American Mass Incarceration and Post-Network Quality Television

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The Captivating Aspirations of Post-Network Quality Television in the Age of Mass Incarceration: An Introduction

Abstract
Why did a President of the USA invite a TV showrunner to the White House? And what does it have to do with mass incarceration? This introduction argues that an influential wave of post-network era American television series established their "quality" credentials by advertising themselves as critical interventions into the crisis of mass incarceration. Although these series pushed the frontiers of televisual innovation and helped bring awareness of mass incarceration into the mainstream, their aspirations and achievements cannot be disentangled from their industry patron's perennially capitalist prerogatives. After elaborating on this book's key contexts and theoretical investments, it turns to a quick outline of its methods and briefly previews each of the chapters to come.

Keywords: American television, mass incarceration, post-network era, new golden age of television, political economy of TV

In 2015, President Obama invited a retired journalist to the White House. At first glance, such an event would seem to be nothing too out of the ordinary. However, this particular journalist had long since left the news business to become one of America's most celebrated creators of contemporary TV drama. I am speaking of course of David Simon, the creator of one of the most critically acclaimed TV dramas of recent decades: *The Wire* (2002–2008).

Although President Obama succumbed to the urge to confess his fandom for the show, calling it "one of the greatest not just television shows but pieces of art in the last couple of decades" (Simon and Obama) and even letting

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slip his favorite character (Omar Little), the topic of conversation did not revolve around the rising cultural distinction of contemporary television, the technology driving it, nor even consequential shifts in the industry and its practices. Nor did the interlocutors dwell too long on Obama's own fanboy impulses (to Simon's evident relief). Instead, the two sat down to talk about *The Wire*'s ostensible relevance for understanding one of the most pressing, yet often ignored, issues in contemporary American society: mass incarceration.

The USA has the highest rate of incarceration in the world; with just under 5% of the world's population, it accounts for nearly 25% of the world's prisoners (NAACP). Facilitated by illiberal tough-on-crime legislation, the structural and institutional legacies of slavery and Jim Crow, and a futile War on Drugs, mass incarceration has wrought catastrophe upon the economic, social, political, and personal prospects of millions of Americans. Although increasingly punitive criminal justice policies began taking off in the 1970s, they are themselves historically implicated in the intersecting blights of racial segregation and poverty, aggravated in turn over the course of the late 20th century by the deindustrialization of the American economy and the concurrent neoliberal dismantling of the welfare state. Americans are not equally susceptible to these hardships; rather, mass incarceration takes a particularly outsized toll on already vulnerable communities of color.

Social scientists and historians have done a good job of documenting the "tough-on-crime" political rhetoric and an attendant "punitive turn" in public policy and criminal law which have spurred mass incarceration over the course of the late 20th century. The fallout from these repressive criminal justice policies, including the War on Drugs, has had a disproportionate impact on the urban poor in general and young men of color in particular. Such disproportionalities have occurred largely as the result of the unequal application of supposedly "colorblind" policies (Alexander 101–102). Although the letter of the law is ostensibly race-neutral, zero-tolerance policing practices such as New York City's infamous "stop-and-frisk" policy have resulted in the repressive over-policing of precarious and historically marginalized communities of color (Kaplan-Lyman 180). Furthermore, the "collateral consequences" associated with incarceration have not only plagued ex-prisoners long after release but have also rent apart families and strained the social threads holding together many already fragile communities (Travis 16; Hagan and Ronit 122). This situation is exacerbated in turn by still other forms of persistent if often covert racism, including discrimination in housing, employment,

and credit markets (Pager and Shepherd 187–192). The stigma that comes with a criminal record keeps those who enter the system subsequently disenfranchised, unable to collect social benefits, and largely locked out of the rest of society.

In spite of efforts by academics, journalists, and activists to illuminate issues surrounding mass incarceration, consistent demonization of these communities in the media has ensured that the majority of Americans are largely ignorant of them. Until only recently, many Americans viewed skewed racial outcomes, if they were aware of them at all, as the result of a "culture of poverty" rather than embedded historical structures, systemic racism, or governmental policies applied from above (Beckett and Sasson 97–101). To a great extent, American mass media functioned to shore up these misconceptions. TV is arguably the primary medium through which most Americans come to learn about and understand their wider world. And yet, with a few important exceptions, American news media largely elided critical coverage of mass incarceration until well into the first decade of the 21st century, focusing instead on particularly spectacular tales of gruesome crime and victimization or the shrill, attention-grabbing rhetoric of tough-on-crime politicians and pundits. Meanwhile, viewers were rarely exposed to the necessary contextual knowledge which would allow them to adequately evaluate such claims, let alone parse the images and rhetoric accompanying them. This may have been in large part due to the historical structure of the American television industry, which had long been dominated by the "big three" broadcast networks (ABC, NBC, CBS), later augmented by a host of cable offerings which initially produced little in the way of original programming.[1] Nearly all of these channels depend upon advertisers as their primary source of revenue and, as a result, have often tended to purchase or produce what TV critics and industry insiders alike refer to as "least objectionable programming": news and entertainment programming designed to keep viewership ratings high by upsetting as few audience sensibilities as possible (Klein 327–328). In this climate, few networks seemed willing to take a gamble on critical programming for fear of offending viewers or agitating advertisers.

