



PERFORMING THE BLUES: ILLUMINATING HOW COLOR SCHEMES RELATE TO DETENTION, GENDER, AND MIGRATION IN *SUPERSTORE* AND *THE INFILTRATORS*

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In November 2015, the television sitcom *Superstore* debuted on the NBC network and quickly gained popularity, running for six seasons until March 2021. Showcasing the talented actress America Ferrera, this comedic show brought together a diverse group of actors for a cast that NBC has called “a unique family of employees that work at Cloud 9, a super-sized megastore” (NBC.com). Much like the “supersized” fries formerly sold at McDonalds restaurants, Cloud 9 resembles the enormous hypermarket or big box stores. Created by Justin Spitzer, who is known for his work on *The Office*, the television program *Superstore* depicts humorous situations where America Ferrera’s character plays the lead in the show’s storytelling. Along with acting, Ferrera has also worked as a producer for the popular sitcom, which addresses a bevy of serious topics including problems created by racism, sexism, and the detention of undocumented migrants. These serious and timely topics are packaged in stylistically noteworthy ways, including the use of a blue color scheme that appears in the fictional store’s branding. This creates a televisual world that is saturated in *blue*. The color is nearly inescapable. As a nod to the branding of its counterpart Walmart, which also uses the color blue in several ways, *Superstore*’s creators ostensibly use blue to bring into focus the real social dimensions of U.S. capitalist enterprise and its unsavory implications.

The fictional company’s frequent use of blue becomes the visual representation of a powerful corporate employer and a rather constraining social environment, where employees feel a dearth of self-determination. To a



similar extent, a set of filmmakers from this same era—Cristina Ibarra and Alex Rivera—make use of the color orange (and similar hues) in their innovative 2019 film *The Infiltrators*, which comments upon the detention of migrants in Florida specifically as well as the United States of America more broadly. A mix of documentary and performance, this film takes viewers behind closed doors and illuminates the heartbreaking struggles of real human beings, who are migrants in America. As in the case above, the film’s orange hues are interpreted here in terms of their inescapable presence and their association with the emotional “blues” that come with being incarcerated by both the U.S. government and a corporation that profits from separating people from their families. In this way, the creators utilize color as a stylistic strategy to enact an eye-catching set of performances that bring attention to silenced lives. Through this approach, the creators use color to create a commentary on the constricting roles that migrants experience in migrants experience constricting roles in daily life and the attainment of the American Dream.

Employing a comparative approach, this article examines how *Superstore* and *The Infiltrators* connect the controversial phenomena of the U.S. detention system to public acts of consumption and performances of ethnic and gender identity. Instead of attaining their ideals, viewers will observe the stories’ figures experiencing frustration and tension in the on-screen performances of public life. As this study explains, the colors of blue and orange mirror and enhance the storytelling’s thematic dimensions. Scholars in Performance Studies and Ethnic Studies frequently examine how the notion of selfhood relates to one’s society whether it is one’s culture or the public. Performance Studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz has theorized how queer Latinx people enact “disidentification” with dominant cultural views at times (Muñoz 1999, x). He explains there is a sense of connecting and disconnecting that takes place between minoritized individuals and a nation-state. The employees’ blue uniforms in *Superstore* exemplify this connection and disconnection to the corporation, which is the larger entity like the U.S. nation-state. Although they may wear the blue uniform, their demeanor and countenance reveal their disidentification (and dissatisfaction) with the corporate entity. Wrapped up in the color blue, the workers become a part of the blue tinted salesfloor and stockroom comprising the show’s mise-en-scène. These uniforms make the workers appear integrated into the blandly blue landscape and brand they sell, however the workers’ candid performances on screen tell us another story.

To better understand this blue strategy, there is a benefit to considering the historical origins of the color’s popularity and widespread usage. Notably, the historian Michel Pastoureau offers an extensive critical history of the color, in which he hypothesizes the color’s connotations, etymology, and symbology. As



he illustrates, a certain set of blue hues have been associated with significant historical figures who have had considerable influence and prominence in western society. In his assessment, Pastoureau historicizes the color in the context of the Christian figure, the Blessed Virgin Mary. He explains:

“her blue tended to become brighter and more appealing, reflecting the influence of the ‘chromophile’ theologians and church builders. Glaziers and illuminators of the early and mid-twelfth century made the blue of the Virgin’s robes brighter and clearer, because this luminosity was a form of divine illumination.” (Pastoureau 2001, 51)

This luminous depiction of blue clothing is visible within Church frescoes and oil paintings, thus instantiating the notion that blue is the color of the sacred and the divine. Of course, the cultural associations with the color blue have varied greatly across time and culture. For instance, more recently the color blue has been adopted for the purpose of creating uniforms for law enforcement agencies, security teams, militaries as well as workers such as “blue-collar jobs,” which signals a set of ideas that befit a television show about laborers at a fictional superstore.

