

**CAMERAS COMPLICATING QUEER CRIMINALS: ANALYZING REPRESENTATIONS OF
BLACK LGBTQIA+ JUVENILES IN NETFLIX'S *GIRLS INCARCERATED***

by

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As a society tied to television, we love to have access to worlds we don't often experience, like the edgy, scandalous criminal life. Some of popular media's most indulged TV shows incorporate an unconventional character, crime, and drama. These binge-worthy series make up a portion of the "prison genre," which includes shows like *Inside the World's Toughest Prison* (2016), *60 Days In* (2016), *Love After Lock Up* (2018), *Girls Incarcerated: Young & Locked Up* (2018), and *Jail Birds* (2019). And that's just to name a few among many. Over the past 20 years, there has been a surge in cameras permeating the walls of jails and prisons creating the prison-televisual complex (Page & Ouellette, 2020). Consider *Orange Is the New Black* and the many honors it has received including Golden Globe Nominations, People's Choice Awards, Peabody Award, Image Awards, GLAD Media Awards, and 21 nominations and 4 Primetime Emmy Awards from the Television Academy (*Orange Is the New Black*, n.d.). This goes to show that people are not only watching these shows because it's something to watch; they *love* them. And whether we know it or not, consuming this media has an impact on our perception of incarcerated populations. Viewing representations of young adult and juvenile offenders of marginalized identities informs their existence beyond what research tells us.

A decent amount of existing criminological, sociological, legal, and social work research looks at LGBTQ+ youth, Black youth, and female youth involved in the juvenile justice system. So, their experiences are looked at in popular media and among academia. But there is a lack of research on our juveniles that are Black, queer, *and* female. Despite being an under researched population, Black LGBTQ+ female offenders are consistently featured in a multitude of reality TV and drama specials. In popular media, the representation of Black queer girls involved in the criminal justice are constantly seen as a

point of spectatorship, And in academic circles, relevant research addresses the marginalization of these youth, but does not thoroughly investigate their experiences, interpersonal interactions, and behaviors while incarcerated. Yet, on television, these are the things that we enjoy tuning into and keep us coming back for more. I am extending the existing literature, while challenging scholars and society to think about something new. I move to further the understanding how popular entertainment portrays this marginalized population's acculturation within the correctional setting compared to the realities of the girls' experiences.

This research addresses how the representation of Black queer girls' intersectional identity shapes their depicted experiences in the correctional facility setting, as seen in Netflix's original show, *Girls Incarcerated: Young and Locked Up*. Analyzing these intersections of sexuality, race, gender performance, and age reveal nuances of adultification and respectability politics that are unique to the systemic nature of incarceration. Examining the media representations of this population will reveal that the illustration both challenges and obscures how their experiences are perceived. Therefore, the representation must be criticized and understood in length to derive larger implications for real world application. This research will address how popular media muddles social expectations for these youth. It speaks to the notion that representation matters and it has real life consequences that can affect the population it portrays. In the ways that mediated texts serves a purpose or convey a particular message, *Girls Incarcerated: Young & Locked Up* influences how society understands the functions of intersectionality, sexual identity, age, race, and gender in delinquent Black queer girls.

To establish context, first, this paper will summarize literature surrounding juvenile justice involvement, youth development, and consumption of media representations pertaining to LGBTQIA+ Black girls. This will also highlight the proposed framework, which includes the theory of adultification, intersectionality, and respectability politics. Then, I will discuss the show's background and cultural relevance. Next, a qualitative textual analysis of media representations of *Girls Incarcerated* will argue that this portrayal complicates the narrative of Black queer juveniles for consumers. Relevant themes amongst the cast members, story arcs, depictions of relationship, and displayed complexity of their lives will be considered. Then, the theoretical framework will be applied to discuss the mediated storylines of these individuals in a larger societal scope. I will conclude with larger implications for evaluating media representations of Black female LGBTQIA+ juveniles, identifying support needed by these girls, increasing cultural awareness and enlightenment regarding intersectional identities, and contributing to the communication studies field of scholarship.

The Plight of Black & Queer Juvenile Girls in the System

Since its inception, the juvenile justice system has made numerous changes to ensure it moves away from being an adult system handling youth and more towards a process attuned to the needs of troubled kids. Yet among this progression, the treatment toward young Black female offenders has not reflected the same efforts to be more sensitive or trauma informed (Pasko, 2010). This system still harshly mistreats Black girls, especially when it comes to detaining Black girls in correctional facilities. Another marginalized group, LGBTQIA+ juvenile girls, are disregarded in similar ways. These Black and queer juveniles are being disproportionately detained at higher rates for extended

periods, filling the penal institutions. With this, it makes sense that they are commonly represented in shows and movies about the incarceration of female offenders. One would be hard pressed to find a prison movie that doesn't push the lesbian narrative or exhibit a cast that includes an African American female.

