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BIOPOWER IS THE NEW BLACK: GENDER REFRACTIONS AND REFLECTIONS BETWEEN PANOPTICON AND TELEVISION

What am I allowed to see of the “queer” behind bars? To address this complex issue, I will focus on the character of Sophia Burset, one of the inmates of the TV series *Orange Is the New Black*, in order to deal with imprisoned queer subjects and their representation through the spectrum of the “homonormative regime of visibility” (Ferrante 2019). By means of the character of Sophia, I will try to put into practice a type of countersexual exercise (Preciado 2002) of critical observation, in order to examine the disciplinary desires of queer subjects trapped by the Prison Industrial Complex, by social expectations, and also by identitarian assumptions in critical discourse in our theoretical and political spaces. What does a countersexual exercise mean? I focus on Sophia Burset’s body not only to enlighten the biopower effects both inside and outside prison, but I pay more attention to her practices of resistance and the objects she uses in order to produce “flaws of the text.” Sophia might help us to find “lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) from disciplinary power in prison, but also from disciplinary attitudes to reading texts. By following in her footsteps, I examine the power of troubling the norm and undoing normative desire which is also embedded in the critical approach to TV, Gender, and Cultural Studies.

As a premise to my analysis, it might be useful to illustrate the concept of ‘homonormative regime of visibility.’ Over the last few years, new TV programs, series, and soap operas have involved queer people, either as characters or as audience on a daily basis. This is not due to a self-organized irruption into visibility of a political subject: it is more connected, rather, with the rise of a paradigm of what can be visible and tolerable for queers. The homonormative regime of visibility is the set of norms governing the representation of certain subjects. In my study, I define this regime as homonormative, in order to draw the trajectory of homosexual assimilation into mainstream culture (Ferrante 2019). While in the past queer subjects troubled the order of society, today gays and lesbians are assimilated because they are useful to the new needs of neoliberal western society, as Lisa Duggan states (2004). Yet, Susan Stryker warns that Duggan’s analysis might itself be homonormative. In fact, it renders the role played by trans- and gender-nonconformists invisible. These are people who challenge the order founded on binarism and the coherence of sexual assignment that gays and lesbians carefully guard (2008). At the same time, TV can be seen as a place where the excess produced by disciplinary desire can be unveiled, because lines of flight are continuously produced here. My analysis of the series, in this case focusing on Sophia, is a “countersexual exercise” (Preciado 2002) in that it unveils the breaches in the structure of the text and detects the strength and the power of the deviance from the cis-hetero-centric¹ system, operating thus with the agency of practices through objects rather than focusing on identities.

I am allowed to see what is happening behind the bars only through the perspective of a fictional representation of a TV program. *Orange Is the New Black* is a TV series written and directed by Jenji Kohan, inspired by Piper Kerman’s biographical novel (Kerman 2010), and produced and streamed by Netflix. The screen acts as a further yet more complex perspective functioning as a lens through which we can watch the Panopticon². Not only does discipline act on queers inside the prison, it also acts in the construction of a regime of visibility for queer subjects. There is an interplay of refractions between what can be visible and tolerable of queers inside the prison and what can be tolerable, visible of queers in society. This is not a methodological aspect, but part of the core object of my analysis. Quoting from Foucault: “Full lighting and

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¹ The Latin prefix *cis-* stands for “on this side” as opposite to “trans.” Cis-gender is the term for people whose gender identity matches the sex that they were assigned at birth.

² The Panopticon is the ideal model of prison when it is intended as an institutional building and a system of control designed by the English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham.



the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap” (Foucault 1995, 200). *Par excellence*, TV controls and splits the act of watching and being watched. Furthermore, the Panopticon produces homogenous effects from different desires by different powers.

1. Technologies of gender beyond the bars

Foucault in *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (1995) is talking about prison, yet his concern resonates as a warning about what it means to come out more generally. In this part of the analysis I emphasize the relationship – not exclusively metaphorical – that exists between the visibility inside the prison as a disciplinary structure and visibility in television as a disciplined representation.

