

“Life Isn’t Some Cartoon Musical”: Neoliberal Identity Politics in *Zootopia* and *Orange Is the New Black*

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IN THE SUMMER OF 2016, PROGRESSIVES SEEMED TO HAVE REASON TO rejoice. Amidst the ongoing culture wars, representations of women and minorities had been slowly but steadily improving in American film and television: the latest Disney princesses provided role models that were no longer necessarily straight and white, the notoriously white *Star Wars* franchise was undergoing noticeable diversification, and activist groups like Black Lives Matter were once again putting issues like racial profiling and police departments’ abuse of power on the national agenda. So even if the war had not yet been won, some crucial battles clearly seemed to have been decided, and with the appointment of the first female President of the United States seemingly a foregone conclusion, the long arc of history did indeed seem to be bending toward justice.

Then a painful lesson was learned. The bizarre fluke that was Trump’s election victory taught many people—on both sides of the political spectrum—that the word “inconceivable” apparently did not mean what they thought it meant, forcing many to re-evaluate their understanding of this increasingly surreal twenty-first-century political reality. If three decades of neoliberal doctrine had slowly accustomed people to the idea that no alternative is possible, Trump’s political ascent and the European far-right antiglobalist movement now appear as the harbingers of a new, postneoliberal age. Whether it will be one of neo-fascist oppression or rejuvenated civic engagement and political dissent (or both) remains, of course, to be seen.

But one historical fact is abundantly clear: the institutional failures of global capitalism have unleashed many years of accumulated frustration and resentment against the combination of progressive multiculturalism and technocratic governmentality that typified the neoliberal era.

While the constantly shifting ground of the current political landscape is clearly too unstable to define, it does present itself as an obvious point of crisis from which one might reflect on some of the contradictions of neoliberalism's cultural logic. While neoliberalism's key cultural features have been increasingly embedded in media-industrial production for the past two decades, cultural studies scholarship has been somewhat slow to adapt. Much of media studies' critical position traditionally approached mass media as the expression of a "dominant ideology" in the Althusserian sense, interpellating audiences by subjecting individuals to hegemonic institutions of power (Althusser 261–70). Many cultural studies scholars, above all those within fan studies, have therefore foregrounded and celebrated the ways in which audiences have appropriated, transformed, and subverted cultural norms as a form of civic resistance.

But in the twenty-first-century media-industrial context, it is all too obvious that the "mass media" are anything but monolithic, catering instead to a wide variety of political and ideological values—some of which would previously be described as countercultural or even anticapitalist (Gilbert, *Anticapitalism* 116). Much has been made, for instance, of the ways in which Disney princesses in popular movies like *Frozen* (2014) and *Moana* (2016) represent a progressive departure from the more obvious sexism of earlier characters, or how Netflix series like *Sense8* are evidence of a mainstream culture becoming more radically progressive. All these indications of progressive ideological values might signal actual social and economic progress, but they remain incorporated in a system of cultural production that still "feeds rather than challenges" the system of global capitalism (Fisher 12).

As the dominant cultural logic within a media landscape that is indeed increasingly diverse, neoliberalism exploits diversity to increase economic gain. In this context, diversity exists primarily in the sense that it offers a heterogeneous collection of texts that cater to contradictory and—ultimately—incommensurable ideological positions. Both their narrative organization and their forms of

distribution express key aspects of neoliberalism's most basic contradictions. To make a distinction between two different types of popular texts: those that may still be considered traditionally "mainstream" mass media draw on the "broadcasting" model by catering to the widest possible audience; and those that are available as "niche" media, typify a "narrowcasting" strategy (Gillian 86–87), flourishing within the context of on-demand culture and a highly segmented and individualized neoliberal environment (Tryon 12–13).

Two popular texts exemplify the contradictory logic of neoliberal popular media and the coexisting types of media-industrial production: Disney's *Zootopia* (2016) and Netflix's *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–). Both strongly foreground "progressive" attitudes toward identity politics in their representational strategies of race and gender. On one hand, the reception of *Zootopia* (2016), a traditionally "mainstream" media text, has clearly been shaped by gestures of progressive representational politics which clearly added to their status among the most desirable audience groups. *Orange Is the New Black*, on the other hand, provides a striking example of popular "niche" media, which circulates as a cultural text within a much more limited audience, and which also appears to embrace a more radical politics.