Despite their disparate involvement in the penal system and representation in mainstream media, research still neglects their trajectories (Mountz, 2020). They struggle behind bars in a system that is supposed to rehabilitate them *and* they struggle in the freedom of society. LGBTQIA+ juveniles face adversities that can include bullying by friends and family, homelessness, child welfare involvement, physical and mental health disparities, experiences of sexual trauma, and overall lack of support, among other adverse childhood experiences that lead to involvement in the juvenile justice system (Mountz, 2020). And Black girls suffer the consequences of adultification or the perception that they should behave like an adult and not enjoy any freedoms or attributes of a child. This causes Black girls being viewed as older than they are, hypersexualized, and disproportionately punished in schools and the community. In regard to the juvenile justice system, research shows that Black girls have fewer cases dismissed, fewer diversion opportunities, higher incarceration rates, and harsher sentences. (Epstein et al., 2017)

The Black and LGBTQIA+ identities are closely related, as the criminalization of queer youth was built upon historical practices of policing sexuality and sexual expression along with the recent mass incarceration of Black and Brown individuals (Mountz, 2020). Historically, Black girls have been deprived of their independent sexual agency and policed by the heteronormative binary and beliefs of sexuality. Similarly, within correctional

facilities, these Black LGBTQ+ youth are ignored when the system automatically assuming their sexuality falls within the binary. Or they are being excluded and deemed an exceptional population (Mountz, 2020). In this systemic environment, maintaining minority identities allows for oppression from mainstream beliefs and restricts the potential personal growth that these young girls could experience. Although this is the common lived experience of this population, the media representations of them, does not always fully capture their plight. Well-rounded representations of their trajectory are ideal to encourage realistic expectations and perceptions of these young girls.

Implications of an Intersectional Identity

Similar to the goal of these media representations, any research regarding juvenile Black girls needs to be grounded in the basis of intersectionality and emphasize multidimensionality, as discussed by Marquitta S. Dorsey & Abigail Williams-Butler (2021). Intersectionality is a premise for understanding that one's experiences are a complex interaction of the oppressions that their identities sustain (Dorsey & Williams-Butler, 2021). In this case, Black queer juvenile offenders manage the interactions of their race, sex, sexual identity, and age. Multidimensionality is meant to consider the concentration of oppression that each identity brings. It helps understand "how black girls establish their social and gender identity based on or according to acts of racial, gender, age and social discrimination" during their time of development (Dorsey & Williams-Butler, 2021, p. 7). This research emphasizes that intersectional and multi-dimensional frameworks are vital in understanding the specific needs that mitigate oppressive systems that these youth are involved in. This is especially relevant for incarcerated juveniles, because the institutions

that detain them, commonly and systemically manage or attempt to influence their sexual identity, disregard their gender identity, and age.

Female Sexuality in Correctional Settings

Sexuality and intimate partner relationships are relevant topics in the conversation regarding women in correctional settings. Associate Professor of Sociology and Criminology, Lisa Pasko (2010) notes that within these facilities, correctional staff have inherently taken the role of diagnosing, dictating, and dissuading what they deem as problematic behavior, when it comes to female sexuality. Data has proven that staff believe that while in custody, queer girls are (1) not able to differentiate between intimacy, love, and violence due to their past trauma (2) all queer due to their past sexual abuse (3) suffering from sickness based on their deviant sexuality (4) displaying a trauma response by attempting to pursue girls for more power and popularity and (5) not permitted to be attracted to girls while incarcerated (Pasko, 2010). Correctional staff characterize lesbianism in custody as just “part of the institutionalization experience,” which negates and invalidates their experiences and pathways to systemic involvement (p. 1124). It is important to understand this restrictive function of a female correctional facility, because the show, *Girls Incarcerated*, displays the same systematic behaviors around sexuality, but it does not give insight to the systemic and historical culture that it developed from.

In the media, traditionally, the women in prison films and shows are treated as a glimpse into the life of lesbianism, which created the prison lesbian narrative (Ciasullo, 2008). Some cast members in *Girls Incarcerated* embody this prison lesbian trope. Particularly, Black girls are the prison lesbians, feeding into the “early representations of lesbianism in prison [that] often relied upon a racialized sexuality....placing African-

American women in the aggressive male role and white women in the passive female role.” (p.196) Women are typically depicted, in this role, but my text, challenges the stereotypical prison lesbian narrative and applies it to a younger demographic. But, *Girls Incarcerated* discusses the girls’ lesbianism in the context of their personal experiences, as opposed to the role of the prison lesbian in a fictional TV drama.

Viewing Popular Media as Public Pedagogy

All aforementioned lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ Black girls, including their oppression and personal development in race, gender, and sexuality, are acknowledged in some fashion within the various prison shows that have been created. Young women with these experiences are the type of girls that *Girls Incarcerated: Young & Locked Up* attempts to capture when they casted marginalized youth of that particular race and sexual identity. In an *Odyssey* article by Meagan Kashty, producers, Plum Pictures and Loud TV, explain that they strived to portray the range of incarcerated juvenile girls, an underrepresented population. Their goal was to exemplify “the power of change.” Although their intentions were good and the series provides a dispossessed population needed exposure, most media texts often have larger and unintended consequences and inferences that diverge from the original purpose.

Representation

One must acknowledge the additional implications of representation and spectatorship of particular bodies in popular media to have a complete understanding of their narrative. Take, for example, the attention and comments made regarding the character Rue in the *Hunger Games* (2012). S.R. Toliver, who specializes in literature and

humanities, primarily analyzes the real-world implications of adultification and representation of young Black girls using Rue's character in the science fiction, action movie. Toliver's analysis is grounded in a conceptual framework that discusses how the stereotypical tropes of Black women (i.e. Mammy, Jezebel, Magical Negro, Sapphire, Welfare Queen, etc.) are commonly and inappropriately applied to the public perception of Black girls. Toliver states that this false representation contributes to the adultification of Black girls. This "negative presentation of black female existence is so deeply ingrained in American culture that the phantoms of negative stereotypes continue to hunt various books, magazines, music videos, and films" (p. 6). This characterization has become timeless. It is true for a movie released in 2012 and it is true for the documentary series, *Girls Incarcerated* released in 2018. When looking at *Girls Incarcerated* or any representations in entertainment pieces, a Critical Discourse Analysis understands that texts do not exist in a vacuum. All texts speak to larger social implications and reinforce or deconstruct social ideologies. Larger implications acknowledge that we must challenge problematic representations to prevent society from continuously misrepresenting and further marginalizing already oppressed groups. (Toliver, 2018).