In 1791 Jeremy Bentham designed the ideal model of a Panopticon prison. The project was conceived in order to make power an impending presence, even when it is not verifiable; the visibility in the Panopticon is constant, even when the surveillance is not continuous. This machine produces control by splitting the act of watching and being watched. This property produces some sort of assonance between the Panopticon and television, a technology that produces, regulates and controls, by interrupting the reciprocity of the gaze. The Panopticon is a “transparent, circular cage,” a perfect discipline model, generalized to the whole social body: “The panoptic schema, without disappearing as such or losing any of its properties, was destined to spread throughout the social body; its vocation was to become a generalized function” (Foucault 1995, 207). Thus the discipline does not only act on bodies and relationships in the prison, but it also works through the multiplying effect of television, producing a more general rule on how biopower actually works on/with queer subjects. Although watching the prison through the TV screen is not a way to analyze the reality of prison, Lietchfield prison is rather the place where the gaze of these devices merge and produce the norm of what a queer body can or should be. In this perspective—or, more appropriately, from these different points of view?—I look at *Orange Is the New Black* trying to find the possibility of escape from the trap of hyper-visibility, already present in the text.

The prison on our screen does not resemble the familiar high walls of the Panopticon model; it is, rather, surrounded by woods and lakes.³ Lietchfield is a low security prison, a territory ruled by geometric forms rather than cells, where safety is guaranteed by ethnic lines rather than bars, where individuals are not the subjects of voluntary actions but act—commit crimes, fight, escape—as some populations determined by the materiality of the environment in which they live. This prison, where a hen wanders around unnoticed, is a jail without locks, in which the custodial experience explodes in all its dramatic force only with Tricia Miller’s⁴ death in the tenth episode of the first season. The prison narrative does not happen in a vacuum of the imagination, and tries to deal with the actual conditions of the contemporary Prison Industrial Complex, the system of state and private industries which gains profit from the prison experience. Lietchfield is in fact a privatized prison, in which services are contracted, medical expenses have been cut, and where the inmates are the productive *main d’oeuvre* for the private bodies who invest in their misfortunes. For all these reasons, the prison structure we witness is rarely claustrophobic: this makes it easier to identify with the inmates, because it reminds us of an architecture that Foucault would define as a security society, rather than a disciplinary society (Foucault 2004).

Foucault analyses prisons as a “compact model of disciplining mechanism” (Foucault 1995, 197), but prison does not represent a mere metaphor of how the discipline of gender acts; in fact. This is produced by and produces disciplinary discourses giving a specific gendered consistence to the concept of biopower. In *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003) Angela Davis writes important pages of analysis on the “Prison Industrial Complex” (PIC), outlining the most interesting arguments of abolitionist discourse⁵. Part of her analysis is devoted to the relationship between prison and gender. Davis shows how this relationship cannot be

³ This essay was written at an early stage of the series and it focuses on Lietchfield as it is represented in the first seasons of the series. It is important to underline that this prison itself will have an evolution in the representation of power, conflicts, racial issues and confinement. In the last season, for example, a new focus on the confinement of immigrant enriched the series with new perspectives that could not be assimilated in this analysis.

⁴ Tricia Miller is a young drug addict inmate, who dies after overdosing on heroin in prison. Prison guard George Miller staged her body to make the death look like a suicide to protect his drug smuggling operation.

⁵ The historical abolitionist movement fought to end slavery. The same term is used by the movement against prison incarceration as a modern model of confinement and exploitation of racialized bodies.



reduced to the complaint of the condition in female prisons, as a kind of accessory and additional issue in the abolitionist discourse. In the chapter “How Gender Structures Prison,” Davis focuses on how the prison disciplinary model of moralization and confinement draws its origins from the experience of control and punishment which women suffered well before the invention of the prisons:

In seeking to understand this gendered difference in the perception of prisoners, it should be kept in mind that as the prison emerged and evolved as the major form of public punishment, women continued to be routinely subjected to forms of punishment that have not been acknowledged as such. (Davis 2003, 76)

