

The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

College of Communications

**THE (UN)REAL HOUSEWIVES OF ATLANTA:**

**A POST-FEMINIST, POST-RACIAL TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF REALITY TV'S FAVORITE**

**HOUSEWIVES**

A Thesis in

Media Studies

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

December 2017

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## ABSTRACT

Reality Television (rTV) has become a staple of network and cable television with images claiming to be of *real events, people, and situations*. While this content widely constructs stereotypical images of women, it is also helping to develop the problematic representation of a quickly growing new genre of rTV, one that features *housewives*. From *basketball wives* to *hip-hop wives* – ‘housewife’ series have proved popular and profitable. Using Bravo Network’s commercially successful *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* as a case study, this thesis explores the formation of the Black housewife. Here, I conduct a textual analysis of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* to explore the post-racial and post-feminist building blocks used to create Bravo’s take on the popular housewife image. Bravo’s successful *The Real Housewives* series documents the lifestyles of several sets of housewives from different cities/states across the United States. Of the seven different casts in this series, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (RHOA) is the first one to feature Black women, as well as showcase a majority African-American cast. RHOA is an important case study as it reinforces and challenges the normality of the exploitation of the Black woman in media in return for ratings. Though stereotypical portrayals of women of color are all-too-familiar within mainstream television, RHOA is different because this specific cast, still riddled with racist and sexist stereotypes, is Bravo’s *Real Housewives* series ratings frontrunner. Thus, this study contributes to media studies research on race and gender. **The Real Housewives of Atlanta** reflects post-racist and post-feminist ideology, specifically through the show’s character development of the ‘housewife’ and its purported attempt to represent “reality” on television.

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## Acknowledgments

### **To My Thesis Advisor & Mentor, Dr. Michelle Rodino-Colocino:**

If you didn't know you were an *Angel* ... you are. Thank you for always believing in my talent and me. I am forever thankful for the endless encouragement and academic guidance during this journey.

### **To My Committee - Dr. Michelle Rodino-Colocino, Dr. Matthew McAllister, & Dr. Jo Dumas:**

Thank You, Thank You. Thank You. I am forever grateful for your direction and support throughout this process. Your insight, contributions, and kindness are truly unparalleled.

### **To My Dean, Dr. Marie Hardin:**

Thank you for being a true leader. I will forever appreciate your genuineness, support, and generosity. It is an honor to be a part of the College of Communications family.

### **To Dr. Jeanne Hall:**

You will never be forgotten. Thank you for sharing your light with me. Posthumously, I pray I have made you proud.

### **To My Mother, Blossom:**

*"It's been a long, long, long time!"* I am so happy I could finally bring *this smile* to your face. Thank you for every single prayer, my love. God Knows I needed each and every one.

### **To My Sisters, Antoinette & Sharia:**

*Sisterssss!* You know what time it is!! Listen-I appreciate every annoying, loving, sincere boss nudge. Thank you both for *always* keeping me honest.

### **To My Family & Friends:**

Know this was no easy task and far from possible with out your genuine *Love* and *Positivity*. I thank the Lord for shinning through each of you, especially when I needed it the most. Thank You!

*I dedicate this to mi daddy,*

*Lemuel Stewart.*

*\*\**

*Yessah'.... Mi reach!!!*

*\*huge Daddy grin\**

*And I am here...*

*Only because of You!*

***XO,***

***Daddy's Girl***

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION: *HONEY, I'M HOME...?*

---

The 'housewife' has long been a figure representing the ideal home. In the past three decades reality television (rTV), unscripted entertainment television that often follows the lives of seemingly ordinary people (who are often not trained, unionized actors), has further developed this traditional cultural figure. The rTV genre is a prominent one in modern US television. In 2017, at least 320 different rTV programs populated the television landscape, especially on basic cable channels (Kendall and Raffle-Wax, 2017). Of course, TV producers do not provide a *mirror* reflection for the audiences of prime time rTV, but instead, rTV producers construct a *manipulated* creation of who they *think* will attract audiences and advertisers. The depiction of the housewife in rTV receives no special treatment in this regard.

Common in rTV are aesthetically pleasing depictions of the "truth". What could make for better rTV? The perpetual displays of luxurious living, an irresistibly intense cast, as well as the engaging, semi-filtered drama are just a few of rTVs many features. The framework is no different when it comes to one of the most successful programs in rTV, **The Real Housewives of Atlanta** (RHOA). A combination of the show's diversity and unparalleled network viewership of the already widely popular *Real Housewives* franchise makes this series a worthy object of scholarly study. The following thesis is most interested in how the character development of the "housewife" in *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* represents aspects of post-racism and post-feminism.



## Theoretical Framework

Race and gender issues have longed plagued women of color in media. In fact, distorted portrayals of African-American women are prevalent and often steeped in misogynist stereotypes, including being noted as vain, ignorant, and materialistic. This thesis engages with the voices of leading critical race and feminist scholars who have debated the significance of claims that we are living in a post-racial and post-feminist society, including Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2015), bell hooks (1992), Michelle Alexander (2012), Rosalind Gill (2007), and Amartya Sen (2006). By advancing a discussion of how a popular rTV as RHOA highlights common issues of racism and anti-feminism, I call for change in the stereotypical portrayals of women in popular culture, specifically women of color. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, in its ninth season as of 2017, *could have* constructed plots and images that advanced racial harmony and gender equality, but it did not. Instead the show glorifies new post-racial and post-feminist values but also reinforces old stereotypes about Black women.

In RHOA, these contradictions appear widely in racial stereotyping, popular within the makeup of rTVs across cable networks. Though popular among audiences, shows like RHOA that feature a predominately Black female cast reiterate these stereotypes. The reusable model of stereotypes, dating back to the era of legal chattel slavery in the US, with the subordinate “*Mammy*” figure to the super-sexualized “*Jezebel*” (Collins, 2000) to the modern day “*Angry Black Woman*”, has helped to construct misogynist media portrayals of Black women (especially as mothers) for decades. These negative portrayals, specifically of Black women, are

inconsistent with claims that we are living in a post-racial, colorblind society. More specifically, colorblindness is how media presents raced issues or concerns regarding race to society; it proposes an absence of race, which in theory would give way to an overall absence of race issues, which ultimately creates a *major* race issue.

Society today promotes the argument that we have reached “beyond race” – that systems of racial inequalities and oppression are no longer a major concern and racism is no longer “visible” in a post-racial America. Colorblindness, the core value of a post-racial society, presents a harmonious environment where race is no longer topic of discussion in the political, social, or economical landscapes of society.

Prolific race theorist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2015), who applies the notion of such post-racial harmony, contends that structural racial inequality is still present and labels the new era instead the “new racism” (p. 5) He further explains:

...We lack a place to pin these new developments as we can no longer legitimately claim we live in Jim Crow America. This means that we lack a claim about the existence of a racial regime in post-Civil Rights America that is responsible for the prevailing racial ideology and practices. (Bonilla-Silva 2015, p. 5)

Fellow race scholar, Michelle Alexander (2012), in her book *The New Jim Crow*, echoes Bonilla-Silva when she expresses her stance on the post-racial front.

Alexander agrees that much has not changed since the end of the Jim Crow era besides the language:

In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social

contempt... we [now instead] use our criminal justice system to label people of color “criminals” and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind. (Alexander, 2012, p. 2)

These notions of colorblindness and post-racial functions also align with Amartya Sen’s early racial inclusive stance in his book *Identity and Violence* (Sen, 2006). When discussing social competition among civilization, recognizing that the range of identities are numerous, Sen argues that the presence of one identity does not disqualify the significance of another. Sen contends that learning to identify with others is ultimately crucial to living. His concept “*identity disregard*” means “ignoring, or neglecting altogether, the influence of any sense of identity with others, on what we value and how we behave”(p. 20). Sen notes that one who exhibits identity disregard neglects all others a fallacy that leads to greater social problems. As Sen further explains, identity is not personal, but is a social activity. Identity disregard and colorblindness intertwine as they both exhibit a system of dismissal - where colorblindness dismisses race and identity disregard dismisses all others in general. Both concepts, together and separately, devalue the social importance of race and identity.

Incorporating the above frameworks into this study will help to critique the presence of RHOA in a post-racial and post-feminist arena.

