significantly influenced by a novel titled *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu* (1913), which marks the beginning of the “Fu Manchu” stereotype used in film and television, which reinforces the trope of the “Yellow Peril.” The Yellow Peril is a stereotype that “may be traced back to the fifth century (BCE), in the ways that the Greeks [were afraid of] the Persian [invasion]” (Yang 12) and therefore viewed them as a foreign threat. Over time, this fear of an invading “other” was directed against East Asians, especially in the late 19th century, as Western fear of Chinese and Japanese immigration increased (Yang 13).

The influence of these stereotypes extends into the entertainment industry, where Hollywood, for example, has shaped the portrayal of Asians and Asian Americans in film and television for decades. By reinforcing these stereotypes, the Hollywood film industry has not only limited the

opportunities and roles of Asian and Asian American actors and actresses (Paner 10) but has also contributed significantly to the marginalization of Asian and Asian American characters in films. The Hollywood film industry paved the way for the television industry, as various issues such as underrepresentation and typecasting, as well as stereotypes such as the “Perpetual Foreigner” or “Model Minority,” have been present in US television since the late 19th century.

Given this historical background, it is important to analyze how these patterns continue in contemporary media. In the following chapters, I closely analyze how race, gender, sexuality, and class of Asians and Asian American women are negotiated and portrayed in *Orange is the New Black*, a series that is considered groundbreaking and a complete turning point in the representation of various ethnicities, sexual orientations, and genders. While the series has been praised for challenging common representations of race and gender, various authors claim that its portrayal of Asian and Asian American characters reflects a longstanding pattern of misrepresentation that renders them invisible, exotic, or mysterious- tropes that have historically shaped their presence in US media.

In order to explore this topic in-depth, my thesis analyzes the portrayal of four key characters from various ethnicities regarding categories such as gender, sexuality, class, and race and highlights the similarities and differences in their representation. More specifically, the two Asian American characters “Mei Chang” and “Brook Soso,” as well as the white American character “Piper Chapman” and the African American character “Poussey Washington” are critically analyzed and contrasted. The white American and African American characters were chosen because they often appear and interact with the two Asian American characters in the series. By analyzing various key scenes from the series in which the characters of different ethnicities engage with each other, the work also explores how the Asian American characters are co-constructed with the white American and the African American characters.

Additionally, one of the two female Asian American characters in *Orange is the New Black* exhibits character traits typically associated with Asian and Asian American men, which raises even more questions about the gender and racial dynamics of the show. Therefore, it is important to examine not only the representation of Asian and Asian American women but also the representation of Asian and Asian American men within the same framework. For this reason, I also provide an overview of stereotypes related to Asian and Asian American men and how they are portrayed in *Orange is the New Black*.

Since the social categories of race, gender, sexuality, and class are central to the success of *Orange is the New Black*, and their representation is said to differentiate the series from various

other popular cultural works, my thesis aims to determine whether the claims of misrepresentation and reinforcement of racist ideas mentioned by various scholars are, in fact, valid. I aim to critically interrogate, analyze, and reflect on these representations and shed light on their impact on the ethnic minorities affected.

1.1 Research Questions and Hypotheses

The central research question of this work is “How are Asian American characters represented in *Orange is the New Black*, regarding gender, sexuality, class, race, and identity?” In addition, the following subordinate research questions are addressed, which help to paint a more complex picture of the representation of the Asian American characters in *Orange is the New Black*:

- How are the Asian American characters co-constructed with white American and African American characters?
- How do the Asian American representations differ from the other racialized representations?
- How are the relationships and interactions between Asian American characters and characters of other ethnicities depicted, especially in the context of gender and sexuality?
- Which stereotypes, if any, are applied to Asian American characters, and how do these influence the viewer’s perception?
- How does the representation of Asian American characters challenge or reinforce existing media tropes about Asian Americans?

If the allegations of upholding racist tropes and reinforcing stereotypes mentioned in my introduction can indeed be confirmed within the scope of the analysis of this work, a conclusion is drawn to answer the question of the reasoning behind *Orange is the New Black*’s decision to counteract stereotypes about certain ethnicities and reinforce them about others.

1.2 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into six main chapters, each contributing to the analysis of the representation of Asian and Asian American women in *Orange is the New Black*.

Chapter 2 establishes the theoretical framework and addresses the principles of cultural studies by closely examining and discussing the concepts most relevant to this work: representation, binary categories, and othering. In addition, it provides an overview of typical and stereotypical

media representations of Asians and Asian Americans, which serves as the foundation for understanding how these characters are portrayed in the series.

Chapter 3 focuses on the concept of identity and provides an overview of the social categories that are analyzed and contrasted in this work. In particular, the terms race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class are thoroughly explored and discussed. Since stereotyping and harmful representations are usually not limited to one social category alone, chapter 4 is dedicated to explaining my intersectional approach, which highlights the interconnectedness of these categories and further establishes how “race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other locations of social group membership impact lived experiences and social relations” (Harris and Bartlow 1).

Chapter 5 applies a feminist media analysis to critically analyze how the aforementioned female characters are portrayed in *Orange is the New Black*. In addition, a comparative analysis of the characters is conducted to learn more about how the Asian American characters are co-constructed with the white American and African American characters.

Finally, chapter 6 summarizes the main findings from the individual chapters, provides comprehensive answers to the central research questions, and reflects on the most important findings of the work.

1.3 Positioning

I recognize that as a white, middle-class person of European descent who identifies as male, I am researching a topic with complex and sensitive issues that are outside of my direct experiences, such as the representation of Asian and Asian American women in the media and more general issues of race, ethnicity, and gender. I recognize that these topics are complex and, at times, controversial. Nevertheless, it is highly necessary to discuss them in the context of this work. Therefore, I will approach these categories cautiously and am aware that they may reinforce the stereotypes and images I aim to critique in this work.

Furthermore, I speak about marginalized communities and the power dynamics involved, and I do not claim that I am needed as an advocate. It is not my intention to speak for Asian and Asian American women or any of the other groups addressed in this work. Instead, my goal is to contribute to the discourse about media representations and their potential impact. I discuss the representation of women and the portrayal of different ethnicities to highlight the constructed

nature of representation and encourage viewers to critically assess them without overshadowing marginalized voices.

Additionally, due to the topic of this work, terms such as “black,” “white,” “Asian,” “African American,” “Latin American,” among others, must be used for clarity and comprehensibility. However, I acknowledge the problematic, one-dimensional nature of these terms as they categorize people into simple groups. I am aware of the history of power dynamics and oppression associated with some of these terms and try to use them considerately, critically, and, as previously mentioned, with the acknowledgment of their limitations.

2. The Construction of Meaning and Representation

One field that analyzes how meaning is created, distributed, and interpreted within different societies and helps decipher and understand these systems of meaning is cultural studies. Cultural studies are associated with analyzing and understanding various aspects of culture. Cultural studies scholar Harry M. Benshoff defines the field as the following:

Cultural studies is a series of interrelated concepts exploring cultural texts and contexts more than a divine method or essentialized approach. It is a highly interdisciplinary field, drawing from and giving back to fields as diverse as mass communications, literary studies, sociology, anthropology, ethnography, history, art, and visual culture, as well as more recent fields devoted to thinking about race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in more complex ways (199).

In simpler terms, cultural studies is a dynamic field that analyzes representation in cultural contexts such as film, television, literature, popular culture, and many others. Cultural studies aim to “understand[...] texts within and against their cultural contexts” (Benshoff 198). Its understanding of “text” is very broad and includes film and television. In addition, a cultural studies approach allows for the analysis of the culture that produces and consumes media, as well as the way texts are produced within a specific culture. It is a field that studies people “whose race, class, gender, nationality, etc. render them – and their viewing practices – diverse, multiple, and perhaps most importantly, active” (Benshoff 198). One of the most important critical doctrines of cultural studies regarding the meaning-making of texts in film and television is that “different people make sense of the same media artifacts in different ways, based upon their socio-historical positionings” (Benshoff 198). This means that individuals interpret and understand media differently depending on their social contexts, cultural influences, and experiences.

For example, if an Asian American woman is portrayed with the help of exoticized stereotypes, a white audience will interpret the representation differently than an Asian American audience, as they may not immediately recognize and internalize the harmful stereotypes and therefore might interpret them as humor. In contrast, Asian American audiences who have personally experienced these stereotypes may feel offended by a stereotypical portrayal because it contributes to issues such as racism and discrimination.

Since media representation is a key factor in shaping public perception, it is necessary to examine the theoretical framework that explains how meaning is constructed and shared through media. Stuart Hall, a Jamaican-born British sociologist, cultural theorist, and founding member of cultural studies, has contributed significantly to the concept of representation as we know it today. According to Hall, representation is not a simple reflection of reality but a complex process that involves the construction of meaning (S. Hall 1). Meaning is shared within cultures,

which Hall describes as “the circuit of culture” (S. Hall 1). This circuit of culture is a system that includes five interconnected concepts: representation, regulation, identity, consumption, and production - each representing a distinct aspect of the cultural process.

Representation involves the production and distribution of meaning through language, which includes signs, symbols, and images in addition to words and phrases. This includes how things, people, and ideas are represented in cultural contexts such as media, art, and literature. Identity is the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others. It explores how social categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality are constructed, negotiated, and ultimately attributed to people, groups, or objects. Production refers to how meaning is encoded or created by producers, institutions, and industries. In contrast, consumption refers to how the consumer decodes or understands the meaning created in this dual process. Regulation includes various institutions and practices that control cultural production and consumption, such as laws, regulations, and policies (Champ and Brooks 574ff).

These five interrelated concepts work in a continuous loop, allowing for the analysis of cultural contexts. Representation defines through language “how things and concepts are different or similar to other things” (Champ and Brooks 575) and highlights that language is a dynamic concept that is subject to change over time. The constantly evolving nature of language also underlines its influence on cultural perceptions and identities. Therefore, language can be understood as a representational system that assists in both constructing and understanding meanings. The signs and symbols of a language can be sounds, written texts, films, and even objects, and they represent the concepts, ideas, and feelings about a particular topic (S. Hall 1). Similarly, culture is “a set of things – novels and paintings or TV programmes and comics” and is primarily concerned with “the production and the exchange of meanings – the ‘giving and taking of meaning’ – between the members of a society or group” (S. Hall 2). Two individuals can be considered to belong to the same culture if they share a common set of values, practices, and understandings of the world, which enables them to understand each other’s ideas, thoughts, and feelings. These ideas are created through a system of encoding and decoding. Encoding is the process of representing a person or an idea, using language to express the meaning of the producer. Decoding, on the other hand, is “the [...] process of unravelling certain meanings” (S. Hall 166) and, therefore, the interpretation of meaning. The decoded meaning relies heavily on the already internalized perception of the person or idea represented. Since this process is influenced by experiences, it has a significant influence on how stereotypes are either reinforced

or challenged. This means that “concepts and memories of experiences that are special to individuals help dictate how dominant ideas of the world come into being” (Yang 11), which can be positive but also harmful in the form of stereotyping, bias, and prejudice.

Cultural studies analyses often build their methodology around Stuart Hall’s concept of encoding and decoding of meaning in research on film and television. Expanding on this idea, Harry M. Benshoff argues that “whoever controls the meaning(s) of certain ideas or terms, controls the debate and shapes public understanding in accordance with their political aims” (198). This idea highlights the power dynamics that are present in the production of meaning and emphasizes how cultural narratives are shaped by those in control of the representations. In regards to media, this means that, since meaning is subject to power relations, media creators and directors have a significant impact on the portrayal of narratives, symbols, and themes that shape the discourse around the topic and influence how audiences perceive and understand those ideas. Furthermore, it means that media producers also follow the concept of the circuit of culture and can, therefore, portray a specific idea in various ways.

For example, they may choose to portray an Asian or Asian American character in a way that reinforces existing stereotypes, limits alternative perspectives, and, therefore, influences how audiences internalize and accept these stereotypes as the definitive idea of Asians or Asian Americans. This raises important questions about the relationship between representation and power, especially regarding the responsibility of media producers (Benshoff 199). However, it also means that instead of portraying Asians and Asian Americans with negative stereotypes such as the Yellow Peril, the Dragon Lady, or the Perpetual Foreigner, media producers also have the power to portray Asians and Asian Americans in a positive way that challenges these stereotypes and redefines the narrative. When creating a role, characters are assigned a specific identity related to social categories such as race, gender, class, and sexuality. Depending on that identity, a specific meaning is encoded. If media producers, for example, choose to incorporate negative stereotypes or reinforce negative gender aspects, harmful meanings are created. This meaning is then decoded through comparison with prior knowledge or more general ideas about the represented group and accepted as the primary meaning in this consumer’s culture, whether positive or negative.

Therefore, the media is a powerful outlet for shaping the public’s opinion. The ways in which media producers navigate these interconnected concepts in the circuit of culture determines the meaning that is then “defined in the broader society about Asians and Asian Americans” and can ultimately “become part of the public cognition and understanding” (Yang 11).

2.1 Binary Oppositions and Othering

Binary oppositions and othering are two important concepts that highlight the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in a cultural context and serve as a framework for understanding representation in the media. According to Stuart Hall, “meanings are often organized into sharply opposed binaries” (10). This suggests that these dichotomies are pervasive, ranging from simple distinctions such as good and bad, rich and poor, and young and old to more complex oppositions.

A prime example of this is the concept of othering, which describes the binary relationship between “self” and “other.” Othering has repeatedly been done in the past, most notably in the concept of Orientalism, in which the West not only distanced itself from the East but also defined its identity in opposition to it. This constructed opposition was not simply a descriptive contrast but was used as a way for the West to highlight their superiority over the East. The West achieved this by emphasizing the binary contrasts between them and the East. In particular, the West was portrayed as progressive, rational, and civilized, whereas the East was portrayed as primitive, irrational, and barbaric (Gabriel and Wilson 1f). Without the concept of the Orient, which delineated what the West was not, there would be no concept of the West.

Meanings, therefore, emerge from binary oppositions. However, as Stuart Hall notes, “these binaries are constantly [changing], as representations interact with one another, substituting for each other, displacing one another along an unending chain” (10). It is crucial to recognize that these binary oppositions are dynamic to understand that meanings are not limited to binaries but can go beyond simplistic dichotomies. “However, humans easily fall into the suspicion of oversimplifying the subtle and not-so-subtle differences within the broad range of the poles” (Yang 7), which can lead to harmful consequences. This use of the binaries “self” and “other” oversimplifies the cultural complexity of different ethnicities, cultures, nations, and other communities. It imposes fixed representations and characteristics on these groups, which are often inaccurate since binary distinctions are never neutral and far from representing the full spectrum of human identity (Yang 7). This can lead to certain dangerous hierarchies and a lot of suffering and misery, as has often been the case in historical contexts, such as the opposition of “white,” which represents the superior and ideal “self,” and “Black,” which represents the inferior and different “other,” among other examples.

Furthermore, the concepts of binary oppositions and othering also play a significant role in media representation, where stereotypical media images often portray the “other” as inferior, which negatively affects various ethnic groups, including Asians, Asian Americans, African

Americans, Latin Americans, Native Americans, and many more. This trend in media representation has serious consequences, as it shapes public perception and reinforces prejudices. In fact, the issue is evident “throughout the US history [...] in kinds of expressions, fictions, films, and TVs [which] helped enforce the power and the ways [...] of the white and their established institutions” (Yang 8).

2.2 Medial Representations of Asians and Asian Americans

Applying the theoretical framework of representation discussed in the previous chapters allows for examining how these concepts are reflected in the specific context of Asian and Asian American media representations. The stereotyping of Asians and Asian Americans in the media highlights the impact of representations on audience perceptions and illustrates how stereotypes can shape experiences and attitudes. To properly analyze the medial representation of Asians and Asian Americans, it is essential to clarify the concept of stereotyping, as “the terms stereotype, prejudice, discrimination and racism [are often used] interchangeably” (Aoki and Mio 422). Despite their thematic overlap, these terms have different meanings and implications and, therefore, require clear definitions to ensure proper application.

My thesis primarily focuses on the concept of stereotypes, which is the most commonly discussed aspect among the four concepts relevant to this topic. “Stereotypes are widely-accepted, culturally shared beliefs describing personal traits and characteristics of groups of individuals” (Ramasubramanian 2), meaning that people have specific thoughts about other individuals that result from categorizing them into specific and recognizable groups. Therefore, stereotypes are the assumption that people belong to a particular group based on shared characteristics. An example of this would be saying “that Asians tend to be shorter than Whites [as] a statement of fact,” disregarding that there is “a wide variation within each group, as there are some tall Asians [...] and some short whites [...]” (Aoki and Mio 422).