Even prior to the emergence of penitentiary and punishment, hysterical, crazy and immoral women were expelled from society and confined in institutions. The cell model itself was created as a way to reproduce the confinement of the domestic environment, the place where “fallen women” (Davis 2003, 70) could be re-socialized as good wives and good mothers. The deprivation of liberty was a model that will have been extended even to men who were still granted the hope of redemption through education and religion. Similarly, harassment and violence are further models of humiliation and control experienced by women to which male prisoners are also subject. This explains why Davis emphasizes the gendered structure of prisons, and how this model, in turn, structures society as a generalizable laboratory: “Forward-looking research and organizing strategies should recognize that the deeply gendered character of punishment both reflects and further entrenches the gendered structure of larger society” (2003, 61). I will try to push this observation a little further by thinking about the prison as an institution marked by gender, especially from a binary perspective. According to Eric Stanley,

Gender normativity, understood as a series of cultural, political, legal and religious assumptions that attempt to divide our bodies into two categories (men/women), is both a product of and a producer of Prison Industrial Complex. (Stanley and Smith 2011, 6)

Orange Is the New Black has the merit of decentralizing the perspective/view on the prison system, which envisions the prisoner as a man – at best as a woman – presenting a taxonomy of the nuances of femininity and masculinity that make up the universe of genders. At the same time the TV series, through constant flashbacks that reconstruct the past of the inmates, reveals how hetero- and homo-normativity are already systems of “discipline and punishment” for nonconforming bodies and sexualities. Queer, trans*, gender nonconforming, as much as cisgender women, especially lesbians, are trapped inside the system of genders even before birth. Prospective parents ask “Is the baby a boy or a girl?”, right from the very first scan, introducing gender surveillance which will haunt a person for the rest of their lives. The ultrasound machine, in a nutshell, is already a panoptic technology aimed at disciplining the healthy and gendered body.

Captive Genders is a book by an abolitionist collective which explains through data, reflections, and accounts of personal experiences the relationship between genders and detention. It is above all an analysis of how police violence has been naturalized in order to become a form of ordinary discipline for nonconforming people. Moreover, it is a rare opportunity to tell the history of the LGBT movement not as a gradual assimilationist adjustment, based on the collaboration between state forces and queer people. In fact, prison is a place of conflict, where oppression and antagonism are manifested through clashes. The adoption of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Act against hate crimes tried to obscure the roots of hatred for all types of otherness perceived as a minority,⁶ rendering transparent the hatred that the State

⁶ “The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr., Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009, 18 U.S.C. § 249, was enacted as Division E of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010. Section 249 of Title 18 provides funding and technical assistance to state, local, and tribal jurisdictions to help them to more effectively investigate and prosecute hate crimes. It also creates a new federal criminal law which criminalizes willfully causing bodily injury (or attempting to do so with fire, firearm, or other dangerous weapon) when: (1) the crime was committed because of the actual or perceived race, color, religion, national origin of any person or (2) the crime was committed because of the actual or perceived religion, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability of any person and the crime affected interstate



exercises against minorities. This operation has allowed the construction of a Prison State, whose perimeter is wider than the prison, and where differences are produced, standardized and erased. The disciplining of gender is an important example of the relationship between State, power and the discipline of bodies (Stanley and Smith 2011).

In this dynamic, violence, even when exercised only as a threat, plays a role in social production; this violence is therefore fundamental to the order of society. Through the “construction of constitutive constraint” (Stanley and Smith 2011, xi) power produces normal bodies, which are intelligible, but at the same time it necessarily produces the abject, the unthinkable. The institution discriminates each time, creating a distinction between innocent and disciplined bodies, and guilty bodies, which can't fit into the order of heterosexuality:

In this we mean to suggest that we must pay attention to the ways that the PIC harms trans/gender-non-conforming and queer people and also to how the PIC produces the gender binary and heteronormativity itself. (Stanley and Smith 2011, 6)

By focusing on an intersectional approach with a further perspective on race, Beth Richie, in *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence and America's Prison Nation*, develops an analysis on the relation between domestic violence and state violence against women of color. Richie contributes to this analysis by explaining how the interrelation of gender and race produces bodies that deserve protection, both in society and in prison, thus reinforcing the stereotype of the ‘fallen black woman,’ ‘welfare mamas’ incapable of taking care of their children, and bodies that are worthy of sexual assault and police brutality even when they are in custody, with no chance of redemption. From this perspective the “prison nation” is not only an expression to deal with the increase in detention rates for black women since the 1960s, but it also portrays a society founded on the order of gender and race that is disciplined through the interaction and overlap of domestic violence, sexual assault, and state violence.

