

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/deep-justice-related-thoughts-about-reality-tv>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Im going to admit two things that may make me a pop culture pariah:

1. For a long time, Orange Is the New Black the show and the book made me angry.
2. I watch all of the Real Housewives franchises. These two things are, to my surprise, related. Ill start by explaining the anger I felt at Orange Is the New Black.

When Orange Is the New Black started getting lots of attention, I was struck by the perversity of it all: millions of Americans are incarcerated right now, many for crimes far less serious, knowing, and incredibly avoidable than carrying drug money, and its only a marketable story when people realize it can happen to a pretty, white, educated woman? Viewed in a certain light, Piper Kermans story is an instance of justice being color- and class-blind a system success story, in that it demonstrates that punishment can sometimes be meted out just as harshly to a woman like her as it is daily to people of color. Increased severity is not the way most of us would hope to see the American justice system achieve racial parity, I grant you, but it is one way to go about it.

I should be clear that underneath everything, my anger is not really to do with Piper Kerman, her book, or the show. In truth, its at the privilege that makes her story at all remarkable, and at the for-whites-only compassion that makes her prison memoir a bestseller when others sail into obscurity. Its not that I dont see how her punishment was a waste. Its that I dont see how that makes her in any way special.

I will also say what I admire about Piper Kerman. I admire that she admits her guilt and does not see that as a reason to forfeit our sympathy or be viewed as less of a person. (More people should have that privilege to be, as [Bryan Stevenson puts it](#), more than the worst thing theyve ever done.) I admire that she is committing so much of her life, post-release, to attempting to extend our collective sympathy to others who are incarcerated to making us care about the stories that begin with the guilty verdict, the same place where so many other books and shows end.

This is what brings me back around to my shame: The Real Housewives. Specifically, those of New Jersey, my fair home state.

(Note: I will accept condescension only from those who have never watched a football game, a Fox show, House of Cards, or Homeland, as these are all soap operas. Otherwise, I say: you best dust that glass house youre in.)

Even if youre one of those TV is awlllful types, you may have heard or read about Teresa and Joe Giudice being sentenced to 15 and 41 months of federal prison, respectively, after pleading guilty to mortgage fraud. If youve been a regular viewer of the show, this should not be wholly unexpected; the first-season sight of Joe paying for services with piles of cash was not, to put it mildly, a confidence builder. And during the last couple of seasons as the couples prosecution has wended its way through the system this last season took place entirely between their guilty pleas and their sentencing no one has argued that they didnt do what they were accused of doing, or that this came out of nowhere. Everyone is confident they did what they were accused of. No one approves of it. But still on a show not exactly known for restraint and dignity people are acknowledging this as a family tragedy.

Instead of the usual sideshow, what weve seen is the slow sinking in of a much more terrible reality than is usually broadcast on Bravo. This ludicrous show where the cast members scream, lie, scream some more, pull hair, occasionally upend tables, and pretty much always reinforce anti-Italian stereotypes Ive cringed at for a lifetime is taking viewers inside the stress and strain of waiting for the hammer to fall.

I think, in doing that, its doing something that Orange Is the New Black also does: making more privileged, white people care about the guilty. Even if its for terrible reasons the guilty now look more like them its happening. And I think that could be meaningful, especially if they are pushed to make the next step, to see that being separated from your kids (even when youve done something wrong) isnt any easier when you weren't raised to think this could never happen to you.

A lot of people care about what happens to the innocent. Thats natural, but its also easy. Its harder to make people care about what happens to the guilty, but its more important; they are the systems purpose. We have to care about what happens when the system works, not just what happens when it fails.

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