Stereotypes can be perceived as both positive and negative but more often tend to have negative connotations. While some may argue that certain stereotypes can be good, the idea is problematic in itself. As Paner explains, “positive” stereotypes often only “disguise [themselves] as positive and well-meaning, but [are] ultimately meant to maintain white supremacy” (Paner 25) and divide individuals from one another. Some claim, however, that stereotypes can sometimes be perceived as positive, as they may elicit “feelings of respect and admiration from others” (Gupta et al. 2). Yet, even the seemingly positive stereotypes are often associated with unfavorable characterizations. One example of a stereotype that is typically framed as “positive” in film

and television is the portrayal of Asians and Asian Americans as a “Model Minority,” which is discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Therefore, “seemingly positive racial stereotypes” still define a group in only one dimension and can “reinforce racial hierarchies while undermining support for race-targeted policies” (Ramasubramanian 2) and “negatively affect [individuals’] psychological well-being” (Nguyen Do 5).

Negative stereotypes, on the other hand, often have a lasting impact on individuals, leading to “cultural and social negative effects and contributing to feelings of inferiority” (Nagaraj and Wen 3). Furthermore, “negative stereotypes of racial/ethnic out-groups are used to justify white superiority” (Ramasubramanian 2) and “promote an ideology that validates certain practices toward racial minorities” (Johnson 1). Therefore, regardless of whether stereotypes are framed as positive or negative, they ultimately serve to reinforce racial structures that disadvantage marginalized groups.

The concept of prejudice is closely related to the term stereotype, as they both share a common conceptual basis but differ significantly. Prejudice refers to “a bias against or in favor of a group of people based upon that group’s categorization” (Aoki and Mio 423), which means having a predisposition for or against certain groups. While stereotypes express generalized beliefs about a group of individuals, prejudice refers to the attitudes toward that group. Prejudiced behavior involves judging the individuals within a group not based on their actions but rather on ideas and assumptions about the group. An example of prejudice would be to say that “Asian/Asian American students are seen to be good in mathematics” and therefore assume “that these [individuals] can[not] excel in subjects other than mathematics” (Aoki and Mio 423).

Furthermore, stereotypes and prejudice are closely related because “a person who endorses Asian-American stereotypes would seek out information that supports their prejudiced perspectives” (Ramasubramanian 20) while ignoring any views that contradict their beliefs. In addition, prejudice can change a positive trait into a negative one. For example, when being good at mathematics is attributed as a natural talent, it may lead to a lack of recognition of individual achievements, as previously mentioned. This highlights how “neutral” or “positive” stereotypes can develop into harmful prejudices. Therefore, prejudice is a preconceived opinion that is often based on stereotypes and without any actual experience, and often leads to discrimination, inequality, and social division (Aoki and Mio 423).

Discrimination is another concept closely connected to stereotypes. Discrimination is defined as “behavior toward people based upon their categorization” (Aoki and Mio 423). These cate-

gories often revolve around social constructs such as race, gender, class, or sexuality, and discriminatory actions typically involve unfair or unequal treatment. Although discrimination can sometimes occur without intent, more frequently, it is an intentional behavior (Aoki and Mio 423). A recent example of discrimination against a social group occurred in the United States of America during the COVID-19 pandemic, where Asian Americans were blamed for the alleged creation and spread of the virus, resulting in verbal abuse, harassment, and physical violence towards many of the groups' individuals (Gover et al. 647), regardless of their origin.

The main difference between discrimination and the concepts of stereotype and prejudice is that “while stereotypes and prejudice occur entirely within the mind and do not directly affect others, discrimination does” (Aoki and Mio 423). Nevertheless, discrimination is closely linked to both stereotypes and prejudice, and together, the concepts form “a triad of connected attitudes, beliefs, and actions” (Spencer), with discrimination being based on beliefs, which in turn are based on stereotypes and prejudice.

Racism is the fourth critical concept to address in the realms of biased tendencies towards social communities. It is defined as “the institutionalized mistreatment of people based upon their classification in a racial/ethnic group on the downside of power” (Aoki and Mio 423). This means that racism is a systematic and empowered form of discrimination. However, it is important to distinguish between institutional and structural racism. Institutional racism refers to institutions such as government, law enforcement, and workplaces, whereas structural racism goes beyond institutions and also includes societal structures (Braveman et al. 172). Institutionalized racism against Asians and Asian Americans could be seen, for example, when the United States government declared that “American citizens of Japanese descent were enemies of the country [after Pearl Harbor] and [gave the order] to incarcerate them for the duration of the war unless they were willing to join the US Armed Forces for the war effort” (Aoki and Mio 423f). In contrast, structural racism is evident in Hollywood's history in the absence of Asian and Asian American lead roles with individuality, depth, and development. This lack of representation reinforces stereotypes and limits the visibility of Asians and Asian Americans, contributing to structural discrimination in the media.

Emphasizing the differences between stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and racism highlights their impact on Asians and Asian Americans and illustrates a spectrum from general beliefs to systemic oppression. Stereotypes divide complex individuals into simplistic categories; prejudice conveys biased attitudes; discrimination translates this bias into actions; and racism institutionalizes discrimination within power structures. These concepts provide the foundation

for analyzing Asian and Asian American media portrayals in three specific themes: invisibility, exoticness, and mysteriousness.

2.2.1 Invisibility

The origins of the invisibility of Asians and Asian Americans are deeply rooted in a system of prejudice and stereotypes, with the Perpetual Foreigner stereotype being particularly influential. This stereotype portrays Asian Americans “as fundamentally foreign individuals who will never fully assimilate into the American society” (Abrams 29), meaning that “members of ethnic minorities will always be seen as the ‘other’ in the white Anglo-Saxon dominant society of the United States” (Huynh et al. 133), regardless of their American upbringing or the length of their residency in the United States of America. The Perpetual Foreigner stereotype “was created by and for powerful white men in an attempt to maintain their privilege and dominance in US society,” and “media outlets assisted in the transmission of this message, including Hollywood movies” (Foster 118-119). As a result, “Asian Americans are often overlooked in their right to civic participation” (Lee et al. 76) and, despite being born in the United States of America, are often confronted with questions about their origin or comments about their flawless English.

This stereotype is further reinforced by Hollywood’s portrayal of Asian and Asian American characters. Hollywood writers, producers, and directors have played a significant role in constructing and reinforcing the negative stereotype of the Perpetual Foreigner. This is evident, for example, when “Asian American actors [and actresses] that grew up in the United States and therefore do not have Asian accents [are asked by] Hollywood writers, producers, and directors [...] to use them” (Aoki and Mio 424). This practice causes audiences to associate an Asian appearance with the concept of a foreigner “and not usually a sympathetic foreigner, either” (Aoki and Mio 424). The stereotype is often perpetuated to use the Asian or Asian American character as a source of humor, portraying them as a “bewildered immigrant who does not know what is going on around him or a victim to feel sorry for” (Aoki and Mio 424), reinforcing simplistic and demeaning caricatures.

A television example of this is *2 Broke Girls* (James Burrows, CBS 2011-2017), “one of television’s most popular sitcoms” (Xu), in which Han Lee, a Korean immigrant who owns the diner where the protagonists work, is portrayed in the most stereotypical way possible: He speaks with a strong accent, and his English skills are often the subject of jokes. Additionally, he is portrayed as non-threatening, submissive, and lacking authority. Finally, the character frequently appears as not understanding and adapting to the American culture, making him the

subject of ridicule. Therefore, the character is constantly the target of humor as he represents “the epitome of the ‘Perpetual Foreigner’ trope that many Asian-American actors cannot escape from” (Xu).

However, it is not only through character portrayal that the invisibility of Asians and Asian Americans in the media is maintained but also through certain casting practices. The stereotype of the Perpetual Foreigner, for example, is reinforced through the practice of “yellowface” in film and television, where non-Asian actors and actresses dress up and wear makeup to appear Asian. This practice is an example of how the media contributes to the invisibility of Asians and Asian Americans. Casting white actors in Asian roles not only misrepresents Asian cultures but also denies Asian actors and actresses the opportunity to tell their own stories. This is particularly harmful as it “helps support and maintain a condition of unequal power relations between whites and Asians and Asian Americans” as well as “maintaining dominant media power and blurring the ethnic and cultural differences among Asian and Asian American groups” (Ono and Pham 46). In addition, the use of yellowface suggests that Asians and Asian Americans can be represented without actually being Asian, which further reinforces the invisibility and stereotyping of Asians and Asian Americans in the media.

This practice was prevalent “in early twentieth-century Hollywood,” when “Asians and Asian Americans were not ordinarily given jobs in Hollywood, and Asian and Asian American characters were scarce. When such characters did exist, a convention of yellowface ensured that they were played primarily by whites” (Ono and Pham 45). Examples of the use of yellowface in film and television are the character of Wang Lung in *The Good Earth* (1937), Dr. Han Suyin in *Love is a Many Splendored Thing* (1955), and Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961). However, this practice is not limited to early Hollywood films, as it is also practiced in contemporary productions. More recent uses of yellowface include the cast of *How I Met Your Mother* (Pamela Fryman, CBS 2005-2015), who wore a Fu Manchu mustache and stereotypical clothing, as well as Hollywood actress Scarlett Johansson portraying the character Motoko Kusanagi in the adaption of the Japanese manga *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) (Ono and Pham 50).

Adding to the already complex misrepresentation of Asians and Asian Americans is the persistence of stereotypes associated with Asian and Asian American men, which further reinforce their invisibility. Understanding the stereotypes about Asian and Asian American men is crucial for analyzing the representation of Asian American women in media, as female characters sometimes adopt traits associated with Asian male stereotypes, which is also the case in *Orange is the New Black*.

The stereotype of Asian and Asian American men as emasculated is rooted in a long history of “marginalization and alienation that has shaped contemporary constructions of Asian American men” (Iwamoto and Liu 216). This stereotype perpetuates the idea that Asian and Asian American men lack traditional masculinity and are instead marginalized as “sexually deviant, asexual, effeminate” (Shek 381). Such stereotypes heavily contribute to the invisibility of Asians and Asian Americans in film and television by promoting portrayals that marginalize Asian male characters as physically weak, submissive, and lacking conventional masculine attributes. This, in turn, leads to a limited range of roles, exclusion, and underrepresentation in leading roles. Furthermore, Asian and Asian American men are often portrayed as “ineffective and impotent – the less-ideal male figure in comparison to the white male exemplar” (Iwamoto and Liu 215), further reinforcing the positive portrayal of their white counterparts.

Similarly, the Model Minority stereotype, while seemingly positive, is actually “not as positive as it appears to be” (Ramasubramanian 5) and is instead described as “extremely misleading and even harmful” (Lee 71). This stereotype suggests that “Asian Americans have achieved enormous economic and academic success by working hard and following cultural norms” and “that Asian Americans have ‘made it’ and no longer face any barriers to economic, social, or political success” (Lee 69). However, this notion creates tension between Asian Americans and other ethnic groups, as it “enforces the erroneous perception that Asian Americans no longer experience racism and discrimination and thus do not need social services like bilingual education, affirmative action, health care, welfare, and so on” (Lee 74). In contrast, the reality is that they have not achieved complete equality with white Americans and continue to face racial prejudice. Additionally, the Model Minority stereotype masks the diversity within the Asian and Asian American communities, as it ignores the specific ethnic sub-groups, hides socioeconomic differences, and presumes a uniform pattern of economic success.

This perception of Asians and Asian Americans not only influences real-world experiences, but also shapes the portrayal of Asians and Asian Americans in the media. In film and television, Asian and Asian American characters are often cast as “geeks” or “tech geniuses,” reinforcing the Model Minority stereotype and limiting character diversity as they tend to fit into specific professional roles and are often “dovetailed with traits such as unsociability and awkwardness” (Ramasubramanian 5). However, this portrayal is not consistent with the actual presence of Asians and Asian Americans in prestigious professions. Although approximately “one of every six physicians in the United States is of Asian descent, [...] Asian American doctors are infrequently seen on network television” (Aoki and Mio 429). This highlights the prejudiced belief

that esteemed professions, such as doctors, are predominantly reserved for white characters to improve their representation in film and television.

2.2.2 The Exotic

Portraying Asians and Asian Americans as exotic in media means representing them as different from the white norm and as intriguing individuals. Such portrayals are typically limited to Asian and Asian American women and often include emphasizing cultural practices and physical appearances. One of the most frequent cinematic representations of Asian and Asian American women as exotic is the Dragon Lady stereotype. The Dragon Lady portrays Asian women “as manipulative sexual beings who seduce white men, then betray them” (Aoki and Mio 435), as “evil, inscrutable, sinister” (C. Hall 198) and aggressive. Therefore, the Dragon Lady symbolizes the “female embodiment of the white society’s fear of Asians and Asian Americans” (Johnson 5) and is frequently used as prejudice when Asian and Asian American women “speak[...] up and [...] express[...] ideas and opinions,” deeming them as “overbearing, demanding, aggressive, and unlikeable” (McGowan 7).

The stereotype of Asians and Asian Americans as exotic can be traced back to early Hollywood cinema, where the Dragon Ladies usually represented the villainesses and existed only “to oppose and destroy the white, male hero” (Lu 56). Asian American actress Anna May Wong was one of the earliest Hollywood actresses to experience this stereotype. “Wong was often offered supporting roles [...] or, when the role was more important, it was a stereotyped character [...] a Dragon Lady, like the daughter of Fu Man Chu” (Staszak 628). The earliest films in which Wong portrayed the Dragon Lady stereotype were *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924) and *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931), in which she played characters who were cunning and manipulative, which has helped to shape the image of Asian and Asian American women as exotic, mysterious and deceitful (McGowan 7).

However, the Dragon Lady is a stereotype that is not only confined to early Hollywood cinema but has also been widely used in contemporary American popular television series. One well-known example of this stereotype in modern television is the character of Ling Woo, played by Lucy Liu in the legal comedy-drama *Ally McBeal* (David E. Kelley, FOX 1997-2002). Woo is introduced as a sharp and assertive lawyer but falls into the Dragon Lady stereotype due to her cunning and manipulative character, which is highly visible through the co-construction with the white main character, Ally McBeal. “For example, Woo has been portrayed as evil, McBeal as good; Woo growls, McBeal purrs,” and she manipulates “her boyfriend through promises of

money she could bring to the firm and sexual promises” (Patton 251). These characteristics of the Dragon Lady stereotype make Woo “the alien of the law firm” and an “unwelcome addition to the law team despite her expertise and her success” (Patton 251f). The portrayal of the Dragon Lady stereotype “as this oversexualized, evil seductress” (Patton 252) reinforces the challenges and stereotypes faced by Asian and Asian American women in American popular television. It promotes the prominently conveyed trope of Asian women as exotic, dangerous, and different.

Another stereotype that contributes to the stereotype of Asian and Asian American women as exotic is the trope of the Lotus Blossom, which is also frequently referred to as China Doll. The Lotus Blossom stereotype “is similar to the Dragon Lady in that they are both sexual in nature” (Tan 85). However, while the Dragon Lady is described as a “deceptive evil genius,” the Lotus Blossom is an “object[...] of white heterosexual cis-gendered men’s sexual desires” (Yeh Cheung and Ono 2) and is seen as a “plaything for Caucasians” that “pander[s] to the needs of men” (Johnson 5). The stereotype portrays Asian and Asian American women as “submissive, docile, and meant to be ‘dominated’ or ‘saved’ by white men.” The notoriety of this stereotype dates back to World War II, “as more men brought Asian wives back to the US, [following] the War Brides Acts of 1945 and 1946, which allowed US servicemen who married women while stationed abroad to bring them back home” (Tan 85).

Around the same time, Hollywood began to adopt this stereotype, reinforcing it in film and television. For example, in *The Toll of the Sea* (1922), Asian American actress Anna May Wong, who, as previously mentioned, has frequently portrayed the stereotype of the Dragon Lady, plays “the quite literally named Lotus Blossom who falls in love with a white American seaman” (Tan 86). In the movie, the American man is represented as the hero even though he leaves the Asian woman for his American wife, while Wong plays the role of the helpless Asian woman in need of a white savior. Another typical character role associated with the Lotus Blossom depicts the Asian woman as a prostitute and the white male as her savior, “rescuing her from prostitution” (Tan 86). An example of this portrayal can be found in the movie *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), which further reinforced the image of the Lotus Blossom by emphasizing the exotic.

Early Hollywood essentially offered limited character roles for Asian and Asian American actresses and utilized the harmful practice of “typecasting” due to the prevailing racial stereotypes. However, “while a majority of modern [Hollywood] films [...] aim to tell new stories that do not try to stereotype” (Tan 87), contemporary Hollywood still employs exotic stereotypes toward Asian and Asian American women. In *The Wolverine* (2013), for example, both

female Asian American characters portray stereotypes that perpetuate the idea of Asians as exotic. Yukio, who is characterized as fierce and ruthlessly powerful, embodies the dangerous Dragon Lady. At the same time, the other Asian American woman, Mariko Yashida, represents the passive, vulnerable Lotus Blossom, always in need of protection (Fang).