Teresa de Lauretis focused on the analysis of how, in practice, violence is a constitutive experience of the subject:

The very notion of a “rhetoric of violence” (...) presupposes that some order of language, some kind of discursive representation is at work not only in the concept “violence” but in the social practices of violence as well. (de Lauretis 1987, 32)

De Lauretis aims to create a further link between violence and representation. When this semiotic relationship between the rhetoric of violence and its representation is established, it becomes difficult to determine which pole of the relationship is the cause and which is the effect, because they produce continuous slippages. More specifically, in this reflection between the prison and the discipline of the sexes de Lauretis describes this relationship through the expression “violence is engendered in representation.” I will try to unpack this formula that links the issue of violence and its representation as a floating but still permanent relationship: violence is generated in the representation, where the action of generating already implies the root of gender.

In other words, representation is a violent act because it is already marked by gender. According to de Lauretis violence is inseparable from gender, even when the ideological nature of gender itself is made explicit. This is also true if we consider gender not as being immutable and essential, but as a historical and social ‘fact,’ which takes on a specific weight in cultural relations. In fact, even from a deconstructionist perspective, it is impossible to erase the violent matrix implied in the processual nature of the production of gender as a way to access power. De Lauretis's approach is noteworthy in this analysis of the prison because it operates in order to dismantle analyses of violence that, in order to be “universal” or “neutral,” are blind to differences and overlapped complexities.

or foreign commerce or occurred within federal special maritime and territorial jurisdiction.” See <https://www.justice.gov/crt/matthew-shepard-and-james-byrd-jr-hate-crimes-prevention-act-2009-0>. Last visited November 5, 2019.



Violence, in fact, is not only the difference between two power positions, but it marks the quality of a certain supremacy acting through gender differences, as well as race, religion, class or health, etc. In Foucault the technology of sex is the set of devices that serve to maximize life and maintain power without resistance. Disciplined subjects are involved in the mutual and constant process of surveillance. Therefore, sexuality is not an immanent characteristic of the body, but a product of technologies aimed to control and discipline society. De Lauretis borrows the Foucauldian notion of the technology of sex in order to rethink the notion of gender as a concept which is neither essential nor linguistic, but as the result of the representation created by social technologies: “Technologies of gender are the techniques and discursive strategies by which gender is constructed and, hence, as I argue violence is engendered” (de Lauretis 1987, 32).

Orange Is the New Black might be the point where we are able to juxtapose visibility as a disciplined structure with visibility as disciplined representation looking closer at biopower as gender discipline. In fact, the way these technologies of gender function inside the prison mirrors the same matrix of violence used to confine and order gendered bodies in society. At the same time, this violence entails a certain degree of an exceptional and explicit violence, which is embedded in representation as a technology of gendered discipline.

2. Sophia: the technology of gender behind bars

In this analysis of *Orange Is the New Black*, I concentrate on the character of Sophia Burset. She is played by Laverne Cox, who since the release of the series has increased in popularity and embraced her public role as promoter of civil rights and visibility for trans women and, especially, trans women of color. Besides this she also played an important role in her support of the public campaign for the release of Cece McDonald.⁷ Sophia is a trans black woman, not only because of her experience through genders, but also as “trans-scendental,” as bell hooks defined her in a public conversation with Laverne Cox herself at the New School College of New York.⁸ “trans-scendental” means going beyond the definition of femininity that operates in society, in prison and in feminism, beyond the rigid allocation to racial groups in prison. Sophia is in fact not affiliated with any of the tribes or families behind bars, which gather around ethnicity to provide themselves with care and protection. At first, her otherness keeps her out of clashes, but later she is involved against her will and pays for her neutrality with isolation. However, Sophia is still a mediating, pacifying character, who bestows wisdom, as reflected in the etymology of her name.

