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EDUCATION

Orange Is the New Class

In this college course, binge-watching Netflix is a requirement.



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ALIA WONG | DEC 19, 2014

The show is as riveting as it is enlightening, humorous as it is dark. From its raw lesbianism and gnawing poverty to its meth-laden Jesus worshipping and tribalistic racial segregation, *Orange is the New Black* has managed to captivate [as many as 3 million](#) Netflix users in just two seasons. Its back-to-back episodes can easily consume whole weekends, the blessing—or curse—of Netflix’s decision to release an entire season’s

trove of installments all at once.

But watching an entire season of television in one sitting can be productive if it's homework—as it is for one lucky group of college students in the suburban town of University Center, Michigan. Saginaw Valley State University is slated to offer a new writing class next semester that will give students an opportunity to do something constructive with that binge-watching: get college credit.

Orange is the New Black—the Netflix TV series, not the memoir off of which it was based—is being featured as the main "textbook" in Assistant Professor Kim Lacey's general-education English course next semester on writing about oppression.

The story provides an illuminating window into prison, humanizing hardened criminals and exposing just how inhumane jail can be.

The show was first released as a Netflix original series last summer and almost immediately became a near-cult sensation. It's the brainchild of creator and producer Jenji Kohan—best known previously for her hit show *Weeds*, a similarly dark comedy series—and the storyline, or at least its groundwork, is ostensibly the product of reality.* That's because it's based on the memoir of Piper Kerman, a woman who spent 13 months in federal women's prison in Danbury, Connecticut, after getting convicted for a

crime she had committed five years prior: laundering money and trafficking drugs on behalf of her then-girlfriend, a large-scale, globe-trotting heroin dealer.

"Some people may scoff at the idea of [the show] not being highbrow enough, but that's just not true," Lacey said, referring to the series as the course's "text." "It's not like these texts aren't sophisticated tools—you just have to discuss these tools intelligently."

And as racial tensions, the vices of law enforcement, and the sexual-violence epidemic figure prominently in current events, the timing of the course couldn't be better. Lacey is sure issues surrounding the recent killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner by police officers, for example, will drive class discussions. She will also require students to draw from a supplementary textbook titled

The blond, WASPish, college-educated Kerman wasn't a typical inmate by any means, as the book and TV series demonstrate. But being a newcomer to the world of crime and the idiosyncrasies of the penitentiary system certainly gave her some perspective. Kerman's fellow inmates included a transgender woman, a cook who got involved with the Russian mafia, a former foster kid, and a one-time opiate junkie. The characters in her memoir identify with a range of races: white, black, or Latina. And many of the prisoners are lesbian—whether they permanently identify as such or are just "gay for the stay." Kerman's story—both as detailed in the memoir and as rehashed on Netflix subscribers' screens—provides an illuminating window into the microcosm that is the Danbury prison, humanizing hardened criminals and exposing just how inhumane jail can be.

It's precisely those qualities that inspired Lacey, a 34-year-old Michigan native with a Ph.D. in English, to develop the course at Saginaw Valley State University. (The fact that she's a proud *Orange is the New Black*

aficionado herself didn't hurt, either.)

The writing course will cover issues such as race relations, gender inequality, and sexual orientation, topics that Lacey believes *Orange is the New Black* explores unlike any other piece of work. "The experience of the well-to-do prisoner," Lacey said, translates into that of "human society in general." The lessons don't focus on plotlines but rather on the deeper themes the series explores: how different forms of discrimination and oppression intersect, for example, or why certain advantages are afforded to some characters and not others.

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Orange is the New Black will factor into homework assignments and class discussions just as any textbook would. Some sessions will feature guest lectures: potentially some criminal justice professors from the university and a therapist who works

at one of the local prisons, to name a few. Lacey also plans on incorporating social media like Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr so her students can engage in dialogue about the show already taking place in the real world.

It's no wonder the course is already a hit: Both of its sections filled up almost immediately. Still, Lacey says students are interested in the class not only because its centerpiece is a TV show, but also largely because the

topics it covers are relevant and important. And she isn't the first professor to use contemporary television to engage students in important intellectual topics. Chadwick Matlin, for example, once taught a course at Tufts called "[The Future is Lost: The TV Series as Cultural Phenomenon](#)." And Chicago's Columbia College has in the past offered a course about [zombies in popular media](#).

"It's more than just watching TV," Lacey said, noting that many of the students who've signed up have likely already watched *Orange is the New Black*. "That the students are coming in with knowledge of the text itself just shows the amount of interest there is in the conversations that should come from that show ... They're being part of that conversation as it's happening."

** This post originally stated that Jenji Kohan is the director of the series. We regret the error.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ALIA WONG is an associate editor at *The Atlantic*, where she covers education. She previously wrote for *Honolulu Civil Beat*.

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