Similarly, early television has included the Lotus Blossom stereotype in series such as *The New Adventures of Charlie Chan* (Leslie Arliss, *Syndication* 1957-1958) and *The Green Hornet* (William Beaudine, *ABC* 1966-1967), resulting in Asians and Asian Americans being “misrepresented or portrayed as stereotypes” becoming the norm in media, which also “contributed to the perpetuation of unequal power relations in the United States” (Ye Cheung and Ono 1). Furthermore, the stereotypical portrayal of characters in contemporary television series - such as Mindy in *Emily in Paris* (Andrew Fleming, *Netflix* 2020-present), who perpetuates the stereotype of the Asian woman as exotic and mysterious, or Kimiko in *The Boys* (Eric Kripke, *Amazon Prime Video* 2019), who embodies the stereotype of the Lotus Blossom by remaining mostly silent and submissive despite her strength (Sirikul) - underscores the fact that while contemporary television is experiencing “an increase in Asian American leading roles [and in] Asian American televisual representation” (Yeh Cheung and Ono 5ff), it has not yet overcome the reinforcement of racist stereotypes against Asian and Asian American women for comedic relief.

2.2.3 Mysteriousness

Various stereotypes characterize Asians and Asian Americans as “human oddities, mysterious [...], and completely immoral” (Ono and Pham 29), underscoring the often-negative portrayal of their identities in the media. The Yellow Peril stereotype, for example, is a color metaphor and describes the concept of mysteriousness as particularly threatening. This is because it portrays Asians as “a great potential threat to take over, invade, or even Asianize the society and culture of the US” (Yang 9). The stereotype is a way of reversing the roles by constructing “whites as vulnerable, threatened, or otherwise in danger” and emphasizing “the powerful, threatening potential of Asians and Asian Americans” (Ono and Pham 25), which contrasts with the popular narratives that portray Asians and Asian Americans as invisible or exotic. However, while this stereotype seems to ascribe a certain power to Asians and Asian Americans, the portrayal is never positive or successful. Instead, despite the exaggerated threat, the Yellow Peril is always ultimately contained, and white supremacy is restored (Yang 22). The stereotype contributes to the negative portrayal of Asians and Asian Americans as mysterious by portraying

them as “smoking opium, wearing strange dress” as well as “gambling addicted and a threat to the white women, sexually and physically” (Yang 14).

Similar to the stereotypes mentioned above, the Yellow Peril was used heavily in early Hollywood, with negative representations being exaggerated in various films. The movie *Broken Blossoms* (1919) is among the earliest films to depict the Yellow Peril stereotype, portraying “the Yellow Terror in all his glory” (Yang 16) as an extremely dangerous sexual threat to the white women in the film. This movie further reinforces the image of Asians and Asian Americans as mysterious by depicting the Yellow Peril in “a strange robe, wield[ing] his long, curvy queue, and carr[ying] a distorted facial expression that represents a vital threat” (Yang 16).

While there are many different representations of the Yellow Peril stereotype, one of the archetypes is the Fu Manchu. The Yellow Peril stereotype is a historically rooted concept, whereas the Fu Manchu stereotype evolved from the trope of the Yellow Peril and can be considered a sub-stereotype of the Yellow Peril. The character Dr. Fu Manchu is the protagonist of many movies and series based on the original 1923 British film titled *The Mystery of Dr. Fu Manchu*. In the United States, he first appeared in a 1929 American film with the same title, *The Mystery of Dr. Fu Manchu*. “Although Dr. Fu Manchu was not the first Yellow Peril stereotype, he has become the typical representation of the Yellow Peril, and his version has been repeatedly modeled many more times [...] than his Yellow Peril predecessors” (Yang 20). He is usually depicted with “mean-slanted eyebrows and features – thin, long mustache, and long fingernails” and his mysteriousness is highlighted by his ability to hypnotize people, making him appear as “someone definitely from another land with secrets we could only guess at” (Aoki and Mio 426). Furthermore, “Dr. Fu Manchu was diabolical, sinister, and evil, a particular, masculine representation of Yellow Peril” (Ono and Pham 34).

The casting choices for the character Fu Manchu in most films and series further reinforced racist prejudices in Hollywood. This is because the character is that he was predominantly played by white men, highlighting that “this was what white men thought villainous Asian men to be like” (Aoki and Mio 426). This is further evidenced by the original creator of Dr. Fu Manchu, who later stated that he had created the character while having “little contact or knowledge about Chinese people” (Ono and Pham 34).

The negative image of Dr. Fu Manchu continued to appear in the media throughout the 1940s and 1950s, as “the villainous character has continued to appear in films, TV series, and other media representations to maintain the discourse of the Yellow Peril” (Yang 21). The character fits perfectly into the already existing stereotype of the Yellow Peril as he is considered an

“incarnation of Yellow Peril” (Ono and Pham 34) who “perpetuates the myth that the Chinese, and by extension, Asians, are trying to take over the Western World” (Yang 22), adding the aforementioned features of an evil mastermind. In addition, Dr. Fu Manchu is also characterized by “his sexual lust for and ultimate domination over the white woman” (Yang 22) and is described as “an asexual rapist who uses force to capture his women in order to breed superior offspring” (Ono and Pham 36). Despite the exaggerated nature of these depictions, the portrayals had a significant influence on how Asians and Asian Americans are perceived in the West. However, similarly to the Yellow Peril stereotype in media, “at the end of each [narrative], the [Fu Manchu] is contained in spite of the exaggerated threat posed by the scheming Chinese man. White male supremacy, as an ideological construct, is reestablished as Asian men are ritually vilified in order to maintain a sense of superiority among white men” (Ono and Pham 34).

Although the stereotypes of the Yellow Peril and Fu Manchu are rarely portrayed on contemporary screens due to a growing awareness of them in the entertainment industry, their influence does not “fade away into history” (Yang 10). The concept of Asians and Asian Americans as mysterious continues to persist, as television shows today usually have “the typical Chinatown episode seen on countless police dramas,” which shows the “underground seediness of a Chinatown or Little Tokyo where buildings are mere facades for what lurks behind them or literally underground beneath street level” (Aoki and Mio 427). Additionally, the visual appearance of the Fu Manchu is still regularly used, mainly because the ideas and concepts connected to it are instantly recognizable.

3 Identity and the Social Categories Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Class

Identity is a concept that includes various aspects of an individual's sense of self. However, there is no single meaning to identity; instead, it acts as an umbrella term for numerous different aspects, such as racial identity, ethnic identity, gender identity, and sexual identity, among others. According to Stuart Hall, identity is how one defines themselves and is defined by others (1). The concept of identity plays a crucial role when discussing media representations of different ethnicities, as these representations often influence various aspects of an individual's identity. This chapter provides an overview of the different aspects of identity, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class, and establishes how these social categories are portrayed and influenced by media representation.

3.1 Race and Ethnicity

Although closely interrelated, race and ethnicity are concepts that slightly differ. "In the United States, race and ethnicity are defined [...] by institutions [...], groups, and individuals [...], and these definitions have personal, social, and political consequences" (Chang and Kwan 114). Traditionally, race was considered a genetic feature rather than a social construct, as racial groups "have been identified by their surface physical characteristics (e.g., skin color, hair type, eye shape, body, and facial form)" as well as their non-physical genetically distinct characteristics, such as "intelligence, athletic ability, and sexual potency" (Chang and Kwan 114). Today, however, science and medicine agree that race is, in fact, socially constructed. Since "surface physical characteristics are primarily climatic variation across geographic areas, and only a handful of genes are likely responsible for these surface physical characteristics" (Chang and Kwan 114), there is no biological basis to think of human differences in terms of race.

Furthermore, there is agreement that "most characteristics [...] vary as points of continuums, rather than as mutually exclusive categories" (Chang and Kwan 114). Race is, therefore, a constructed concept subject to social, economic, and political change. Throughout history, institutions have created racial constructions to justify actions such as "enslavement, exploitation or expulsion of one ethnic group by another" (Chang and Kwan 115). Such categorization of ethnic groups into races has traditionally been enforced by those in power positions, which historically have been primarily white individuals "who are at the top of the hierarchy, attaining, aggrandizing, consolidating, and preserving their power and status through the oppression of other racial groups" (Chang and Kwan 115).

While race is primarily based on physical characteristics, ethnicity is “a social categorization based on the culture of an individual’s ancestors’ national or heritage group” (Chang and Kwan 115). Unlike race, which typically categorizes people based on their physical appearance, ethnicity is a broader concept that includes shared traits within a culture. This means that an ethnic group is characterized by having a “clearly defined sociocultural history and distinct cultural features that are transmitted across generations” (Chang and Kwan 115). These characteristics can include both visible features, such as name and genealogy, and less visible indicators, such as experiences, beliefs, and values that are not immediately apparent. In the United States, for example, Asians and Asian Americans are distinguished from other ethnic groups such as African Americans, Latin Americans, or white Americans. In addition, the concept of ethnicity allows for a distinction among Asian Americans themselves, identifying groups such as Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese, among others. This is especially important as it recognizes and highlights the fact that “although there are some cultural values shared by various Asian American ethnic groups, there are also values, worldviews, cultural customs and traditions, and histories that make each group distinct” (Chang and Kwan 115).

However, this understanding and recognition of ethnicity is often overlooked, which contributes to the persistence of racism - a fact that has been visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. During that time, there was a significant increase in "anti-Asian hate" in the United States of America, as Americans unjustly blamed Asian Americans for the creation and spread of the virus - an idea that in itself is already problematic. Furthermore, instead of distinguishing between the different Asian American ethnic groups, all Asian Americans were targeted on the false and racist assumption that they were of Chinese descent and, therefore, responsible for COVID-19. In one case, “a Korean American woman in midtown Manhattan was grabbed by the hair, shoved, and punched in the face by an assailant. The perpetrator yelled at the victim, ‘You’ve got coronavirus, you Asian (expletive)’” or in another case, "a perpetrator attacked a family from Myanmar, stabbing three victims including a 2-year-old girl and a 6-year-old boy. The assailant told police he feared the victims were Chinese and infecting others with the coronavirus" (Gover et al. 659). These acts highlight the destructive impact of racist ideologies that disregard the complexities of ethnic identities and instead reinforce negative stereotypes and cause violence.

Understanding how identity is shaped by external influences and personal experiences requires awareness of the differences between race and ethnicity. While race is a social construct shaped by visible physical characteristics defined by the dominant group, ethnicity is a social construct

derived from shared cultural characteristics. Understanding this difference allows us to distinguish between racial and ethnic identity. Individuals within these racial and ethnic groups have the power to define what it means to be a member of these groups. Therefore, although racial groups have an “externally defined category – a race,” they also have “an internally defined identity” (Chang and Kwan 115) that they can form to develop a sense of self. However, the influence of negative media portrayals that reinforce stereotypes against certain groups can have a significant impact on how individuals perceive their racial or ethnic identity.

Both racial and ethnic identity are “psychological constructs based on an individual’s identification, attitudes, values, behaviors, and affiliation with her or his race and ethnicity” (Chang and Kwan 115). Racial identity refers to the perception of oneself as a member of a particular racial group and feeling a sense of connectedness with others who share similar physical characteristics that – as previously mentioned – are defined by society. These are usually visible characteristics such as skin color, facial features, and hair texture. This identification has a significant impact on how an individual is perceived and treated, as well as how they perceive themselves. Racial identity “describes how individuals deal with the effects of racism, give up dominant cultural views of their own racial group in exchange for self-definition, and develop positive attitudes toward their own racial group” (Chang and Kwan 117). Ethnic identity, on the other hand, describes the sense of belonging to a cultural group, which is characterized by shared traits such as language, traditions, and values. However, ethnic identity is dynamic and allows for identification with more than one racial or ethnic group at the same time, which racial identity does not. Furthermore, “unlike racial identity, ethnic identity is not always conceptually grounded in oppression and racism” (Chang and Kwan 119). Nevertheless, while ethnic identity provides a sense of belonging, it can also cause negative experiences, such as exclusion or being reduced to simplified, stereotypical representations.

The portrayal of Asians and Asian Americans in film and television has significant implications for the racial and ethnic identity of individuals within these groups. Stereotyping, negative portrayals, and marginalization contribute to one-dimensional representations of Asian and Asian Americans and a limited understanding of identities. Stereotypical representations such as the Model Minority or the Perpetual Foreigner reinforce harmful tropes towards Asians and Asian Americans, shaping the way they are perceived by others as well as how they perceive themselves, as it leads to the internalization of these ideas and contributes to practices such as othering.

3.2 Gender and Sexuality

Analyzing the representation of Asians and Asian Americans in the media requires an understanding of the complex dynamics that shape the construction of gender and sexual identity. Since media representations are crucial in shaping perceptions of gender roles and sexuality, examining how these representations affect societal understanding is important. Drawing on Judith Butler's concepts of gender performativity and the socially constructed nature of identity, as well as Michel Foucault's theory of sexuality as shaped by power dynamics, we can analyze how the media contributes to shaping, reinforcing, or challenging gender and sexual identities within the Asian and Asian American ethnicity. Gender and sexuality are both social constructs that significantly influence each other. For this reason, and because they are both subject to societal norms, they are often used and discussed together. However, there is a significant difference between the terms that must be understood for a thorough analysis of the two concepts.

A central aspect of the construction of gender and sexual identity in the media is how foundational theorists challenge traditional perspectives. Before Judith Butler's work on the topic of sex and gender, it was assumed that there was a stable connection between the two terms. It was widely accepted that the "genitalia determine one's sex [...] and that females are feminine, males are masculine" (Hatch 241). In her influential work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler challenged this traditional view of gender and sex and highlighted the social dynamics of these two concepts. Judith Butler argues against the assumption that gender is a binary category and that the biological gender (sex) is innate. Instead, she claims that it is a cultural norm that only the two sexes, male and female, exist (9-10). "That is why babies who are born with ambiguous genitalia are being operated on to normalize their genitalia, to make their bodies male or female" (Ton 7). Because of this modification to align with the established societal norms, Butler describes sex as a socially constructed phenomenon.

Furthermore, Judith Butler claims that gender is performative and produced by our behavior, not the other way around (33). Therefore, what we understand as gender or sex, femininity or masculinity, male or female, is socially constructed and a result of an individual's actions rather than predetermined by the body at birth. Furthermore, according to Judith Butler, gender is "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (44). This means that it is not an individual's biological sex that determines whether they behave "in a certain manner - to sit with knees splayed far apart, or legs demurely crossed, for example,"

but rather, that “these stylized behaviors are what produce our masculinity or femininity” (Hatch 242f). This is the reason that, according to Judith Butler, gender is not a fixed element assigned at birth but rather a social construct that is shaped through repeated actions that are historically associated with being deemed “masculine” or “feminine” and are often also referred to as gender expression (43).

Building on the discussion about gender as a social construct, sexuality has also been subjected to a similar critical reassessment. In the past, sexuality, like gender, was described as a fixed and natural characteristic. One of the leading scholars on sexuality is Michel Foucault, who analyzed the connection between power dynamics and sexuality. He describes sexuality as the following:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power (105-106).

This means that an individual’s sexuality is not a fixed characteristic but rather a social construct that is shaped by power dynamics. Today, there is a general agreement that sexuality is dynamic and socially or culturally constructed, is part of an individual’s identity, and can be described as “a continuum of identities, desires, fantasies, behaviors, and attractions, which can range from homoerotic to heterosexual” (Chen and Kim 248). Historically, however, heterosexuality has been widely considered as “a ‘given’ and ‘normal,’” and therefore, research has been focused “on sexualities that sit outside this supposed norm (e.g., homosexuality, lesbianism)” (Farvid 92). This is where two key terms come into play: heteronormativity and homonormativity.

Heteronormativity describes the “hegemonic system of norms, discourses, and practices that constructs heterosexuality as natural and superior to all other expressions of sexuality” (Robinson 1). This concept highlights the privilege of heterosexuality in society. In addition, it “legitimizes homophobia – the irrational fear of gay and lesbian people - and heterosexism - the discrimination of sexual minorities within social relations and structures” (Robinson 1). Even today, heteronormativity is still institutionally reinforced, for example, in religion and culture, among others. Furthermore, heteronormativity has been the basis for media representations for decades. In fact, before the late 1990s and early 2000s, the only sexuality portrayed in the media was heterosexual. “One of the turning points for gay and lesbian representation on television

occurred in 1997 following the show *Ellen*, which was the first television show that had a lesbian leading character” (Chavez 10). Although there has been an upward trend towards a more diverse range of sexualities since then, “mainstream media representations are [still] dominated by heterosexuality” (Chavez 10), and “the media [still] underrepresents lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people and/or presents them stereotypically” (Robinson 1). Additionally, the concept of heteronormativity also naturalizes “the [stereotypical] gender roles of masculine men and feminine women” (Robinson 1), disregarding the view of gender as a social construct. Moreover, in the concept of heteronormativity, “monogamous, marital, procreative heterosexuality is considered superior to all other sexual expressions” (Robinson 1), which leads to the assumption that anything deviating from these sexual practices is abnormal, resulting in negative interpretation and, subsequently, a harmful representation in the media.