Inmate Burset’s storyline urges a complication of our analysis by interlocking different assets of power and resistance. Even if this analysis focuses mostly on her body as a trans woman, I cannot escape the complexity of her whole experience as a trans black woman in trouble because she needed money to access her transition; intersectional feminism has given us useful tools not to analyze different layers of these axes of oppression, but to understand the complexity of the interaction (Hill Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1995). I observe Sophia working, moving in space, interacting with other inmates, I re-narrate her story of resistance because it allows me to examine the notion of gender not as episteme, but as a product of intersection – and violence – of social technologies like the prison, medicine, and television. Most of her story is told in the episode *Lesbian Request Denied*, the fourth of the first season, directed by Jodie Foster.

I have argued above that the prison is a paradigm of surveillance and confinement for immoral, dangerous, abnormal bodies. Sophia shows the peculiarity of her body which lies “outside the rules”: the queer body is a specific place for the exercise of power. In prison, bodies that do not adhere to the norm are subjected to additional punishments. These penalties are arbitrary and consist of the re-assignment to the undesired gender, the duty to comply with this, the administration of hormones constantly under threat, as well as the exercise of violence by guards and other inmates (Stanley and Smith 2011).

⁷ Chrishaun “CeCe” McDonald, a 23-year-old Black transgender woman, was sentenced to 41 months in prison for second-degree manslaughter despite clear evidence of self-defense. To make matters worse, she had been forced to serve her time in a men’s prison. CeCe McDonald’s case not only represents a tragic miscarriage of justice, but also speaks of the fundamental unfairness of the criminal justice system for the Black trans community. McDonald was released in January 2014 after serving 19 months. Since her release she has been an activist and she has also contributed to the foreword of the new 2015 edition of the above-mentioned *Captive Genders* (Stanley and Smith 2011).

⁸ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oMmZIJjgY>. Last visited November 5, 2019.



Concretely, the experience of Sophia tells us that not only is prison shaped by gender, but that it shapes gender as well. Sophia explicitly personifies the fact that assignation to a gender is a constitutively violent experience, which legitimizes the exercise of power over bodies, and offers different nuances to the concept of biopower and the control it exercises both inside and outside the prison gates. Furthermore, Sophia's body is also a battleground where the techniques of discipline and the techniques and practices of resistance of a black trans woman fight. This resistance is brought to the screen violently through a grotesque exchange between Mr. Haley, petty executor of arbitrary budget cuts in the prison under privatization, and Sophia and her determination to prioritize hormones at the cost of her own life:

Mister Haley: The bottom line is that the prison can no longer provide high-end hormones.

Sophia Burset: If I don't get my medication, I'm going through withdrawal. Hot flashes, night sweats. My face will sag, my body hair will start to grow back. Let me explain this for you. When my penis was split in half and inverted, my testosterone left to replace the estrogen that you taking away from me!

MH: Okay, Okay! What do you want from me?

SB: I wanna see a doctor.

MH: You can't go to the clinic unless it is an emergency.

SB: This is an emergency.

MH: Yeah, well, we don't see it that way. Was there something else?

SB: (grabs an object from Mr. Haley's desk) Yes. (swallows it) I'd like to report an emergency.

Sophia does not accept antidepressants and continues to struggle to break the thread that binds her to a male fate. Paul B. Preciado, in his autobiographical essay on the experience of transition, *Testo Junkie*, sets the issue of hormones within the technology of gender. Hormones do not produce gender, but they open its doors. If Butler defines gender as an imitation without the original, according to Preciado hormones realize the dream to transit from one fiction to another (Preciado 2013). Estrogen is not femininity, which is an effect of social technology, but it is the vector for molecular becoming (Guattari 1996) that opens the door to unlimited narrative possibilities.