While the exact hue of the *Cloud 9* workers’ uniforms has varied from a darker royal blue to a lighter cerulean color, the color is repeatedly shown again and again in the set’s walls, signage, binders, and décor, which creates an almost omnipresent effect—as if it were inescapable and saturating everything. In contrast, during season 2’s episode 2, the workers stage a strike in protest of an employee being fired. The character Jonah (played by Ben Feldman) designs a shirt that reads as “Boycott Cloud 9,” which is shown in a bright red-orange color. This strike and the energy behind it continue to appear in a few forms during the show’s seasons, leading the corporation to make efforts to squash it. In another episode, ironically titled “Employee Appreciation Day,” undocumented workers are dramatically removed from the workplace. A manager named Jeff (Michael Bunin) mentions that the corporation has spurred the U.S. government to remove undocumented people from the company. In this moment and others, an ambitious gay Filipinx worker named Mateo Liwanag (played by Nico Santos), feels targeted and imperiled because he is an undocumented worker who lacks the rights of citizens. Due to the corporation’s animus towards the undocumented and figures seen as agitators, Mateo is targeted, exacerbating the existing stresses that some queer people already face (Hardin & Hall 2001, 2). This stressful situation becomes a key part of the story’s focus when a large group of officers from the United States Immigration



and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.) descend upon this Cloud 9 store in the midwestern city of St. Louis, Missouri.

As Mateo is driven away in a Homeland Security van, he is shown sitting behind a metal grill divider that separates the camera (and driver) from the now incarcerated Mateo. This decidedly disturbing moment leaves Mateo's coworkers in a state of anguish as the entire staff watches Mateo leave the parking lot in the darkly tinted van. This moment unfurled after a set of episodes in which Mateo's undocumented status was explored. Conversations with coworkers included one moment where a main character, a heterosexual white male named Jonah, offers to marry Mateo so he can receive a green card. Mateo acts disgusted by the prospect of feigning a marriage with Jonah, who is emasculatingly labeled 'the pretty one.'" Jonah's offer to marry Mateo is emblematic of his desire to be a more "woke" and progressive male figure. His other socially conscious efforts include his interest in starting a union. Instead of embodying the traditional idea of rugged individualism, which is often associated with American manhood, Jonah's character embodies the ideology of "new masculinity" (Caplan-Bricker, 2019, NP). The social ideology of new masculinity involves being more inclusive, sensitive, and open-minded to a range of ideas beyond the so-called normative performances of gender. In contrast with traditional notions of gender, Jonah and Mateo resist the ingrained cultural norms of gender for personal reasons. Jonah wishes to show his more sensitive side for the sake of attracting women, while Mateo lives more honestly as an "out" gay person. However, in both characters, the creators twist this performative approach to a markedly comedic effect, thus interweaving sociopolitical alternatives with an entertaining sendup.



Figure 1. Mateo (played by Nico Santos) is removed from the store by I.C.E.



Along with Jonah's offer, Mateo has the support of his supervisor, a Latina woman named Amy Sosa (America Ferrera). In studying the role of Sosa more closely, fans may recall that American Ferrera is the daughter of Honduran American immigrants, who once sought the American Dream much like the character of Mateo. Ultimately, Ferrera's character Amy sides with Mateo and tries to create a distraction by urging her workers to call up friends and get them to fill the store, thus making it difficult for the I.C.E. agents to target Mateo. In this key moment, Mateo sheds his blue store uniform so he can blend in with the consumers in the store, his disguise is little help. The I.C.E. agents have seen a photograph of him, thus allowing them to track him. As Mateo tries to escape, another worker named Dina (played by Lauren Ash), speaks over the walkie system and says "I'll get you out of there," thus helping Amy as she tries to guide Mateo out of the store before I.C.E. can capture him. Even with Dina's supportive words and guidance, the sizable number of I.C.E. officers make it impossible for Mateo to escape from the store and incredible number of I.C.E. officers.