**Now Introducing: *The Women of The Real Housewives of Atlanta***

*The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (RHOA) edition is the first of its kind to feature women of color, as well as showcase a majority African-American cast. Because RHOA is the first majority black female cast in the franchise, it is important to understand its place in cable TV's wider attempts to mobilize blackness to produce other markets for programming. In a panoramic view, "blackness" is a vital element for cable channels and how they draw viewers, not only African-American viewers, but large, "predominantly white audiences" (Fuller, 2010, p. 287). Given the stereotypical portrayals of the African-American women, RHOA is just one example of media that reinforce social inequality. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* continues to produce the highest ratings among the eight other editions within *The Real Housewives* franchise, which include Miami, Orange County, Beverly Hills, D.C., New York, New Jersey, Potomac, and Dallas. This RHOA recent season premiere (season 9), garnering 2.59 million viewers, helped "the series extend its lead as the highest-rated 'Housewives' series" (Asante, 2016, p. 1). Also significant in the network's overall rating history, RHOA's season 7 premiere achieved the record of "Bravo's highest-rated season premiere in the network's more than 30-year history" (Patten, 2017, p. 1). In terms of the modern day televisual construction of the 'housewife', RHOA portrays an all too familiar, yet distorted image, which I find intriguing, given the show's undeniable success to date. How does RHOA manage to garner such success on the premises of stereotypes, directly influenced by post-racial and post-feminist views? Specifically, why are women of color a constant source of mockery and exploitation? The RHOA cast, when juxtaposed against its counterparts,

highlights the very issues rooted in post-racial and post-feminist culture, with the outcomes deemed profitable.

**Justification for the Study: *Why The Real Housewives of Atlanta?***

Within today's popular culture, media often sacrifice authenticity for theatrics, thus trading sincerity for sensationalism. The stereotypes used to construct the RHOA can have an internalized effect on how people, including African Americans, perceive African Americans in general, Dixon explains:

The media may act as a sociocultural agent or source of stereotypical information about African Americans (Hamilton, Stroessner, & Driscoll, 1994). We might view the media as a source of social learning that essentially teaches and reinforces certain ideas about Blacks (Dixon, 2000, p. 3).

This study sets out to explore how RHOA draws on stereotypes and dramatization of Black women to represent "Black housewives". I focus my textual analysis on the debut episodes of Season One, as the first seasons of TV shows establish the basic premises of the program and prime viewers for what to expect; they introduce characters and narrative themes to audiences. I choose Season One because of the newness and rawness of the character portrayal and the show's particular diverse impact on the franchise's already controversial presence. Thus, the first season allows me to highlight controversial identities that the RHOA cast display season after to season to its loyal audience. Furthermore, I demonstrate how the show serves as an agent to post-racist and post-feminist ideologies, specifically through the show's character development of the "Black housewife".

Primarily, the significance of studying the RHOA is because it actually acts as a contradiction to its post-racial and post-feminist efforts. With the presence of an African-American female dominant cast in a white female dominant series signals a move forward towards racial equality/exposure - given the special spotlight on wealthy black women - new to the rTV sector. However, the RHOA, stereotypically constructed, only reiterates an anti-feminist and racist discourse. RHOA also exhibits imagery grounded in the ideals of commodification and objectification. My *main research question* is: how does RHOA's construction of the 'Black housewife' also cater to the innate dysfunctions of post-racism and post-feminism?

### **Literature Review Preview: *Understanding The 'Black Housewife'***

This study will discuss elements that constitute the media interpretation of the "Black housewife", using Bravo's commercially successful *Real Housewives* franchise. Specifically, I analyze how producers of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* portray African-American women in their construction of an ideal Black housewife. I examine the uses of dramatization, gender inequalities, and racial stereotypes to illuminate how Black housewives are portrayed. As I show below, the stereotypical depiction of women of color in media is far from a new phenomenon. Literature has shown that early television portrayal of black women offered a reusable model throughout the medium's history.

Although little scholarly attention has been given to "Black housewives" exclusively, the exceptions have proved fruitful. Among such studies, those that foreground intersectionality are most useful to my analysis. Intersectionality Theory examines the intersections of social factors that construct one's identity, such as race,

class, and gender. Intersectionality has been a valuable contribution to both critical race and feminist research. Critical race scholar Kimberlee Crenshaw created the term in 1989, and gained prominence once integrated with Patricia Hills Collins' Black Feminist research. Thus, incorporating intersectionality into this study provides a way to better deconstruct the stereotypical images of the RHOA.

The reusable model of stereotypes used for women of color, specifically African-American women, will be examined, with the assistance of Intersectionality. Applying this theory to will help to better understand the images portrayed in RHOA and how those images create inconsistencies within its post-feminist and post-racial environment. Here, one scholar notes stereotypes popularity in her study of African American women in popular Black reality shows,

Stereotypes of African American women abound in shows like *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, which features a predominantly African American, female cast and is the most successful show in Bravo TV's history, drawing in four million viewers each week, according to Bravo TV" (Reid, 2013, p. 2).

Stereotypes, as Reid notes, are a lucrative advantage within the rTV industry. The successful viewership alone of the these images of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta's* creates a valid discussion of its role in popular culture and its impact on post-feminist and post-racial discourse.

In terms of televisual production, stereotypes provide popular "scripts" when it comes to African-American characters. RHOA is replete with such scripts. The women's most basic interactions are carefully sketched and prompted to be melodramatic, alarming, and, in most cases, highly offensive- which is how the

nature of constructed, made-for-TV programming is understood. Consequently, the scripted post-feminist and post-racial moments within RHOA should be accepted as the industry's attempt to be *compelling* and *inclusive*.

**Method of Analysis: Deconstructing The Black Housewife**

To get at how housewives are represented on RHOA, I conduct a critical textual analysis attentive to the intersection of race, gender, and class. A critical textual analysis allows for any content to be 'read' as text, thus allowing the *interpretations* of the text to be used as elements to be examined (McKee, 2001). It is an interpretive stance opposed to an objectivist approach to analyzing and understanding media content. This qualitative method of analysis is based on the methodological strategy of deconstruction and the "radical questioning of underlying assumptions of a text by exposing internal inconsistencies" (Fürsich, 2009, p. 241). This methodology, one favored among cultural studies, allows the researcher "to discern latent meaning, but also implicit patterns, assumptions, and omissions of a text" (Fürsich, p. 241).

A textual analysis of RHOA will be most useful when analyzing the housewives' reactive monologues, better known as "confessionals". Confessionals are moments where the individual cast members discuss scenes being shown while looking directly into the camera. Here, they are reflective of their own feelings and thought processes of the scene in question. Incorporated in most rTVs, confessionals are a popular tool of communication in any reality series. This technique gives cast members a moment with the viewer- a one-on-one; it acts as a visual journal, that



also, sometimes, intercut with the current scene (Mittell, 2010). Dialogue and monologues (including confessionals) serve as valuable areas for analysis as the two are key stylistic techniques and can often make explicit or reinforce implied meanings in other segments of a program or reveal character's motivations and personality. Although it is said to be 'unscripted', reality television is heavily edited. "Unscripted dialogue, such as ones found in reality programming," as Mittell argues, "is often edited to follow patterns of scripted dialogue to maximize clarity and flow between participants" (Mittell, 2010). Thus, because editing decisions are key to reality TV's presentation of dialogue and ultimately, of character development, my textual analysis pays special attention to such decisions.

### **Procedure Preview**

In this study, the construction of the RHOA women and overall themes of Season One served as the examined "text." I attended to the construction of the women's personas, their interactions with each other and other non-housewives, their confessionals, and several other televisual factors.

Once I reviewed the 8 episodes, I determined what messages to viewers were prevalent and resounding throughout the season. I questioned each episode, asking:

- *How does the episode negotiate identity?*
- *How does the episode's images characterize the women, especially as women of color?*
- *How does the show develop their identity through a post racial/feminism culture?*

Questioning each episode allowed me to develop central themes found in RHOA, which were rooted in misogyny and riddled with racially charged stereotypes. I then documented the instances within each episode that correlated to my list of identified themes. My recordings contained special focus to several aspects of production of the series, which included reviews of central plots, individual and group notes on actions and reactions (both verbal and non-verbal), and relevant direct quotes of each housewife. These recordings, in return, provided me with the fundamentals for a discussion of how RHOA caters to the innate dysfunctions of post-racism and post-feminism within popular culture.

Conducting a textual analysis enabled me to develop a dialogue around the misrepresentations of the casts' persona. These themes serve as the foundation to understanding the televisual construction of the 'housewife.' Decoding the cast's dialogue, as well as the presentation of character assists in the understanding of how the "Black housewife" ideal functions in RHOA.

### **Chapter Outline: *Stay tuned!***

Chapter two, the review of the previous scholarly literature, will focus on the studies of cultural scholars who have investigated and deconstructed the role that women of color have involuntarily played in media. The chapter will review the industry of reality television as a business and mode of representation, the mobilization of "blackness" in cable television, and how women of color have been pigeonholed to one set image for decades. As I explained above, the stereotypical depiction of Black women in media is far from a new phenomenon. Literature has

shown that television portrayals of Black housewives provide a reusable model for character development. Thus, chapter two will highlight the groundwork needed to better understand the connections between media and society as I define the televisual construction of the housewives in RHOA.