Spectatorship

The construction of agency for trans and cisgender Black characters in Netflix's *Orange is the New Black (OITNB)* using intersectionality and transgender theories is a good example of LGBTQIA spectatorship in the media (Thomas, 2020). The representation of the trans woman is important in OITNB and contributes to diversifying the narrative surrounding Black women and simultaneously works against systems that attempt to

oppress their existence. This is the same reason why there is value in seeing LGBTQIA+ Girls cased on *Girls Incarcerated*. But, in OITNB, Sophia, a trans woman, takes on a post-racial narrative because she does not have strong ties among other Black women on the show; the show disregards her Blackness and solely emphasizes her gender identity. They further argue that this makes her character “non-threatening” and reinforces the “single-axis identity” issue (p. 522). This also offers an opportunity for dominant groups to gaze upon the marginalized. For the oppressed, this is both freedom and repression because they are seen, but their narrative is limited. They only can process Sophia when they eliminate her race and focus on her trans identity. In this example, the show does not acknowledge the intersectionality of a Black woman’s identity, which is important in understanding the power of representation in the media and the everyday experiences of a particular group. Eliminating the full scope of a Black character’s identity forces them to perform respectability politics.

The Respectable Reality TV Star

Historically, the way Black people behave in the public’s eye is a platform for scrutiny amongst society (Pickens, 2015). Therefore, Black Americans perform respectability. Maintaining respectability allows a Black person to have more perceived agency and respect in relation to and amongst the mainstream, White gaze. The politics of respectability, essentially say that, as a Black person, your Blackness cannot be “too loud”. Black Americans subscribe to this standard because it fosters the motivation to be accepted and represent themselves and the race in a positive light. In *Shoving aside the politics of respectability: black women, reality TV, and the ratchet performance*, Therí A. Pickens begins

by detailing the basics of the concept. She rationalizes that on the part of the Black individual, they are required to minimize and constantly regulate their behavior for the benefit of the entire Black people.

Black folks across the board, whether in their everyday lives or in a role in popular entertainment, engage in respectability politics. Pickens (2015) further applies this Black bodies casted in Reality TV shows. Often, in the entertainment industry, the common narratives of “‘troubling blackness’ becomes pronounced as black and non-black audiences attempt to police black women’s behavior. These audiences evince an “investment in a conception of cultural politics that continues to privilege representation itself as the primary site of hope and critique” (Gray 2005, Pickens, 2015). This restricts and places Black women in Reality TV in a role only meant to satisfy a political agenda and not for their personal reasons. Pickens (2015) literature primarily discusses Black women in shows like *Real Housewives of Atlanta* (2008) and *Love & Hip Hop* (2011). My research similarly frames the role of queer Black girls in *Girls Incarcerated: Young & Locked Up*. They, too, push a political agenda that constructs marginalized Black girls as respectable in the context of incarcerated juveniles. In the correctional setting, respectability manifests itself slightly different, but it has the same premise of being deemed as a socially acceptable body in this space. As a solution, Pickens (2015) challenges us to think about the possibilities if oppressors accepted all images and performances of Black folks. This poses the resolution that individualism is needed, as opposed to perpetuating collective images that propose one restricting narrative.

In ways that representation and spectatorship teach certain beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors as I've explained, media is a form of public pedagogy. It teaches us how to perceive people, places, things, and concepts in various ways. This research will consider media as public pedagogy that informs the experiences of Black LGBTQIA+ youth confined to correctional settings using concepts of adultification and respectability seen in *Girls Incarcerated: Young & Locked Up*.

Women in Prison Genre

Around the time of the peak *Orange is the New Black* (2013) hype, it became clear that mainstream media is drawn to capturing the women in prison narrative (Jacobi, 2015). But *Orange is the New Black* (2013) is not the only show that feeds into the spectatorship of women and girls behind bars. Other shows include *Wentworth* (2003), *Women Behind Bars* (2008), *Beyond Scared Straight* (2011), *Women in Prison* (2015), *Bad Girls Behind Bars* (2019), and *Cellmate Secrets* (2021). Notably, scholars acknowledge that this media genre depicts stereotypical characterizations of women, instead of portraying the complex experiences of the inmates. Hinshaw and Jacobi (2015) argue that representation of these women and girls risks the following:

Such projects also require us to wrestle with fundamental questions about the ethics of representation. As Ruby C. Tapia (2010) argues... ever present is the "risk of creating unproductive, even violent, relations of representation and interpretation"... Such risks resonate for incarcerated women, particularly in circumstances where there are significant differences in power between those constructing (and witnessing) the representations and those being represented. The risks of representation are perhaps even more acute in the case of incarcerated

women, since the frameworks for envisioning them have historically been so narrow (for example, fallen women, monsters, sexualized objects, and so on). (69)

Fans of this genre are not often exposed or encouraged to consider the real-world implications of these representations of incarcerated female offenders, based off what the big screen is showing. Viewers are watching for the entertainment. Extended research describes this popular media phenomenon as a culture. This fascination is based on the prison-televisual complex, in which elements of mass incarceration are commodified in filmed entertainment in a complex manner, that extends beyond a means to show case the systemic nature of the prison industry (Page & Ouellette, 2020). This complexity becomes more nuanced once it considers the representation of juvenile offenders, an even more vulnerable and deprived population.