Sophia now is queuing with many other prisoners, all apparently in need of medical care. Her body is different from the others, taller, healthier, passing,⁹ beautiful (according to hegemonic standards) and yet more impatient, more exposed. She meets the prison doctor:

Doctor: Burset

Sophia: What are those? Those aren't my pills.

D: They are now. Whole prison is going generic.

S: What's the dose?

D: Point five milligrams.

S: Then that ain't enough. I need four of those.

D: I do what the chart says.

S: You can't just change my dose.

D: Talk to your counselor, okay?

Here we witness a dialectic between sciences: on the one hand, recognized, exact medical science, which refers to the prison's institutional power to justify and impose itself; on the other hand, Sophia's science, the only one who can know her project. The difference between a drug and a poison resides in the doses. Questioning what the right dose is means questioning 'hormonal justice,' or rather the expectations of

⁹ See Serano 2013.



Sophia, Cece, Chelsea,¹⁰ on what shape they want to give to their bodies and where they wish to be placed on the spectrum of genders. As Preciado writes, “We are confronted with the materiality of gender. Everything is a matter of doses, of melting and crystallization points, of the molecules, of regulatory, of milligrams, of form and mode of administration, of habit, of praxis” (2013, 142).

I look at Sophia through the mirror, “behind the screen of representation” (Irigaray 1985, 9), complicating even further the play of refraction between the Panopticon and the screen: the mirror is a further destabilizing lens, capable of opening a perspective on what is not visible, on the unconscious, the unknown or too well known (Curti 1998). It is dawn, Sophia has just come out of the shower, and no one is in the bathroom at that time, a rare moment of intimacy. She proudly caresses her hairless face. She approaches the mirror to get a better look. The mirror returns the truth, a lie, the other. As Lidia Curti states, “The opposition between the imagination and the concrete becomes unclear and mirrors other oppositions” (Curti 1998, 95). Looking for the truth of her outward appearance, Sophia finds herself looking into the eyes of her past. Laverne Cox meets her twin,¹¹ Sophia meets Marcus, a fire-fighter, a family man. Marcus looks in the mirror and sees a deepest truth and wish for the future: this truth has a female face, and with the desire to make it reality, he begins to implement various scams and gimmicks in order to cope with the transition. This is the moment when Sophia comes into the scene. Who does Sophia look at? Who is Sophia? Who is represented by and beyond the mirror? With the same words that Luce Irigaray uses for Alice underground:

No doubt this is the moment Alice ought to seize. Now is the time for her to come on stage herself with her violet, violated eyes. Blue and red. Eyes that recognize the right side, the wrong side, and the other side: the blur of deformation; the black or white of a loss of identity. Eyes always expecting appearances to alter, expecting that one will turn into the other, is already the other. (Irigaray 1985, 10)

In her essay *The Looking Glass, from the Other Side*, Irigaray introduces, in a poetic way, how the refraction into the mirror has been the core of many reflections about the relationship between representation and identity, or more in particular how to deal with the negotiation of identity and the constraints of representation with its violence. The issue of the mirror has always been a key topic to deal with for psychoanalysis, but it has also been a specific space of re-writing for feminist thinkers such as Irigaray and, more in general, a tool of empowerment in feminist practices since the early 1970s. This is the reason why it might be productive to use the mirror to look at Sophia, in the moment she is mirroring herself, troubling the idea of representation but also introducing a new point of view for feminist analysis and practice. George “Pornstache” Mendez assigns the epithet “Cyber Pussy” to her to emphasize the inauthentic, but yet erotic, nature of her femininity, and Sophia embodies throughout the series the resisting power of gender as technology. Hers is an intersectional body at the margin not only because she is black and challenges the heteronormativity of social and disciplinary expectations, but also because she is at the margin of an essentialist and universalist normative that considers femininity a biological fact (Ferrante 2019).