Homonormativity, on the other hand, is a concept where sexual minorities and members of the LGBTQ+ community - intentionally or unconsciously - reinforce the hegemonic system of heteronormativity. This happens when sexual minorities start following traditional heterosexual lifestyle values like “monogamy, marriage, domesticity, and reproduction” (Robinson 1). However, while this may be done to “stake a claim for their rights through asserting that gay and lesbian individuals are just like their heterosexual counterparts, except for their same-sex attractions and counterparts” (Robinson 1), it discriminates against those members of the LGBTQ+ community who do not follow traditional norms. Furthermore, it “limits the rights that sexual minorities can gain, since they are still framed through particular heteronormative institutions” (Robinson 1), which leads to a marginalization of queer lifestyles and a division of the LGBTQ+ community. Those who follow heteronormative practices are given more rights and privileges than those who do not fit into what is considered “normal” in both heterosexual and homosexual communities. Homonormativity has also been part of the media for a long time, with practices such as selective visibility, meaning that while sexual minorities are shown on television, they are often portrayed as a reflection of traditional heterosexual norms and practices such as monogamy and marriage, rather than polyamory or asexuality (Robinson 1). When practices that stem from the heterosexual norm are displayed in the media, they are usually portrayed negatively and incoherently or in a comedic way, all of which lead to discrimination.

Both heteronormativity and homonormativity are, therefore, critical concepts that help understand how societal norms influence and constrain the representation and perception of sexual minorities and different gender identities. Understanding both of these concepts allows for a

critical analysis of how the media perpetuates certain norms at the expense of minorities. This is also evident in the portrayal of gender identity and sexuality of Asians and Asian Americans in the media, which has a long history of being one-dimensional and stereotypical. While Asian and Asian American women have typically been portrayed as “aesthetically pleasing, sexually willing and speechless [...] dark and primitive [...], exotic and enticing”, Asian and Asian American men have almost always been “portrayed as predatory figures ... as ugly or loathsome [...], tyrannical and lecherous, cruel in their treatment of their women while lusting after the Euro-American woman [...], inferior in both physique and ethics” (Ono and Pham 63). These stereotypical portrayals have been prevalent in mainstream media for decades. Hypersexual and fetishized portrayals of Asian and Asian American women not only objectify and limit them but also reinforce harmful ideas about their perceived sexual roles, as seen in stereotypical portrayals such as the Dragon Lady, Lotus Blossom, or China Doll. Similarly, Asian and Asian American men are often portrayed in ways that conform to the emasculating Model Minority stereotype, downplaying their sexuality and reinforcing dominant tropes about Asian masculinity.

3.3 Class

Another social category that is often co-constructing race, gender, and sexuality is class. Unlike the other categories, the definition of class is more complex, as there is no single, universally accepted definition. Various scholars, including Pierre Bourdieu, John Goldthorpe, Erik Olin Wright, and Cynthia Crompton, offer different perspectives on the concept of social class. However, class is an important aspect of cultural and social identity, as it strongly influences the behaviors and experiences of an individual. This is why understanding the different aspects of class is necessary when discussing representations.

Historically, social class has been defined between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, whereas belonging to the bourgeoisie meant “having ownership of the means of production,” while belonging to the proletariat meant “selling your labour” (Manstead 269). This distinction is central in Karl Marx’s definition of social class. However, while this classification may have been helpful at the time, it is much more difficult to maintain this definition when traditional occupations have shifted or disappeared entirely. As social structures evolved, scholars introduced new approaches to understanding class that went beyond economic capital. Pierre Bourdieu, for example, distances himself from this Marxist idea of power and inequality and incorporates the terms cultural capital and habitus. He claims that “power and dominance derive not only from possession of material resources but also from possession of cultural and social resources”

(Crossley 86), which means that he highlights non-economic factors such as education and social disposition. Bourdieu assumes that everyone has a portfolio of capital with a particular amount and composition. “Among the rich, for example, we find those whose wealth is weighted in the direction of economic capital and others whose wealth is weighted towards cultural capital” (Crossley 86). This highlights the fact that the understanding of class includes not only an individual’s economic status but also their cultural status.

In addition, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus describes a set of dispositions and attitudes that are shaped by interactions and experiences. Concerning social class, this means that an individual who grew up in a privileged environment might have dispositions that lead them towards developing certain preferences and ways of interacting with others that reflect their social background. In comparison, someone from a less privileged environment might have different dispositions (Maton 49-50). Therefore, Bourdieu highlights the importance of cultural capital, social dispositions, and economic capital in determining and defining class.

Although Bourdieu’s point of view was highly influential in the study of social class, it is still not possible to accept this definition of class as universal. To provide a broader perspective, Max Weber introduced an alternative approach. He proposed a multidimensional approach that included the dimensions of status and power in addition to economic class. According to Max Weber, social stratification consists of three components: class, which describes the economic factors; status, which describes the prestige and social honor one receives in society; and power, which refers to the influence and authority in society. Therefore, economic class does not alone determine social inequality (83-85).

Finally, several other scholars, such as John Goldthorpe and Erik Olin Wright, have further expanded the definition of social class by including an individual’s position within the occupational structure and emphasizing the social mobility of class (Kirk 15). However, although all scholars recognize class as a social concept, there is no clear definition of social class that theorists and experts can agree on. Instead, the term class is often connected to the categories of race and gender in intersectional analyses. This leads to another point of view between the scholars of cultural studies, which is the fact that class is becoming increasingly irrelevant and that differences are ceasing to exist. However, this is “a position taken by those usually unaffected by its exclusions and deprivations” (Kirk 15). To understand this, it would be necessary to experience a particular social class, which would help “illuminate our understanding and the complexity of class identities” (Kirk 15). Therefore, the categorization of class in society is as

significant as the categories of race and gender, especially when it comes to media representation, as media representation of social classes can influence audiences' perception and understanding of class dynamics.

4. The Intersectional Approach

The concept of intersectionality, which is central to feminist theory, was introduced and coined by African American lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw. In her works of the late 1980s and early 1990s, she discussed how social categories such as class, race, gender, and sexuality are not mutually exclusive categories in which people can be oppressed or discriminated against but that they are, in fact, intertwined and intersected. To provide historical context, it is important to recognize that, even before Crenshaw's works, theorists such as bell hooks have addressed similar issues.

In her book *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (1981), bell hooks has already argued that "black women's experience [have] been obscured by a political movement and theoretical discourse that tend to focus on blacks and women as separate groups. If black women are equally important as women as are white women, oughtn't their experiences to be just as constitutive of our analysis of gender? But black women's experience differs in critical ways from white women's experience" (hooks qtd. in Weldon 194). hooks highlights the fact that identities are intertwined, with a particular focus on racial and gender identity. Being both black and female results in a significantly different experience than being white and female or black and male. She further underlines the fact that black women have been overlooked and, therefore, not represented adequately. The author challenges the idea that the experiences of white women are considered the norm for women in general, as the experiences of black women should be recognized as equally important and included in a discourse about gender identity.

Building on hooks' foundational arguments, Kimberlé Crenshaw expands the discussion of intersectionality. In her famous work *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*, Crenshaw draws upon bell hooks' standpoint and states the following:

In an earlier article, I used the concept of intersectionality to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experiences. My objective there was to illustrate that many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately. I build on those observations here by exploring the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, and representational aspects of violence against women of color (1244).

This means that discrimination cannot be addressed by simply focusing on one social category, such as race or gender, but rather that women of color often face intersectional forms of discrimination. Therefore, Crenshaw highlights the intersection of social categories, such as race, gender, sexuality, and class, and emphasizes their influence on the treatment and experiences of individuals. An example of this would be that “the position of African American women at the nexus of race and gender relations means that their experience of sexual violence is qualitatively different from the experience of either white women or African-American men” (Weldon 194).

Other feminist scholars share this recognition of intersectionality. American feminist theorist Elizabeth Spelman, for example, argued in her work *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* that “people cannot discern the ‘woman part’ from the ‘African-American part’ or from the ‘middle-class part’” (Spelman qtd. in Weldon 194), emphasizing that identity is not something that can be broken down into its components and viewed as one-dimensional. Spelman, therefore, similar to hooks and Crenshaw, emphasizes that identity is made up of intertwined categories such as race, gender, class, and sexuality and, instead of “examining gender, race, class, and nation, as separate systems of oppression,” the notion of intersectionality is essential to “explore how these systems mutually construct one another” (Weldon 194).

While these authors have significantly influenced our understanding of the intersectional characteristics of identity, especially regarding African American women, there is less research on individuals from other racial and ethnic groups. Asians and Asian Americans, for example, “are [also] not free from gendered, racialized treatment” (Chou 3). As a sociologist who focuses on the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality in the lives of Asians and Asian Americans, Rosalind S. Chou states that the intersection of gender and race predominantly affects the self-perception and self-esteem of Asian American individuals. In her work, *Asian American Sexual Politics: The Construction of Race, Gender, and Sexuality* (2009), Chou claims:

For the women, femininity has been shaped specifically by their racial identity. ‘Orientalization’ as a colonial concept plays a role in these racialized and gendered stereotypes of Asian American women. The gendered and sexualized racialization process and “racial castration” has impacted Asian American men in a different way than their female counterparts. Violence is a prevalent theme in their gendered and racial formation. Asian American men begin as targets of violence and sometimes become perpetrators (4).

This suggests that concepts such as Orientalism play a significant role in the construction of racial and gendered stereotypes for Asian and Asian American women, whereas racialized ideas

such as racial castration impact Asian and Asian American men by reinforcing stereotypes associated with their racial identity. Furthermore, it highlights the intersection of the categories race, gender, and sexuality and demonstrates how historical and social concepts have shaped the racial and gendered identity of Asian and Asian American women and men, which impact individuals' identities and experiences.

The intersection of different social categories affecting the lives of Asian Americans is further highlighted in Yen Le Espiritu's work *Asian American Women and Men: Labor, Laws, and Love* (2008). The scholar addresses gendered labor barriers and examines how labor patterns have affected Asians and Asian Americans. She highlights the disadvantages that Asians and Asian Americans face in social institutions such as labor markets and the legal system and underscores the fact that, similarly to the example of African American women, "Asian American women will have different experiences than white women or Asian American men" (Chou 18).

In conclusion, social categories such as "gender, race, and sexuality are all part of an interlinked system of representation that helps describe and define who has power in relationship to others" (Ono and Pham 65). Intersectionality emphasizes that individuals within a particular group are not identical and recognizes that an individual's identity is not one-dimensional. This approach highlights the importance of identifying the unique challenges each individual faces due to the intersection of social categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and class. An example of the concept would be that heterosexual Asian or Asian American women and homosexual Asian or Asian American women might both encounter stereotypes of their racial identity and expectations regarding femininity. For the homosexual Asian American woman, however, there may be another layer of discrimination that intersects with challenges to her sexual identity.

Applying these theoretical insights to media representation, the following chapter analyzes how *Orange is the New Black* represents the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class in the portrayal of Mei Chang, Brook Soso, Piper Chapman, and Poussey Washington. By analyzing key scenes and interactions between the characters, I examine how their identities are co-constructed and how *Orange is the New Black* challenges or reinforces existing stereotypes. Using the intersectional framework, the following analysis will shed light on the multi-layered forms of marginalization and power dynamics in the representation of Asian and Asian American women in the series.

5. Analysis of *Orange is the New Black*

5.1 The Character Piper Chapman

Piper Chapman, as already stated, is the protagonist of *Orange is the New Black*; she is 31 years old and has been sentenced to 15 months in Litchfield Federal Penitentiary for Women for a drug trafficking offense she committed over a decade ago. She exhibits typical character traits of a “WASP,” which is “an abbreviation for ‘white Anglo-Saxon Protestant’ that further signifies a woman with wealth and status from the Northeast region of the United States” (Sullivan Barak 51). The television series tells her story and follows her journey in a mixed-ethnicity women’s prison. As already discussed, the producer of *Orange is the New Black*, Jenji Kohan, describes the character Piper Chapman as a Trojan Horse. A Trojan Horse, derived from Greek mythology, is a hollow wooden horse in which the Greeks hid and overwhelmed the Trojans in a surprise attack. Kohan describes the concept of Piper Chapman as the Trojan horse as follows:

In a lot of ways Piper was my Trojan Horse. You're not going to go into a network and sell a show on really fascinating tales of black women, and Latina women, and old women and criminals. But if you take this white girl, this sort of fish out of water, and you follow her in, you can then expand your world and tell all of those other stories. But it's a hard sell to just go in and try to sell those stories initially. The girl next door, the cool blonde, is a very easy access point, and it's relatable for a lot of audiences and a lot of networks looking for a certain demographic. It's useful (Kohan qtd. in P. Gupta).

The view that a series featuring “women of color, queer women, older women, women of all shapes and sizes, women from a range of class backgrounds” (Sullivan Barak 45) must be presented from a white woman’s perspective to be successful is highly problematic. Moreover, in her explanation, the producer mentions both African American and Latin American women, as well as older women and criminals, but does not even mention the Asian American characters of the series, which suggests a potential marginalization of Asian American representation within the narrative of the show. By presenting the story of women of all ethnicities through the lens of an upper-middle-class white woman, Kohan reinforces the Hollywood stereotype that audiences need a white protagonist to engage with diverse narratives. Furthermore, by highlighting the concept of Piper Chapman as a Trojan Horse, Kohan suggests that stories about women of ethnicities other than white Americans are not compelling enough to stand on their own and, instead, must be filtered through the experiences of a privileged white character. Therefore, Kohan conforms to the idea of whiteness as the ideal of Western society and perpetuates racist practices that have been practiced in Hollywood film and television for decades. This is evident in Kohan’s portrayal of the protagonist, Piper Chapman, who seems to reinforce the view of the white, upper-middle-class demographic as superior. This privileged status is

highlighted through characteristics such as Piper Chapman's college degree in communications and comparative literature, her luxurious home and expensive clothing, her involvement in a startup whose products are to be sold in expensive stores, as well as her leisure activities, including vacations with her husband.

Additionally, Piper Chapman's socioeconomic advantage over other inmates becomes apparent early in the series, especially in a scene in which she is informed by the front desk staff at Litchfield Federal Penitentiary that she is not allowed to bring a phone into prison. Her reaction, "Oh, my God, Larry, by the time I get out, there'll have been, like, three new generations of iPhones" ("I Wasn't Ready" 12:07-12:12) along with her subsequent request to her husband to "please keep my website updated," ("I Wasn't Ready" 13:39-13:41) highlights the fact that her biggest concerns in prison are primarily materialistic. These scenes underscore her privileged social status, setting her apart from inmates of other ethnic backgrounds within the series.

From the beginning, Piper Chapman's skin color and socioeconomic background give her a level of privilege that is not available to inmates of other ethnicities. This distinction is evident in her first interactions with correctional officer Sam Healy and the warden of Litchfield Federal Penitentiary, Joe Caputo. Sam Healy greets Piper Chapman warmly and is very friendly and interested in her. He even addresses her as "Miss Chapman" ("I Wasn't Ready" 27:21-27:22) and gives her tips on how to behave in this prison. Similarly, Joe Caputo even grants her the unusual favor of calling her fiancé, during which she complains about not even getting shampoo and having to trade for it, further highlighting her privileged social status. Following the phone call, Joe Caputo presents her with a shampoo bottle as a gift. These instances underscore how Piper Chapman's white skin and her upper-middle-class background are grounds for better treatment by the authorities of Litchfield Federal Penitentiary.

The fact that Piper Chapman has privileges that inmates of other ethnicities do not have becomes even more apparent in the second season of *Orange is the New Black* when she is unexpectedly granted furlough to visit her terminally ill grandmother. This allows her to leave prison for 48 hours, an opportunity that is very unusual for the inmates of Litchfield Federal Penitentiary. Initially, correctional officer Sam Healy tells her that "furlough is like the Loch Ness Monster. Much discussed and rarely seen. [...] I'm sorry. There's nothing I can do to help you" ("Low Self Esteem City" 26:10-26:23). At the end of the episode, however, Sam Healy submits her for a three-day furlough for no apparent reason. A few episodes later, her furlough has been processed and Sam Healy tells her, "I made a few phone calls, moved the process along. You get to go and say goodbye to your nana" ("Appropriately Sized Pots" 12:43-12:48). The fact

that her request is processed and granted without any further action from Piper Chapman highlights her white privilege and, since this is highly unusual in prison, is noticed by other inmates and leads to severe criticism:

TASHA JEFFERSON. You know, Chapman been getting special treatment since the minute she got here. Figures she'd be the first to get furlough.

[...]

POUSSEY WASHINGTON. Man, I tried for six months to get furlough. Clearly, a dead black mom ain't no competition for a sick, old white granny.

