



## What Does a TV Show Look Like?

Broadcast television has long been criticized for lacking racial and ethnic diversity. But the prison drama *Orange Is the New Black* has a diverse range of characters including a transgender African American woman. Laverne Cox, who plays a transgender prisoner, says that the show is a breakout because of the range of faces in the show. “We don’t see enough multidimensional portrayals of trans women and women in jail who are different races, ages, body types. . . . We don’t see enough multidimensional portrayals of women in general, that show the diversity of womanhood.”<sup>68</sup>

Even with its high level of diversity (which some complain gets talked about too much), the core of the series is based on a memoir by a Piper Kerman, a memoir by a “privileged white woman serving a prison sentence.” But, as critic Roxane Gay points out, “Unfortunately, we will never see a similar show about a woman of color as a stranger in a strange land, bewildered by incarceration.”<sup>69</sup>

*Orange Is the New Black (OITNB)*, Netflix’s cutting-edge drama, is making the news for a wide range of reasons. Perhaps the most noteworthy thing about it is that Netflix is a streaming service, not a broadcast or cable network, so Netflix releases the entire season of the series all at once, so fans who want to can binge watch all the episodes in a single weekend. But the prison drama is also notable for its cast of characters. As you look at this cast photo from 2014, what do you notice about the photo? What would you expect from a show with this cast? ■

### WHAT does this photo say?

*Orange Is the New Black* is the story of a twenty-four-year-old white woman college graduate who was convicted of carrying money for a West African drug lord. She was eventually imprisoned in Danbury, Connecticut.<sup>70</sup> Does the cast photo look like the people you usually see on television? Why or why not?

### WHAT do these messages mean?

Does the fact that this show has a racially diverse cast with a range of sexual orientations matter? Does the show represent diversity because it has a transgendered woman in the cast? Does it matter that the portrayal of these characters is sometimes stereotypical?

### HOW do you and your classmates respond to these images?

Before you started this exercise, had you noticed how diverse the cast of *OITNB* is? Does that change how you feel about the show? Is it important to have diverse casts on television? Why do you think this way? What other types of diversity (beyond racial and ethnic) should television be concerned about? Why?



Web 9.3: Read about “colorblind casting.”