In chapter three, I detail exactly how I conducted my textual analysis of the episodes in Season One of RHOA. I explain how I evaluated each episode, investigating the central themes and ideas showcased. I then go on to provide the evidence that supports these central themes, with a review of the show's most problematic moments, surprising testaments through direct quotes, and the carefully manipulated uses of imagery to fulfill each plot. These observations allowed me to then disassemble the foundational aspects used to create the 'real housewife'.

In the closing chapter, chapter four, I summarize how the RHOA does more harm than any good in the realm of representation. Building on the findings in the analysis chapter, I conclude that RHOA does in fact play into the guise of a post-feminist and post-racial society and how crippling it may be if audiences want to imagine themselves in this context. I further discuss ways in which the series could have made strides toward race and gender equality with a change in message, delivery, and focus. I also touch on my limitations and critique my methods. I recommended alternative ways this study could have been analyzed to further uncover underlying messages and misrepresentations.

## Chapter 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE: THE BOOMING BUSINESS OF REALITY TV, WOMEN, AND BLACKNESS

---

This literature review focuses on the studies of cultural scholars who have investigated and deconstructed the limited roles that women, especially women of color, have played in media for decades. My analysis of *The Real Housewives Atlanta* is guided by the literature of heavily debated but influential theoretical perspectives of media, race and gender. I draw on this literature to deconstruct the role that these Atlanta housewives play in the game of televisual misrepresentation and, likewise, the space they occupy in a world filled with post-racial and post-feminist discourse.

#### **Reality TV: The Spawn of Low Cost and Cheap Labor**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the RHOA is a ratings giant. What makes audiences faithfully return week after week, enacting down-to-the-second countdowns via the social media of their choice, awaiting each new episode? How does the show's reality-based design help it achieve its undeniable loyal fan base? The foundational elements of reality TV must first be understood to account for RHOA's success.

Reality television is the 'imaginary beyond' – carefully crafted and constructed through the wonders of camera angles, 'real people', story-telling, editing, and production – where engaged audience members fall instantaneously

into a voyeuristic gaze into the “raw and uncut”, drama-filled scenarios of the ordinary to extraordinary. From bratty toddler beauty pageant queens to single millionaire bachelors in search of love, this genre is a monopoly of motives, in terms of production. Reality TV, an obvious oxymoron, since *selected* individuals are placed into *staged* scenarios, is actually the most popular form of entertainment (Schroeder, 2006). Though many may agree that rTV is an elaborate cycle of “‘trash’ television” (Bindig, L., & Bergstrom, A.M., 2013, p. 174), it has come to be an excellent arena of which to analyze and debate (Hill, 2005).

Reality TV exploded on the network scene in the early 90s and, presently, makes up 17% of primetime television programming. In addition to viewers’ consuming and/or internalizing the discursive messages on race within this popular form, scholars note concern with the appealing ways that *Otherness* sneaks into media content. As bell hooks asserts, “the commodification of Otherness has been successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling” (hooks, 1992, p. 21).

The ubiquitous entertainment genre of rTV, hosting a plethora of subgenres, including makeover, competitive, and dating, has proven able to peak the interest of a variety of different viewers, with varied interests. The over-arching questions imbedded within all related rTV discourse remains: *How real is reality television and why is it so successful?*

To help explain the latter of that mystery, I quote author of ‘Reality Check’, Michael Essany, creator and star of his own rTV program, in his honest summary of the medium:

“In most cases, programming developed under the rubric of reality is less a product of authentic circumstance and more the result of off-screen manipulation by producers, executives, and, naturally, post-production ‘tweaking’” (Essany, 2013, p. 5).

Critical studies scholar Mark P. Orbe, in his study on reality TV’s impact on race relations further elaborates on Essany’s field outlook. He goes on to explain how rTV is simply a “misnomer” - as cast members are commonly coached and prompted by producers, with the final product being meticulously edited in post-production to heighten its effect on viewers (Orbe, 2008). This scripted medium has developed a sector of television with endless possibilities to theme, approach, execution, and message - though, often, collectively discursive.

Reality television research originated with a focus on its definition, its initial popularity and position in network television, and soon the emergence of the several rTV subgenres. Bill Nichols (1994), John Corner (1995, 1996), Richard Kilborne (1994, 1998) and Brian Winston (2005) have proven to be trailblazers and experts within this entertainment genre (Hill, 2005).

Reality TV has become a modern day phenomenon, cleverly drawing viewers into a staged and, sometimes, scripted ‘reality’. Its popularity has drastically increased over the past few years due to allowing real people to interact in a carefully controlled environment (Zinkievich, 2004). RTV arguably has some roots in the introduction of game shows like the *Price is Right* and *This is Your Life*, where people were chosen randomly from the studio audiences to create the show’s atmosphere. Soon it evolved from game shows to programming with more dramatic

content along with a group of people specifically chosen to be around each other for a long period of time under a specific and challenging task. This format has stayed successful and its popularity in terms of viewership has nearly tripled since first being introduced with ratings phenomenon *Survivor* and soon after *American Idol*.

The rise of rTV came at a time when broadcasters were looking for quick solutions to economic problems within the industry. The changing nature of the US syndication television market affected the success of reality programming. As local stations looked for ways to fill up schedules, rTV offered cheap and popular programming. Catherine MacKay, regional chief executive for Fremantle Media, claims that the US networks have caught onto the fact that reality programming, at half the production costs, could garner the same amount of viewership, if not more, than a drama or comedy (Hill, 2005).

Simply, rTV provided a cheap alternative to drama. One hour-long drama would cost approximately \$1.5 million unlike an hour-long episode of rTV, which would only run about \$200,000. The monetary gap between drama and rTV was due to the smaller production crew for non-scripted programming, few professional actors, if any, and a non-unionized crew. Overall, rTV was economically attractive to local stations and networks. RTV programming also tends to be quite friendly to advertising, with several subgenres about consumerist topics and easy product placement and integration (Deery, 2012).

As the evolution of rTV continued and became more and more popular, the programming was categorized into several different subgenres. Given the large range of formats within [rTV] it is hardly surprising that viewers make distinctions

between different types of programmes (Hill, 2007). Subgenres provide viewers with “an unmediated, voyeuristic, yet often playful look into what might be called the entertaining real” (Murray & Ouellette, 2004, p. 5). Mina Tsay and Maja Krakowiak (2006) in their exploratory study on rTV engagement discuss how rTV subgenres such as dating/romance, game shows, makeover/ lifestyle, hidden camera shows, talent shows, docusoaps, reality sitcoms, law enforcement, and court shows provide unique and different sense of ‘real’ entertainment to the viewer. (see ‘Categories of Reality Programming’ figure 1)



Reality Check | Categories of Reality Programming | fig. 1

From blog posts, show reviews, personal observations and discussions with others on reality television programs as a whole, the most successful rTV shows in terms of ratings, such as the RHOA, embody six key elements:

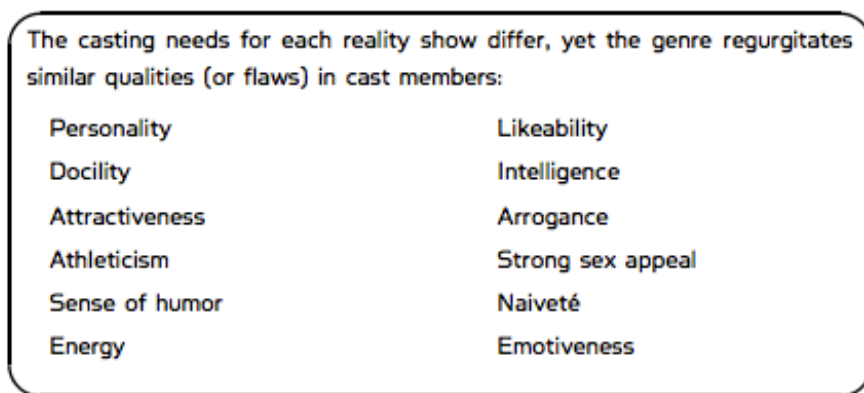
- ‘Un-scripted’
- ‘Real People’
- Relativity
- Voyeuristic



- Originality
- Competitiveness

These success factors blend to create reality programs that are intriguing and, more importantly, entertaining.

Specifically, the ‘un-scripted’ and ‘real people’ approach in rTVs is glamorized for appeal purposes for an increase in viewership. The ratings success of the reality series genre on broadcast networks is masking a sizable deficiency in adult 18-49 ratings of both returning and new scripted series on just about every network, according to an analysis of Nielsen Media Research data done by Initiative Media (Consoli, 2003). TV networks, however, have control of what is aired, regardless of the magnitude. The performances of media professionals and so-called "ordinary people" are concretely premeditated in current interactive and reality TV formats (Ytreberg, 2009). (see ‘Casting Qualities’ figure 2)



Reality Check | Casting Qualities | fig. 2

The ‘un-scripted’ and ‘real people’ features of rTV influence the level of relativity to the contestants and/or overall message of the RTV program. With the

advent of rTV we, as media consumers, have gained the ability to voyeuristically indulge in that which we find relatable, intriguing and (in many cases) frightening (Schessler-Jandreau, 2008).