3. Sophia and the others: mirroring femininities

¹⁰ Chelsea Elizabeth Manning (born Bradley Edward Manning, December 17, 1987) is a United States Army soldier who was convicted by court-martial in July 2013 of violations of the Espionage Act and other offenses after disclosing to WikiLeaks nearly three-quarters of a million classified or unclassified but sensitive military and diplomatic documents. Manning was sentenced in August 2013 to 35 year-long imprisonment, with the possibility of parole in the eighth year, and to be dishonorably discharged from the Army. Manning is a transgender woman who, in a statement the day after sentencing, said she had felt female since childhood, wanted to be known as Chelsea, and desired to begin hormone replacement therapy. On January 17, 2017, President Barack Obama commuted Manning’s sentence to a total of seven years of confinement dating from the date of arrest by military authorities. Manning was released from prison in 2017 and she also contributed with an essay to the 2015 expanded second edition of the book *Captive Genders* (Stanley and Smith 2011).

¹¹ Laverne Cox’s twin brother, musician M. Lamar, plays Buset before the coming out as trans woman.



In *Female Masculinity*, Jack Halberstam (1998) analyzes movies dealing with women in prison. The stereotype that comes out of the cinematic representation seems to adhere well enough to the main plot of *Orange Is the New Black* and Piper Kerman's experience. The young, female, heterosexual and innocent protagonist, after a few days of detention, immediately ends up losing her naivety, recognizing that she is responsible for old crimes committed in a previous life, but also for planning and committing new, worse crimes. First of all she (re-)discovers herself as a lesbian. There is no redemption behind bars and her femininity seems to be something to throw away as soon as possible in order to survive.

This digression allows me to point out that femininity, which has been defined by Halberstam as a luxury and a privilege, is denied to prisoners as part of the verdict. It becomes then even more meaningful to note that Sophia, a trans woman, is the guardian of femininity within the prison walls. Sooner or later all the inmates arrive at her beauty salon. No matter what race and social position in jail one occupies, everyone at some point might benefit from Sophia Burset's services. Even Big Boo (Lea DeLaria), the butch *par excellence*, has a makeover. In order to feel ready and comfortable for any important moment The Woman, or better, any woman goes to the hairdresser's. In order to take care of herself, to see herself as "fierce," to enjoy an intimate moment and confess. Sophia, like any respectful hairdresser, then takes on the role of counsellor, psychologist, and confessor at the same time. The sequence is repeated identically in different episodes: Sophia stands behind the shoulders of the inmate who sits down to have her hair styled.

Again, the mirror has a central role: in fact, at the exact moment when their gazes meet in the large mirror, through that same mirror they meet the viewer's gaze. The border between inside and outside, self and television representation, is then shattered. The intersection of the gaze produces bonds and, at the point of convergence, identification is achieved and simultaneously demystified, so that all the parts involved can acknowledge each other (Mulvey 1975). At the same time, the very troubling nature of prison enables inmates to bond:

This confrontation and closeness between women – whether it is hostility or solidarity – shows the complexity of a relationship that in an earlier moment had seemed clear and "natural." The complexity is there, inside and outside the fiction. It also involves the relation of the women on the screen through a series of mirror images, the gaze recreates the difficult relationship to other women, in the recurrence of mothers and daughters, sisters and friends, enemies and rivals. The relation to the body becomes the relation to the self, while autobiography becomes vision and fantasy. The same as the other is known and familiar, yet at the same time hidden, mysterious, unknown, "uncanny." (Curti 1998, 71)

In front of the mirror Sophia meets herself and her other self, in front of another mirror she meets with others, but then holds out a handy mirror to other inmates and invites each woman to look again at themselves. In the fourth episode of the second season, *A Whole Other Hole*, Sophia fully expresses her "radical epistemological potential" (de Lauretis 1987, 2). After a long debate, the African American crew meets in the bathroom to come to terms with a very sensitive as well as intimate issue: how many holes have we got? While the most skeptical Taystee is closed behind the door, her companions' cheers specify "the eeny-meeny-weeny-weeny pee hole," the tiny little hole near the pee hole ... but separated ... maybe a bit inside and a bit outside ... but yes ... close to the "main coochie hole." Under the eyes of the astonished inmates, childhood skirmishes continue until Sophia enters the bathroom to give the final word: "The urethra is located between the clit and the vagina, inside the labia minora." The anatomical description is rich of appropriate detail and with a vocabulary that immediately differs from the childish language of her companions. As an experienced lesbian, Pussey asks Sophia, with great wonder, how she could be so competent. Sophia answers: "I designed one myself. Had plans drawn up and everything. I have seen some funky punamy [vulva] in my day. I'm not gonna leave that shit up to chance."