ALEIDA DIAZ. You and your man aren't even together no more. What a waste. If I got out, me and Cesar would be fucking all damn day.

BLANCA FLORES. Diablo and I would go all day and all night

ALEIDA DIAZ. (Laughing) Sick abuela. The fuck you came up with that one?

NICKY NICHOLS. Christ, Chapman, everybody hates your fucking guts.

(Piper Chapman is pushed by Tasha Jefferson while sitting at her lunch table.)

POUSSEY WASHINGTON. Man, people's parents fucking go. There are sick people in here who can't get proper treatment. Chapman ain't got no strife in her life, but bitch gets the red carpet laid out for her ("Appropriately Sized Pots" 42:20-43:35).

Aware of her privilege, Piper Chapman climbs onto the lunch table and dramatically utters the following words:

Yes, I am white. We have established that. And I got furlough, too. I guess white privilege wins again. [ironically] And as a speaker for the entire white race, I would like to say I am sorry that you guys got the raw deal. But I love my fucking grandmother. And yeah, yeah, she may be a whitey too, but she's a fucking person, and she's sick and she needs me. So shut the fuck up! ("Appropriately Sized Pots" 43:45-44:26)

While this scene is a prime example of Piper Chapman's privilege as an upper-middle-class white woman and how it sets her apart from the other inmates, it also highlights the invisibility of the Asian American characters in *Orange is the New Black*. They are the only ethnic group not involved in the furlough situation at all. In fact, they do not even make an appearance in the episode, reinforcing the stereotype of Asians and Asian Americans as invisible and voiceless.

Beyond race and class, Piper Chapman's character also raises questions about the show's portrayal of sexuality. Throughout the series, Piper Chapman's sexuality is never explicitly explained. At the beginning of the first season, she is engaged to a man named Larry Bloom. However, in her flashback episode, a romantic relationship with another woman, Alex Vause, is revealed, with whom she later reunites in prison and begins a new relationship. She also becomes involved with another inmate, Stella Carlin, who entangles both Piper Chapman and Alex Vause in some sort of a love triangle. However, neither Piper Chapman herself nor the other characters in prison describe or question her sexuality in any detail, and "terms like 'bisexuality' or 'queer' are not used" (Sullivan Barak 51). Piper Chapman's conservative family, as well as correctional officer Sam Healy, presume that she is heterosexual. Piper Chapman's family members seem very uncomfortable when she reveals her past relationship with a woman. Her mother, in particular, expresses her disapproval of Piper Chapman's choice to engage in a relationship with a woman. Her mother's inability to accept her daughter's sexuality, as it does not conform to her conservative ideals, leaves her in denial, and she offers to find a "cure" for Piper Chapman. This is particularly evident in a scene where her mother visits Piper Chapman in prison:

PIPER CHAPMAN'S MOTHER. I need you to be very honest with me. Are you losing it in here? Because we're very worried about you. There are medications.

PIPER CHAPMAN. I am not going crazy. I am surrounded by crazy, and I am trying to climb Everest in flip-flops, but I am not going crazy, okay?

PIPER CHAPMAN'S MOTHER. Honey, nobody would blame you. Look at this place. You are incarcerated. God only knows the emotional toll it must take to be in here with that woman. (She is referring to Alex Vause.)

PIPER CHAPMAN. She is the least of my problems.

PIPER CHAPMAN'S MOTHER. She is your entire problem, Piper. You'd be home trying on wedding dresses, growing your business, giving me grandchildren if it weren't for her. She stole all that from you. ("You Also Have a Pizza" 5:13-6:02)

Additionally, Sam Healy tells her to "stay away from the lesbians" and to "not engage in lesbian sex during her incarceration" (Chavez 46) to avoid getting in trouble. When she confirms that she has no interest in lesbian activities due to being engaged to her fiancé Larry Bloom, Sam Healy seems relieved. The closest explanation regarding Piper Chapman's sexuality that the viewer gets is when she tells her friend Polly Harper, "I like hot girls. I like hot boys. I like hot

people. What can I say, I'm shallow" ("Bora Bora Bora" 13:58-14:01). These examples highlight the fact that both Piper Chapman's family and Sam Healy follow the concept of heteronormativity, which makes them assume that heterosexuality is the norm and superior. However, even though Piper Chapman denies being heterosexual, this is disregarded. Where other inmates would face punishment or harsher treatment, Piper Chapman is given privileges, as those in power choose to ignore her actual sexuality and focus on her ethnicity and social status instead.

Furthermore, although Piper Chapman is considered physically attractive as she is very feminine, has "straight blonde hair, straight white teeth, and big blue eyes" (Sullivan Barak 51), and is meant to represent 'the girl next door,' she is rarely sexualized. This is demonstrated by the fact that Piper Chapman, despite being an attractive woman, never becomes a target when her fellow inmates, Carrie Black, and Nicky Nichols, have a competition to see who can have sex with more women in a short time period. The Asian American character, Brook Soso, on the other hand, despite resembling Piper Chapman in physique and femininity, is sexualized in her first appearance at Litchfield Federal Penitentiary, as she immediately becomes the prime target in the competition between Carrie Black and Nicky Nichols.

In this regard, Chavez notes that "Piper's sexuality is portrayed differently than the other characters in the series" (47). Aside from her struggles of balancing her relationship with her fiancé, Larry Bloom, reconnecting with her ex-girlfriend, Alex Vause, and facing disapproval from her mother, Piper Chapman's sexuality is rarely addressed, and she experiences no negative consequences because of it. *Orange is the New Black* avoids stereotypical innuendos and unwanted sexual advances toward Piper Chapman, except for a single incident involving Suzanne Warren, a neurodivergent African American inmate. However, Piper Chapman manipulates Suzanne Warren to her advantage by claiming she needs protection from her ex-girlfriend, Alex Vause. This leads to Suzanne Warren helping Piper Chapman and subsequently declaring Piper her prison wife. It is important to mention, however, that the "prison wife" situation of Suzanne Warren and Piper Chapman is "always portrayed in a comedic sense" (Chavez 48), which is very different from the experiences of other characters regarding sexual advances. Furthermore, Piper Chapman always remains in control of the situation with Suzanne Warren, and there are at least equal power dynamics between her and Suzanne Warren.

However, the same cannot be said about the Asian American character Brook Soso. The fact that Piper Chapman "experiences her sexuality in different ways than other characters in the series" (Chavez 48) is particularly evident when comparing her to the two Asian American characters within the series, whose sexualities are represented in a very stereotypical way. Mei

Chang is portrayed as sexually deviant and asexual, while Brook Soso is displayed as an object of desire and is constantly sexualized, even fetishized, and frequently manipulated and tricked into sexual acts. Mei Chang and Brook Soso are discussed in more detail in chapters 5.3 and 5.4.

In addition to race, class, and sexuality, gender representation is a central factor in the characterization of Piper Chapman. However, it is necessary to mention that only a few characters in *Orange is the New Black* directly state their gender identity. Nevertheless, the gender performances of the characters that do not state their gender identity can still be analyzed through their gender expressions, which are dictated by societal norms. As previously mentioned, according to Judith Butler, gender is “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (45). The term gender expression, which consists of markers, actions, and behaviors typically linked to the term feminine, is frequently used to describe gender. Typical markers for gender expression include “clothing, hair styles, jewelry, attitudes, or behaviors appropriate for one’s gender” (Chavez 40). Accordingly, it can be assumed that Piper Chapman falls into the female gender category based on her actions and behavior. Her clothing outside of prison, especially in the flashback scenes with ex-girlfriend Alex Vause, is strikingly feminine, as she is seen wearing dresses and aesthetic lingerie. In addition, Piper Chapman expresses the female gender through actions like visiting the prison’s hair and beauty salon, as well as purchasing items from the commissary that are typically associated with the female gender, such as pink nail polish. Moreover, she has a broad knowledge of soaps and body creams and was on the verge of starting a business to produce and sell artisanal bath products, which is also more commonly attributed to the female gender.

Although her female gender itself does not grant her any privileges within Litchfield Federal Penitentiary, the portrayal and representation of her gender differs significantly from that of the Asian American characters. Piper Chapman’s gender expression, as mentioned above, is closely aligned with societal norms of white upper-middle-class femininity. In contrast, the gender identity of the Asian American characters is portrayed as stereotypical and one-dimensional. Furthermore, the intersection of gender and race is what sets Piper Chapman further apart from inmates of other ethnicities. She is constantly displayed as the white damsel in distress, “a woman that is in need of protection from masculine authority figures around her” (Chavez 41). This is highlighted in the previously mentioned scenes with Sam Healy, who “often take[s] her

side” because of “her normative gender expression [...]” (Chavez 40), and Joe Caputo, in whose office Piper Chapman cries to be allowed to call her fiancé Larry Bloom.

Another scene where the intersection of Piper Chapman’s performed gender and her whiteness works to her advantage is when she is caught snooping to find out where the money for unfinished electrical repairs went. After discovering that it was likely taken by correctional officer Joel Luschek, she is caught by Sam Healy. Aware of her privileged status with the correctional officer, Piper Chapman innocently talks her way out of trouble, and her offense is quickly disregarded. In contrast, the Asian American character Brook Soso, despite having a similar gender expression, is denied simple requests, such as switching counselors, because she does not have the same privileges as Piper Chapman.

5.2 The Character Poussey Washington

Poussey Washington, a young African American woman in her early twenties, is another inmate at Litchfield Federal Penitentiary. She was convicted of possession of marijuana, which resulted in her serving a six-year sentence in Litchfield Federal Penitentiary. Before her incarceration, she lived in Germany, where her father, a US Army general, was stationed. Poussey Washington identifies as a lesbian; She used to be in a relationship with the daughter of a German commander. When the German commander discovered this relationship, he disapproved and arranged the reassignment of Poussey Washington's father back to the United States of America. After discovering this, she confronts the German commander with a concealed weapon but is stopped by her father. Unlike the German commander, her African American father approves of her sexuality.

Poussey Washington initially radiates a positive and energetic personality in Litchfield Federal Penitentiary. However, later in the series, she becomes depressed and resorts to self-made alcohol, known as hooch, while in prison. This character development illustrates how the "deprivations and frustrations of life inside prison [can] lead to certain psychological changes" (Snead-Greene and Royster 70). However, there is another turning point for Poussey Washington, which is when she saves the Asian American character Brook Soso, whom she finds unconscious in the prison library due to an overdose. This incident leads to a friendship that later transforms into a romantic relationship between Poussey Washington and Brook Soso, helping Poussey regain her positive and energetic personality. However, in the fourth season of *Orange is the New Black*, the character Poussey Washington meets a tragic end when she is suffocated by correctional officer Baxter Bayley during a peaceful demonstration in the prison cafeteria. After her death, the prison staff initially attempt to cover up Poussey Washington's death, resulting in a prison riot, a memorial, and an article in the newspaper.

The character development of Poussey Washington highlights the fact that characters other than Piper Chapman can move beyond stereotypical or superficial roles and instead be portrayed as genuine individuals with deep feelings, ideas, desires, aspirations, and the ability to change. However, Poussey Washington's character development contrasts the Asian American characters, who either remain entirely one-dimensional and never develop any depth or merely serve as a vehicle for the development of other characters such as Poussey Washington. This lack of meaningful development will be further analyzed in chapters 5.3 and 5.4.

Apart from the development of her character, it is also important to analyze how Poussey Washington's background influences her experiences. As previously mentioned, Poussey Washington

is an African American woman from a middle-class background. Although her socioeconomic status is not explicitly mentioned in *Orange is the New Black*, the fact that her father was an army general suggests a privileged socioeconomic status. This assumption is further reinforced in the flashback episode that tells Poussey Washington's story before her time in Litchfield Federal Penitentiary. The episode shows her family home in Germany, including her room, which contains various articles of value, as well as jewelry. In addition, the flashback episode highlights her education and travel experience, placing her in Germany and New York and showing her on the way to Amsterdam.

While her socioeconomic status is not further discussed in the series, Poussey Washington's African American origin is frequently the basis for unfair treatment. This is evident as she is sentenced to six years in Litchfield Federal Penitentiary for the offense of possessing less than an ounce of marijuana. "Studies have shown that African Americans [...] are significantly more likely than whites to be arrested for possession and sale of marijuana, targeted for arrest by the police, and to receive a conviction and criminal record, despite the fact that the majority of marijuana users are non-Hispanic whites" (Snead-Greene and Royster 69). Piper Chapman, on the other hand, who was convicted for a much more severe drug offense of trafficking drugs to another country by plane, received a comparatively lenient sentence. Additionally, another flashback episode further highlights the racist treatment when it is revealed that both the white correctional officer, Bayley Baxter, and the African American woman, Poussey Washington, were stopped by the police for the same offense - possession of marijuana. However, while Bayley Baxter was sent home with a warning, Poussey Washington was arrested and charged. This underscores the fact that, especially in the United States of America, "millions of poor people and folks of color [...] are trapped [...] in a criminal justice system which is treating them like commodities, like people who are easily disposable" (Snead-Greene and Royster 70).

Nevertheless, the discrimination based on her ethnicity does not end with her arrest but continues well into her time at Litchfield Federal Penitentiary. The fifth episode of the first season of *Orange is the New Black*, titled "The Chickening," features various inmates, including both Poussey Washington and Piper Chapman, chasing after a chicken that Piper discovered on prison grounds. According to various urban myths within the prison, the chicken possesses magical powers, drugs, or candy. The commotion triggers a lockdown, and the inmates involved are forced to lie down on the ground. Those involved are then sent to correctional officer Sam Healy to receive their punishment. However, the episode only shows the conversations with

Poussey Washington and Piper Chapman. Despite Piper Chapman being the one who discovered the chicken and initiated the chase, Sam Healy chooses to overlook her role in the incident:

SAM HEALY. So, I'm not sure if I have the rumor straight. Is the chicken filled with money, or heroin, or guns, or candy?

PIPER CHAPMAN. No, no. Mr. Healy, this is...

SAM HEALY. (He interrupts Piper Chapman.) I'm not sending you down the hill. You made a mistake. You're new.

PIPER CHAPMAN. Thank you. [...]

SAM HEALY. Look, I don't care if you've seen this thing or not. But I don't want you exciting other inmates with this kind of talk. They're not like you and me. They're less reasonable. Less educated. ("The Chickening" 41:30-41:52)

The conversation highlights Sam Healy's perception of women of color as inferior, leading him to not punish Piper Chapman due to her skin color and socioeconomic status. This claim becomes even more evident when Poussey Washington is placed in the Security Housing Units (SHU) and gets her visitation rights revoked for breaking the same rule as Piper Chapman. Similar unequal treatment and discrimination against women of color could be observed in the furlough situation mentioned in the previous chapter, where Poussey Washington's skin color and her social status led to her being treated differently than Piper Chapman. Additionally, since Poussey Washington is openly lesbian and Sam Healy is known for his homophobia, it is likely the intersection of her skin color, socioeconomic status, and sexuality that leads to discrimination in punishment. With his words and actions, Sam Healy "ultimately legitimizes the hegemony of the white, upper-middle class," highlighting how "the women in *Orange is the New Black* deal with both oppression and privilege which is decided on because of their race" ("Representations in *Orange is the New Black*" 5f).

While Poussey Washington experiences direct discrimination due to her being African American, the Asian American characters once again face another form of marginalization: invisibility. Throughout the episode, the white American, African American, and Latin American characters all have theories on what is inside the chicken and are actively searching for it. The Asian American characters, however, neither make an appearance nor offer any theory on the chicken's contents. Although the Asian American characters are not discriminated against through stereotypes in this situation, they are still discriminated against through exclusion.

The portrayal of white supremacy at Litchfield Federal Penitentiary reaches its climax at the end of season four, with the death of Poussey Washington at the hands of correctional officer Baxter Bayley. In the episode “The Animals,” the incarcerated women protest against the harsh methods of the captain of the guards, Desmond Piscatella. As the protest turns from peaceful to physical violence due to the guards physically removing inmates, a fight breaks out, and Poussey Washington attempts to intervene. However, she is pushed to the ground and restrained by Baxter Bayley, who places his knee on her back and has a firm grip on her neck. Due to the chaotic nature of the fight, Baxter Bayley is distracted and overhears Poussey Washington uttering the words: “No, come on, man, I’m trying to help. [...] Oh, fuck it hurts. Get your foot off me, man! Man, get off me! Help me!” (“The Animals” 56:47-57:18) before tragically suffocating to death. This incident “was meant to reflect the present-day issue of police brutality and promote the Black Lives Matter movement” (Cruz 29), more specifically, the killings of African Americans like Eric Garner and Michael Brown, who both are real-life victims of murder at the hands of white police officers.