1 That is, with the notable exception of some branded cable channels targeted specifically at well-defined niche demographics which appeared during what Lotz calls the "multi-channel transition" (*Revolutionized* 25) such as BET, MTV, and Nickelodeon, as well as major cable news outlets like CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC. Even so, these channels were not specifically known for the production of complex or "quality" long-form drama.

American television's historical reticence to address mass incarceration has important social and cultural implications. As David J. Leonard and Lisa A. Guerrero argue, television

> helps to determine the limits of the ways that a large majority of the population of consumer-citizens make meaning of their world… televisual epistemologies account for a considerable degree of people's social "knowledge" about the world around them…. Television, then, becomes a site of social ordering that is arguably more powerful than other institutions of social ordering because the veil of 'entertainment' effectively hides the mechanisms… on which it operates and makes invisible the constitutive nature between mass consumer culture and systems of social marginalization. (9)

Although genres such as the police procedural, the courtroom drama, and the pseudo-documentarian reality-TV show have met with commercial success, such formulaic programs have generally upheld ideological fantasies and have rarely questioned the legitimacy, functionality, or viability of the USA's increasingly bloated yet largely dysfunctional criminal justice institutions. Meanwhile, mass incarceration and the sociological, economic, and personal havoc it wrought throughout the country flew under the radar for decades, obscured by political gossip, confessional talk shows, highly staged reality-TV distractions, and Manichaean dramas (Beckett and Sasson 81–89).

The Wire, however, would seem to have taken a different route. Over five sprawling seasons it emphasized the precarious conditions of the white working classes and Black urban poor abandoned by neoliberal policies of social disinvestment, left exposed to the vicissitudes of the unregulated market, and ultimately captured by a state beholden to corrupt capitalist interests, making them, as David Simon puts it in the aforementioned interview, "Permanently a part of the 'other America'" (Simon and Obama).[2] It is for this reason that Obama invited Simon to discuss his work at the White House: "Part of the challenge is going to be making sure, number one, that we humanize what so often in the local news is just a bunch of shadowy characters, and tell their stories. And that's where the work you've done is so important" (Simon and Obama). But what precisely is that work? And how did it come about?

2 Simon's quote is a reference to political scientist Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962), a seminal exposé detailing the scope of poverty amongst the affluence of post-WWII United States.

Remediating Mass Incarceration

Even as the dawn of the 21st century witnessed the height of the incarceration boom, technological and industry innovations were concurrently hard at work altering the American media landscape. Far more than merely introducing new communication devices or infrastructures, the innovations of the last several decades have radically altered not only how Americans use media, but also the shape of the content they consume, with a particularly potent impact on the contours of the market for American television drama. Transformations in the TV industry over the past two decades have occasioned an unprecedented proliferation of long-form narrative series which either claim or are widely designated labels such as "prestige" or "quality" TV dramas. Some of these dramas have explored what Arin Keeble and Ivan Stacy, echoing dialogue from *The Wire*, call the "dark corners" of American life (2). While American television has often been derided as a defender of the status quo or a tool for the ideological reification and consolidation of America's own most cherished fantasies, some recent programs seem intent on changing what Americans know and the way they think about issues such as criminal justice, policing, prisons, racism, *de facto* segregation, discrimination, the War on Drugs, urban dislocation, and poverty – all of which play a role in producing the contemporary crisis of racialized mass incarceration.

For much of its history TV has been a much-maligned medium, frequently associated with low production values, unsophisticated mass appeal, and ideological complicity (Martin 21–22). In contrast, it has now become increasingly common to speak of a "creative revolution" which gave birth to a so-called "New Golden Age" of "quality" television.[3] The story goes something like this: disruptive technological advancements enabled a proliferation of new cable and online industry players. Competition between them primed an arms race for stand-out programming. Eager to push out novel content as quickly as possible, channels gave creators free rein to experiment with narrative complexity and previously taboo themes, offering an expanded menu of "niche" programming choices which, freed from the constricting schedules of network programming and the domestic tyranny of the

3 Popular accounts of this "New Golden Age" range from essentially celebratory narratives penned for mass appeal, such as Brett Martin's unduly male-centric *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution* or Allen Sepinwall's unabashedly triumphalist *The Revolution Was Televised*, to the staunchly academic, such as Amanda D. Lotz's *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*. However, the key elements of these various accounts have tended to coalesce into a standard narrative.

boob-tube, consumers can view at their leisure. Technological advancements and industrial competitiveness unleashed creative energies, untethered consumer choice, and brought cultural distinction to a formerly mediocre medium. This "creative revolution" narrative is at once techno-evangelical, pro-capitalist, and even vaguely liberationist. What it tends to obscure, however, is that these energies were not unleashed for their own sake, but rather serve TV industry players' own ever-shifting yet perennially commercial prerogatives.