Far from being two arbitrary examples of popular media production in the neoliberal age, these two seemingly dissimilar texts have a great deal in common. Most strikingly, they both obviously attempt to appeal to an audience with progressive cultural values, in the first place by distancing themselves from their respective generic and medium-specific traditions. To put it more plainly: both *Zootopia* and *Orange Is the New Black* (hereafter *OITNB*) feature female protagonists who embody feminist values of agency, ambition, and self-determination and who are surrounded by supporting characters that often challenge and subvert racial stereotypes and gender roles. Moreover, they both dramatize situations of law enforcement in ways that reflect provocatively on issues of neoliberal governmentality, each text in its own way organizing its diegetic world as an environment of constant tension and negotiation between institutions of law enforcement and those over whom they exert their considerable powers. Both properties have also established themselves as critical and popular successes, and each has triggered enthusiastic critical discussions of their progressive cultural values alongside the almost-unanimous celebration of their craftsmanship as contemporary media products.

A close look at the representational organization of these two properties in the context of their respective media-industrial contexts reveals the extent to which popular culture has absorbed the progressive identity politics that have long informed the cultural studies tradition. First, *Zootopia* provides a primary text through which to consider whether mainstream culture itself has become an unlikely “site of resistance” to patriarchal capitalist ideology. *OITNB*, which is made for a much smaller and more specific audience, is—predictably—more “radical” in its progressive treatment of race and gender. But in both cases, these representational strategies turn out to be highly compatible with the cultural logic of neoliberal capitalism. As my analysis will demonstrate, both texts’ subversive potential remains fundamentally limited by a sociocultural context in which solutions to systemic problems can only be resolved at the individual level and where questions of race and gender are too easily separated from critiques of capitalism’s systemic forms of power.

Neoliberal Popular Culture: Media Industries in the Age of Flexible Accumulation

While “neoliberalism” has by now been adopted by many cultural studies scholars as a broad indictment of undesirable ideological values, the term has a specific relation to a historical phase of capitalism. Rather than perceiving culture as the direct expression of political and ideological power, the cultural material produced by mass media is better understood as a site of conflicting residual, emergent, and oppositional tendencies and sensibilities where key contradictions of contemporary capitalist cultural production emerge (Williams, *Television* 13; *Marxism and Literature* 78; *Culture and Materialism* 60–62). Thus, the processes of contemporary media production are not overdetermined in the “vulgar” Marxist sense. It makes more sense to see them as expressions of tensions that are fundamentally material, in the sense that they can be traced back to contradictions in the specific social and economic organization of neoliberal capitalism.

David Harvey helpfully characterized the neoliberal era as that of *flexible accumulation*, meaning that deregulation of global trade and capital’s access to labor occurred in response to the 1970s crisis of falling rates of profit (147). Neoliberalism, therefore, firstly indicates

an emergent set of political, economic, and sociocultural practices that arose alongside global capitalism, first identified by cultural theorists as the “postmodernism” of late capitalism in the 1980s (Jame-son), establishing itself as an increasingly global cultural and economic dominant under the Clinton/Blair doctrine in the 1990s, and gathering full force as the seemingly inescapable “capitalist realism” of the twenty-first century (Fisher).

While there is no shortage of theoretical writing on neoliberalism, two French works of scholarship are especially helpful for defining neoliberalism not just as a political and economic model but also as a form of subjectivity. The first is Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s massively influential *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, which defined the neoliberal spirit as one of increased entrepreneurialism, with global capitalism’s just-in-time production cycles and ubiquitous financialization shifting businesses’ focus from long-term investment to the unpredictable and crisis-prone speculation of the neoliberal era. Industrial capitalism’s “faith in rationality and long-term planning” (18) has been supplanted in the era of global capitalism by a state of “ideological disarray” (xlii) that is both liberating and bewildering: liberating because it has loosened the cultural, social, and economic constraints of industrial capitalism’s more monolithic dominant ideology, and bewildering because one is left without meaningful conceptions of shared values.

The second key definition of neoliberalism is provided by Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval’s *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, which theorizes the ways in which neoliberal policies have fostered new forms of subjectivity. Building upon Boltanski and Chiapello’s focus on the new spirit of global capitalism, they argue that the cultural logic of neoliberal capitalism actively produces a new and quite different type of norm that privileges individualism above all else. This new existential norm

enjoins everyone to live in a world of generalized competition; it calls upon wage-earning classes and populations to engage in economic struggle against one another; it aligns social relations with the model of the market; it promotes the justification of ever greater inequalities; it even transforms the individual, now called on to conceive and conduct him- or herself as an enterprise.

(Boltanski and Chiapello 3)

In short, neoliberal subjectivity expresses an emergent set of social relations that dissolves the shared bonds of empathy, solidarity, and class-consciousness that informed the transformative social movements of the twentieth century. It provides the ideological justification for a political and economic system of flexible accumulation, designed to further enrich the most powerful while disenfranchising the most vulnerable. At the same time, these groups' ability to organize and resist collectively has been undermined by neoliberalism's basic paradigm of *entrepreneurial individualism*. In terms of media representation and identity politics, this means that progressive depictions of oppressed groups are moved to the purely individual level. For, as Jeremy Gilbert has pointed out, "Hegemonic neoliberalism is perfectly happy for individuals to undergo personal transformations, so long as they do not aggregate or catalyze any significant social transformation" (*Common Ground* 195).