The aftermath of her death not only highlights institutional racism but also the lengths authorities will go to protect their own. After Poussey Washington’s death, the staff at Litchfield Federal Penitentiary attempts to prevent the incident from becoming public. Desmond Piscatella suggests framing the death as “dealing with a violent inmate” and emphasizing that “our man was doing his job. This was not about race” (“Toast Can’t Never Be” 2:36-2:45). Joe Caputo later makes a statement on live television, describing Baxter Bayley as a “victim of circumstances” and that he “fulfilled his duty” and that “[Joe Caputo] defend[s] his actions” (“Toast Can’t Never Be” 1:09:45-1:11:23). This incident “represents both sides of the same unjust coin: her death is an accident, but it is also systematically produced by racist systems that protect and maintain the innocence of the man who kills her” (Ruderman-Looff 491). It is white supremacy that spares white police officers and prison staff from criminal prosecution when they injure or kill people of color.

However, it is necessary to acknowledge that while Poussey Washington is frequently discriminated against and ultimately murdered due to internalized racism, her death is a means to address a fundamental issue outside of the fictional setting of Litchfield Federal Penitentiary. Studies show that in the United States of America, people of color, especially African Americans, “have significantly higher death rates compared with whites” (Lett et al. 395) in cases of police shootings. Therefore, it can be argued that the discrimination and racism Poussey Washington faced during her time at Litchfield Federal Penitentiary are included to shed light on the

deeply rooted racist ideologies and discrimination against African Americans, especially African American women, that still prevail in the United States of America today. However, the same cannot be said about the Asian American characters, as their portrayals do not reflect this level of societal critique. Their portrayals are both highly stereotypical and do not address any of the societal issues, such as the invisibility, fetishization, and discrimination of Asian Americans. This topic will be further explored in chapters 5.3 and 5.4.

Additionally, despite experiencing racism from both the staff at Litchfield Federal Penitentiary as well as inmates of other ethnicities, Poussey Washington is part of a strong community within the African American ethnic group. The various ethnic groups at Litchfield Federal Penitentiary, as said by inmate Lorna Morello in the very first episode of the series, “look out for [their] own. [...] It’s tribal, not racist” (“I Wasn’t Ready” 32:14-32:21). Poussey Washington is very well integrated into the African American group inside the prison, which can be seen in various scenes. Even after she develops a drinking problem due to depression, she receives nothing but support from her fellow African Americans. Her best friend, Tasha Jefferson, even “commits a minor crime [after getting out of prison] in order to get back to prison, where she has a friend, Poussey” (Jović 26). This shows that, even though Poussey Washington is an African American woman who is discriminated against because of her race, she still has privileges such as community support and belonging, protection, as well as access to resources that are controlled by the African Americans in prison. While these privileges differ from those Piper Chapman has, they are just as important and not granted since others do not have them. Mei Chang and Brook Soso are the only two Asian Americans in Litchfield Federal Penitentiary and, therefore, are exempt from these privileges altogether.

In terms of gender, Poussey Washington is a character that is far from any traditional or stereotypical representation, as she is “a black woman, [...] thin in stature and from a military background. She wears her hair short and can often be viewed in rather baggy clothing” (Fryett 22). This portrayal challenges traditional gender norms in several ways, making her a prime example of a gender representation that is not based solely on stereotypes. Furthermore, she is “depicted as humorous, honest and thoughtful” (Gesualdo 78), with interests and character traits that do not allow for a simple categorization. She is portrayed as a lover of literature and a highly intellectual person. Although Poussey Washington radiates a calm disposition, she can shift into a more rigid personality as she “stands up for what she believes in and is not afraid to protect herself” (Gesualdo 78). Poussey’s gender expression mixes both traditionally male and female

attributes, as she shows both strength, for example, when she saves Brook Soso from overdosing on antidepressants, and vulnerability, for example, when she confesses her romantic feelings to her friend Tasha Jefferson, despite knowing that Tasha does not reciprocate her feelings.

Poussey Washington's complex personality challenges traditional female gender norms and highlights the fact that femininity cannot be narrowly defined. Therefore, it is evident that *Orange is the New Black* features a diverse representation of African American women that challenges gender stereotypes, whereas, in contrast, the gender representation of the Asian American characters is purely based on stereotypical ideologies without more complex personalities. Furthermore, Poussey Washington's gender expression includes traditionally male traits, contrasting with the more stereotypically feminine characters, such as Piper Chapman. However, her masculine traits are never presented in a ridiculous or comedic way. This portrayal is significantly different from the one of Mei Chang, who also expresses a gender identity that reflects traditionally male traits but is built on stereotypes commonly associated with Asian American men. While Poussey Washington's masculine traits are integrated into her complex personality as a part of her identity, for Mei Chang, it seems to be the single defining feature of gender identity, which is analyzed in more detail in chapter 5.3.

Beyond her gender representation, Poussey Washington's portrayal also intersects with her sexuality. She offers a portrayal that both challenges and reinforces existing stereotypes about African-American women in the media. Although Poussey Washington openly identifies as lesbian, she does not conform to "the usual portrayals of lesbians: white, thin, and attractive" and instead "challenge[s] the white, middle/upper-class depictions" (Fryett 16) of lesbians typically portrayed in the media. However, it can be argued that her sexuality is consistent with traditional narratives about African American women's sexuality. bell hooks coins the term "tragically sexual," which can be applied to Poussey Washington, playing on the stereotype of negated sexuality of African American women, suggesting a conventional portrayal of her sexual identity (hooks 74). This portrayal is first seen in her flashback episode, where the viewer learns about Poussey Washington's relationship with Franziska, the daughter of a German commander. "Poussey, though not rejected by her lover per se, is rejected by Franziska's father and abandoned by Franziska, as the end of the flashback shows Franziska reunited with her father" (Fryett 23f). The idea of Poussey Washington as tragically sexual becomes even more apparent later in the series when she confesses her love to her best friend, Tasha Jefferson, who does not reciprocate the feelings. When Poussey Washington tries to kiss her, she is rejected and abandoned by Tasha Jefferson.

Nevertheless, by the end of season three, there is a shift in the representation of Poussey Washington as tragically sexual. After she finds and saves Brook Soso, who has overdosed on antidepressants, the two form a bond that ultimately results in a romantic relationship. This relationship frees Poussey Washington from the narrative of the tragically sexual African American woman, as the couple stays together until the day of Poussey Washington's death. It can be argued that "this couple challenges lesbian interpretations on television because it features an interracial relationship [and] takes two groups that are often marginalized on television, race and LGBTQ groups, and intersects them" ("Representations in *Orange Is the New Black*" 12). The relationship with Brook Soso helps Poussey Washington move beyond the limiting stereotype of the negated and tragic sexuality of African American women, as she is now engaged in a consensual and meaningful relationship without being abandoned or repressed. This portrayal offers a different representation of African American women's sexuality, which is often denied in the media.

However, although the portrayal of their relationship has many positive aspects, such as challenging traditional television depictions of lesbian relationships as well as rewriting traditional media portrayals of African American women, it also reinforces certain stereotypes about Asian and Asian American women since the circumstances at the start of their relationship are subject to stereotypical ideologies, which are explored in more detail in chapter 5.4.

5.3 The Character Mei Chang

Mei Chang is the first of the two Asian American characters to appear in *Orange is the New Black*. She makes her debut in the first season of the series, whereas the other Asian American character, Brook Soso, is introduced in the second season. Despite appearing in the first season of the series, the viewer does not learn much about Mei Chang until the third season of *Orange is the New Black*. From her initial appearances, all we know is that she is a 52-year-old woman who is relatively quiet, antisocial, and isolated from the other inmates. She is very short, has short black hair, and wears no makeup. Other than that, “Chang is mostly invisible in the first season” (M. Kim 63), possibly reflecting the fact that the Asian American ethnicity only accounts for a minimal proportion of inmates in the US American prison system.

However, as previously mentioned, Asian and Asian American characters have been rendered invisible in the media for decades, which raises the question of whether Mei Chang is just another stereotypical representation of Asian American invisibility. This suspicion is reinforced later in the series when we learn the reason for Mei Chang’s incarceration at Litchfield Federal Penitentiary. Mei Chang is convicted of organized crime after she joins her brother’s illegal animal trafficking business and tortures and kills the supplier who tried to deceive them by selling ping pong balls instead of turtle eggs. In addition, before entering her brother’s business, Mei Chang emigrated to the United States of America to be sold as a bride. However, she is rejected by all of the potential suitors due to her physical appearance:

(Translated from Mandarin)

POTENTIAL BUYER. Is this a joke?

MEI CHANG’S BROTHER. Welcome to our family, Mr. Sun. My sister and I are so pleased to meet you.

POTENTIAL BUYER. You promised me a beautiful girl.

WOMAN. I never actually said “beautiful.”

POTENTIAL BUYER. You said she had “pleasing attributes.”

Woman: And I’m sure she does.

MEI CHANG’S BROTHER. My sister’s a good cook. And very thrifty.

POTENTIAL BUYER. So am I. And I paid to find a wife, not a squatty peasant who still smells like sheep shit. Call me when you want to get serious. [...]

MEI CHANG'S BROTHER. are we going to do now? [...] I can't take care of her. [...] You must know someone else who needs a wife.

WOMAN. I'm only as good as the product. If you don't have the looks, you at least need the charm. ("Ching Chong Chang" 6:15-7:14)

Mei Chang has no voice in the process of being sold as a bride, which already underlines her invisibility. Her invisibility is further emphasized when the viewer learns that she joins her brother's illegal animal dealing business precisely because she is figuratively invisible:

(Translated from Mandarin)

SUPPLIER 1. Okay, we've got two boxes of dried sea cucumber and a box of deer antlers. Really nice this time, from New Zealand.

MEI CHANG'S BROTHER. And? Where's my special delivery?

SUPPLIER 2. We had a little setback. That idiot Zhang Bo got himself busted.

MEI CHANG'S BROTHER. I need this stuff, Deng. You think I make money on fucking chrysanthemum tea? I have six people waiting on bear bile.

SUPPLIER 1. The cops are all over the neighborhood, stopping anyone suspicious. Your gall bladders are sitting with 300 Gs worth of rhino horn in a storage unit in Flushing and we can't touch them.

SUPPLIER 2. Look, this will blow over. We wait a few months—

MEI CHANG'S BROTHER. A few months? No. (Long pause) Take Mei. Have her carry it.

SUPPLIER 2. (Laughs) This is no job for a woman.

MEI CHANG'S BROTHER. It's a job for this woman. The whole time we've been talking, she was standing right there. You never even looked at her. She's invisible. ("Ching Chong Chang" 19:09-20:20)

She then participates in her brother's criminal operations, such as smuggling "medicinal delicacies like dried sea cucumber, deer antlers, bear bile, and turtle eggs," which in itself reinforces her "strangeness, mysteriousness, primitiveness, and unintelligibility" (M. Kim 66), all of which are traits associated with the stereotype of the Yellow Peril. When she joins the business, she is placed in a position of power and exhibits character traits associated with the Yellow Peril

stereotype, as she becomes “diabolical, conniving, and ruthless” (Johnson 9). This is evident in a scene where she tortures the potential husband for rejecting her in the previously mentioned scene. Additionally, her portrayal also aligns with the Dragon Lady stereotype, which is characterized by “the stark contrast between [her] petite body (or [her] gender) and cold-blooded, fatal actions” (M. Kim 66).

It is evident that Mei Chang’s entire backstory is stereotypical and is built around the theme of invisibility. Mei Chang’s life has primarily been defined by the expectations and actions of the people around her, particularly her brother. Ironically, she only breaks free from the stereotypical role of the Asian woman traded for marriage by her family for financial gain because of another stereotype - her invisibility. Moreover, her involvement in her brother’s organized crime business also illustrates her limited options. Her story accurately reflects the stereotype of invisibility, where her individuality and personality are overshadowed by the roles and stereotypes imposed on her by society.

However, the persistent stereotype of Asians and Asian Americans as invisible is not solely confined to Mei Chang’s backstory. Mei Chang, the only Asian American character in the first season of *Orange is the New Black*, has appeared only three times in the first seven episodes of the series and has a screen time of less than one minute in any of these appearances. In fact, “Chang only appears in five episodes out of thirteen episodes [of season one], and her screen time is less than five minutes out of approximately 725 minutes (0,6 percent)” (M. Kim 63). When she does appear, she does not have a significant impact on the series, which reflects the invisibility and underrepresentation of Asians and Asian Americans in the media. In contrast, Carrie Black, an equally relevant white character with a similar physical appearance to Mei Chang in terms of height, hairstyle, and lack of makeup, receives the same amount of screen time in just three episodes as Mei Chang does in the entire first season of *Orange is the New Black*.

Additionally, according to a statistic from a Reddit user, Mei Chang is not even in the top 20 characters by number of spoken lines (WalterEagle), despite being a recurring character. Furthermore, Mei Chang does not appear on any of the official promotional posters for seasons one through seven of *Orange is the New Black*, even though she has appeared in all seven seasons of the series. These observations further highlight the fact that *Orange is the New Black*, despite being praised as a highly progressive show that has challenged stereotypical narratives for various ethnicities, adheres to, and, whether intentionally or not, reinforces the stereotype of Asians

and Asian Americans as invisible. In doing so, the show continues the long-standing trend of negative representations of Asians and Asian Americans in US American media.

Apart from her limited screen time, her portrayal is subject to further stereotypes, particularly in the way she speaks. Although Mei Chang has very few spoken lines, her thick accent is immediately evident when she does speak. An exaggerated accent is usually used to easily convey a character's ethnicity or for a comedic effect. However, this also makes it "a harmful yet defining feature of Asian representation [...] and becomes a signifier of the Asian identity that is often mocked" (M. Nguyen 7). Furthermore, "accents and English fluency are often perceived as an indicator of intelligence" (M. Nguyen 8), and exaggerated accents are, therefore, often used to portray a character as less intelligent and contribute to the marginalization of the ethnicity the character belongs to.

In terms of appearance, Mei Chang is a very short Asian American woman and belongs to the Golden Girls, a term used to refer to the older inmates. Her physical appearance is "particularly masculine, emphasized by her short spiky hair and lack of makeup" (C. Kim 80), as well as the fact that she has "facial hair [that] appears to be a mini Fu Manchu mustache" which resembles "caricature[s] of Orientalist images from the early 20th century" (M. Kim 64). This is very reminiscent of the stereotypical portrayal of Asian American men, as they are "seen as asexual [...] never the leading person, or [...] the Perpetual Foreigner" (Johnson 20), which aligns closely with Mei Chang's portrayal. Unlike other characters who actively engage in sexual activities with other inmates or even guards, Mei Chang's sexuality is neither explored nor mentioned throughout the seven seasons of the series. Instead, she "seems to evoke the stereotype of the Asian male as sexually impotent voyeur or pervert as she takes the role of the scorekeeper for two inmates' – Big Boo and Nicky – competition in sexual pursuits" (C. Kim 80). Although she does not participate in the competition, her facial expression "derives some sort of pleasure in overseeing it" (C. Kim 80).

Adding to the representation of sexual stereotypes of Asian American men is Mei Chang's job in Litchfield Federal Penitentiary, which is revealed in the second episode of *Orange is the New Black*'s first season, titled "Tit Punch." Mei Chang is seen working in the prison commissary, a job that may have been chosen "to further emasculate Asian men, [as] employment opportunities [are] limited in scope, consisting primarily of 'feminine' work such as laundry, house-keeping, and cooking" (Shek 381). Although the commissary work does not fit the typical "feminine" job, it is in stark contrast to more physically demanding - and therefore more stereotypically masculine - prison jobs, such as electrical or agricultural work. Furthermore, while most

inmates work in teams, the work in the commissary is a one-person job. This job separates Mei Chang from the other inmates by steel bars, which might be an indication of her being different from the others due to her being the only Asian American in Litchfield Federal Penitentiary at the time.

Aside from her physical appearance and profession being consistent with stereotypical portrayals of Asian American men, Mei Chang's overall presence in *Orange is the New Black* further reinforces her invisibility. In fact, Mei Chang does not make her second appearance until the sixth episode of *Orange is the New Black*'s first season. In this episode, the prisoners organize a rally to fight for the right to represent their ethnicity on the Women's Advisory Council (WAC). Piper Chapman represents the white American inmates; Maria Ruiz advocates for the Latin American inmates; Tasha Jefferson speaks for the African American inmates and Mei Chang, without even having campaigned, is elected to "represent both the Others and the Golden Girls" ("WAC Pack" 54:32-54:36). This scene underscores the fact that Asian Americans are basically non-existent in Litchfield Federal Penitentiary, as they are not even mentioned by name, unlike the other ethnicities. Furthermore, there are no inmates of other ethnicities other than white American, African American, Latin American, and Asian American in Litchfield Federal Penitentiary; thus, the term "others" stands exclusively for Asian Americans. This is especially critical as Asians and Asian Americans are often victims of the practice of othering, which "is a process whereby [...] groups are marked as different and inferior from the dominant social group" (Griffin 1). Given the number of inmates from other ethnicities, there is no doubt that Asian Americans are rendered invisible in *Orange is the New Black*, and, as a result, are harmfully categorized as "others."