Voyeurism plays a role in rTVs, as the contestants' lives are watched from afar without direct permission given to the viewer. The committed viewer critically observes the trials and tribulations of the contestant. Originality sets the given rTV apart from like programs within its genre. The more unique and engaging, the better the rTV would do with ratings. Some critics argue this has been a struggle for rTV. Several genres, such as reality television and television comedies, are seen as in desperate need of a new approach (Haggerty, 2010).

Competitiveness, especially in dating-based rTVs, has been a prime strategy in maintaining a loyal audience. Watching men and women, compete for 'love', can be seen as barbaric and insincere. Early in rTV history the competition genre dominated the scene (Whitlock, 2012). The success factors pulled together make for primetime rTV.

Understanding the manipulative and neoliberal nature of rTV will provide better understanding of how of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* provides agency to post-racism and post-feminism, as well as highlighting its position in the mobilization of blackness.

## **Black (Women) in TV Land**

Though now trendy within rTV programming, the 'Black housewife', has been a seldomly-examined identity within media's popular culture. Unfortunately, like most roles for Black women, regrettably, her identity is also routinely marginalized.

Historically, the inclusion of the Black women in media displayed controlled images of subordination to patriarchal white supremacy (Collins, 2000). Today, it is apparent that the imagery has not shifted too far from objectification and subordination. Reality programming, like the RHOA, continues to reiterate the same stereotypical notions that women across racial and ethnic identities are expected to be sexually appealing and inferior to their counterpart.

To better evaluate the contributing factors to identity of Black women in popular culture, critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw introduced the theory of Intersectionality. Intersectionality theory is key to understanding how RHOA develops the "Black housewife" identity. The theory will assist in my deconstruction of the social and cultural roles depicted through cast members of the RHOA. Intersectionality will be used as a conceptual tool to critically examine the show's scripted use of race, gender, and social class to create their image of the "Black housewife".

Primarily, this theory discusses the intersections of social factors that work collectively to create one's self-identity. Intersectionality enables an "analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization, which shape Black

women's experiences and, in turn, are shaped by Black women" (Collins, 2000, p. 299).

Intersectionality has also been instrumental to women's studies. Scholars have called it "the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far" (McCall 2005, p. 1771).

Conceptually, the theory of intersectionality suggests that the crossing of particular social elements can better depict the experience of an individual's social and cultural existence. Intersectionality theory, more specifically, discusses the intersections of several dynamics of one's identity, such as race, gender, class, religion, as well as other complexities. According to Dorthe Staunæs, the theory is ideal for examining how a particular group or sector can be seen as different, but also rebellious and, in some cases, isolated (Staunæs, 2003).

Afro-American feminist researchers Leslie McCall and Kimberle Crenshaw are known for applying intersectionality theory in the fields of women's studies and black feminist studies. McCall, also a leading sociological theorist, explains intersectionality as "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relationships and subject formations" (McCall, 2005, p. 1771). For media analysis, using intersectionality in this respect allows a discussion and connection of social constructs that seem to be interdependent of each other when looking at a specific character, role, or idea. Crenshaw, a distinguished scholar of critical race theory, is noted for creating the term intersectionality theory in 1989. Crenshaw used intersectionality to highlight key facets of Black women's employment

experience, noting the multiple ways that race and gender are influential (Crenshaw, 1989).

The theory gained additional prominence when sociologist Patricia Hills Collins integrated the term within Black feminist research on media and culture. Collins used 'Black Feminist Thought' to get at intersectionality, and as a result, she was able to include all women in application of her theory, instead of just African-American women (Mann and Huffman, 2005).

According to Collins, systems of oppression, such as patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, and imperialism often explored as individual processes, through intersectionality, can be seen as larger structures that work through these other systems simultaneously (Collins, 1998). Collins explains:

Intersectional paradigms suggest that certain ideas and/or practices surface repeatedly across multiple systems of oppression. Serving as focal points for intersecting systems of oppression, these ideas and practices may be central to how gender, sexuality, race, class, and nation mutually construct one another. (Collins, 2000, p. 48)

Intersectionality theory also informs my observations of specific themes used to portray RHOA's women. As I conducted the textual analysis of Season One, applying the ideal of intersectionality, I discovered that the RHOA plays into a list of racist as well as sexist perceptions of Black women, common in popular rTV, such as: Collins' "matriarch", "jezebel", and "ratchet" images. Although RHOA housewives think of themselves as elites, they are also represented in ways that challenge their elite status. The housewives appear overly materialistic, openly envious, blatantly

ignorant, and heavily insecure -just a few of the disparaging attributes assigned to these women of RHOA.

Furthermore, intersectionality scholars focus on the use of race and gender to emphasize issues of racism and sexism in American society and how they interact (Knudsen, 2007). Both Crenshaw and Collins use intersectionality to understand invisible structures of oppression of women that intersect in multiple ways. The works of these two scholars provides this study with the basis of how RHOA develops the portrayal of the women of color. Intersectionality will be used to deconstruct the images contrived on the RHOA and how they, in return, cause racial tension and gender misinterpretation.

Also useful to my analysis is how communications scholar Robin M. Boylorn (2008), author of *As Seen on TV: An Autoethnographic Reflection on Race and Reality*, applies the theory of intersectionality. Boylorn applies the theory in her first-hand, first person plea of the urgency for positive portrayals of African-American women in reality television to oppose stereotypical representations. Through “Representational Intersectionality” Boylorn discusses common stereotypical approaches in which race and gender images are developed and also highlights the segmentations of minority women by critics of racist and sexist representation (Boylorn, 2008). This theoretical framework will explore the adverse roles the women of color occupy within RHOA, highlighting the intersection of their race, gender, and class as fundamental elements of common stereotypes.

Additionally, RHOA also ‘isolates’ the women from being identifiable with previous casts--and operates as the first cast of racialized “Others” in the series.

Therefore, also relevant to my analysis is bell hooks' conceptualizations of cultural appropriation through the commodification and decontextualization of ethnic, non-white bodies (hooks, 1992). Hooks explains these dynamics through the theory she has coined as "eating the other", where black culture is theoretically "consumed" but not empathized with by dominating forces of society.

The foregoing studies further inform my analysis. From the RHOA housewives' poor relationships with their spouses to the resounding disrespect among each other, the women who make up the cast of RHOA, paradoxically, seem to reinforce and also undermine stereotypical notions about Black women. My examination of RHOA looks through the lens of intersectionality as well as post-racism and post-feminism to make sense of how the show constructs and sometimes challenges stereotypes.

### **Post-Racism reflects on Post-Feminism**

Post-racism and Post-feminism tend to complement each other within popular culture. One scholar whose work influences this analysis is cultural studies scholar Ralina Joseph. Using the lenses of critical race and feminist ideals, Joseph argues, "discourses of post-race are undeniably gendered, and discourses of post-feminism are undeniably raced" (Joseph, 2009, p. 240). These ideals, according to Joseph, are not independent of each other, but are interdependent. Exploring such inconsistencies between media and society can inspire further discussions on how we can move past such portrayals of reality. Joseph further articulates the

importance of using these lenses in her study on Tyra Banks, the model-turned-mogul, and the celebrity's media 'fat scandal':

The intersectional post-moments of post-race and post-feminism flourish in the realm of popular culture, which, as cultural studies scholars like Stuart Hall (1996b), Angela McRobbie (1999), and George Lipsitz (1990) remind us, is the arena in which we imagine ourselves. It is where the so-called fictions of our identities, like those of race and gender, become facts (Joseph, 2009, p. 240).

The presentation of these ideals ultimately works together to provide a post-feminist, post-racial code of conduct.

Identifying these moments in RHOA helps account for the constructed identities of the housewives, and shows foundational relationships that underlie such constructions. Thus, my analysis asks: What aspects of the RHOA cast represent post-racism and post-feminism? How does the show develop the identity of the 'Black housewife' by drawing on aspects of post-racial and post-feminist culture? How does RHOA manage to garner such success on the premises of stereotypes, directly influenced by post-racial and post-feminist views? Analyzing these components, with the theoretical lens Ralina discusses, helps this analysis move past mere assessment of the integrity of these identities. Exploring the dimensions of race and gender within RHOA will create awareness of its quite anti-feminist and racial tendencies in popular culture.

Much of popular culture, in fact, reflects problematic ideologies of race and gender, often by denying the inequalities embedded in these social categories. This



in turn provides a false projection of reality. Joseph briefly explains this phenomenon:

...popular culture both reflects and produces ideologies that translate to racialized and gendered differences ... and yet much popular culture, as a type of consumer culture, often ignores these racialized and gendered realities and instead largely serves the ideological function of post-race and post-feminism. (Joseph, 2009, p 241)

This study keeps Joseph's arguments firmly in mind when I discuss elements that constitute the media interpretation of the "Black housewife" through Bravo's commercially successful *Real Housewives* franchise.