This flexibility has also transformed the organization of media-industrial production and distribution. Under industrial capitalism, American film studios and television networks largely operated in ways similar to Fordist car factories: the classical Hollywood era was dominated by a small group of hierarchically organized, monolithic businesses that cranked out distinctive but fairly homogeneous products along highly predictable rhythms and patterns (Schatz). While the logos of many of these classical studios and networks still survive, the organization of these industries has changed dramatically in Hollywood's post-classical age. On one hand, economic deregulation facilitated an unprecedented wave of corporate buy-outs, mergers, and take-overs. This has yielded a media landscape in which a small handful of horizontally and vertically integrated conglomerates like The Disney Company and Time Warner have a staggering amount of power over the production and distribution of a wide variety of cultural texts. At the same time, these massive conglomerates depend more than ever on outsourcing media-industrial work to smaller, more flexible production companies rather than employing their own full-time staff (Deuze 2–3).

This proliferation of increasingly precarious media production for thoroughly diversified transnational conglomerates is reflected in the growing number of media texts that cater to highly specific niche tastes—a phenomenon illustrated most vividly by the success of boutique premium cable channels like HBO, which has thrived critically and commercially by appealing directly to a cultural elite willing to

pay extra for “quality TV” (Mittell 17). These media texts firstly cater to very specific highbrow tastes and preferences, thus distancing themselves from older conceptions of mainstream culture. They are also distributed via platforms that allow for the individualization of textual reception: Netflix, HBO Go, and the rise of algorithmic recommendations exemplify the arrival of “on-demand culture” as the pinnacle of individual media consumerism (Tryon 5).

In this context, it is important to rethink the relationship between the representation of ideological meaning in commercial media texts and the material organization of the industries that produce and distribute them. To illustrate some of the contradictions that arise in this situation, the Disney film *Zootopia* provides an excellent example of the tension between older conceptions of mainstream culture and the neoliberal context in which these texts are produced and distributed.

Zootopia: Identity Politics and Utopian Governmentality

Netflix recommendations, Facebook filter bubbles, long-tail business models, and niche media all vividly represent the individualistic on-demand cultural logic of neoliberalism. But at the same time, one can hardly maintain that mainstream mass media no longer exist. Superhero movies, the rejuvenated *Star Wars* series, and animated features routinely rake in over \$1 billion, and have also come to depend increasingly on international markets for their box office returns. Thus, one of the key contradictions of media production in the neoliberal era involves this double logic: on one end of the spectrum, a stronger focus on global blockbusters connected to established brands; and on the other, the rapid growth of niche media that cater to highly specific forms of cultural capital.

Zootopia exemplifies the former aspect of media production. While it does not expand on an existing property or storyworld, the film fits comfortably within the established global Disney brand, and it has obviously benefited from the global channels of promotion and distribution that are available to the world’s biggest media conglomerate. With an international gross of over \$1 billion and a 98% “fresh” score on reviews aggregator *Rotten Tomatoes*, the film was another unmitigated critical and commercial success after the runaway global

phenomenon of Disney's previous animated feature *Frozen*. That film's focus on the filial relationship between two female characters, together with its ironic take on the genre's conventional assumptions about heterosexual romance, led many critics to celebrate the film for its subversive sensibility. But even though *Frozen's* superficially progressive gender politics were widely perceived as a radical break with the Disney brand's traditional representation of female characters, it also falls within a longer tradition of the company's reversal of stereotypes in response to shifting cultural tastes (Blouin 118). In this sense, *Frozen's* "progressive" politics merely represent another step in a much longer development of incrementally "feminist" princesses, through the "independent" and "liberated" young women in *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and *Aladdin* (1992) to the more recent variations in *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Tangled* (2010), and *Brave* (2012).¹

Zootopia stands apart from these other films firstly because it is not about a princess, and secondly because—unlike the vast majority of animated Disney features—it takes place in the present. The film's allegorical representation of contemporary urban life has animals standing in for a variety of social groups, ethnic identities, professions, and other stereotypes. But where *The Lion King* deployed a similar allegorical structure to deliver a thoroughly fascist ideological payload (Roth), *Zootopia* has the appearance of a progressive fable in which questions of sexism, racism, and civil rights are frequently foregrounded—even in ways that seem to go against the familiar ideological organization of the notoriously conservative Disney worldview (Wasko 145–52).