Many TV critics and commentators attribute the rise of this New Golden Age of "quality" TV drama to the advent of TV's "post-network era" (Lotz, *Revolutionized* 8) and trace its inauguration back to the premiere of HBO's first original dramatic series, *OZ* (1997–2003).[4] Produced at the height of the upsurge in American imprisonment and celebrated as the forerunner for a new generation of critically acclaimed "quality" television series which have inflected recognizable genres with more challenging, edgier, and ostensibly socially relevant postures, *OZ* is set entirely in a maximum security prison and is widely thought to be the first fictional, long-form American TV drama to explore the opaque back-stages of the criminal justice system. Largely unencumbered by the regulations, censorship, and norms governing traditional broadcast television, it is easy to claim that *OZ* and many of the series that followed relied primarily upon a banal ratcheting up of depictions of sex and violence. However, these series also often pair such graphic content with a willingness to venture into and tell complex, multi-faceted stories about otherwise forgotten corners of American society. Searching for a vocabulary to describe such programs without naively reproducing their self-celebratory bravura, many scholars have adopted the term with which Jason Mittell christens his study of recent TV cultures: *Complex TV*.[5]

A great deal of TV scholarship in the cultural studies tradition still tends to center around concepts of identity, diversity, and visibility, suggesting that such criticism is primarily invested in questions of representation and recognition. Meanwhile, a great deal of scholarship penned by social scientists or communications scholars, while rightly recognizing the enormous influence of the televisual field, often remains primarily anxious

4 For just a few high-profile examples, see: Sepinwall 20; and Martin 14.

5 This rhetoric of complexity, while perhaps descriptively accurate, may still be construed to implicitly promote certain aesthetic standards and value determinations over others. Therefore, this book frequently borrows Mittell's insights regarding these series' narrative structures, cultural poetics, and circulation while opting for the more commonly used term "quality," rendering it in scare quotes to both recognize and analytically exploit the ambiguities, problematic assumptions, and commercial strategies it implies.

about television's capacity to corrupt values or distort public perceptions. Still other modes of TV scholarship (such as that modelled on film history) often tend, if only implicitly, to treat television as a relatively autonomous, self-perpetuating, and generically enclosed system. Even those practitioners of ideology critique who attempt to situate television in wider cultural constellations tend to read TV programs, however complex, in a somewhat symptomatic fashion, drawing focus primarily, if not exclusively, to the ways in which they reproduce, facilitate, or recover hegemonic, emergent, or residual ideological formations. While I am undoubtedly indebted to and often reliant upon the critical assumptions, vocabularies, and scholarly practices outlined above and do not shy away from deploying them in *bricolage* fashion whenever it is productive, I also find them increasingly insufficient on their own to address the attempts of many recent television programs to advertise their own social relevance or self-consciously posture as social critique in an ever more fractured commercial landscape and rapidly evolving media ecology.

I maintain that our cultural politics and critical assumptions need to be rethought in light of television's own growing self-awareness as a medium historically accused of the "perpetuation, rationalization, and justification" of representational violence even as it increasingly pursues (even when only as pretense) its potential as "a space of opposition, a vehicle for challenging and resisting the representations perpetuated throughout the American cultural landscape" (Leonard and Guerrero 13). Indeed, television often seems not only ever more cognizant of the standard critical models under which it has been scrutinized, but also increasingly capable of deflecting or even assimilating them. It is for reasons such as these that Herman Gray has argued for a shift not only in scholarly practices, but in the cultural politics which attend them:

> We are approaching the limit of cultural politics that aim primarily for cultural visibility and institutional recognition. Prompted by the new information technologies… the centrality of commercial popular culture, and its relationship to different global projects and enactments of new cultural politics of difference, we face the need for a different kind of cultural politics. (198)

The chapters which follow turn to a small corpus of TV series which seem invested in addressing the moment of American mass incarceration by both engaging with and extending beyond a cultural politics restricted to concerns about visibility, diversity, and recognition. They do this in

large part by reaching beyond the universe of television conventions to remediate epistemological and cultural domains which might seem at times quite distant from TV's home turf.[6] Through a series of analyses focused around some of the most influential programs of the post-network era between the years of 1997 to 2017, I trace out the ways in which "quality" TV series have helped to render mass incarceration visible as an issue of public concern. While touching on a variety of media and their cultural contexts, the chapters which follow award pride of place to the in-depth analysis of a few select "quality" dramatic series: *OZ*, *The Wire*, *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–2019), and *Queen Sugar* (2016–), as well as one documentary, *13th* (2016).