Girls Incarcerated

This research, analyzes the Netflix docuseries *Girls Incarcerated: Young & Locked Up* as a text that is representative of the young females embodied within the prison-televisual complex. *Girls Incarcerated* was first released in March 2018 and currently has a total of two seasons and sixteen episodes. It is rated TV-MA for mature audiences, which may not be suitable for ages 17 and under. This series follows teenage girls who are incarcerated at juvenile correctional facilities in Indiana. Upon its release, the show gained mass popularity, as expected for a reality tv show about criminal culture. Having received many accolades, *Girls Incarcerated* was rated highly among The Best Netflix Original Reality Shows, The Best Netflix Original Documentary Series, and The Best Reality TV Shows Of 2018 (Ranker, n.d.). The trendy following behind the series reflects the audience's interest in the cast member's stories.

Supporters follow the girls' lives beyond the TV show. Several of the girls presented in the program have thousands of followers on various social media platforms. Season 2 cast member, Brittani Reyes, has 25.6K followers on Instagram (Reyes, n.d.). Brianna Guerra has 96.3K Instagram followers (Guerra, n.d.). The show's LeeAeria Stokes, Brianna Guerra, Tiffany Kristler, and Paige McAtee all have YouTube channels and videos about their reality tv experience and their everyday lives. Their loads of subscriber and views are the proof that people are tuning in. Many of them boast their feature on popular show in their social media bios by claiming the title of "Public Figure" or giving the series a shout out. On Instagram, as soon as you open her profile page, Christiona Hutchinson, from Season 1, has "#NETFIX'S FINEST" and "#*girlsincarcerated*" flaunted at the top (Hutchinson, n.d.). Adding to the fan phrenzy, you cannot forget to mention the many fan pages created for the fanatics that want to see more of the girls. Needless to say, consumers are buying in to the producer's product.

This research will conduct a qualitative textual analysis of media representations of LGBT Black Girls in Juvenile Detention Centers in *Girls Incarcerated: Young & Locked Up*. Textual analysis and similar critical discourse analysis methods attempt to analyze complex ideologies that are prominent among society (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). This type of methodology disrupts text that "[have] an integral part in mirroring, constructing, constituting, reifying, and dismantling social identities and relations." (Toliver, 2018, p.6). It is important to apply this type of analysis to *Girls Incarcerated* because it allows us to analyze the representation of queer Black girls' relationships and experiences, and explain what "structures of power," ideologies, and institutions are dominating the narrative (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

This close textual examination will include segments from Season 1 of Netflix's *Girls Incarcerated* following cast members, Armani Buckner and Christiona Hutchinson. The research will look at the depiction of their storylines, inmate relationships, and behaviors within the larger narrative created throughout the entire season. The data gathered will identify themes relevant to adultification, intersectionality, and respectability. Identifying commonalities or gaps within the narrative that reach saturation will reveal larger implications that will be detailed in later parts of this essay.

Girls Incarcerated: Young & Locked Up creates a complicated narrative for young Black LGBTQIA+ women. In the show, they are subjected to adultification and made to abide by distinct respectability politics that narrow and minimize their experiences. This representation of Black queer girls erases key elements of their intersectional identity, including their oppression and liberty to be a child vulnerable to mistakes.

The first season's premier episode of *Girls Incarcerated*, "The Girls of Madison", starts off by showing juvenile offenders interact amongst themselves, hearing the girl's opinions on life behind bars, and getting the staff's insight on the incarceration experience at Madison Juvenile Correctional Facility in Madison, Indiana. After the initial segment, viewers are introduced to select female offenders. For example, we begin with an in depth look at Brianna Guerra, one of the more challenging youth in the facility. In her introduction scene, Brianna is yelling and cursing, "look at the fucking score you dumbass bitches" (Rigg & George, 2018-2019) to the other girls during a recreational volleyball game. Then, we get a montage of staff describing Brianna as someone who will "tell you how it is", a "princess thug," and an obvious alpha personality. In her confessionals, Brianna, this young, White, girl talks about her absent father, drug use, and her history of

criminality. She talks about “putting the pistol on ‘em” or robbing people and the rush of high-speed police car chases (Rigg & George, 2018-2019). Soon after, the audience is introduced to the diverse spectrum of youth detained in this facility. We begin meeting several other girls of various classes, races, ages, and learn about their experiences throughout the season. Analyzing how each girl is depicted throughout the show, I am able to compare and make distinct implications regarding how specific identities are represented compared to others. This revealed a representation of Black, masculine presenting girls that is complicated by elements of adultification and respectability.

Black Queer Juveniles, Adultification, and Respectability

Christiona Hutchinson

Early in the first episode of *Girls Incarcerated*, Christiona Hutchinson, also known as Chrissy, is introduced to the show by giving a firsthand account of her progress while incarcerated. The show presents Chrissy as her authentic self: a well-articulated, masculine of center, athletic, social, and mature girl. The camera follows her dribbling a basketball, shooting hoops in the facility’s gym, while she narrates her introduction. She starts off by describing her previous behaviors, her family background. Then, we get a glimpse of what her experience has been at Madison Juvenile Correctional Facility. She proudly tells the audience about her behavior changing for the better, including earning her diploma, receiving high rank in the program, and confidence. We see a very developed side of Chrissy where she is very honest and acknowledges her wrongs. Chrissy goes on to say that, “I’ve changed a lot. I’m proud of myself. I’m getting better.” Staff speak highly about her progress as well. The warden of the facility, admitted that Chrissy was initially

hard to deal with and had a “tough shell,” but overtime she “wasn’t that monster” anymore. This is when we begin to see snippets of Chrissy smiling, laughing, and being supported by her peers and staff.