The film's protagonist is Judy Hopps, a young female rabbit from the rural town of Bunnyburrow, who goes against social expectations by moving to metropolitan Zootropolis to become a police officer. As her parents and everyone else around her explain repeatedly, no bunny has ever achieved this goal. But this plucky and obviously resourceful young rabbit's resolve is only strengthened by the taunts of the local bully. Thus, when he asks her "What crazy world are you living in where you think a bunny could be a cop?" the film's position is obviously that such antibunny stereotypes represent outdated ways of thinking that should no longer apply in *Zootopia's* more modern world.

This first indication of the film's allegorical narrative structure immediately points to the deliberately confusing inconsistency of its representational identity politics. When reading the film as a fable about gender roles, as audiences are clearly encouraged to do, Judy's biological make-up as a rabbit becomes shorthand for preconceptions about gender: the main reason other characters ridicule her desire to join the police force are directly related to cultural constructions of femininity. This is made especially clear during the montage sequence in which Judy is first defeated by the police academy's physical training regimen, only to emerge victorious after finding clever ways to use her smaller-than-average physique to clear the seemingly insurmountable obstacles on the course. But while Judy's "bunniness" obviously stands in for femininity, it is striking that some of the much larger animals that surround her at the police academy—including her demanding drill sergeant—are also voiced by female actors.

This is, therefore, also the point where the film's thoroughly neoliberal approach to gender and identity politics first begins to reveal itself. Within the film's allegorical framework, with huge numbers of mammal species living together harmoniously, there are clearly animals of both genders available that would be considered suitable for police work. But while a few incidental cops are passingly identified as female, Judy never engages in meaningful social interactions with those female colleagues, or indeed with any women save for her occasional chat with her parents. Instead, the many scenes showing her surrounded by comically oversized fellow police officers (Figure 1) plays up familiar cinematic representations of female characters struggling to succeed in a male-dominated work environment—most memorably in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Figure 2).

But while this cartoonish exaggeration usefully foregrounds the challenges still routinely faced by countless women, the screenwriters' decision to isolate Judy from other female characters severely undercuts the film's potential to engage meaningfully with feminism. One could easily imagine Judy having one or more women colleagues—possibly of more imposing physique—who could become an ally or mentor within the department, just as Clarice Starling's primary figure of contact and support is a woman of color who undergoes obviously similar challenges. In contrast, *Zootopia's* representational gender politics play directly into the neoliberal agenda, illustrating



FIGURE 1. Judy Hopps tries to fit in with much larger colleagues in *Zootopia*. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

once again that success in the workplace is an entirely individual matter: it is up to Judy alone to find the wherewithal to succeed in an unfair world rather than to question or challenge the coordinates of that world's political organization.

Adding insult to injury, the film's only other substantial female character serves merely as a transparent indictment of affirmative action. The diminutive sheep Dawn Bellwether, who initially uses her modest bureaucratic powers as Assistant Mayor to support Judy's



FIGURE 2. Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) surrounded by physically imposing male agents in *The Silence of the Lambs*. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

efforts to become something more than “some token bunny,” is ultimately revealed to have masterminded the film’s central criminal plot. While monologuing about her crimes in their climactic confrontation, Bellwether vents her frustration about functioning as a “glorified secretary,” thereby confirming the prejudicial stereotype that women who have reached positions of authority have done so as the result of unfairly preferential treatment or by currying favor, rather than on the basis of real accomplishment, which makes them both inadequate and dangerously resentful.

As the only two significant female characters in a movie that is positively bursting with colorful male animals, it is telling that Judy Hopps and Dawn Bellwether so perfectly reflect two mutually reinforcing stereotypes that relate back to institutional sexism and the workplace: on one side, the “undeserved” progress of a woman who holds a grudge against what she sees as an unfair system, and, on the other, the “deserved” achievements of a woman who has managed to “lean in” and overcome the grossly unfair hurdles of a social order that privileges white men above all others, but which is still ultimately “fair” in its recognition of her extraordinary abilities (Aschoff 40–41). In other words, the film provides a vivid illustration of neoliberalism’s most basic commandment, holding individual subjects accountable for their own successes and failure, while disqualifying the necessity for any form of systemic political change.

Sadly, *Zootopia*’s textbook instrumentalization of neoliberal identity politics is not limited to issues of gender. In a well-intentioned but thoroughly tone-deaf attempt to give the film an even more “progressive” agenda, *Zootopia* also takes on the topic of institutional racism by coding some species as nonwhite within its allegory of contemporary urban life. Perhaps attempting to address the implicitly troubling predator/prey relationship in *The Lion King*, the film’s metropolitan central location is portrayed as utopian because predator species no longer feed upon the herbivores: instead, predator species have evolved, learning to control their “savage” urges and live in harmony alongside the mammals they used to devour.