"Quality" television often draws upon and repurposes content drawn from more culturally distinguished fields with an eye towards repairing TV's bad reputation while overcoming its perceived narrative limitations. It therefore harbors ambitions to not only renew or refresh commercially successful formulas, but also frequently promotes the aspiration to transcend its media identity altogether. This in itself is not terribly uncommon, as screen media often source their material from literary, autobiographical, or journalistic publications and traditions (and these series are no exception). But while television scholars habitually emphasize "quality" TV's tendencies to style itself along the lines of cinema and literature, I argue that the works analyzed herein are different insofar as each of them source their material, narrative conventions, and even their political commitments not *only* from other forms of art and media, but *also* from domains of *knowledge production* which are more generally associated with academic scholarship than commercial media. These include prison ethnography, urban sociology, identity politics activism, and even Black feminist scholarship. More than merely constructing or marketing themselves as "hybrids" of pre-existing genres, they flaunt a sense of erudite, often pseudo-sociological "knowingness" and derive their

6 It should be noted here that I am using terms such as "remediate" and "remediation" somewhat differently from the usage originally proposed by Bolter and Grusin. For these authors, remediation marks "a double logic" whereby our culture constantly proliferates new forms of media, generating conditions of hypermediacy, in the doomed effort to overcome its reliance upon mediation and achieve a sense of transparency (5). In this sense, new media both parrots and proclaims itself superior to older media (6). My usage is related but not quite identical. I am interested in the effects generated when TV series adopt the convention, aesthetics, and epistemologies of domains not generally associated with screen media. My usage is therefore more similar to, although also somewhat distinct from, that deployed by figures such as Astrid Erll, Ann Rigney, and others working in the tradition of memory studies, in which "remediation primarily describes the transcription of memory content into different media… It is not tied to any one specific medium and can therefore be represented across the spectrum of available media" (Erll 313).

cultural distinction from the carefully cultivated perception and explicitly advertised claim that they possess a serious form of superior knowledge – a subtle, but not inconsequential point of nuance. These unconventional investments yield not only creative innovations and interventions, but also activate unconventional routines of cultural circulation and provoke no small degree of controversy.

There are very real and productive tensions at work between these series' avowed ambitions to draw from, disseminate, and ultimately shape "knowledge" about mass incarceration on the one hand, and the ultimately commercial contexts in which they are embedded and to which they are indebted for their very emergence on the other. To explore these tensions, I focus on what I call *serial aspirations*: that is, the overlapping (and, at times, clashing) aesthetic ambitions, commercial targets, and socio-political objectives – in a word, the *cultural work* – which a program assigns itself. Serial aspirations are often complicated, sometimes contradictory, and are frequently re-negotiated in complex feedback loops with a series' own effects, receptions, and contexts. We might variously define serial aspirations as loosely guiding ethos, discursive ambitions, or sets of managerial discourses which help both audiences and production staff to understand a series' network of various (and often shifting) intentions, orient their attention to certain aspects above others, and help to regulate – but in no way predetermine – the ways in which a serial publication interacts with its receptions and audiences both during production and long after it has ceased to air. In this sense, serial aspirations provide not only brand differentiation, but also narrative orientation, allowing series to coherently organize themselves as networked "entities of distributed intention" (Kelleter, "Seriality" 28). This includes not only their relation to the epistemic domains and cultural contexts which they proclaim themselves invested in, such as *Orange Is the New Black*'s attempts to portray itself as a kind of activism or *Queen Sugar*'s assimilation of critical vocabularies native to contemporary social movements or Black studies scholarship, but perhaps even more significantly when seemingly tangential fields of cultural practice respond by laying claim to them, such as when sociologists re-describe *The Wire* as a televisual dramatization of their own findings or when activist-minded reviewers proclaim that "'Queen Sugar' Does Black Lives Matter Storytelling Right" (Phillips).

While industry patrons and mainstream commentators often celebrate these series precisely for their pretentions to possess superior knowledge about places and populations which TV has historically either ignored, marginalized, or stigmatized, such aspirations are also problematic. It cannot

be denied that these series have indeed contributed to and helped to shape public awareness about issues surrounding the social reproduction of mass incarceration, such as *The Wire*'s treatment of urban abandonment and the perverse outcomes of the War on Drugs. Indeed, these series have brought previously sidelined social milieus and frequently ignored institutional dysfunctions to the attention of a wide array of middle- and upper-class viewers, often for the very first time. While these series both raise and shape awareness about mass incarceration while allowing viewers to glean a certain degree of intellectual pleasure (and frequently flatters them for doing so), they ask for little in the way of direct political engagement; instead, they allow relatively affluent, mostly white audiences the thrill of slumming in ghettos, prisons, or other exotic social environs from the safety of their couches. The structural problems and political policies which produce and sustain the marginalization of these populations are taken up largely to serve the purpose of producing "quality" TV drama; as a result, both the struggles of these populations and the politics of resistance which emerge from them are repackaged into a kind of commercialized spectacle.