### **Post-Feminism: Phantom Autonomy**

Through the manipulative nature of reality TV – along with producers' machinations for the reusable televisual model of the Black woman- the mediated trajectory of the women of RHOA are deeply rooted in an overall "post-feminist guise of equality" (McRobbie, 2007, p. 718). Post-feminism urges its "willing" participant to inhabit a lifestyle purely autonomous in nature and distant from the somewhat 'ancient' ideals of feminism, in order to adhere and adjust to modern times (and modern demands), while still exhibiting (and exploiting) ideals of feminism (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2007; Butler, 2013).

The conceptualizations of post-feminism among feminist cultural studies scholars are vast and varied, and have yet to reflect one overarching definition (Gill, 2007). The essence of the RHOA is a clear expression of post-feminism – one part backlash response to feminism, trying desperately to embody a 'new age women

empowerment'. However, Jess Butler, feminist cultural scholar, notes differently, while echoing the popular conceptualizations of fellow scholars like McRobbie and Gill:

...while the concept of backlash is certainly important for understanding the emergence of post-feminism, it does not adequately capture the complex, and often paradoxical, character of this contemporary discursive formation, particularly the ways in which postfeminist discourses offer up an “entanglement” of feminist and antifeminist ideas (McRobbie, 2004, p. 255; as quoted in Butler, 2013, p. 43).

This thesis draws largely on the conceptualizations of post-feminism, specifically that of post-feminism proposed as a “sensitivity”, defined by feminist cultural scholar Rosalind Gill, whose work will be discussed below. I will argue that we can understand RHOA’s images of Black women, at least partly, with the help of Gill’s conceptualization of post-feminist ideals.

The presence and acceptance of post-feminism is largely regarded for signaling the end of feminism, even though it is the “contemporary, post-feminist woman” who reaps the benefits of the movement. The social, educational, and political feminist victories – such as the pill, Roe v. Wade, Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign- though not forgotten, seem to only serve as examples that feminism has ‘done its job’ and is therefore deemed useless (Butler, 2013).

Presented as a direct response to feminism, post-feminism, instead “evoked, both implicitly and explicitly, a variety of concepts, histories, and phrases that, taken together, construct an identifiable discursive framework” that counters feminism as a movement and discourse (Butler, 2013, p. 43).

Prior to Gill's sensibility conceptualization, post-feminism was "understood as an epistemological perspective, an historical shift, or (simply) a backlash against feminism" (Gill, 2007; Butler, 2013, p. 43). In an effort to better explore and interrogate the expansive collection of post-feminist culture, Gill proposed reading post-feminist discourse as a sensibility. She further outlines themes and characteristics that would easily identify a text as such (Gill, 2007). Reading post-feminist media culture with a lens of sensibility would "emphasize the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them" (Gill, 2007, p. 149). Jess Butler (2013, p. 43) outlined the characteristics of Gill's notion of sensibility as follows, that it:

1. *Implies that gender equality has been achieved and feminist activism is thus no longer necessary;*
2. *Defines femininity as a bodily property and revives notions of natural sexual difference;*
3. *Marks a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification;*
4. *Encourages self-surveillance, self-discipline, and a makeover paradigm;*
5. *Emphasizes individualism, choice, and empowerment as the primary routes to women's independence and freedom; and*
6. *Promotes consumerism and the commodification of difference.*

Butler details, while acknowledging the advancements of Gill and McRobbie in the decoding post-feminist discourses, these frameworks describe "the complex

and often contradictory interplay of feminism, neoliberalism, and the deployment of sexuality in contemporary society”(Butler, 2013, p. 43). Reading post-feminism as a sensibility will showcase the obvious contradictions it embodies within its modern society and the aspects of feminism it seeks to leave behind.

This conceptualization of post-feminism as a sensibility will allow the undermining messages of self-identity, social function and capacity, as well as modern articulations of race and gender to be analyzed within RHOA. Specifically, the show is quite reflexive of what the new norm enacts -- where “post-feminism constructs women as both subjects and consumers, elevating consumption as an individualistic mechanism of empowerment and effectively commodifying feminist activism” (Tasker and Negra, 2007; as quoted in Butler, 2013, p. 45).

More closely, the women of RHOA, funneled through the glitz and glam of rTV post-production, yield a vision of elitism and materialism, as well as greed and insecurity. Thus, the RHOA expertly promotes the sensationalism of the *‘Post-Feminist Masquerade’*. The post-feminist masquerade ideal, first introduced by psychoanalyst Riviere in 1929, is one that feminist writers often reference, as he states, “women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men” (Riviere, 1929/1986, p. 35; Butler, 1999, p. 65; as quoted in Gill, 2007, p. 723), further explaining that “womanliness and masquerade to be indistinguishable, (that) there is no naturally feminine woman lurking underneath this mask” (Gill, 2007, p. 723) . The post-feminist masquerade, a strategy to secure women in gendered, sexualized, and neoliberal conditions and positions.

McRobbie proposes in her discussion of young women of the West and their 'new sexual contract' under this post-feminist culture:

The masquerade exists as mode of feminine inscription, an interpellative device, at work and highly visible across the commercial domain as a familiar (even nostalgic), light hearted (unserious), refrain of femininity...This signals that the hyper-femininity of the masquerade which would seemingly re-locate women back inside the terms of traditional gender hierarchies, by having her wear spindly stilettos and 'pencil' skirts does not in fact mean entrapment since it is now a matter of choice rather than obligation. (McRobbie, 2007, pg. 723)

The 'post-feminist masquerade' complements post-feminist sensibilities. The proceeding analysis chapter will draw the connections between post-feminism and the scripted portrayal of the Atlanta housewives of RHOA.

## Chapter 3

### ANALYSIS: THE (UN)REAL HOUSEWIVES OF ATLANTA

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Season One of the Real Housewives of Atlanta crocheted themes that can be critiqued using post-feminist and racial perspectives. The lives of the RHOA women are caricatured to fit a distinct look and feel, established by the show's producers - following suit in terms of the series' historical, stereotypical, and controversial approach to image (and character depiction). As I conducted my textual analysis on the eight episodes of Season One, monitoring trends in plots, characters, and imagery, I set out to pinpoint the show's structural backbone, underlying messages, and obvious intentions – elements I focus on to interpret RHOA's representation of the “Black housewife”.

#### **Method: Deconstructing The Housewife**

Shown to be an effective qualitative method of analysis, a critical textual analysis was conducted to examine how the women of color of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* contribute to post-racial and post-feminist media culture. Conducting a critical textual analysis is a process in which any particular form of content can be ‘read’ as text, allowing the reader's understandings of the text to be used as elements to be examined (McKee, 2001). It takes an interpretive stance, as opposed to a quantitative approaches to studying content, in this case, televised media.

In my initial review of the first season of RHOA, I noted the most glaring stereotypical and gendered instances. I then re-watched the 8 episodes of the

season (which includes the reunion show) and identified four reoccurring themes that best encompassed RHOA's clear misrepresentations of race, gender, as well as class:

- |                       |                   |
|-----------------------|-------------------|
| <b>1. Wealth</b>      | <b>3. Elitism</b> |
| <b>2. Materialism</b> | <b>4. Vanity</b>  |

Once themes were determined and ordered in such a way that effectively introduces each succeeding theme (as seen above), the themes were then matched with specific plot developments – which are supported by direct quotes and visuals from scenes throughout the entire season. These themes not only intertwine and complement each other within the text, but they also vividly highlight the core ideals of post-racial and post-feminist culture such as: colorblindness, consumerism, and neoliberalism, just to mention a few.

The mapping out of the themes prompted a thorough interrogation of each episode's plots, character portrayal, as well as cast interactions, and overall dialogue. As I deconstructed the adverse portrayals of the RHOA cast members, I approached each episode through the lens of the several theoretical frameworks previously outlined, I also questioned each text as follows:

- How does the episode negotiate identity?
  - a. What does it mean to be a 'wealthy black woman'?
  - b. How does this episode present 'wealthy black women'?
- How does the episode's images characterize the women vs. women of color?
  - a. Does the displays seem to be self-inflicted?

- b. Do the images complement or contradict each other?
- How does the show develop their identity through a post racial/feminism culture?
  - a. What ideals of post-feminism are entertained?
  - b. What ideals of post-racism are entertained?

Employing these methods collectively as a conceptual tool enables me to critically examine the show's presentation of race, gender, and social class – elements used to develop Bravo's image of a *real housewife*.

