

Sophia Burset: Thinking Outside the SHU

August Miguez

Professor Katharine Kittredge

Transgender characters are rare in any form of mainstream media, narrowing even further with respect to transgender women, and yet further again for transgender women of color. Sophia Burset, from *Orange is the New Black*, is notable first because of her existence as a black transwoman of color, but more so due to her character arc as relating to the common abuse of transgender prisoners. The show first aired in 2013 and is continuing with its fifth season this June, and is based off of a memoir by Piper Kerman, which was then adapted for television by Jenji Kohan. The show focuses on the lives and interactions of prisoners at a fictional penitentiary center in New York, and has a main cast of nearly twenty women. Sophia Burset is a woman charged with credit card fraud accumulated through high cost of procedures done as a part of her transition. She is a proud, feminine woman who works in the prison salon, and is an exemplary model of female confidence and compassion despite some of the worst situations possible. In addition, as a transwoman, she faces discrimination displayed by fellow inmates, prison guards, and even the prison system itself, in the form of indefinite solitary confinement for her 'protection' and denial of medical treatment. She faces maltreatment and the negative consequences of prolonged solitary confinement. Despite this, she is a strong-willed woman and protests against her confinement by flooding and setting fire to her cell, as well as cutting her own wrists, and eventually returns to the prison. In Sophia's absence, her salon was vandalized, her image as a friendly face was defiled, and hate speech was scrawled on the walls and fixtures of the prison. Despite her caring and positive nature, she is vilified by many other characters, and the strength of her character is partly diminished as she is often swept to the side in favor of less

interesting and less powerful story arcs. The most recent season ends with no clear resolution for her situation, but has sparked much controversy and deeper discussion among critics because of the revelation of the underlying transphobia in the prison system, even when a transgender person is placed in the system aligning with their gender. There is immense significance to her character, especially as her actress, Laverne Cox, was the first transgender person nominated for an Emmy and has been widely publicized as a strong advocate for transgender rights. Despite the flaws in her presence and portrayal in the show, Sophia Burset is one of few main-cast transwomen characters of color in pop culture, and has inspired many other media stations to create or integrate transgender characters and storylines in their works. Positive representation of transgender characters in media is extremely important to giving a voice and a platform of creative expression to transgender artists, as well as being a source of inspiration, confidence, and hope for transgender people who previously could not see themselves as desirable parts of society.