Moreover, the strategy of appealing to the sensibilities of a particularly lucrative segment of college-educated, relatively affluent, and majority white viewers leads "quality" TV to privilege certain aesthetic tendencies, social perspectives, and political agendas over others. While a great many crime series in the wake of 9/11 catered to either neoconservative or libertarian fantasy structures – think Fox's *24* (2001–2010) or FX's *Sons of Anarchy* (2008–2014) –, other "quality" shows gravitated instead towards postures of liberal reformism and/or progressive solutionism which may have been seen as more appealing to highly educated (and thus highly coveted) audience segments; only rarely, however, do television series seriously entertain more radical political agendas such as prison abolitionism. When they do, such radical agendas are usually paid little more than lip-service, or they are appropriated for the purposes of propelling dramatic conflict and thereby subordinated to television's commercial imperative for serial continuation. The shows dealt with herein are no exception: they may at times aspire to critique the status quo, but they often fall far short of staging calls for revolution. They may proffer social critique and even tout themselves as credible and knowing participants in larger social and political debates, but rarely do they acknowledge their own role in perpetuating the serial routines of racial capitalism. Instead, their formal, aesthetic, and political ambitions are both enabled and constrained by their industry patron's own practices of brand differentiation, digital distribution, and audience surveillance. These programs therefore more often end up renegotiating rather than rejecting

outright the terms of American culture's dual investments in the profitable cosmetics of neoliberal multiculturalism and the inheritances of slavery which structure the spectacle of its hyper-carceral state.

The Political Economy of Post-Network Television

Instead of merely writing serial aspirations off as purely cynical attempts to appropriate and profit from the commercialization of ostensibly progressive political concerns (although they surely do this to some degree), we must acknowledge the capitalistic context in which contemporary American TV programs are produced while at the same time taking them seriously as "influential makers of American culture" (Kelleter, *Serial* 40). That said, even as we trace out these series' participations and (re)negotiations within and across expansive cultural spheres, we must not therefore lose sight of their media specificity in a competitive attention economy increasingly characterized by niche marketing, technological disruption, and corporate consolidation. Indeed, it is perhaps precisely because the series investigated herein so often seek to advertise themselves to select audiences as counter-hegemonic alternatives to standardized TV formulas that we need to attend with even more care to the various industry contexts, media ecologies, and business logics which allowed them to come into being in the first place. The "creative revolution" narrative which is so integral to the so-called New Golden Age of "quality" TV is not only the product of creative aspirations, but also denotes a shrewd business strategy which at once responds to, papers over, and inspires other underlying and often unacknowledged business objectives and industry circumstances.

Rather than viewing these series as artistic masterworks birthed by genius showrunners over the course of an unqualified creative revolution, we must keep in mind that these series won commission and renewal over several seasons primarily for the valuable role they played in consolidating the brand credentials and market power of their respective industry sponsors and in catering to the presumed or enculturated tastes of lucrative upmarket viewership segments. Indeed, these particular programs belong to an even larger cohort which has helped to shore up the commercial viability of an ever-growing host of upstart competitors who have increasingly muscled the big three networks out of their dominant position. Such industry players include not only cable channels such as AMC, FX, and OWN, but also premium subscription-based offerings such as HBO and, more recently, streaming video portals such as Netflix, all of which have

sought to profit from ever more finely cut consumer segmentations defined not only along traditional lines of demography such as age or gender but, also and increasingly, less tangible features such as tastes and consumption habits, thus contributing to the progressive fragmentation of the viewing public. Many of the most successful contemporary TV brands increasingly depend not on advertising dollars, but rather subscription fees paid either through cable service providers or directly by individuals to cover costs and generate profit. Subscriber-funded television needs to maintain the perception that its offerings are novel enough for subscribers to keep up their subscription (Lotz, *Revolutionized* 176). This in turn allows subscribers to flatter themselves as more culturally sophisticated than viewers of basic cable or network fare, converting highly targeted sets of taste and consumption behavior into a specie of cultural capital. As such, the rhetoric and practices of "quality" function as legitimizing discourses which, in the words of Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, "produces a bifurcation of the medium into good and bad television" so as to "mobilize taste to include and exclude, to identify members and keep boundaries" (7).

Picking up on this last point, many critics have rightly raised alarms about the tendencies of such "quality" TV shows to glamorize the tastes of relatively affluent white male audiences at the expense of lower-income and minoritized ones. And, indeed, the so-called "New Golden Age of Television" arises in large part from the desire to cater to notoriously difficult to reach and ostensibly more "sophisticated" audience segments, while broadcast and basic cable networks continue to push out and license reams of relatively low-cost programming, often packaged as reality-TV or light-hearted, family-friendly sitcoms, in a bid to gather less affluent but substantially larger audiences. The latter programming may be considered more influential than "quality" TV dramas produced for "prestige" or "premium" audience segments insofar as they continue to make up the beef of programming time in network and basic cable TV schedules. They are often syndicated in rerun blocks which fill the off-peak hours of daytime programming, and therefore the days of those largely confined, whether through choice or necessity, to the home. In terms, therefore, of sheer volume, network programming has indeed tended to reach more eyeballs more frequently, and has very likely had an outsized impact on less affluent or "mass" audiences as compared "quality" dramas produced by premium cable channels or streaming services. Indeed, there is little denying that much of the dramatic programming which awards itself the moniker of "quality" has been largely – although by no means exclusively – produced for and directed at substantially narrower demographic categories, including fairly affluent white male subscribers.