Then she gives Taystee a handy mirror and invites her to examine herself: "Here. Take a long look, honey. You'll see what I'm talking about." We are expected to look at Taystee through the small mirror, and to watch her eyes slowly changing expression, ranging from perplexity, to wonder, followed by cries of jubilation, as she sees herself for the first time. The gesture, the moment of complicity between women, the horizontal sharing of knowledge and, most of all, the mirror, all link Sophia to the tradition of the feminist practice of



“self-observation.” In the 1970s, as part of the practice of self-consciousness, women began to look at their bodies, individually and collectively, to find out what had been hidden for thousands of years in the folds of the body by social control. The Boston Women's Health Book Collective in 1971 is the most famous of these experiences, which collected their testimonies as well as practical, detailed, and clear information on the woman's body, pleasure, abortion, and pregnancy. This collective work, called *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, has been translated into different languages and has provided several generations of women around the world with the words to talk about themselves in a language that did not previously exist, except for the disciplinary discourse of medicine. That feminist experience had the merit of creating a major epistemological rupture in the 20th century, placing the female body at the center of a non-natural and political *herstory*¹².

Nevertheless, as Paul Preciado points out, feminist discourse has worked through the fragmentation of the bodies, cutting out organs, assuming peculiarities, turning them into the anatomical center of sexual difference: “Sexual difference is a technological operation of reduction that abstracts some parts from the totality of the body and isolates them to make them sexual signifiers” (Preciado 2002, 31).¹³ In Sophia's gesture of the mirror, I read a re-signification of the practice of self-observation. There is no hidden truth about sex, nothing to find, no essence to explore, because “the truth about sex is not a disclosure, it is design sex” (Preciado 2013, 35). Sophia performs a new caesura that forces us to reformulate the questions of what gender is, as it is well expressed, again, in de Lauretis's words: “But that notion of gender as sexual difference and its derivative notions – women's cultures, mothering, feminine writing, femininity, etc. – have now become a limitation” (de Lauretis 1987, 1). According to de Lauretis, posing the gender issue in terms of difference means insisting on tying feminists to the Western patriarchy paradigm, homogenizing all other kinds of difference, so that even the cultural practices of rewriting are ultimately relegated to the political unconscious theoretical framework, producing only new hegemonic narratives. The difference “constrains feminist critical thought within the conceptual frame of sex universal opposition” (de Lauretis 1987, 2). The universalism of the kind of feminism based on essentialized difference erases the difference between women and between women and the Woman. In fact, considering the woman as an archetype, various women would only represent several impersonations of the same metaphysical essence, that leaves very little to tell about the story of Sophia, of Big Boo, and of Piper Chapman. In fact, the notion of difference alone cannot explain how the subject is gen(d)erated by sexual experience.

4. Queer bodies beyond the bars

We return then, thanks to the body and to Sophia's practice, to propose a notion of gender that is neither essential nor linguistic, but a result of the technologies discussed earlier. In conclusion, it should be clearer now why gender technology is a technology of representation, but also a self-representation technology. Sophia is the eccentric subject evading the norm as well as the critique of the norm, molded through everyday struggles, subject of translations, expectations, writings and interpretation, on the border between heteronormativity and the new paradigm of homonormativity. Looking at Sophia through the screen I have tried to de-essentialize the discourse on femininity, and more in general on gender. I started this analysis asking what I am allowed to see of “queer” behind bars; now, by way of conclusion, I should ask, what am I allowed to see beyond the gender, behind bars?

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¹² It is the term to note the re-writing of *history* from a feminist perspective. The term has been largely used in academic and activists' spaces to address the obliteration of women in official history and archives.

¹³ My translation.



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