Trapped amid the raid, Mateo submits to being captured despite being encouraged to climb into a vent by his friend Cheyenne (played by Nikole Sakura). Mateo responds, "It's okay. It's over," which signals he is giving up his escape effort, despite having the store's employees largely unified on his side. In part, this capture is reminiscent of other moments in the show's history where the store's system is shown to have automatic locking mechanisms that accidentally trap the staff in the store. A powerful blizzard also once trapped the staff in the store, preventing them from leaving. Similarly, the Cloud 9 company financially traps employees by paying them rather low wage and denying them opportunities for advancement. These labor conditions have fostered feelings of being trapped in a store with little sense of hope, and an unclear sense of futurity. This same pattern of inescapability is conveyed in the lighting, clothes, and marketing of the film *The Infiltrators*. In this case, the very visible color orange is present in a myriad of scenes. Although some may positively associate the color orange with the delicious eponymous fruit, it is also associated with a less savory set of circumstances such as public warnings of danger, fire, intense storms, and other major hazards.



Figure 2. Marco and Claudio in *The Infiltrators*.

Highlighting the stories of multiple people detained in the detention facility, *The Infiltrators* illuminates how a small team of dedicated activists from the National Immigrant Youth Alliance collaborate innovatively. In the visual storytelling of *The Infiltrators*, viewers are treated to a mix of reenactments and documentary footage, which leads the film's spectators to be immersed within the migrants' struggles. In *The Infiltrators*, the most noticeable presence of the color orange is the jumpsuits worn by the detainees, who are forced to wear the color like many other real prisoners. Due to Netflix's comedic television series *Orange is the New Black*, life in prison has come to be associated with bright orange jumpsuits, even though the clothing used in prisons has varied considerably over time. In historical terms, the color orange has been shown in appetizing forms such as Vincent van Gogh's set of paintings of oranges. The scholar David Scott Kastan explains how Van Gogh's paintings of oranges exhibit a "glowing" appearance that causes them to be exceedingly eye-catching (Kastan 2018, 50). In the case of *The Infiltrators*, the orange jumpsuits make the prisoners easier to observe on surveillance cameras and target in the event of escapes, however the color also fosters a sense of social unity among the detainees in the film. This unity stands in contrast to the prison guards' watchful eyes. As the film progresses, viewers see a young character named Marco (Maynor Alvarado) who becomes detained through his intentional effort to infiltrate this U.S. detention prison in Florida. As a soft-spoken and shorter male, Marco attracts little attention from the guards. This allows him to gain access to detainees on the inside such as Claudio (Manuel Uriza). There, he can help Claudio and the rest of the detainees to organize themselves, gain greater attention from the media, and ultimately stage a hunger strike. Through this collaborative effort, the team courageously stages campaigns to liberate migrants, who face a highly uncertain future and disturbingly depressing set



of circumstances. To shine a light on “the blues” the detainees face, the film’s creators use bright colors such as the hue of orange to cast a bright light upon the system in which people are being unjustly detained.

In several of the film’s scenes, the color orange is displayed in provocative ways. The film’s intentional lighting scheme, for example, exhibits a discernible pattern. During a set of more intense re-enactments in the film, the scenes are mediated through an orangey filter, thus extending the prevalence of orange shown in the detainees’ jumpsuits in the detention center. This lighting is visible in notable scenes like the moment when an organizer named Viri impersonates a desperate migrant who wishes to be deported, and she explains, “I can compare it to a theater play.” Along with this narration in the documentary footage, viewers are treated to a performance, whereby we see the actress Chelsea Rendon play Viri. In this moment, Viri gains access to the detainee population inside the detention center, thereby assisting the prisoners and helping them organize against the detention center. Shown in an orangey color, this reenacted moment illuminates the strategy, yet it is an anxiety-inducing memory. This orangey filter is also observable in a second scene where a migrant named Beni refuses to get on a plane for deportation. Likewise lit in an orangey color, this tense moment is a performed reenactment that allows us to see what migrants have suffered in their pursuit of the American Dream. The use of this filter helps us to see through the eyes of the detainees, enabling us to visualize how many migrants often are relegated to a grim existence in America; where one’s undocumented status can lead to a dire set of dynamics involving heightened anxiety, depression, vulnerability, and limitations.



Figure 3. Amy (played by America Ferrera) selling products in Superstore.