Even so, it would be a mistake to assume that the strategies of TV executives and programmers somehow simply reflect the inherent or organic tastes of their target audiences. It is similarly problematic to assume that industry logics just replicate rather than actively help to produce and reify the processes of social sorting which define traditional demographic markers as well as assumptions about their tastes. Televisual tastes are not simply monitored, diagnosed, and fed; they are instead actively cultivated, often in ways which are themselves revealing not of the pre-existing preferences of their targets, but of the biases and assumptions which television producers, executives, and marketers hold towards those audiences. It likewise does not follow that content will be necessarily consumed exclusively (or even primarily) by the audience at which it is initially targeted. Even though TV producers have increasingly vast and ever more invasive systems of technological surveillance at their disposal, they are not omnipotent. Often enough, such systems reproduce the biases of their designers rather than reveal the pre-existing preferences of their targets. Indeed, one need only note how often the "personalized" menu of choices surfaced by Netflix's recommendation algorithm generate increasingly narrow (and sometimes comical) rabbit holes to see those biases in action. Since tastes, never static, are always being cultivated and developed through the aggregate choices of individual viewers as well as the activities of TV producers, programmers, and marketers, they may be influenced by everything from marketing biases to the sheer accident of viral trends (in cases where they were not algorithmically encouraged, that is); the result is a self-propelling moving target, as tastes evolve in a state of perpetual feedback loops embedded within a complex, ever-shifting media environment. Finally, to assume that less affluent or minoritized audience are somehow uninterested in searching beyond the menu of choices foisted upon them, or impotent to seek out, enjoy, and even cultivate a taste for ostensibly more "highbrow" entertainment options on their own, risks inflating the efficacy of TV segmentation strategies to an unwarranted degree. It also perpetuates (if perhaps unintentionally) a form of soft condescension all too common amongst academic elites, the majority of whom do *not* hail from such backgrounds, and may therefore inadvertently make assumptions which reinscribe or affirm rather than interrogate the logics of TV marketers. Media critics might do well to challenge such assumptions; from illegal file-sharing to "decoding" against the grain (Hall 263), less affluent and minoritized audiences have all kinds of ways to make "quality" content their own.

That said, television producers indeed continue to utilize segmentation models, and there is little question that these practices have been

especially, albeit not exclusively, amicable to the creation of programs which at once play upon and, to some degree, break with the conventions of earlier "quality" network offerings as they seek to garner the attention of the time-starved professional classes. As Mark Jancovich and James Lyon write, even though "quality" TV programming has "long been criticized for displaying an overwhelming preoccupation with the white, affluent, urban middle classes" and their presumed tastes, we should not therefore simply shrug them off: "The response to such shows should not be to reject them as narrow 'bourgeois' entertainment, but to be attentive to the various processes that work to produce them" (3). In this sense, the tendency of contemporary "quality" TV programs to challenge hegemonic ideological positions, foster social relevance, and deploy unconventional forms must be understood as a key component of their producers' overall business strategies, particularly the need to cultivate brand distinction. Cultivating a distinct brand image suggests the need to groom a specific, relatively loyal (and particularly lucrative) audience segment. Thus, narrowcasting – the identification, analysis, targeting, and cultivation of niche audience segments – has emerged as one of the most important strategies driving content innovation and proliferation.

While narrowcasting provides one of the key commercial conditions which justifies the shift away from broadcast-era strategies, it also has crucial implications for questions of representation, recognition, and address. Narrowcasting certainly has the potential to create viewership silos marked by typical demographic segmentations of class, gender, and race, but it also creates opportunities and incentives to produce specialized content in the first place. As Herman Gray argues, this in turn has important implications for how brands decide to accommodate questions of identity and difference in a highly heterogeneous viewing public:

> the specific problem of symbolically making the American nation through television's integrative function… has moved, first, from erasure, repression, and transformation of difference… through integration and pluralism… to explicit recognition of the centrality of difference… The corporate brand name and network logo have become the means of expressing distinction and thus the recognition of the intractability of difference on a global scale. Problems of race and ethnicity have given way to the question of how to link a brand name to specific kinds of difference – culture, nation-states, gender, sexuality, and tradition – in order to establish distinctive brand identifications and loyalty through consumerism. (106)

Online streaming platforms like Netflix must go even further; rather than appealing to a defined audience segment, they must offer a wide enough variety of content to appeal to many different segments and tastes at once. Thus, streaming platforms deploy what Amanda D. Lotz describes as a "'conglomerated niche' strategy of providing a little bit of content for a lot of different audience segments" (*Disrupt* 158). The advantage of such a strategy is that it "achieves the advantages of scale while servicing heterogeneous tastes" (Lotz, *Portals*). Indeed, the launch of Disney+ following shorty after Disney's acquisition of 21st Century Fox and AT&T's dual ownership of both HBO Max and WarnerMedia content indicate that the *fragmentation* encouraged by narrowcasting strategies must be juxtaposed against the increasing *consolidation* of media businesses under the umbrella of a few major conglomerates. This is especially important in consideration of their aggressive attempts to shore up their competitive advantages, whether it be through vertical integration, the dismantling of net neutrality regulations, or more rigorous surveillance, policing, and manipulation of viewers' behavior.