The film’s allegorical relationship between predator and prey is coded as equivalent to that between whites and people of color in American urban environments. This is first explicitly established with the introduction of Nick Wilde, the con-artist fox who becomes Judy’s reluctant investigative partner. Even though Nick is voiced by

the almost aggressively white Jason Bateman, his character runs into social behaviors that code him—and all other predators—as “black in every way except through his voice” (Fleeger). Indeed, the film’s central plot comes to revolve around Bellwether’s conspiracy to gain power by mobilizing long-standing prejudice against predators as “savages” that naturally prey upon the meek and innocent herbivores, who are thereby coded as white.² Aside from the supremely poor judgment underlying the writers’ decision to explicitly associate non-white minorities with carnivorous animals, the film does at least attempt to leverage this ill-advised analogy into a progressive ideological message.

At its most effective, the film draws on this offensive idea to illustrate how quickly media narratives can reinforce racist prejudice. In a surprisingly powerful montage sequence, the constant repetition of the misleading news story that attributes Zootropolis’s recent wave of violence to “traditionally predatory animals” yields a variety of public displays of racism: other mammals quietly move away from predator families on the subway, the mayor (a lion) is falsely accused of leading a conspiracy to restore predators’ supremacy, and the harmless desk sergeant Clawhauser (an obese cheetah) is dismissed from his job at the front desk because “they thought it would be better if a predator such as myself wasn’t the first face that you see when you walk into the ZPD.” A rally against the sudden resurgence of antipredator prejudice in the once-utopian metropolis underlines these references to racist discourses, with angry protesters yelling at a sad-faced jaguar to “go back to the forest.”

It is refreshing to see such an explicitly antiracist position in a Disney movie—not only because the Disney canon has enthusiastically contributed to racist stereotyping throughout its long history (Sperb) but also because the critical depiction of institutional racism goes against neoliberal culture’s facile and quite superficial commitment to “diversity.” The sequence reveals the uncomfortable reality of racial segregation that underlies the history of urban development, which is conveniently erased by popular depictions of the gentrified metropolis as an attractive and diverse environment (Zukin, *Naked City* 29). As much as *Zootopia* plays—most literally—into this familiar image of the Disneyfied city (Zukin, *Landscapes*), it counters those utopian implications by foregrounding tensions too easily glossed over in discourses of urban renewal and gentrification.

Nevertheless, the intersection between the film's gender politics and its treatment of racism yields what can only be described as an absolute clusterfuck of neoliberal identity politics. Firstly, the aforementioned lack of meaningful feminist engagement mires its treatment of gender in the morass of entrepreneurial individualism, with each woman left to her own devices as true "entrepreneurs of the self." But secondly, and far more egregiously, the filmmakers' decision to represent people of color as carnivorous mammals plays into the very basic racism that the film superficially rejects. The ease with which the citizens of Zootopia accept the notion that predators can never *really* be trusted is a direct reflection of a eugenicist logic that paints nonwhite minorities as "super-predators" whose social behavior remains biologically determined.

Zootopia's flailing attempt to brush all this ugliness back under the carpet results in the hardcore neoliberalism of positing "personal awareness as the answer to social inequality" (Fleeger): while advancement by oppressed groups leads to the worst kinds of abuses of power, scrappy, can-do individuals like Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde can overcome sexist and racist prejudice through personal determination and perseverance. And, what is more, the success both characters achieve is celebrated in the end by their official elevation to the police force—an institute of governmentality more implicated than any other in the violent oppression of feminist and antiracist protest. Therefore, while *Zootopia* clearly attempts to express an inclusive and socially progressive message, its inability to think outside the boundaries of global capitalism's cultural logic ends up demonstrating most vividly one of the central contradictions of neoliberal identity politics.

Orange Is the New Black and the Challenges of Neoliberal Identity Politics

On the surface, *OITNB* is the mirror image of *Zootopia*: the popular Netflix series was among the first breakout hits to establish the former mail-order video rental store as the purveyor of original content squarely targeted at top audience demographics (Lotz 119). Its success helped solidify not only the Netflix brand within the burgeoning metagenre of Quality TV, but also distinguished it clearly from American premium cable competitors like HBO and Showtime by

offering up cycles of episodes as what has come to be known as the “full-drop season” (Mittell 41). Having moved from the rental of physical disks to the leading transnational subscription service offering on-demand content, Netflix smartly embraced one particular aspect of premium cable’s successful distribution strategy in the twenty-first century, whereby many viewers had grown accustomed to binge-watching entire seasons on DVD rather than waiting for weekly installments (Mittell 38).