In the subsequent episode, correctional officer Sam Healy invites the elected representatives to his office to discuss their ideas for improving the Litchfield Federal Penitentiary. While the representatives of the white American, African American, and Latin American ethnicities present their suggestions for improvement, Mei Chang is portrayed as confused, seemingly not understanding the situation and her role in the meeting:

SAM HEALY. Good morning. Welcome, ladies of the WAC. [...] All right, now, business i.e. if you will, the concerns of your fellow inmates.

MARIA RUIZ. Mr. Healy, the pillow that we get for sleeping is thin like paper. Sometimes... *yo necesito* two pillows. For ergonomics. [...]

TASHA JEFFERSON. Okay, first of all, the hot sauce in the commissary is bullshit. We want that Thailand sauce, the one with the rooster on it. [...] And second of all, ain't no reason we can't get *Fifty Shades of Grey* in the library!

SAM HEALY. We talked about this, Jefferson. Fed's not gonna subsidize erotica.

PIPER CHAPMAN. I've got a copy.

MARIA RUIZ. Me too.

MEI CHANG. (Leans in) Fifty shades. (Indefinable expression) [...]

PIPER CHAPMAN. The thing is, I think a few basic changes could drastically improve the quality of life. Like clinic hours... every week for preventative health care. And re-opening the track. And maybe legal counseling. And the GED program. [...]

(Mei Chang closes her eyes and makes snoring sounds.)

SAM HEALY. Chang, you're up.

MEI CHANG. Okay, Mr. Healy. Okay.

(Sam Healy, Piper Chapman, Maria Ruiz, and Tasha Jefferson look at Mei Chang while she does not say anything.)

SAM HEALY. Lay it on me, Chang.

MEI CHANG. Okay. (She still does not say anything.)

SAM HEALY. Good. We got a good list going here, some good ideas. ("Blood Donut" 5:03-7:48)

In this portrayal, Mei Chang embodies the stereotype of the Perpetual Foreigner, as it is suggested that she does not belong in this setting because she either does not understand the task or cannot communicate her ideas adequately. She seems to be "unable to assimilate into the larger American society," which, in this scene, consists of Sam Healy and the three other representatives of the Women's Advisory Council, which promotes "the permanent status of Asians as the perpetually foreign, invisible other" (Johnson 13).

It is not until the third season of *Orange is the New Black* that the viewer learns more about Mei Chang, as we are given more detailed information about the character. While most characters introduced in the first season of *Orange is the New Black* had flashback episodes revealing their backgrounds and reasons for being in Litchfield Federal Penitentiary at this point, Mei

Chang had to wait until the sixth episode of the third season for her story to be told. In addition, her flashback episode is titled “Ching Chong Chang,” which, while intended to be both humorous and provocative, is an extremely offensive and highly racist title (M. Kim 67) that plays on the “commonly used pejorative to mock the Chinese language, culture, and the people themselves” (C. Kim 79) and is frequently “used to elicit humor from the viewers in contexts involving Asians” (M. Kim 67). This episode is also “the only explicitly racialized [...] episode title, standing in contrast to other titles [of flashback episodes] that are empowering (‘We Can Be Heroes’) or irreverent (‘Fucksgiving’)” (M. Kim 68) and raises the question of the reasons for this choice.

At the beginning of her flashback episode, another inmate calls Mei Chang “Ching Chong Chang,” which, as previously mentioned, is a mockery of the Chinese language and culture. Later, Mei Chang is seen soaking her feet in an unspecified liquid, which elicits a confused reaction from the viewer due to the lack of explanation. In another scene, Mei Chang is shown brushing her teeth with salt, while Piper Chapman and Alex Vause whisper about the action being strange while openly laughing at her:

ALEX VAUSE. What – (Laughs)

(Piper Chapman and Alex Vause appear perplexed, watching Mei Chang brush her teeth with salt.)

ALEX VAUSE. I’m thirsty just looking at her.

PIPER CHAPMAN. (Whispering) Well, you should see what she does with pepper. (Laughs)

MEI CHANG. Hey, lesbians. My eyes squinty, but ears work fine.

PIPER CHAPMAN. Let’s go.

ALEX VAUSE. I’m sorry. I laugh when I see something super weird. (Laughs)

PIPER CHAPMAN. (Hushed) Alex! Alex!

ALEX VAUSE. How did she get a whole box of salt? (“Ching Chong Chang” 4:51-5:32)

Mei Chang’s portrayal contributes to reinforcing the stereotype of the Perpetual Foreigner, and the “strangeness and mysteriousness [of her actions] keep Orientalism alive, isolating Mei Chang from others” (M. Kim 65). This stereotypical portrayal, along with her solitary habits of

walking and sitting alone, as well as taking food out of the cafeteria with guards not even noticing (M. Kim 65), further emphasizes her invisibility and isolation.

5.4 The Character Brook Soso

Brook Soso, the second Asian American character of the series, is introduced in the third episode of *Orange is the New Black*'s second season, titled "Hugs Can Be Deceiving." She is of Scottish and Japanese descent and, similar to the show's main character, Piper Chapman, comes from an educated, upper-middle-class background and is a "very outspoken personality [which] allow[s] her to embody a matrix of complexities rather than remaining as a stagnant background role" (C. Kim 80). Brook Soso is characterized by her long black hair and slim figure and is generally considered attractive. She is a social activist for many different causes, having campaigned against the construction of a Walmart in favor of a park, as well as volunteering at a homeless shelter. She was convicted of illegally chaining herself to a tree during a political protest and was sentenced to serve time in Litchfield Federal Penitentiary. During her time in prison, she engages in several sexual relationships, including the already discussed committed relationship with the African American inmate Poussey Washington in season four of *Orange is the New Black*. However, Brook Soso identifies as pansexual as she mentions that she is "attracted to people, not genders" ("(Don't) Say Anything" 9:28-9:30).

Understanding Brook Soso's upbringing provides important insights into the ways her character was shaped by cultural expectations. In one of her flashback episodes, we learn about Brook Soso's childhood and see her as a child with her very stereotypical mother, who forces her to practice playing the piano to perfection:

(Brook Soso is playing piano as her mother approaches her.)

BROOK SOSO'S MOTHER. Three, four, and wrong! (She shakes her head.) Well?

BROOK SOSO. I skipped the final repetition and played directly into the coda.

BROOK SOSO'S MOTHER. You thought I wouldn't notice? Do you know what happens to cheaters?

BROOK SOSO. They go to hell. [...] I didn't watch TV on purpose, Jessica's parents always have the *700 Club* on.

BROOK SOSO'S MOTHER. And that's why Jessica never places at the science fair. There is no hell. There is no heaven. When we die, all that remains are the memories of our achievements. And cheaters are very quickly forgotten. Again! Play. And sit up straight!

(Brook Soso starts playing the piano again as her mother walks off.) (“Trust No Bitch” 4:39-5:48)

Brook Soso’s mother embodies the Tiger Mother stereotype, which is defined as a parent “who is overly strict and emotionally manipulative with her child to foster high levels of academic achievement” (M. Kim 70). This is another stereotype frequently associated with Asians and Asian Americans and is closely related to the Model Minority stereotype. The Tiger Mother emphasizes discipline, hard work, and academic excellence as the most important aspects of life, qualities that are also typically emphasized in the Model Minority stereotype.

When analyzing the character’s portrayal, it is immediately apparent that Brook Soso was created to be the exact opposite of Mei Chang. For example, “Chang is asexual; Soso’s sexuality is exoticized. Chang hardly speaks; Soso cannot stop talking” (M. Kim 69). At first glance, it seems that Brook Soso “challenge[s] the racism towards Asians that had been embodied and perpetuated through Chang throughout the first season, in that she is more multidimensional and complex” (C. Kim 80), as she has her own storyline and much more screen time than Mei Chang. However, it soon becomes evident that the character Brook Soso follows a similar ideology about Asians and Asian Americans as Mei Chang. While Mei Chang is defined by her invisibility, the character Brook Soso relies heavily on other stereotypes, painting a one-dimensional picture of the only other Asian American woman at Litchfield Federal Penitentiary. This comparison of the only two Asian American characters in *Orange is the New Black* highlights the series’ tendency to reinforce racial stereotypes rather than challenge them.

The fact that Brook Soso’s character consists of highly stereotypical representations is evident right after her introduction in *Orange is the New Black*, as she is immediately confronted with her sexualization. In her first encounter with Carrie Black, a white lesbian inmate, she faces sexualized remarks such as, “They must have locked you up for your own good. [...] Daddy can protect you from the criminal element” (“Hugs Can Be Deceiving” 1:30-1:37), while other inmates make kissing noises and suggestive gestures behind her back. This initial appearance shapes how she is portrayed throughout the series – as “highly sexualized, extremely fecund, and as objects of the white, male gaze” (Hai and Dong 91), even though, in this case, the male gaze is exercised by female characters within the series.

This pattern of sexualization is not limited to the initial interactions of Brook Soso but continues throughout the series. The perpetuation of this hypersexualized image of Asian and Asian American women is further underscored in the fourth episode of the second season, titled “A Whole Other Hole,” in which Brook Soso exemplifies and reinforces the Lotus Blossom stereotype. In

the episode, inmates Nicky Nichols and Carrie Black, both of whom exhibit stereotypical characteristics commonly associated with the butch lesbian identity, which is typically “produced via the rejection of strong symbols of femininity” (Jones 191), have a competition in which the goal is to “see who can have sex with [Brook Soso] first” (C. Kim 80). Before even speaking to her, one of the two inmates already sexualizes and objectifies Brook Soso by asking, “Who is Brook? Oh, yea. That’s the new girl, right? Hot one of the Asian persuasion?” (“A Whole Other Hole” 12:16-12:23), thereby challenging Brook Soso’s identity and “reinforcing the often-fetishized portrayals of Asian women in the media” (C. Kim 80). The term “Asian persuasion” is highly problematic, as it plays directly into the stereotypical representation of Asians and Asian Americans as exotic and simplifies the Asian ethnicity while completely disregarding diversity and individuality within Asian cultures.

However, this is not the only instance in which Brook Soso is given racist names, which “despite her biracial identity,” constantly reminds the viewer “of Soso’s Asian identity, as she is isolated from others” (M. Kim 70). Some examples of racist nicknames she is given are “Ching Chong China Doll” (“We Have Manners” 27:04-27:05), as well as “Pocahontas” (“Appropriately Sized Pots” 50:59-51:00) and “Mulan” (“40 Oz. of Furlough” 30:22-30:23). The names “Pocahontas” and “Mulan” are derived from Disney characters and are considered racist because they reduce cultural identities to stereotypes and reinforce harmful generalizations about Asian women.

The sexualization of Brook Soso continues when, in the same episode as the previous incident, she asks Piper Chapman a question about movie night in Litchfield Federal Penitentiary. Piper is talking to Carrie Black about a blanket she stole from her when Brook Soso interrupts them:

BROOK SOSO. Piper, there you are! Um, so, I heard tonight is movie night, and I don’t have headphones yet, so I went to—

CARRIE BLACK. (She gets extremely close to Brook Soso.) Hey! What’s your name?

BROOK SOSO. (She ignores Carrie Black.) Um, so, anyway, I guess I just don’t understand this Chinese lady at the commissary. Is she Chinese? I don’t wanna presume. She could be Malay.

(Carrie Black gets behind Brook Soso, looking up and down her body.)

PIPER CHAPMAN. Not now, Brook.

BROOK SOSO. Okay, should I meet you out here?

(Brook Soso squints uncomfortably over her shoulder, watching Carrie Black.)

PIPER CHAPMAN. I'm busy. Go back to your cube. Now.

BROOK SOSO. Okay, yeah!

CARRIE BLACK. (She looks after Brook Soso with her eyes fixed on her lower body.)
Bye! [...]

CARRIE BLACK. Hey, you really want that blanket? Maybe we could work out a trade?
("A Whole Other Hole" 25:33-26:18)

This whole scene is notably unsettling for Brook Soso, as Carrie Black invades her personal space, almost brushing her body against Brook Soso's. Brook reacts visibly uncomfortable but tries to ignore Carrie Black by continuing to talk to Piper Chapman. Carrie Black continues to look Brook Soso up and down, practically undressing her with her gaze, stereotypically portraying Brook Soso as the exotic Asian woman, "unfamiliar; strikingly and intriguingly unusual or beautiful" (Aoki and Mio 427). After Brook leaves, Carrie Black strikes up a deal with Piper Chapman, proposing to trade the stolen blanket for Brook Soso's body. This underscores the value that the white American characters in *Orange is the New Black* put on the female Asian American body and further reinforces the stereotype of the "Lotus Blossom [as] a concept of the Asian female body as an erotic ornament created to serve the white male" (Johnson 18). Furthermore, a white character's attempt to trade an Asian American character to another white character can be read as an embodiment of both historical and contemporary racial hierarchies, as it reflects the devaluation of non-white bodies. In an attempt to close the deal, Piper Chapman tries to convince Brook Soso that she needs Carrie Black due to all the dangers that lurk in prison:

PIPER CHAPMAN. It can be seriously dangerous in here. Don't kid yourself.

BROOK SOSO. What do you mean?

PIPER CHAPMAN. You're a pretty girl. And you're gonna be a target. I know that I was.

BROOK SOSO. You mean like rape?

PIPER CHAPMAN. Ooh, rape, assault, battery. You need to find yourself a prison wife. Somebody really tough. Somebody nobody's gonna fuck with.

BROOK SOSO. Did you do that?

PIPER CHAPMAN. All I'm saying is that one night with the right protector can keep you safe for the rest of your sentence. [...] What you need is someone who inspires real fear. You know, someone who's kind of man-ish and kind of bulky but tender at heart. And there's not a lot of good ones. Most of them are taken.

CARRIE BLACK. (She walks to their table.) Hey, you two. What are we talking about here? Well, you know, I am feeling so single today.

BROOK SOSO. What's going on?

PIPER CHAPMAN. Nothing. Big Boo, (Big Boo is Carrie Black's nickname.) this is Brook. And, Brook, this is Big Boo.

BROOK SOSO. Uh... Is this some kind of game? I don't get it. What is going on? [...]

PIPER CHAPMAN. Clearly, this is not working, so can I just have my blanket back?

CARRIE BLACK. No. You didn't deliver.

BROOK SOSO. Deliver what? Me? Were you trying to pimp me out? [...] You tried to sell me for a blanket?

PIPER CHAPMAN. Well, when you put it that way...

BROOK SOSO. You are sick, you know that? You are seriously fucked up. ("A Whole Other Hole" 47:58-50:02)

In this conversation, Piper Chapman draws upon the stereotype of Asians and Asian Americans as naive, compliant, and obedient, as she hopes Brook Soso will not question her intentions and follow the stereotype of Asians as exotic by complying "without complaint and fitting into the submissive geisha girl stereotype," which conveys "the image of a demure Asian woman serving a white man" (Paner 14). However, Brook Soso seems to defy this stereotype as she sees right through the deal between Piper Chapman and Carrie Black. Brook Soso again appears highly uncomfortable and expresses disgust when she learns that her body has been valued equivalently to a blanket, prompting her to leave the cafeteria. As Brook Soso leaves, Carrie Black looks after her, with her eyes fixed on the lower part of Brook's body and a lascivious grin, completely disregarding her feelings about the potential transaction. This once again underscores the fact that Brook Soso is desirable only because of her body and that the "oriental woman [should be] [...] sexually willing and [...] available without emotional [...] demands" (Johnson 6).

While it may seem that by not falling for the deal between Piper Chapman and Carrie Black, Brook Soso has defied the stereotype of the naive and compliant Asian American woman, and that *Orange is the New Black* aimed to counteract this common stereotype against Asian and Asian American women, this impression is shattered in the final scene of the episode. Nicky Nichols, who has initiated the contest between herself and Carrie Black to determine who can have sex with Brook Soso first, notices that Brook is crying and upset. Nicky Nichols then offers Brook a shoulder to cry on, hiding from her that her goal is to win the contest. Unaware of the competition between Nicky Nichols and Carrie Black, Brook Soso ends up having sex with Nicky. Later in the episode, during the prison movie night, Brook Soso and Nicky Nichols watch the movie together, which seems to displease Carrie Black. Nicky Nichols smiles triumphantly, casually touches Brook Soso's breast, and smirks at Carrie Black, signaling that she has won the competition over Brook Soso's body. Once again, the problematic representations from the previous scenes are further emphasized, reinforcing the portrayal of the "Asian female as an embodiment of excessive sexuality" (C. Kim 80). Brook Soso is reduced to a 'plaything,' serving only as a sexual trophy for the two inmates, who embody the stereotypical characteristics of the heterosexual white male.