What all of this suggests is that the serial aspirations of these programs are always at once enabled and constrained by the commercial interests and business strategies of their producers and sponsors. Thus, their serial aspirations are all, as the title of this chapter suggests, "captivating" in various and overlapping senses of the term. While all of the programs examined herein tackle questions of captivity thematically by remediating various forms of knowledge related to mass incarceration, we should not for this reason alone merely celebrate or confirm their own frequently self-styled pretentions to uncompromised or uncompromising social critique; no representational innovation can in and of itself remediate (in the sense of *remedy*) social injustice. As media products produced in an unabashedly capitalist economy, even the most ambitiously or radically critical American TV program is ultimately held captive to these fundamentally commercial obligations. Thus, while we should not rest with simply decrying TV programs as mere vehicles of ideological dissemination or symptoms of capitalist exploitation, we also cannot fully divorce their serial aspirations or cultural politics from the media ecosystems and political economies in which they are embedded and from which they arise. Indeed, commercial television's primary objective remains to "captivate" its viewers – that is, to contrive ways to profit by attracting and holding the attention of ever more finely defined and narrowly targeted viewership segments. Such objectives appear especially treacherous in a media and technological environment increasingly criticized for its tendency to surveil and corral us into self-reinforcing filter bubbles or echo chambers: media

cages constructed of our own predilections, preferences, and prejudices. However progressive or activist these televisual texts may seem, their cultural politics remain irreversibly entwined with a capitalist society mesmerized by its own increasingly shattered spectacle. It is for this reason above all that the more captivating we may find these programs' serial aspirations to be, the more critical it becomes that we resist falling under their spell.

Our Scheduled Programming

In *Police, Power, and the Production of Racial Boundaries*, Ana Muñiz echoes anthropologist Laura Nadar's influential call to "study up": rather than "focusing on what authority considers deviant," researchers should direct their "energy upward, studying the entities primarily responsible for subjugation" (Muñiz 8). I submit that studying media is one such way to study up. By focusing on "prestige" or "quality" programming, we may gain a better understanding of how emerging business logics and the media cultures they produce are reshaping, for good or ill, the narratives and images which inflect perceptions of law enforcement, criminal justice, corrections, and social justice among middle- and upper-class viewers. After all, these segments comprise not only some of TV's most elusive and therefore lucrative niche markets, but also American society's more privileged and politically influential social layers.

Studying objects and phenomenon of relatively contemporary vintage presents certain challenges. This is especially true when studying serialized media objects, some of which are still ongoing events. To complicate the matter further, in our current media ecosystem time-shifting technologies, digital distribution, and ongoing (re)appraisals in both the scholarly literature and popular press all combine to ensure that influential media products live extended afterlives and generate media effects long after their air date. While it can be tempting for a researcher working under such conditions to obsessively follow events and continuously update their findings, it can also be disastrous – every research project must eventually terminate, else it dooms itself to obscurity. For that reason, the current work trains most of its attention on the years between 1997–2017. This period is bookended on one end by the appearance of HBO's *OZ*, its first storied foray into "prestige" serial drama, while on the other stands a flurry of opinion pieces and critical reappraisals which either predicted or saluted the imminent demise of post-network television's "New Golden Age." There are some exceptions

to this rule, including a first chapter which defines mass incarceration and details the entanglements of its historical rise with the powerful role screen media played in its cultural construction, political legitimization, and social (re)production. Each chapter thereafter functions by situating an influential post-network era TV show which has sought to position itself as an intervention into the crisis of American mass incarceration between the aforementioned years. In each case, I investigate my core objects from within what might be called their most proximate contexts of relevance – that is, the extra-televisual discourses, forms, and knowledge domains towards which they most adamantly aspire. Each analytical chapter carries a title which orients my explorations around a guiding question. This question is always intimately grounded in its primary object's own serial aspirations and serves as a springboard for the analysis of its cultural work. Chapters are arranged in terms of the chronological appearance of their central objects so as to suggest the trajectory of television's development as a media industry and cultural system which is becoming increasingly more aware of and concerned with mass incarceration as a source of thematic content as well as its own historical agency in the legitimization thereof. However, doing justice to the distinct serial aspirations of each program means that each chapter must take a slightly different approach; chapters may therefore be read serially as parts of a broader narrative trajectory, or more episodically as relatively distinct, self-contained essays.

The first chapter covers the historical, sociological, and cultural contexts necessary to ground my readings of primary sources in each of the analytical chapters which follow. It also traces out the entanglements of media, and especially television, with the political history, rhetoric, and public policy which gave birth to mass incarceration. It proposes the notion of "punitive realism" to describe a pattern of generic narrative conventions, aesthetics, and tropes arising in the wake of right-wing blowbacks to the civil rights movement and the disastrous 1971 Attica prison massacre. As a hegemonic cultural formation, punitive realism helped bolster moral panics about urban disorder and shape public perceptions around the boogieman of racialized criminality. To a large degree, popular screen media opportunistically played upon and therefore helped to reinforce these trends. While the punitive realism which operated in so much of the 20th century's screen media, and TV in particular, functioned largely to legitimize the reactionary right-wing political agenda which manufactured the crisis of mass incarceration, post-network television in the 21st century has anchored many of its "quality" claims, if not by ditching punitive realism altogether, then at least by importing and exploring competing avenues alongside it.