In contradistinction, *Superstore* shows the company's customers consuming comestibles and trying a slew of products on the store's salesfloor before paying for them, thereby suggesting that Americans are indulgent consumers that will use products without regard for propriety. In a number of episodes such as "The Color Wars" in season 1, the characters attempt to outsell each other for the purpose of gaining a bonus. Amy tries to sell a sizable number of Minion products to a young African American boy while she wears a golden yellow shirt. Although she usually wears blue, in this episode the workers are assigned to teams, and each team has its own color. Amy is shown next to a wall that is replete with the merchandise of Minions, the intelligent and obedient creatures from the exceedingly popular film franchise that began with *Despicable Me* (2010). These yellowy creatures are the henchmen of the film's villainous figure, and by wearing this yellowy shirt, Amy matches the merchandise, resembling the store's own Minion. Although this product placement is never questioned directly, Amy and Jonah reflect on this consumerism later when Amy's husband attempts to buy a grill that Jonah sells to him. Jonah's actions are brushed aside by Amy later, and his lack of enthusiasm is overlooked. In contrast, the undocumented figure of Mateo is shown to be a dedicated worker who advances the company's consumeristic goals, yet he is later cast as a problematic figure by corporate due to his undocumented status. Although traditionalists have (mis)labeled migrants as being a drain on the U.S. welfare system and its services, this accusation largely has remained a misleading assertion that generalizes about thousands, thus overlooking a more complex picture.

Within *The Infiltrators*, the concept of consumption is portrayed differently as the detainees enact a hunger strike to resist the system. Self-denials like these protests have a long history in the United States, as in the case of Cesar Chavez's participation in the hunger strikes of the late 20th century (Editors 1988, 26). Such denials mirror efforts like boycotts and the "Buy Nothing" movement, whereby the socially conscious segments of society show resistance to the ostensibly ubiquitous "commodity culture" that has been critiqued and theorized by such scholars as Kyla Wazana Tompkins (Tompkins 2012, 158). In her study, Tompkins calls attention to the implicit "magic" in both consuming food and buying goods, yet such magic is from time to time refuted in these pieces where the characters feel forced to eat in undesirable places including a coworker's party in *Superstore* and the prison's cafeteria in *The Infiltrators*. As such, the narratives call attention to how the consumption of products, resources, and food are imbricated with ideologies of citizenship and nationhood. Although consumption is a normalized practice, these visual narratives' compelling performances suggest that there are certain *proper ways*



of consuming that exclude migrants and refugees. In *Superstore*, this notion is suggested by customers and employees who use products bizarrely on the salesfloor with impunity, while the professional Mateo is deemed a threat by I.C.E. In being seen as an outsider, Mateo is understood as being problematic and thus unable to continue working in the consumeristic store—until Mateo is granted a reprieve from doing time in the orange jumpsuit too. These visual narratives create engaging stories that encourage us to question dominant practices that attempt to marginalize people. If we take a cue from the scholar Patrick Johnson, we can ponder how the acts of performance and spectatorship can help to dismantle sociopolitical constraints and rethink assumptions (Johnson 2014, NP). Through such performances, we can simulate ways of thinking beyond the limited systems in which we exist, and thus begin to design a way out of the narrowmindedness that hurts undocumented migrants.

In these eye-catching visual narratives, the actors' performances lead viewers to revisit injustices of the past that have been downplayed or overlooked by a plethora of figures. The emotional and social struggles known as "the blues," which are experienced by many migrants in America are seldom discussed openly in public forums such as the mainstream media. *Superstore* and *The Infiltrators* do the difficult work of exploring this matter and opening hearts and minds, even as much more work remains to be done. Therefore, these acts help spectators to consider their own relationality to the systems that silence migrants, who often are regarded as non-white invaders and remain the largest population of people in detention centers. In effect, they encourage viewers to empathize with vulnerable cultural groups and join in the resistance against the deleterious forces of the white supremacist state that oppresses brown and black peoples. In this resistance, these narratives innovatively use the color schemes of blue and orange to call attention to the dominant culture's anxiety over difference in the contexts of daily life, employment, and border-crossing. In so doing, these visual performances comment on socio-political dynamics of intersectionality including the ways in which homophobia, sexism, and racism collude to create unjust institutional systems. These performative pieces advance the process of fostering dialogue and creating new coalitions to contest the inhumane treatment of undocumented migrants, who play highly important roles across the broader U.S. sociopolitical landscape.



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