### **Location & Cast Background**

#### ***Welcome to Atlanta***

*The Real Housewives of Atlanta* stars five middle-aged 'divas' who reside in Atlanta, GA – proudly dubbed, by the housewives, as the '*Black Hollywood*.' The ladies gleam with pride in the opening credits, as a swift b-roll plays of the lavish Atlanta night life of the elite and influential: Rolls-Royces pulling up to valet, poured flutes of popped champagne, flashes of diamonds, and the Atlanta housewives embracing paparazzi. The women live and breathe an upper-class version of Atlanta - - the location that NeNe Leakes, the break out celebrity from the series, describes in the opening line of the season: "...the mecca of wealthy African-Americans."

Home to an ever-growing list of A-list celebrities, Atlanta is undoubtedly a household name within the entertainment realm, from music to film to sports and television, especially reality TV. Michael Khan, online associate editor for



*CurbedAtlanta.com*, drew correlations between the ratings and real estate prices, specifically in neighborhoods of RHOA stars Kim Zolciak and Kandi Burruss (a later RHOA housewife) (Khan, 2014; see ‘CurbedAtlanta’ figures 3 & 4).



CurbedAtlanta | Correlations of RHOA Ratings Growth To RHO Neighborhood Home Price Growth | Fig. 3

Real Housewives Effect						
Season	Year	P18-49 Ratings	Change in Ratings (from previous year)	Average Atlanta Metro Prices	Change in Atlanta Metro Prices	
3	2010/11	2,001,389		0.47%	\$152,514	0%
4	2011/12	1,893,826		-5.68%	\$141,640	-7%
5	2012/13	1,902,333		0.45%	\$147,093	4%
6	2013/14	2,114,481		10.03%	\$186,159	27%
7	2014/2015	2,200,000		3.89%	\$210,334	13%

CurbedAtlanta | Real Housewives Effect | Fig. 4

The impact of the RHOA is significant - which encourages this analysis and supports the overall goal of this thesis: to identify/investigate the key components that serve as foundation to the televisual construction of the real housewives, which have been observed as both post-racist and post-feminist.

### ***Meet The (Real) Women of RHOA***

The cameras of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* depict the lives of five Atlanta women who proclaim their families to be among the Atlanta elite, an urban society

of wealth and power. This pilot season of RHOA, which aired in October 2008, perpetuated the role of the “Black housewife” by creating a web of controversial, stereotypical, and discursive depictions – depictions formed at the will of producers’ televisual vision for the initial cast of RHOA. NeNe, Sheree’, Kim, DeShawn, and Lisa individually bring an interesting imprint to the RHOA *housewife* construction.

As mentioned above, displays and discussions of class trappings and privilege is a key theme in the series. Kenya Foy, contributor to the *Bustle*, a popular online media forum catered to and managed by women, recalls her take on the first episode of the RHOA, including how she simply could not take the air of arrogance:

*Each of the ladies dropped an obscene amount of references to Atlanta’s “elite,” the “who’s who” of the city and how many wealthy people live there, all while spending thousands on fully-loaded Escalades, Botox-injected handbags and Louis Vuitton cakes (Foy, 2015).*



Season (1) Cast of RHOA | From L-R: Kim, DeShawn, NeNe, Lisa, Sheree’ | Fig. 5

### ***NeNe Leakes:***

Former exotic dancer turned “housewife”, Linnethia, better known as ‘NeNe’, has been married to her husband Gregg, a real estate investor, for 10 years.

Together, they raise their sons, Bryson (18) and Curtis (11). Audiences learn early that NeNe is a “matter-of-fact” type of woman, outspoken with a bold personality, who commonly refers to herself as the “*Queen of the castle*”. She is admired for her bodacious attitude and blunt appeal. NeNe also speaks candidly and openly about her previous mental and physical abusive relationship between her ex and the dysfunctional disconnect with her extended family.

***Sheree’ Whitefield:***

Ex-wife of Bob Whitefield, former quarterback for the Atlanta Falcons, Sheree’ is a single mother of two, Kairo (10) and Kaleigh (8). The Ohio native and aspiring fashion designer behind ‘SHE’ by Sheree’ speaks adamantly about her anticipated seven-figure divorce settlement and how she simply desires to be able to “maintain the exact same lifestyle, if not better” she and her children have become accustomed to. With a fierce fetish for fashion, Sheree’ hires a team to help her put out the best designer label Atlanta has yet to see.

***Kim Kolsiak:***

Obsessed with her extremely gift generous “multi-millionaire” partner, ‘Big Poppa’, whose identity remains confidential throughout the entire season. Kimberleigh, better know as ‘Kim’, is the youngest of the cast and single mom of two girls, Brielle (11) and Ariana (6). She is known for her lofty life-style, always wanting the biggest and the brightest. She does, however, have a terrible chain-smoking habit and can be seen at any moment with a wine glass (literally – as when cameras routinely capture her casually drinking wine- once while sitting in her

convertible in the parking lot of a shopping center). Kim is also the 'minority' among the group of women, as she is the only white woman who is a part of the majority Black cast – which is often highlighted with her persistent “...*people always said you should have been black anyway...*,” remarks that she awkwardly makes through out the entire season.

***DeShawn Snow:***

The soft-spoken and undeniably meek mother and entrepreneur, DeShawn is the wife to her college sweetheart, Eric Snow, guard for the Cleveland Cavaliers. Quite passive aggressive, DeShawn somewhat operates as a single parent to their three boys, Eric Jr. (9), Jarren (6), and Darius (5), as Eric, team captain and 12-year NBA veteran, is typically away six days out of the week. As DeShawn seeks to hire a “governess” to help her manage their brand new, custom-built Atlanta estate, she is also seen making philanthropic moves for her own foundation, the DeShawn Snow Foundation, which works to support the self-esteem of young girls.

***Lisa Hartwell:***

The super energetic, overly ambitious, and particularly fashionable socialite housewife of the cast is none other than Lisa Hartwell. Wife to Ed Hartwell, former linebacker for the ATL Falcons, Lisa, is also mommy to 10-month old baby boy, Ed Jr. Lisa is probably the resident *opportunist* of the cast, as she is extremely fanatical to maintain the ultimate well-rounded image: supportive friend, sophisticated role-model, sexy wife, and successful business woman. Self nicknamed the “Jill-Of-All-Trades”, Lisa has her hands in everything from designing and becoming brand

ambassador for her own high-end custom jewelry line to being co-partner of Hartwell and Associates Realtors. She is also vocal and proud to be of the Black and Chinese culture and is adamant about always being identified as equal parts.

The women of Season One of RHOA serves as an original and popular representation of a predominantly Black cast of housewives in modern television culture, riddled with underlying messages about race, class, and gender. With this particular mix of race, gender, and class, Season One of RHOA could be regarded as a novelty among reality-based television.

### **Themes: Now Introducing... 'The (un)Real Housewives of Atlanta'**

Within the eight episodes of the first season of RHOA, it is undeniable that the underlying tone of its televisual function reflects themes from mainstream rTV popular culture. The following themes were identified upon my second follow-up review of the RHOA. These themes reflect ideals of both post-feminism and post-racism, and also commonly embedded within reality-based programming.

#### ***Wealth***

The rendering of wealth was a key factor and foundation in the RHOA. It was portrayed as influencing, dictating, and consuming the housewives, as well as their families. Discussions and displays of wealth played a crucial role in the overall development of the housewives - it governed their every move and was stated as their overall life goal. From their elaborate home designs, in-home hired staff, custom vehicles, extravagant dining, to high-priced themed children birthday

parties, and gifts imported from overseas, their expensive lifestyle undoubtedly framed and symbolically defined them.

DeShawn is portrayed as most content in her wealth. The opening scene of episode one shows DeShawn and her family stepping into their 10,000 square ft. custom- built mansion. The 2.5 year construction project, that began with the \$395,500 purchase of 4.65 acres that neighbored the private Manor Golf and Country Club, soon yielded the multi-million dollar *Snow Estate*. DeShawn's estate boasted: 6 bedrooms, 6 full and 6 half bathrooms, floating staircase, 2-story great room, formal dining room, 2-story family room, gourmet kitchen with breakfast room, elevators, 6-car garage, paneled gentlemen's study, separate ladies office, home theater, wine cellar, billiards room, card room, recreational room with large custom bar, hair salon, central vacuuming system, zoned heating and cooling systems, steam shower, dry sauna, basketball court, swimming pool with spa, a gazebo with fireplace, and a complete music, video and security systems that run through the estate. (see 'Snapshot of The Snow Mansion' fig. 6)



Season (1) Cast of RHOA | Snapshot of The Snow Mansion| Fig. 6

The interior designer for the Snow Estate mentions that DeShawn actually only spent *three hours* with her in the overall design planning - positioning DeShawn and her husband as pure consumers. Later in the episode, DeShawn casually mentions to her husband, while enjoying the view from their master suite bedroom balcony, “...thank you for not getting mad when we kept going over and over the budget.”