The second chapter extends this historical outline into a reading of the vaunted "realism" of HBO's *OZ* – a series often celebrated for kicking off the New Golden Age of post-network era television. By utilizing the media-saturated cultural form of the prison as a site to stage spectacular scenes of hyperviolence, *OZ* sought to make its name by transgressing the boundaries of televisual decorum. However, its reliance on stereotypical portrayals of prisoners alongside the tendency to submerge them in increasingly more hyperviolent predicaments serves to reify some of the prison's own most naturalized claims to legitimate institutional reproduction. Even so, I argue that especially in later seasons the series' increasing utilization of narrative patterns and aesthetics drawn from the naturalist novel and the gothic mode eventually reach such a level of excess that it bursts, overwhelming its own authenticity codes and rendering the very notion of realism hauntingly bizarre.

The third chapter turns to one of *OZ*'s most proximate televisual heirs, HBO's critically acclaimed series *The Wire*. Noting the series' popularity among sociologists, it argues that *The Wire*'s sociological ambitions render that disciplinary field both more accessible as popular culture and more acquiescent to cultural critique. *The Wire* was highly innovative not only for its long-form serial structure, high-culture aspirations, and understated verisimilitude, but also its searing criticisms of the political, social, and cultural practices of urban policing, surveillance, and even reform. *The Wire* criticizes each of these for claiming the ability to render visible and address the social pathologies which ostensibly drive mass incarceration even as they seem to remain fundamentally unable to *really see* beyond their own limited set of institutional self-interests. Moreover, *The Wire*'s media specificity as "quality" television allows it to not only model itself on, but also reflexively ruminate upon sociology's similarly problematic cultural investments. Even so, *The Wire* is itself deeply invested in ideologies of visibility; it therefore has trouble transcending many of the self-same cultural contradictions it critiques.

In a fourth chapter, I turn to Netflix's wildly popular *Orange Is the New Black*. Although *Orange Is the New Black* is in many ways an heir to both *OZ* and *The Wire*, its status and distribution as a streaming Netflix production requires us to think a bit differently about strategies of dissemination and routines of consumption. While its focus on women prisoners heralds the calls of such figures as Angela Davis, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Andrea J. Ritchie to pay heed to the amplified intersectional vulnerabilities of poor, queer, and trans women of all colors behind bars, it does so while problematically yet intriguingly claiming to leverage entertainment as a vehicle for activism. I consider how *Orange Is the New Black* utilizes narrative

strategies and leverages celebrity activism in order to both shore up its own "activist" quality claims as well as to generate online buzz, propel narrative proliferation, and provide cultural resources for formerly incarcerated and at-risk women. Even as different audience constituencies have attempted to negotiate their political and advocacy interests through highly motivated and inevitably mediated readings of the series, Netflix has leveraged these debates somewhat opportunistically. While Netflix's global ambitions, digital distribution methods, and algorithmic recommendation strategies may trumpet the ostensible virtue of dis-articulating typical demographic markers from often dubious assumptions about taste, they also dissociate identity categories from political commitments by recasting them as consumable entertainment experiences. Taken together, Netflix and *Orange Is the New Black* thus risk cultivating rather than criticizing an increasingly global taste for prisons.

The fifth chapter turns to a consideration of two projects headed by Ava DuVernay: the Netflix documentary *13th* and OWN's drama series *Queen Sugar*. Noting DuVernay's rising prominence as a celebrity auteur steeped in Black feminist cultural theory, I argue that these investments color *13th* and *Queen Sugar*'s respective brands of advocacy documentary and serial TV melodrama. Taking note of *13th's* unspoken investments in the cultural history of American racial melodrama, I connect its heroic attempts to assemble itself as a "history of the present" with an investigation of how *Queen Sugar* couches its take on Black family melodrama within the context of mass incarceration. This leads me to consider how developments in our contemporary media environment and challenges to the reign of mass incarceration have re-shaped the contours of Black representation across media forms. What we just as often discover, however, is not only creative innovation or diversified patterns of representation, but also the repetition of old tropes and dualisms dressed up in new clothes; when it comes to the most deeply engrained habits of American culture, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

I conclude this work by reflecting upon the current state of our increasingly hyperactive yet conglomerate-dominated media ecosystem and its potential to produce and sustain media cultures capable of nurturing a radical abolitionist politics. Can our increasingly fragmented and combative digital public sphere sustain social movements, articulate radical political positions, and foster deliberative democratic participation? Or are we gradually falling prey to neoliberal practices of audience surveillance, data capture, and micro-personalized content delivery which are themselves highly captivating and thus curiously carceral?

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