After this recap of her time incarcerated, we are caught up to present day, in the show, when Chrissy is nearing closer to her release date. Here, we see a glimpse of an outburst Chrissy has regarding losing her honors rank in the program and another incident where she was sent to the confinement unit for a small fight with another youth. Otherwise, we don’t see many other behavioral issues from Christiona Hutchinson, which is relatively good compared to the conduct issues that her primarily White counterparts are involved in.

Making “Black, Lesbian, and Proud” Problematic

Chrissy’s story doesn’t stop there. In the same episode, there is a segment of the show where the topic of sexuality and relationships is depicted. Here, staff and youth are individually asked about sexuality and relationships in prison. The staff’s remarks condemn intimate partner relationships. In this scene, in the day room where a group of Black girls are sitting down, the camera pans to a correctional officer speaking to one of the girls, asking her to move her chair away from another youth, so that they’re not sitting so close. The juvenile responds, “You act like she’s tickling my pussy or something,” showing irritation over the strict surveillance. Other staff continue to explain that intimate relationships are not allowed at the facility, because it hinders the girls’ progress towards rehabilitation. While the youth, on the other hand, make comments explaining that “on the inside” being gay and intimate with another girl is normal even if you don’t identify as gay. When Chrissy’s part pops up in the montage of responses, Chrissy is depicted as

comfortable and confident speaking about and interacting with her sexuality. Chrissy, without hesitation states, “I’m a stud. Like, I’m a lesbian.” Her comment is made amongst clips of other girls describing the nature of intimate relationships at Madison Correctional Facility in a more lighthearted, humorous, and dismissive fashion. White girls are innocently engaged in lesbianism for the “fun” or boredom. They use terms like “Commissary Hoe” and “Gay First Day” to describe girls that pursue lesbian relationships as a means to garner perks in prison or entertain themselves because they’re locked up and have no other options. While this scene does speak to the fluidity of sexuality, as it explores elements of experimentation, it does step into some boundaries of an institutionalized narrative that deems this queerness as sickness to be cured while incarcerated (Pasko, 2010). The “playing lesbian” narrative or attempt to convey youth’s temporary access to lesbianism is problematic and almost invalidating at this young age. The girls are explaining that even though homosexual behavior is common in the setting, heterosexuality is the standard, regardless of your involvement with a woman (Carr et al., 2020). Which then promotes the idea that true homosexuality is abnormal. The notion of abnormality surrounded by the lesbian label is not validating and/or encouraging and or encouraging for a young person that is developing their sexual identity.

On the contrary, Chrissy Hutchinson is the only one shown assertively and explicitly devoted to her sexuality. This isolated representation, again, links the theory of adultification because as opposed to the other girls, Chrissy is not “fake gay” simply because she is in a female facility; Chrissy is *actually* gay. She is representative of the “real” lesbian that Ciasullo (2008) describes as the stereotypical butch who is typically characterized as the only role that can be considered odd or different from the rest. In this

case, Chrissy is different from the rest; she is a respectable inmate, successful, and confident in her sexuality. On one hand, we can admire the positive and realistic queer representation, but on the other hand we must acknowledge what it means for Chrissy's sexuality to be characterized in a mature way compared to the other girls' age appropriate depictions. She is tossed into a narrative that is typically played by and discussed regarding women in adult prisons. Older texts like, *Women Convict* (1956), *The Big Doll House* (1971) and newer works like, *Orange is the New Black* (2013) and *Locked Up* (2015) all construct this storyline around adult women. But, *Girls Incarcerated: Young & Locked Up* applies this same trope to a juvenile female.

This depiction of adultification indicates to viewers that Black girls are more advanced and adult acting when it comes to sex or speaking about sex (Epstein, Blake, and Gonzalez, 2017). The adultification of Black girls is typically aligned with heterosexuality, but here it is looked at through a queer presenting person. It is positive to hear Chrissy voice her own sexuality. She is pushing the narrative and providing underrepresented Black queer girls a platform to be seen. But, Chrissy, as one of the *only* girls to proudly maintain her lesbianism without falter, feeds into the assumption that maturity should come earlier for Black girls compared to their White counterparts. Realistically, individuals that are coming of age and coming to terms with who they are do *not* have to have it all figured out. Yet, there is an expectation that Chrissy should because she is Black woman.

Being a Respectable Delinquent

By the third episode, "Mean Girls" (Rigg & George, 2018), Chrissy Hutchinson is released after two years, the longest sentence among all other cast members in the first

season. Leading up to this accomplishment, Chrissy is portrayed as obeying socially prescribed respectability politics in prison in order to get released. In the same way that Black women are subjected to respectability politics, this representation requires that Black girls in prison have to uphold a misconstrued social standard. Literature regarding respectability politics describes the concept as a Black girl's effort to regulate their actions in public, in order to be more digestible and prosperous within the expectations of oppressive superior groups (Nyachae and Ohito, 2019). Applying this notion to Black girls in the jail or prison setting, good behavior, compliance, and the ability to achieve success is respectable. Thus, we are allowed to understand the show presents Chrissy as a respectable person compared to other juveniles in the facility. In the show, other juveniles do not exemplify the same standard and expectation to behave well. But, Chrissy, as a young Black gay woman, must maintain this level of suitability in this environment, otherwise she cannot be accepted and held in high regard.