The projection of wealth in RHOA is the product of consumerism. All the women of RHOA participated in some form or...*fashion* in conspicuous consumption. In one study that examines the consumerist nature of *The Real Housewives* series explains, “as viewers who tune into any episode are immediately made aware, conspicuous consumption constitutes the bulk of TRHW (*The Real Housewives*) plot” (Cox & Proffitt, 2012). As Rosalind Gill (2007) cited in her conceptualization of reading post-feminism as sensibility, consumerism is a constructing component of post-feminism - but also an indicator, within this context, that it is the primary influence on self-identity. DeShawn makes this assumption clear in her overall excitement of her new home (see ‘DaShawn’s Opening Statement’ fig. 7), sharing her sentiments by saying with owning a home like hers, she knew she was always “*destined for greatness*”. Surprisingly, the statement is also her recorded opening statement – which is partially quoted at the beginning of each episode, as part of the show’s opening credits.



Season (1) Cast of RHOA | DaShawn's Opening Statement| Fig. 7

The importance of wealth, as an overarching theme of each episode, places not only DeShawn, but also the entire cast of RHOA in the post-feminist arena. Episode one alone is seething with references to just how important the foundation of wealth is to the very essence of these housewives:

*In ATL you're IT... with money! – Kim  
...on what gives you status in Atlanta.*

*If you have the money and you have the right connections, you can get a lot of things that you want to get, and you don't even have to be that talented. - NeNe  
...on Kim's latest singing venture*

*You have to be really disciplined, 'cause y'all money's not guaranteed. - DeShawn  
...to Lisa as they discuss her husband's NFL contract*



## **Materialism**

With the housewives explicitly positioned in wealth, their consumerist attitude constitutes free will to 'consume'- as the post-feminist sensibility nature of the text promotes modes of 'individualism' and 'choice'. Distinguished feminist scholar, Jess Butler, in her critique on post-feminist forms that feature women of color, references *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, along with similar rTVs, observing:

The women of color featured in the above representations clearly embody and enact post-feminism: they embrace femininity and the consumption of feminine goods; they espouse a vocabulary of independence, choice, empowerment, and sexual freedom; and they construct themselves (or are constructed by others) as heterosexual subjects (Butler, 2013, p. 48).

Here, Butler agrees that post-feminism prompts the willing participant to secure their new found freedom through "progressive gender ideals"- with a sense of pride (and conviction) explaining, "the women get skinny jeans...they get pedicures and bikini waxes because they have the freedom to *choose* to engage in conventional femininity" (Butler, 2013, p. 46). In the same way, the women of RHOA, contrary to their stated beliefs, remain in gendered roles from which feminism sought liberation.

Moreover, McRobbie (2007), echoed by Butler (2013, p. 46), describes the oppressive phenomenon known as the 'post-feminist masquerade' as an 'interpellative device' where "the hyper-femininity of the masquerade which would seemingly re-locate women back inside the terms of traditional gender hierarchies, by having her wear spindly stilettos and 'pencil' skirts does not in fact mean

entrapment since it is now a matter of choice rather than obligation” (McRobbie, 2007, p. 723). Thus, the postfeminist promise of personal choice further promotes patriarchal control. This contradiction also constitutes post-feminism’s ‘double entanglement’ of feminist and anti-feminist ideals that McRobbie (2004), Gill (2007), and Butler (2013) discuss.

Of all the activities featured and observed along each woman’s individual journey, materialism is heavily supported throughout the season, a theme inscribed in the post-feminism sensibility ideal, embedded in the constructions above, and steeped in consumerism. Each episode showcases the women thinking about shopping, going shopping, or having just finished shopping – of course, for the latest and most exclusive pieces. The women’s ultimate fear is being seen with the same designer bag or dress - a true travesty in the RHOA community. There seems to be no limit to what the housewives desire. When they want it, is when they get it. For example, if these women could buy everything in the world, *they would* - and then demand that the remaining be removed from show room floor. Sheree’, the in-house *fashionista* actually did just that. One episode displays a moment when Sheree’ called to double check that a local designer clothes store, *Intermix*, where she recently purchased a simple cocktail dress for \$1k, had removed any remaining dresses in the same style available from the show floor. In another episode, Sheree’ receives a house call from her personal *shoe* stylist. In this scene, her stylist, Steve, who begins to unbox and arrange over two dozen designer shoes, estimates that Sheree’ has over a thousand pairs already. Within what seems like less than an hour,

Sheree' effortlessly spends \$6500k on five new pairs, featuring labels Fendi, Burberry, as well as Dolce&Gabbana.



Season (1) Cast of RHOA | Sheree's Opinion on Spending| Fig. 8

Thus, RHOA paints a portrait of a pompous, greed-driven cast of women who prioritize consumption of clothing and valuables. As portrayed, these items signify their elite class position and further the post-feminist and post-racial ideals they appear to internalize.

Both the themes of wealth and materialism explored in RHOA promote ideals of consumption and consumerism that Bravo uses to entice female viewers. One study explores the profitable advantages of *female* viewers:

“From a feminist political economic perspective, these numbers illustrate that not only do TRHW bring in high rating and revenues, but also that Bravo strategically garners those ratings from female audiences” (Cox & Proffitt, 2012).

## ***Elitism***

Wealth and materialism give way to ideas of elitism - the notion, that, through acquiring financial security and pricey (as well as priceless) possessions, one has become empowered. Post-feminism reflects vivid characteristics of neoliberalism. Gill, in mapping out the features of post-feminist sensibility, observes that there is a “powerful resonance” that can be witnessed between post-feminism and neoliberalism (Gill, 2007). As explained by Gill, “it is clear that the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of post-feminism” (Gill, 2007, p. 164). I observe this post-feminist neoliberal embrace of elitism right from the show's opening theme song, where the women make references to their individual claims to their entitled spot among the aristocratic meritocracy of Atlanta. Atlanta, moreover, appears to be a place where any one who is already successful can flourish in this society of competitiveness and ownership, and ultimately, indulge in the exclusivity of the upper class. Heavily class driven, Atlanta, as sumptuously described by the RHOA cast, mirrors Joseph’s perspective on the ‘American Dream’, as dramatized by Black celebrities:

Their notions of meritocracy, of achieving success purely through hard work, are post-racial, post-feminist fallacies imagined through romanticized notions of the American Dream, which with its utopian promise ignores racial hierarchy, patriarchy, and structural inequality. When these post-ideas of the American Dream are performed by celebrities, ...their own bodies of

color are used to demonstrate the viability of colorblindness and post-feminism. (Joseph, 2009, p. 249).

Thus, RHOA cast members, despite their affluence, perpetuate ideals that oppress rather than liberate. The show, furthermore, articulates the American Dream in ways that erase gendered and racial hierarchies as well as class inequalities. The women just about serve as advertisements for striving to make it to the upper class, as the show follows them as they attend exclusive networking events that would further increase wealth and power.

The theme of elitism is best highlighted through Lisa, who embodies this element the most. Fiercely ambitious, Lisa is the true definition of (not-so-humble) “over-achiever”. She opens up the season saying, *“No where else is there an elite society of African Americans... going to galas, fashion shows, and living in luxury gated communities.”* Obsessed with work, family, and health, she is extremely committed to the ‘power couple’ image (mentioning the phrase far more than a few times). She prides herself on her ‘personable’ attitude and is always ready for business, laughing with her girlfriend while getting ready for her jewelry trunk show, *“Everything is networking for me!”* With her several hats as a real estate broker and part owner of *Hartwell and Associates Relators*, a professional painter, a jewelry designer and ambassador, and owner of *Heart to Heart* baby clothing line, Lisa explains in short, *“I juggle several things because I’m super hyper!”*

Her over-zealous approach to business, marriage, and image runs perfectly parallel to ideas of self-reliance and upward mobility- ideals that align with both post-feminism and neoliberalism.

## ***Vanity***

The cast leads audiences to believe that the ATL area is one huge beauty contest. It was extremely rare to see any of the women without make-up or even having a bad hair day. Earlier mentioned cast member, DeShawn, equipped with her in-home salon, also has a hired staff to do her hair and make-up daily. This theme reflects the post-feminist sensibility of the makeover paradigm.

Gill explains the “makeover-takeover” - which bombards popular culture, where makeover shows and self-help books explode onto the scene - ready and available to provide their *needed* service to the willing post-feminist participant:

This requires people (predominantly women) to believe, first, that they or their life is lacking or flawed in some way; second, that it is amenable to reinvention or transformation by following the advice of relationship, design, or lifestyle experts and practicing appropriately modified consumption habits (Gill, 2007, p. 156)

From the opening scene, where housewife Lisa exclaims with smile, “*Image is everything in Atlanta!*” – it is obvious the women will live up to the claim. In each episode, it is almost customary among the housewives to verbally affirm their unmistakable beauty and style. Cutting to the individual ‘confessionals’, viewers would hear comments like:

*“Every woman out there wish she could look like this.”*  
-Sheree on her perfect body

*“All eyes on me or none at all.”*  
-Kim on her singing career

*"It'll be different not being in the limelight, but you know, our family unit at the end of day, is all that matters."*

- DeShawn on her husband Eric's sudden knee injury (tear in meniscus) and post-career

*"It's so draining here; you can get caught up into the politics and the plastic people."*

-Dwayne, NeNe's stylist friend, on Sheree and the Atlanta community.