However, portraying Brook Soso as exotic and, therefore, sexualizing her whenever possible is not the only stereotype that *Orange is the New Black* uses for her character. Due to Brook Soso being of both Japanese and Scottish descent, she is given certain advantages that she would not have if she were not biracial. On Brook Soso's first day, white American inmate Lorna Morello provides her with a toothbrush and soap, something she usually only does for other white American inmates. At first, the viewer may assume that Lorna Morello is welcoming her into the white American community with this gesture. However, she immediately follows up the gesture with the sentence, "I don't normally bend the rules like this, but you don't look full ... Asia" ("Hugs Can Be Deceiving" 8:38-8:43), which reminds the viewer of Brook Soso's Asian identity and marks her as different (M. Kim 70). This reinforces the broader issue at play in Litchfield Federal Penitentiary, namely the fact that there are only two Asian American inmates. In a conversation with her bunkmate Mei Chang, several problems that come with Brook Soso's biracial heritage become evident:

BROOK SOSO. You know what sucks? Belonging to a race that doesn't commit enough low-value crimes to be relevant in a place like this. Where's my big Asian prison family?

MEI CHANG. You Scottish.

BROOK SOSO. Not to white people, I'm not. One drop of ethnic blood and bam! I'm basically made in China, like you and my toothbrush.

MEI CHANG. You Scottish! ("Ching Chong Chang" 17:50-18:10)

While it is a fact that Asians and Asian Americans are underrepresented in the US American prison system, as in 2024, only 0,7% of women incarcerated in all prisons in the United States of America were Asian or Asian American (Kajstura and Sawyer), this conversation also highlights that Brook Soso not only does not belong to the white American community in prison but that she is also not accepted as Asian American due to her Scottish heritage, making her racially ambiguous. "The viewers see a division based on what constitutes Asian identity between the first-generation immigrant, Chang, and the born-and-raised-in-America Soso. Chang's denial of Soso's Asianness quashes what Soso searches for – her own tribe" (M. Kim 70f). Since she is portrayed as racially ambiguous, she has no one inside Litchfield Federal Penitentiary, is isolated, and is constantly trying to fit in somewhere. However, when she tries to make friends and fit in somewhere, she continually undergoes the process of othering:

LORNA MORELLO. What's your name again, hun?

BROOK SOSO. Soso

LORNA MORELLO. (Laughing) No, no, no, I said what's your name?

BROOK SOSO. Yeah, that's my name. Brook Soso. Oh. Um, funny story. My parents named me Brook after Brook Shields, the actress. Um, but except without the 'e' - 'cause they thought it'd be a bit more original. But sometime around my 10th birthday, they started saying I was named after a brook instead. Um, like the babbling kind.

LORNA MORELLO. (Ironically) That's funny! ("Hugs Can Be Deceiving" 7:44-8:17)

Not acknowledging that Soso is Brook's actual surname - and therefore her prison name - may seem like a misunderstanding, yet it "is an extremely harmful microaggression that implies that names that are non-European or Anglican are improper and up for ridicule" (C. Kim 80). The fact that Brook Soso tries to use humor to deflect from the situation suggests that this is an issue that she has likely experienced before and reflects the stereotype of the Perpetual Foreigner, as she is never able to integrate into the white American community in prison fully.

This is reinforced later in the same episode when Piper Chapman calls Brook Soso by her first name because she "can't say [her] [prison] name with a straight face" ("Hugs Can Be Deceiving" 29:45-29:47). These bigoted and racist remarks often go unnoticed, which normalizes and

perpetuates the racist, hegemonic notion that Asian names are unnatural and subject to ridicule, and perpetuate Asian Americans as Perpetual Foreigners that can never be assimilated. Furthermore, these examples, as well as Brook Soso becoming the bunkmate of Mei Chang solely based on her physical appearance, strip her of her ethnic identity and deem her to be Asian, completely disregarding her Scottish heritage. The only person who acknowledges that she is partly Scottish is Mei Chang, who only does so to other Brook Soso from herself.

Brook Soso's struggle with isolation, the objectification of her body, and the lack of any sense of belonging at Litchfield Federal Penitentiary have a tremendous impact on her mental health, resulting in her becoming severely depressed by the end of *Orange is the New Black*'s third season. Her depression reaches its climax when she attempts to commit suicide by overdosing on antidepressants, which were recommended to her by her counselor, Sam Healy. After taking all of her antidepressants, she is found unconscious by Poussey Washington. Along with Tasha Jefferson and Suzanne Warren, Poussey Washington "help[s] her and ultimately save[s] her life, while also saving her from being sent to the Psychiatric Housing Unit" (Gesualdo 76). This incident brings the two women closer together, which leads to the already analyzed romantic relationship between them in the fourth season of *Orange is the New Black*.

Following this incident, *Orange is the New Black* emphasizes how Poussey Washington steps up to care for Brook, which highlights her kindness and empathy while largely disregarding Brook Soso's near-death experience. Instead of using her suicide attempt to develop depth for Brook Soso's character, the incident marks a key turning point for Poussey Washington, as it helps her to gain emotional depth and personal growth, whereas Brook Soso only acts as a narrative crutch to further establish Poussey Washington's character. Furthermore, this incident reinforces the common stereotype of Asians and Asian Americans as submissive, as it suggests that their primary function is to support the development of other characters. By reducing Brook Soso's struggles for Poussey Washington's growth, *Orange is the New Black* reinforces the long-standing media stereotype of limiting Asian and Asian American characters to supporting roles in favor of more dominant storylines.

While in her relationship with Poussey Washington, Brook Soso is accepted by the other African American women at Litchfield Federal Penitentiary and is welcomed into their community, making it seem as though she is finally developing some sense of belonging in prison. However, "this projects an illusion of inclusion or even racial utopia, but it paradoxically leaves the Orientalist inassimilability unchallenged" (M. Kim 73), meaning that it further reinforces the existing stereotype of Asians and Asian Americans as "fundamentally foreign individuals who

will never fully assimilate into [...] society” (Abrams 29). Furthermore, by bringing together two inmates “that are often marginalized on television, race, and LGBTQ groups” (“Representations in *Orange is the New Black*” 12), the series succeeds in challenging stereotypical representations of lesbian relationships. However, it also reinforces the racist stereotype of the Lotus Blossom, as Poussey Washington embodies the masculine white hero by literally saving Brook Soso’s life and bringing her into the protective circle of the African American community. While this portrayal may not have been intentional, it perfectly mirrors the stereotype of Asian women as “meant to be ‘dominated’ and ‘saved’” (Tan 85).

Although the circumstances that led to the relationship still appear to be fueled by stereotypical ideologies, there seems to be a shift in the representation of the Asian American character Brook Soso throughout *Orange is the New Black*’s fourth season. While Poussey Washington embodies the male hero saving the docile Asian damsel in distress at the start of their relationship, the dynamic changes. Brook Soso defies the stereotypical role of the submissive Lotus Blossom, who eagerly serves and pleases her partner. Having never been in a relationship with a woman before, Brook Soso instead expresses a desire to take things slow, which Poussey Washington accepts and supports:

BROOK SOSO. I really like you. Like, really, a lot. And I just... I wanna honor your feelings, you know if you wanna call this something. Like, we’re girlfriend-girlfriend, or... lezzy togezzy. I don’t know.

POUSSEY WASHINGTON. How about we say we’re happy, yeah? Leave it at that?
 (“(Don’t Say Anything” 9:56-10:19)

Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, at the end of season four, Poussey Washington is killed by correctional officer Baxter Bayley, leaving Brook Soso completely devastated. Despite her loss, she is still accepted in the African American community as they grieve the loss of Poussey Washington together. However, there is a noticeable tension between her and Poussey’s best friend, Tasha Jefferson, as they argue over who grieves Poussey Washington’s death more and how her memorial should be handled. While Tasha Jefferson becomes the leader of the prison activists in response to Poussey Washington’s death, Brook Soso is primarily confined to Poussey’s old bed, mourning the loss of her love in isolation. This narrative makes Poussey’s death seem even more tragic but does not provide Brook Soso with a meaningful storyline of her own. Instead, the contrast in the portrayal of Tasha Jefferson and Brook Soso regarding Poussey

Washington's death once again highlights the fact that Brook only serves as a narrative crutch for other characters rather than an independent figure in the story. Furthermore, this portrayal reinforces the typical stereotype of Asians and Asian Americans as submissive, once again positioning Brook Soso as a secondary character in service of a more dominant storyline.

Following her isolated mourning of Poussey Washington's death, Brook Soso creates an art installation that also serves as a community library to honor Poussey Washington's love for literature. The memorial is greatly appreciated by Tasha Jefferson and the other inmates, and Brook Soso, who has never been taken seriously by anybody other than Poussey Washington, seems to finally be respected by the other inmates. For a brief moment, it appears that she manages to change the narrative of the invisible "Asian Americans [that are] often overlooked in their right to civic participation" (Lee et al. 76). However, despite her emotional gesture, the community library is shown for less than five minutes throughout the episode and is never mentioned again. Instead, the remaining episodes of *Orange is the New Black's* fifth season focus on Tasha Jefferson's leadership of the prison activists and her fight for racial justice. Once again, the memorial reinforces her role as a grieving figure rather than serving as a turning point for Brook Soso's character and further establishes her as a narrative crutch for the tragedy of Poussey Washington's death.

6. Conclusion

In this work, I have analyzed the representation of the Asian American characters Mei Chang and Brook Soso in *Orange is the New Black* and contrasted their portrayals to those of the white American character Piper Chapman and African American character Poussey Washington. Mei Chang and Brook Soso are marginalized within the series, frequently reduced to stereotypes, and their roles lack depth and character development. In contrast, the white American character Piper Chapman and the African American character Poussey Washington gain significance and undergo substantial character development throughout the seven seasons of *Orange is the New Black*. The Asian American characters, on the other hand, are only introduced for either comedic relief, to be marginalized as sexual objects, or to work as vehicles for other characters to develop. This contrast highlights the fact that, while the creators of *Orange is the New Black* manage to change narratives about certain ethnic groups, they create a certain racial hierarchy within their cast.

Mei Chang's portrayal closely aligns with typical stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans as invisible and mysterious. Her invisibility is evident in her having one of the least screen presences among the season one characters and in the fact that she has no meaningful impact on the series. Furthermore, she is characterized by traits associated with the stereotype of the emasculated Asian man, namely being short, unattractive, and sexually deviant. Even her flashback episode, which is usually included to give characters some depth, has a marginalizing title, is full of stereotypes, and further contributes to her invisibility. Additionally, her thick and exaggerated accent, strange behaviors like brushing her teeth with salt, and her inability to assimilate in prison contribute to her portrayal as the Perpetual Foreigner, while her facial hair conforms to the Fu Manchu stereotype, both of which contribute to her mysteriousness. As a result, the character Mei Chang remains a collection of racist stereotypes that highlight her otherness rather than giving depth or complexity.

Similarly, Brook Soso's portrayal conforms to the idea of Asian American women as exotic. Her character is primarily defined through sexualization, and her appearances in the series are limited by stereotypes such as the Lotus Blossom, which reduce her to an object of desire for the white American characters in the series. These characters explicitly state that they are only interested in her body and do not put any value on her as a person. Furthermore, the negative value put on Asian and Asian American women is evident in various instances, such as the attempt to trade Brook Soso's body for a blanket, which further reinforces her stereotypical

portrayal. Racist nicknames and various microaggressions add to her one-dimensional representation and reinforce the idea that her value lies solely in her sexual objectification. The very few positive moments she experiences, such as receiving a toothbrush and soap from her white American cellmate, are tied to her biracial heritage and mark her as different. As a result, Brook Soso's character is largely defined by stereotypes and objectification rather than being given any real depth or representation.

This contrast in the portrayal of Mei Chang and Brook Soso reflects class-based stereotypes associated with their respective ethnicities. Mei Chang is a Chinese immigrant who embodies many class-based assumptions about Chinese laborers, who are often viewed as poor, "uncultured and bewildered 'other'" (Hai and Dong 91). In contrast, Brook Soso is biracial and has Japanese roots, a country that is typically regarded as more sophisticated and developed. While both are portrayed in stereotypical ways, Brook Soso is represented as more educated and cultured, whereas Mei Chang is depicted as lower class, uneducated, and confined to social invisibility. This contrast reinforces the common stereotype that Chinese immigrants are associated with poverty and struggle, whereas Japanese Americans are perceived as better integrated and more accepted in Western society. Although both characters are portrayed with various stereotypes, there is a significant difference regarding class, which leads to Mei Chang being subjected to negatively regarded stereotypes like the Perpetual Foreigner. In contrast, Brook Soso is portrayed as a "sexual object par excellence" (C. Nguyen 131), which aligns with the Geisha Girl stereotype - a portrayal that is often viewed more positively despite its reductive nature.

The portrayal of Mei Chang and Brook Soso highlights the systematic issues in the representation of Asians and Asian Americans in contemporary media. By simplifying the only two Asian American characters with harmful stereotypes, *Orange is the New Black* follows a historical trend of portraying Asian and Asian American women as invisible, exotic, and mysterious. This representation helps perpetuate racist stereotypes and has significant consequences for the ethnic group affected. Whereas the African American character Poussey Washington goes beyond her initial supporting role and is portrayed defying stereotypes and ethnic tropes, *Orange is the New Black* fails to show the same progression and inclusivity for its Asian American characters.

Both Mei Chang and Brook Soso are classic examples of Asian American characters used to support the development of other, more dominant characters. While Brook is rendered as submissive and solely serves as a narrative crutch for Poussey Washington's character to develop depth and personal growth, Mei Chang's primary function in the series is to highlight how invisible she is to other inmates and even serves as a supporting character in her own flashback

episode. While *Orange is the New Black* is often praised for its diverse representation and shift in the portrayal of racial minorities, the show ultimately fails to give both Asian American characters a storyline with depth. Instead, both characters only remain vehicles to establish other characters.

This analysis is essential, as it contributes to a discourse about race and representation on television. The representation of Asian and Asian American characters in mainstream media, which is addressed in this work, reflects a trend toward marginalizing this ethnic group in favor of more marketable stories. This work provides evidence that the lack of depth and development of the characters Mei Chang and Brook Soso highlights the need for more complex portrayals of Asians and Asian Americans in the media, especially in series that pride themselves on featuring great diversity and changing female narratives (C. Kim 78). However, the lack of representation of Asians and Asian Americans is an issue that is not limited to the media but also impacts society as a whole, because the way ethnic groups are portrayed in the media directly affects how they are perceived and treated in real life.

Although this work analyzed *Orange is the New Black* and its representation of Asian American characters in a comprehensive analysis, the scope of the work is limited to a single television series and only two characters. Future research could go beyond *Orange is the New Black* and consider additional television series and Hollywood films to determine whether the issues identified in this work reflect the trends in the portrayal of Asian and Asian American women in popular media. Additionally, contemporary television shows and movies that feature Asian and Asian American women in the leading roles could be analyzed to compare other forms of representation.

In conclusion, the representation of the Asian American characters in *Orange is the New Black* highlights that even seemingly progressive media marginalize and misrepresent Asians and Asian Americans. Therefore, both media producers and consumers must be aware of these issues and challenge these negative and stereotypical portrayals. The goal must be a portrayal that accurately reflects the complexity of the Asian and Asian American ethnicity rather than reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Only then can popular media become an inclusive and accurately representative space for all ethnic groups.

27.931 words

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Abstract English

This master's thesis critically analyses the representation of Asian American characters in the popular Netflix series *Orange Is the New Black*, focusing on the intersection of the social categories race, gender, sexuality, and class. Using a feminist media analysis combined with a comparative approach, key characters Brook Soso, Mei Chang, Piper Chapman, and Poussey Washington are examined to explore how ethnic identities are co-constructed within the show. This thesis argues that, while *Orange is the New Black* has been praised for its progressive narrative, its portrayal of Asian American characters is far from positive. Instead of being portrayed as complex characters with depth and personal development, the Asian American characters are limited by stereotypical representations and exist mainly as narrative devices for other characters' development.

Abstract Deutsch

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht die Darstellung asiatisch-amerikanischer Charaktere in der beliebten Netflix-Serie „Orange Is the New Black“ kritisch und konzentriert sich dabei auf die Intersektion der sozialen Kategorien ethnische Zugehörigkeit, Geschlecht, Sexualität und soziale Klasse. Mithilfe einer feministischen Medienanalyse und einem vergleichenden Ansatz werden die Schlüsselfiguren Brook Soso, Mei Chang, Piper Chapman und Poussey Washington untersucht, um herauszufinden, wie ethnische Identitäten innerhalb der Serie gemeinsam konstruiert werden. Diese Arbeit argumentiert, dass, obwohl „Orange is the New Black“ für seine progressive Erzählweise gelobt wird, die Darstellung der asiatisch-amerikanischen Charaktere jedoch alles andere als positiv ist. Anstatt als komplexe Charaktere mit Tiefe und persönlicher Entwicklung dargestellt zu werden, werden die asiatisch-amerikanischen Charaktere durch stereotype Darstellungen eingeschränkt und existieren in erster Linie als narrative Mittel für die Entwicklung anderer Charaktere.