Chrissy maintains a high achieving standard even as we follow her after her release and during the transition back into the community. Her premier in the free world is a scene of her dribbling a basketball at an outdoor court in a local park. The alternative hip hop song "Wildside" by Robin Loxley and Emanuel Vo Williams plays in the background giving an hype, upbeat vibe to her new found accomplishment. We see her taking care of her younger brother and spending time with her older sister. Then we get insight into the mended relationship between her and her mother. Chrissy explains, "Me and momma's relationship is coming along, like coming closer and closer. We never got along. But, like, I did a lot of stuff and she ain't gave up on me, so why would I give up on her when I'm the one who was doing all the damage?" (Rigg & George, 2018). She shows a bright future and

dedication to her family and her growth. At this point, no other cast members are shown with such positivity and success throughout the portrayal of their journey at Madison Correctional Facility. Immediately after this narrative, in the following scene, we learn about Holbert, another aggressive White juvenile, cursing obscene words about one of her fellow inmates. So, in comparison to the other youth's progress, Chrissy is a successful product of the system, as it is framed by her performance of respectability. This only validates the use and effectiveness of correctional facilities for one of the most marginalized populations, Black LGBTQIA + girls, without displaying any of the systemic attributes that they endure while going through the Juvenile Justice System. In reality, their experiences do not allow for this type of success to be attained as easily as it is depicted. The representation of Chrissy's story is motivating and uplifting. To see someone in her position "make it out" is inspiring for many. But we can only understand that Chrissy might make it because she is respectable. We are not seeing a full presentation of her identity. Consider if Chrissy was disregarding the politics of respectability, would the narrative be so pleasant? Would viewers be able to accept and root for a gay Black girl that did not exemplify the mainstream expectation of womanhood. We are permitted to celebrate this achievement, but the representation fails to acknowledge the other side that includes adversity, mistakes, and challenging behaviors.

Armani Buckner

Armani Buckner, whom the other girls calls "Buckner," is depicted as a quiet, well-behaved, and relatively mature youth. She is the only other Black lesbian portrayed throughout the season. She is primarily introduced to the audience in season 1, episode 5,

“Love in Lock Up,” (Rigg & George, 2018) where viewers learn a little bit about her relationship with inmate, Alexis Miller, also known as “Miller”. The first scene introducing these two cast members, is primarily about Miller and never highlights Buckner’s journey. It opens with a head on shot of Alexis Miller, a younger white girl, looking at the camera, flipping her hair and smiling. Next, we hear several correctional facility staff and other juveniles describe Miller’s aggressive and difficult behavior as . Then, we receive Miller’s perspective on her behavior where she admits to being violent and chaotic due to her past experiences with her mom and the foster care system. We hear Miller read from her journal, professing her love for Buckner, a Black, masculine, gay girl, who supports her struggles. So only at this point, we are finally introduced to Armani Buckner.

In the later parts of the scene, we see the two girls interacting and we really get a good understanding of how close they have become while incarcerated. Buckner is often shown giving advice and trying to motivate Miller to stay on the right track with her behavior. When Miller becomes angry and tempted to fight another youth, Buckner consoles her in a tender tone and says, “That’s what she wants you to do. You don’t need to do that... Do what you need to do to get out. None of these girls is worth your freedom” (Rigg & George, 2018). It is important to detail the storyline and Buckner’s role in the story, because one must understand that Buckner only has relevance through Miller’s story.

Our Voices Matter

It is important to know that throughout the entire episode Buckner’s story was not told to the audience, therefore we know nothing about her experiences or behaviors, except from what is seen during interactions with Miller. In stark contrast, spectators are afforded

the opportunity to understand Miller and her troubling story, which encourages viewers to sympathize with her. There is much power and privilege in having your story told; it justifies behavior. Miller is a white, queer, young girl that came from poverty and had a rough upbringing. In alignment with social standards and expectations, Miller is allowed more leeway and wiggle room, given her White identity. She is one of the more disruptive and aggressive youth in the facility and that is explicitly captured in the show. When asked about Miller, a juvenile correctional officer laughs and says, "She and I have had some rounds," nodding in agreement to her challenging behavior. Another youth, Sarah Maxwell, says that "[Miller] don't care who you are, how big you are, she'll fight you if she needs to." Immediately after, Miller tells the audience about her involvement with Child Protective Services, drug use, and anger issues among other oppositional challenges. Her experiences justify her behavior and allows an element of vulnerability. The show frames this as the initial daunting, heavy music slows down and turns into soft harmonic instrumental music once Miller tells us about her struggles, which encourages feelings of pity, empathy, and sensitivity. Thus, viewers can maintain her innocence and understand Miller as a dynamic individual with many layers. This representation captures the privilege she has in being permitted to act in ways that are not respectable, in this setting. Consider this in comparison to the lack of insight on Buckner. Buckner has no voice to be heard outside of Miller's narrative; her privilege to be understood as a complex human being is erased. We are not allowed to sympathize or have concern for Buckner, because we don't know what she's been through. This inadvertently minimizes her experiences and denies the opportunity for developing a rounded representation of young Black lesbians. The viewers only perception of Buckner is developed from her limited kind-hearted interactions with

Miller. The narrative and limited representation forces Buckner to engage in respectability politics. We only see Buckner in scenes where she engages in good behavior, as an touching person and peer support to Miller.