The cast of RHOA, collectively, embodies this theme, as well acts out the conditional terms on beauty, which also exhibits a post-racism ideal image.

### **The Dressing Room: Intersections of RHOA Identity and Post-Racism**

*"I'm a Black woman, trapped in a white woman's body..." however, "in Atlanta, even though it's predominately Black, I don't feel out of place."* Kim, the cast's minority, as she is the only white woman who is a part of the majority Black cast, provides the arena where post-racism ideals are unraveled. Kim, further, is found constantly making references that flow with distinguished cultural theorist, bell hooks' arguments associated with the influential 'eating the Other' theory. This theory describes the cultural desire to "consume the Other" - to embody the "primitive" and intriguing features of ethnic nature – ultimately exploiting cultural differences for pleasure, all while under the guise of flattery. More specifically, bell hooks articulates the 'eating the other' phenomenon as one that:

...establishes a contemporary narrative where the suffering imposed by structures of domination on those designated Other is deflected by an emphasis on seduction and longing where the desire is not to make the Other

over in one's image but to become the Other (hooks, 1992, p. 25).

Enacting the “eating the Other” phenomenon, housewife Kim plays into the role of a dominating structure as she explicitly states, almost routinely, how intrigued or impressed she is, specifically, with Black beauty. She is concrete in her stance that she *wants* those features to *enhance* her own. “*Black doesn't crack? White cracks, sister,*” Kim shares with Sheree, as she explains why Sheree beauty supersedes hers:

*“African American women age so much better. I never know their real age. They just have beautiful skin and it's their natural oils – It's something different. It's something I want.”*

However, in the same respect, Kim's claims on the bodies of the non-white female Others, though poised in a pure sense of admiration, still perpetuates her societal position as the or to become the supreme ‘attractive’: whiteness *with* ‘flava’ – white mind, black body. Kim mentioning of “natural oils” reflects hook's argument that white culture is obsessed with the supposed “native” connection with the primitive and nature that people of color are constructed by the dominant as having. Her obsession with Sheree's beauty, finds her not only identifying with Sheree's image, but also going as far as to contrast it with another cast member's image:

*“I always tell people she's a black version of me. You're black. NeNe's black, right? NeNe's a Drag Queen. You're beautiful.”*

*“Sheree's beautiful, so people are gonna' be more apt to talk about her because she is beautiful.”*



In regard to post-racism, the white supremacist advantage is still wholly intact with the presence of Kim. However, the mirage of Kim's invested interest in the ethnic beauty of her fellow cast mates serves as a re-assurance that she embraces Black beauty. But Kim also embraces, paradoxically, the 'colorblindness' of post-racism. On the one hand, Kim seeks the beauty of ethnic color, but Kim's interest in ethnic beauty simultaneously eradicates the presence of racism by replacing it with *infatuation*. The white supremacy of popular culture, visible in post-feminism and post-racist culture, allows Kim to fetishize the Black culture, hidden behind the guise of admiration, and still maintain her white privilege. Hooks explains, "to make one's self vulnerable to the seduction of difference, to seek an encounter with the Other, does not require that one relinquish forever one's mainstream personality" (hooks, 1992, p. 23). The cast, who seemed 'unbothered' by most, if not all, of Kim's outlandish remarks, articulate hook's explanation of how the Other internalizes the gaze: "Concurrently, diverse ethnic/racial groups can also embrace this sense of specialness, that histories and experience once seen as worthy only of disdain can looked upon with awe" (hook, 1992, p. 25). When juxtaposed against her fellow cast mates, Kim embodies the discourse of racial inequalities and cultural appropriation.

## Chapter 4

### CONCLUSION: SO...WHAT'S REAL ABOUT THE RHOA?

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What is *real* about *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, you may ask? The better question is 'what is *unreal*?' – in which the answer to that would be the liberating, harmonious, and all-inclusive landscape of a post-modern culture. As a result, the RHOA is a multi-dimensional contradiction. Through the televisual components of reality TV, in conjunction with the reusable model of common stereotypes, as it relates to women as well as women of color, this study reaffirms Joseph's opinion on the climate of a post-feminist and post-racist culture:

Despite the racialized and gendered nature of all aspects of American life, including media coverage, twenty-first-century US culture is replete with ideas that we are beyond, past, or "post" notions of race-, gender-, and sexuality- based discrimination (Joseph, 2009, p. 238)

This study has revealed that post-feminism and post-racism are sister concepts that ultimately seek to maintain patriarchal control and eternalize racial exclusion. These ideals, as supported by the literature, are not only racial but gendered; both share the ideology that 'inequality is at an end' (Joseph, p. 240). However, *The Real House Of Atlanta*, in *reality*, does more harm than any good in the realm of representation. Butler (2013) details the inequality of these dominating ideals, quoting Projansky (2001, p. 87):

*When women of color are depicted in postfeminist representations, they appear “as assimilated ‘equal’ beneficiaries of the same ‘rights’ that feminism has supposedly provided to white women”, while “the specific intersection of gender and race impressions that women of color may face in the US is ignored”* (Butler, 2013, p. 49).

Furthermore, though this type of discursive depiction with its concomitant complexities is quite common in popular culture, studies observing these issues are scarce - which brings this thesis to a necessary call of duty. Joseph (2009), in her post-feminist and post-racist analysis of model-turn-mogul Tyra Bank, asserts:

While scholarship critiquing post-feminism often makes the effort to mention race-noting, for example, the post-feminist scholarship largely focuses on white women-there has been less attention paid to women of color and few sustained critiques of post race and post feminism in tandem (Joseph, 2009, p. 240).

Encouraging the observation of post-feminism along with post-racism ideals against media that depict women of color will verbalize the hidden agendas of assimilation and work toward a climate of change within gender and race studies.

Through the show’s use of script and dramatizations, the women of color are primarily marginalized in two parts: (1) subjected to the post-feminist ideals of consumption, self-surveillance, and neoliberalism (2) and socially rejected by the post-racial ideals of colorblindness and ‘consumer cannibalism’, as referenced by hooks’ ‘eating the other’ concept (hooks, 1992).

Building on the findings in the analysis chapter, I reiterate that RHOA, the top ratings earning series of the Real Housewives franchise, does in fact play into the guise of a post-feminist and post-racial society. In terms of production, Bravo producers could have utilized positive ways to develop this series simply with a change in message, delivery, and focus - countering the not-too-subtle uses of stereotypes - and, instead, project more enriching story lines and positive portrayals. Doing so could have rendered RHOA an rTV trailblazer, making possible strides toward race and gender equality.

While attempting to maintain an image of women's empowerment and racial harmony, RHOA is constructed through stereotypes, racism, and anti-feminist portrayals. Bravo prides itself on being "a diversified media and entertainment company..." (as quoted in Cox & Proffitt, 2012, p. 297) and promotes RHOA as inclusive of both 'real housewives' and real women. Instead of creating a show about successful, wealthy, mature African-American women taking charge of their household, and lives, RHOA perpetuates stereotypical images of women of color. In pinpointing these issues of the contradictory nature of these RHOA post-moments, employing intersectionality as a conceptual tool was crucial to my observations. Taking the same position of Joseph (2009), this analysis agrees that, "what the ideologies of post-feminism and post-race disregard is that race and gender determine almost all factors informing our lives" and also asserts that, "in popular media, as in other expressions of US race and gender ideologies, notions of post-race and post-feminism are entirely reliant upon each other and indeed operative because of the other" (Joseph, 2009, p. 250-251). Being able to draw conclusions of

exclusion and marginalization was only possible through analyzing the intersections of gender, race, as well as class. In the area of character development, we see the manipulations of image and portrayal highlight messages that are undeniably gendered and raced.

The limitations of this analysis include lack of exploration in audience reaction and interviews of the cast. While feedback of audiences could be possible to obtain through online show reviews and message boards, connecting with each of the original cast members to recount the experience would not be as simple.

As for future research recommendations and alternative ways this study could have been analyzed to further uncover underlying messages and misrepresentations, I suggest: (1) a juxtaposition of the RHOA cast against the other RH casts; (2) an analysis of each RHOA cast member's individual connection to post-racism and post-feminism (3) and possibly examination of each housewives post-show lifestyle (i.e. *Where are they now?*).

In closing, this post-feminist, post-racist analysis shows how media and society reflect each other. **The Real Housewives of Atlanta** reflects just how *unreal* that image is.

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