But besides illustrating this complementary aspect of digital media industries’ recent focus on “long-tail” distribution models (Lotz 145), *OITNB* also allegorizes progressive identity politics within a neoliberal framework. Where Judy Hopps becomes a vessel for depicting societal impediments and prejudices toward women and minorities from the perspective of law enforcement, *OITNB*’s protagonist Piper Chapman is a prism that communicates “the narratives of racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities to a more privileged audience” (Enck and Morrissey 304). A brand-defining “TVIII” hit (Johnson 7), the series shows the transformation of a privileged white woman who must learn to cope in a harsher reality where the system is governed by a form of social Darwinism in which only the fittest will survive—a framework that could also be described as reflective of a condition I have identified elsewhere as neoliberalism’s “post-ideological” condition (Hassler-Forest 67–71).

While the literal utopian mirage of metropolitan Zootropolis appears on the surface as the clear opposite of *OITNB*’s carceral institution, both protagonists’ daily social environments have a lot in common. Firstly, both are presented as heterotopias in the Foucauldian sense: most obviously in the case of the prison, which remains the most literal embodiment of a “heterotopia of deviation” (Foucault 25). But the seemingly diverse and multicultural Zootropolis is itself divided into a collection of separate gated communities, each of which is vigorously policed by the ZPD. Besides the film’s failure to answer the question why a utopian paradise like this would require such an elaborate police force at all, its specific forms of neoliberal governmentality are telling. For the ambitious Judy Hopps, her accomplishment as a law enforcement officer primarily involves her mastery of the panoptic apparatus of ubiquitous surveillance technology. Not only does she learn to use this technology to her advantage, but, in a critical plot point, she expands it with her

privately owned voice recorder, thereby elegantly (though no doubt inadvertently) capturing neoliberalism's erosion of the boundary between private and public spheres.

In the first season of *OITNB*, Piper's transformation from innocence to experience follows a remarkably similar path. She, too, must learn to succeed on her own strength outside of her familiar habitat; she, too, must learn to form and sustain strategic allegiances with those she has good reason to mistrust; and she, too, must ultimately prove herself by overcoming the lethal threat posed by a female antagonist. Where *Zootopia*'s villainous Bellwether reflects neoliberalism's hostility toward "unearned" upward mobility and feminist resentment of patriarchal power, *OITNB*'s big bad Pennsatucky represents the demonized remainder of America's white working class. It, therefore, similarly reinforces neoliberalism's cultural logic of entrepreneurial individualism, as Litchfield penitentiary becomes a microcosm of a brutal and inescapable capitalist realism where women only advance by learning to perceive each other as competitors rather than allies.

In a similar way, the second season applies this framework more explicitly to racial identity. In its distinctive narrative arc, a new main villain is introduced in the character of Yvonne Parker, commonly known as Vee: a ruthless drug dealer and veteran prisoner who exploits the loosely organized racial divisions within the prison population. Using a vernacular that is familiar from antiracist and civil rights movements, Vee appeals with deliberate cynicism to conceptions of shared racial and cultural identity, thereby willfully playing up existing tensions between the three major ethnic groups represented within the prison. In addition to her transparently disingenuous and corrupting attempts to deploy racial identity politics to her own financial advantage, this arc also has the unpleasant implication that black leaders using similar language are implicitly selfish and corrupt, and that antiracist activism is therefore automatically associated with criminal enterprises. Again, the tension this creates can only be resolved by removing the "bad apple" that has managed to abuse existing histories of prejudice that are clearly irrelevant in the neoliberal era's "post-racial multiculturalism" (Belcher 492).

However, as an ongoing serialized narrative, *OITNB* has also been able to revisit these issues and offer alternative approaches to understanding the basic coordinates of neoliberal subjectivity. As the series

has developed, its approach has moved from the fairly standard and predictable reproduction of global capitalism's dominant structure of feeling to adopt a more critical, more nuanced, and more progressive perspective on the intersection between identity politics and the workings of state power. While the show's overall tendency to "upset normative categories of gender and sexuality" certainly represents an important first step (Symes 39), its later seasons have also moved toward more systemic forms of critique.³

A notable subplot that stretches across the third and fourth seasons offers a good indication of this shift. In this elaborate story line, Piper develops a thriving business in used women's underwear, smuggling worn panties out of the prison and selling them for enormous profit to male "panty-sniffers." Piper's entrepreneurial skill is soon rewarded, as she learns first how to manipulate her fellow inmates to collaborate in her illegal enterprise and subsequently must harden herself yet again by establishing her authority over employees whose growing demands for fair wages are swiftly and harshly dealt with. But even though the third season finale appears to hammer home yet again neoliberalism's "business ontology," according to which the safeguarding of profit margins demands ruthless and inhumane leadership (Fisher 17), its continuation in the fourth season turns this dynamic around to focus on the white supremacist underpinnings of entrepreneurial individualism.