Making a Mammy Out of Me

Understanding Armani Buckner in this clip is also very revealing. First, consider her intersectional identity. The intersection of gender, race, sexuality, and even age Buckner is vastly marginalized. She is a young, Black, girl, offender. In a typical environment, she would face adversity naturally. As Kimberly Crenshaw (2021) explained, understanding Armani's intersecting identities allows you to you have some sort understanding why she would be deemed as a vulnerable person. But, in this mediated representation of the correctional jail like setting, the implications of her intersectionality are eliminated. The narrow representation promotes a narrative for queer Black girls that tell society that these girls do not need exposure to reveal weakness. In her scenes, Armani is not vulnerable at all. In this representation she is defying all odds and displays no vulnerability whatsoever, as she wholeheartedly takes on the task of mentoring, guiding, and motivating Alexis to improve her behavior. We further understand that Armani exercises some level of respectability. Again, thinking about the incarcerated juvenile standards of respectability theory, exercising respectability is good behavior. In order to be a good inmate, the representation of Buckner constrains her actions to be upstanding and admirable, so that she maintains the agency to be free of scrutiny of staff and fans and worthy of the respect of others. This feeds into the idealized image of Black girls. In this case, when we think about how respectability theory applies to the depiction of Black girl offenders, Buckner is a gold

star example. But, at a cost. As this is the *only* representation we see of a young Black girl offender, the presentation reflects the idea that society views young Black girls as more adult like compared to their White counterparts. At a very young age, they are oversexualized, expected to handle more, allowed little room for error, and deemed less innocent, and more responsible for their actions (Epstien et al., 2017). Likewise, we see this in Buckner's slim storyline, as she is represented as that mature, responsible figure compared to Miller. This comparison is inevitable because Buckner is a piece of Miller's story; we only know Buckner in relation to Miller, which forces the contrast. When Miller is reactive with other girls on the show, she is characterized as immature. Buckner, with her main role in the show being Miller's partner, is the wise voice of reason and intellect. This is misleading we no longer can look at Buckner through a juvenile lens because she isn't behaving as a kid should. She isn't allowed to because she is burdened with the responsibility of taking care of Miller. Thus, producing another perpetuation of the "mammy" archetype. Defined by Deborah White in 1999, the "mammy" is described as follows:

African-American women household slaves who served as nannies giving maternal care to the white children of the family and receiving an unusual degree of trust and affection from their enslavers. The personal accounts idealized the role of the dominant female house slave: a woman completely dedicated to the white family, especially the children, and given complete charge of domestic management. She was a friend and advisor.

We clearly see that with this representation, Buckner is not only not allowed to be a kid, she is framed as the asexual caretaker of Miller. Her behavior and portrayal is more aligned with how correctional staff act towards youth, instead of a teenager's acceptable flawed behavior. It is likely that a girl like Buckner would have gone through some very difficult experiences that caused her to develop and become the mature person that she is presented as. But, viewers don't get the chance to process her full narrative. This representation is not only interesting, but threatening. It is thought-provoking because it frames Buckner as a grown woman providing for another youth, similar in age, while still being surveilled as a detained juvenile that needs rehabilitation of her own. The culmination of these juxtaposing elements is peculiarly problematic because it creates a narrative with deceitful expectations and larger implications for LGBTQIA+ girls that are being represented.

Discussion

Girls Incarcerated: Young & Locked Up (2018) may not have been the next biggest thing since *Orange is the New Black* (2013), but with the attention it has gained thus far and as a body of mediated text alone, it still does remarkably important work. It represents a larger genre of entertainment that supports an entire structural system that this country was built upon. The genre itself is constantly receiving attention from production and consumers, thus these images that engage race, class, and sex do not seem to be going away any time soon. *Girls Incarcerated*, specifically, brings an innovative element to the genre, capturing delinquent youth in a way that we don't often see on television. It gives a platform for underrepresented young women. This representation matters. At surface

level, the depictions of Christiona Hutchinson and Armani Buckner seem positive, as we move away from stereotypical demeaning representations that we typically consume when popular media characterizes people of color, masculine presenting lesbian women, and criminals. Moving beyond the basic representation and applying the implications of the intersectional identities presented, the first season of *Girls Incarcerated* reframes the young, Black lesbian identity as more positive, mature, and subjected to complicated standards compared to their White juvenile counterparts. Both *Girls Incarcerated: Young & Locked Up* cast members are deemed as highly respectable and accomplished compared to their White juvenile counterparts. This is potentially an ideal coming of age success story. But, the narrative is complicated when we process these girls' stories amongst representations of the heterosexual, White youth that are increasingly deviant and permitted to act in juvenile ways. Many of the white juvenile girls are consistently reoffending, acting out, being disrespectful, and being punished.

In complete contrast, viewers engage in a narrative that incites happiness and hope when we see an exceptional level of maturity and positive depictions for queer Black girls. Although it is uplifting, the producers did not leave room in the narrative to acknowledge that Chrissy and Buckner are still kids. And kids need the opportunity to be kids. This is exceedingly important for marginalized youth that are involved in the criminal justice system, because the main purpose of the juvenile justice system is to rehabilitate and mold youth. But mediated representations like this do not allow for Black girls to make mistakes and be influenced. Producers run the risk of promoting false expectations, because without room for mistakes and the ability to develop, we are contributing to the adultification of Black girls narrative. This kind of narrative articulates marginalized Black girls in a flawless

manner, reinforcing that they must be mature and grown. This element of adultification creates narrow and high anticipations for other youth that identify with and relate to this intersectional identity. It tells them to be like “Chrissy” and embody “Buckner.” This representation is saying that LGBTQIA+ Black girls should know who they are, while other girls can question their sexuality and experiment, but they cannot, and nothing less than that. It says that they are to be a guidance and role model for others and not succumb to any personal mistakes or challenges. Or it completely erases the potentiality and consideration that queer Black girls endure challenges.