In this season, the Latina inmate Maria decides to set up a competing business from within her own ethnic community, thereby triggering Piper to lash out and retaliate against her new rival. But by countering capitalism's inevitable drive toward monopolization, her entrepreneurial common sense sets off a series of predictable but unforeseen reactions, which include the growth of a violent white supremacist movement that emerges around the reluctant but seemingly helpless Piper. Again, it is telling that the series' earlier depiction of a group identity for black inmates is portrayed as deliberate and opportunistic manipulation organized to facilitate a criminal narcotics organization, while the similar emergence of a White Power group is portrayed as the unfortunate and undesirable side effect of Piper's far more innocent used-underwear business. In one of the series' most brutal depictions of physical violence, Maria's crew punishes Piper for her association with white supremacists by painfully

branding her with a swastika, thereby depicting the white entrepreneur as the victim of this clash between representational identity formation.

But as obvious as it may seem to draw a clear line between Vee's "bad" use of identity politics versus Piper's ultimately "good" (although clearly naïve) approach, the fourth season's narrative organization makes it impossible to maintain common criticisms of the series that dismiss Piper as a "White Savior" figure (Belcher 498–99). For while Piper tries to remain distinct from the white supremacist group whose growing power derives from her own attempts to maintain her business monopoly, she soon comes to recognize her own complicity through her own sense of privilege and entitlement. Even if she only takes action after suffering the pain and humiliation of being physically branded a Nazi, the show's depiction of the seemingly natural association between privileged forms of entrepreneurialism and white supremacy speaks volumes about the institutional racism that continues to inform neoliberalism's supposedly "post-racial" structures of power (Enck and Morrissey 306). The elaborate Prison Panties storyline, therefore, demonstrates the systemic nature of racism within a neoliberal context, where the common sense understanding of such issues has come to view them as purely individual practices.

Piper's dawning realization of her own involvement is elegantly paralleled by the storyline of Baxter Bayley, the inept but well-meaning young guard who accidentally asphyxiates inmate Poussey Washington in the fourth season's penultimate episode "The Animals." Introduced in the third season, as the take-over of Litchfield by a privately owned corporation leads to financial cutbacks and the obviously irresponsible loosening of regulations, Bayley was among the more sympathetic new characters, never displaying the sadistic, abusive, or cruelly indifferent attitudes of many of the other new guards on the show. This climactic episode provides Bayley with a flashback origin story in the way that has been customary for featured recurring characters. In three sequences that interrupt the episode's ongoing escalation of tension between the prisoners and the increasingly abusive new guards, we see how Bayley in his teenage years repeatedly engaged in minor offenses, leading to occasional brushes with the police.

But where previous flashback narratives most commonly illustrated how women of color are singled out by the police force and judiciary system for excessive punishment, Bayley's flashback scenes foreground how he and his white friends never faced any meaningful consequences for their own petty crimes and misdemeanors. After being arrested as minors for trespassing, the police officers have some fun by pretending to press charges for far more serious crimes. But contrary to the process we have seen with minorities throughout the show—and, not coincidentally, particularly in the case of Poussey, who ended up serving a prison sentence for a very minor drug charge—Bayley and his friends are set free. If the police officers' intention was "scaring some sense into them," the flashbacks show us that Bayley and his friends' brush with the law has, if anything, further emboldened these middle-class white kids: the next sequence shows Bayley being fired from his job for blithely stealing from his employer, after which he indifferently stalks off with his friends to commit further minor infractions before being hired as a prison guard.

The fact that Poussey's death during a peaceful prisoners' protest was not perpetrated by one of the more obviously violent and prejudiced guards is crucial for understanding how this season develops its nuanced critique of white privilege as the institutional basis for neoliberalism. Contrary to Judy Hopps, who runs up against other characters' prejudices only to learn how to face and overcome her own, both Piper and Bayley are individually more or less "innocent," neither engaging in nor actively endorsing racist or sexist violence and oppression. Having both benefited repeatedly from their own privileged position within an unjust system of social relations, the fourth season's dramatic arc reveals how impeccably this system functions to privilege them, irrespective of their individual ideological positions. In this sense, they both ultimately operate as tools of an oppressive political system that metes out punishment and rewards in ways that are radically asymmetrical. Bayley's unintentional murder of Poussey thereby directly mirrors Piper's inadvertent responsibility for her competitor Maria's extended prison sentence.⁴

As a crucial moment of temporary narrative closure, the fourth season's narrative dénouement thus does succeed in moving beyond neoliberalism's basic framework of entrepreneurial individualism. Earlier seasons primarily reiterated the most basic mantra of capitalist

realism, in which individual characters learn to toughen up in the face of a brutal and harshly competitive daily reality. But the fourth series dramatizes a breaking point that pushes many characters beyond resigned cynicism and self-centered opportunism. For the first time, the palpable effects of systemic abuses derived from the lethal intersection between white supremacist governmentality and neoliberal privatization compel characters to see beyond restrictive identity politics and embrace a truly intersectional sense of solidarity.

Conclusion

Popular culture in the neoliberal age has thrived on the embrace of a form of identity politics that plays into cultural studies' traditional agenda: movies like *Zootopia* and series like *OITNB* present themselves as celebrations of diversity, explicitly taking questions of sexism, racism, and the abuse of power as their guiding motifs. While easily interpreted as signs of social and cultural progress, we must first acknowledge that global capitalism has fostered and even privileged media-industrial practices that embrace more progressive forms of identity politics. Both thoroughly mainstream media texts like *Zootopia* and more niche properties like *OITNB* illustrate how powerful such ideological repositioning can be in the context of global media conglomerates' intensely competitive jockeying for targeted audience engagement and brand loyalty.

But without disparaging the cultural importance of such representational shifts, these progressive gains also remain limited by the way in which such issues are framed by a thoroughly neoliberal agenda. For even if these media texts offer positive depictions of women and ethnic minorities while condemning prejudice and intolerance, they also demonstrate repeatedly that overcoming such systems is above all a matter of individual determination and ability. Not only do Judy Hopps and Piper Chapman both manage to overcome substantial obstacles on the basis of purely personal accomplishment, but this process also teaches them valuable lessons about racist prejudice. Moreover, depictions of collective action organized by nonwhite groups repeatedly take the form of criminal conspiracies—from Nick Wilde's larcenous popsicle business to Vee's appeal to black cultural identity as the motivating factor for her heroin trade. Thus, while

breaking free from traditional constraints of gender, sexual orientation, class, or race is celebrated at the individual level, any form of collective organization on behalf of oppressed groups is presented as disingenuous at best and downright criminal at worst.

But if *Zootopia* can be seen as a clear example of the ways in which mainstream culture has absorbed a progressive veneer within a thoroughly neoliberal structure of feeling, *OITNB* has built toward a moment of crisis that dramatizes the basic logic of white privilege, while also offering a real departure from neoliberalism's entrepreneurial individualism. Its key moment of crisis articulates the emergence of peaceful resistance and direct action as the expression of a truly intersectional sense of identity politics. Where attempts to organize large-scale direct action had—predictably—run up against the hostility and bad faith that had accumulated over time between the variously segregated groups, a transformative moment of solidarity is nevertheless reached in a semispontaneous expression of nonviolent collective resistance. This gesture aligns *OITNB* politically with the Black Lives Matter movement, both thematically in its nuanced but unequivocal indictment of white privilege, and quite literally by the script's incorporation of Eric Garner's tragic dying words "I can't breathe" into the season's most heart-wrenching scene. This climactic moment thus becomes the catalyst for a direction that is still too rarely seen even within the supposedly "subversive" media-industrial productions that proliferate on premium cable and on-demand services.

Reading moments such as these in the context of the more recent upheavals that threaten the former stability of neoliberal democracies, they seem like sure signs that the cultural logic of neoliberalism is no longer as staunchly resilient as it used to be. It is, therefore, all the more appropriate that the season finale ends on a note of such intense foreboding. Its cliffhanger ending of revolutionary violence without a clear political agenda even brought to mind one of Antonio Gramsci's most famous phrases: the real crisis of a postneoliberal order lies again in the fact that "the old is dying and the new cannot be born" (32–33). *Zootopia* and *OITNB* are therefore best read as examples of those "morbid phenomena of the most varied kind" (33) that appear in the current interregnum.

Notes

1. Unlike the other films mentioned here, *Brave* is a Disney/Pixar film and therefore stands apart in terms of branding. But since the film's protagonist, Merida, was officially added to the Disney Princesses franchise as the brand's eleventh member in 2013, the film nevertheless contributed to the cultural history of Disney Princesses.
2. Besides the aforementioned Bateman, the voice casting of other notable actors of color such as Idris Elba superficially runs counter to this logic, though other examples of white-coded characters with nonwhite voices also clearly exist in the Disney canon (most notably James Earl Jones voicing Mufasa in *The Lion King*). For a more elaborate discussion of this point, see Jennifer Fleeger.
3. At the time of writing, the fourth season had recently concluded with a cliffhanger ending that set up the prison riot arc for the fifth season.
4. This dynamic is illustrated further in season five, where the guilt-ridden Bayley's repeated attempts to seek out punishment for his crimes are repeatedly frustrated.

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