This representation oversimplifies their narrative when their experiences are anything but simple. The reality is that a lot of these girls aren’t the societal perfect success story. Their trajectory and interactions with systemic oppression do not allow them to obtain upward mobility, as easily as others. In fact, Chrissy, framed as one of the most successfully rehabilitated girls on the show, is currently incarcerated with a six-year sentence in an adult correctional facility for armed robbery. Despite this likely trajectory, *Girls Incarcerated* still fosters a false sense of expectation for viewers. On a Facebook fan page, supporters commented on Chrissy’s most recent sentence saying things like, “I thought she was one of the good ones” or “This is the most disappointing thing by far. I had high hopes for her.” Many of the other cast members became teen moms, were sent back to juvenile detention, or still addicted to drugs. But, the producers failed to capture the entire picture, so that one can understand the reality of these dispossessed populations.

But, *Girls Incarcerated* does not completely abandon the stereotypical tropes found in prison television. We see the white trash narrative (Rennels, 2015) perpetuated when

we look into the lives of kids like Alexis Miller that come from a White, lower-class background. We also feed into the common belief that White kids are going to do and say, as they wish without consequence. Then, it engages and reinforces the mammy stereotype, emphasizing that Black women are caretakers, who should be capable, at whatever age, to neglect their vulnerabilities and tend to everyone else, but themselves and their person growth. Buckner had no relevance without Miller's role. Miller gave Buckner the agency to be seen. But, Buckner's representation was so limited, it only served Miller.

Overall, this reflects and reinforces a real, systemic problem. It is not uncommon that in our present-day penal and juvenile justice system, white girls compared to Black girls are granted leniency from school discipline to sentencing to the way they are treated by correctional staff. I move to emphasize that this culture is relevant outside of the penal institutions. "Authorities in public systems continue to view black girls as less innocent, less needing of protection and generally more like adults, it appears likely that they would also view black girls as more culpable for their actions and, on that basis, punish them more harshly despite their status as children," as explained by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. With these stereotypes being pushed in these larger societal institutions, the media is a space that can challenge this trope. We need queer Black girls' stories to stand on their own and be developed in their entirety. They should not be one sided. They should not be dependent on other characters.

This systemic culture that polices Black, queer, female youth is harmful and manifest itself in incidents that cannot be ignored. In 2015 a video surfaced on social media through the hashtag #AssaultAtSpringValleyHigh, depicting Deputy Ben Fields at Spring

Valley High School aggressively grabbing, ripping, and slamming a student from her desk because she would not comply (Damberg et al., 2015). Another officer causes traumatic injury to another Black girl at Liberty High School in Osceola County, FL, in 2021, when breaking up a fight (Deliso & Ghebremedhin, 2021). Both of these stories were followed with allegations of racial prejudice. Various big news outlets, including The New York Times, CNN, USA Today, covered Ma'khia Bryant was killed by law enforcement officers in Columbus, Ohio after 911 was contacted to address a physically threatening confrontation she was involved in, where Ma'khia had a knife. The uproar of the shooting became very controversial, as part the discourse justified the killing because of the weapon possession and disregarded the context of her age and gender. Each of these incidents were transgressions of adultification and respectability politics. Seeing similar incidents become viral on social media and be consumed at high volumes, only reinforces the complicated narrative that *Girls Incarcerated* pushes. Society learns to only accept Black girls in a respectable, western, colonized fashion and ensure they are deemed worthy if they achieve beyond age-appropriate standards. Otherwise, beyond age-appropriate punishment and consequence is fit.

Overall, in the representation of queer Black girls, we witness what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) calls “the danger of a single story”. Considering the story that *Girls Incarcerated* pushes, all LGBTQIA+ Black girls cannot be respectable, changed, and mature individuals. The stories about this marginalized population are already slim. So, other girls and consumers need to know that they do not have to subscribe to such expectations set in *Girls Incarcerated: Young & Locked Up*. When thinking about these girls, consumers should have feelings that extend beyond being impressed by their behaviors. This type of research,

based in critical discourse analysis, challenges the typical conversation and attempts to mitigate the misconception. But, the work does not stop here.

Conclusion

Typically, “television and affiliated social media are stitched into the need to constantly monitor the prison, to make it better” (Page & Ouellette, 2020). *Girls Incarcerated: Young and Locked Up* follows suit and is framed by the producers to show the humanity of these girls and alter the typical incarceration narrative to something more optimistic and focused on transforming delinquents (Kashty, 2018). Although the intentions are good, the representation of these girls is complex and sometimes problematic.

In an environment, where they are already policed, the representation of queer Black girls in season one of *Girls Incarcerated: Young & Locked Up* still manages to further engage in the policing of behavior to ensure they are respected as triple marginalized beings and criminals. This representation marries Black girls to respectability politics when they are merely adolescents. They are young developing women, whom are still in the process of learning behavior, as any kid should. Yet, this show pushes a narrative that, once again, subjects them to adultification. These girls are not superhuman. As represented in the show, it is not realistic for them to overcome systemic oppression only using a positive attitude, willpower, and self-discipline. Again, their representation is complicated because it is both positive and problematic. It is encouraging *and* misleading. It is reassuring *and* limited. Consuming these representations is not the issue. The problem arises when we cannot fully understand the implications of the representations. Queer

Black girls deserve to be understood as the complex beings that they are. We need more narratives that challenge these restrictive representations.

Thus, critical attention is needed to investigate how media representation of this population results in real world implications and consequences to their everyday lived experiences and how they are perceived. If we, as a society, are going to heavily consume entertainment predicated on surveilling dispossessed populations, we should ensure these representations are productive. These representations need to be articulated in a very careful way because they're dealing with youth, a very vulnerable group. Thus, we as a society need to pay attention to how we speak about them.

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