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"I'm Rich Bitch:" Black Class Performance and the New Nouveau Riche

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**"I'M RICH BITCH:" BLACK CLASS PERFORMANCE AND THE NEW NOUVEAU
RICHE**

**A Thesis
Presented to
The Academic Faculty**

By

Nykia Hannah

**In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in American Studies**

Kennesaw State University

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Literature Review

In VH1's wildly successful *Flavor of Love*, twenty women from "all walks of life" vie for Public Enemy hype man Flavor Flav's heart. Just as other dating based reality shows before it, *Flavor of Love* was built on the premise that relationships built in the midst of competition and broadcast on television, could indeed end as fairy tale romances. White picket fence excluded, *Flavor of Love* differed from its predecessors in that the show's primary character was not white or ruggedly attractive in the traditional American sense, but was deemed black and unattractive both by the women on the show and by the audience. Despite these differences, Flavor Flav was cast as wealthy and successful, in the capitalist sense and therefore, desirable. Critics of the show acknowledge VH1's role in introducing a primarily black cast to the reality television genre; however, they view the choice of Flavor Flav as excruciatingly damaging to hegemonic American consciousness-particularly as it pertains to the ways in which the black community behaves, is informed, and makes decisions. Further, critics site Flavor Flav's behavior as reminiscent of minstrelsy and argue that it not only perpetuates but reinforces those stereotypes that cast wealthy black men as actors, athletes, or rappers. Despite this criticism, Flavor Flav represents, in many ways, a growing trend within the black community, one that has in large part shifted from a preoccupation with race to one of class. Premiering in 2006, *Flavor of Love* significantly changed the face of reality television and due to its success, allowed for the creation of a primarily black lineup of shows on VH1 ranging from *Married to Medicine*, a show about women who are either married to doctors or doctors themselves to *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*, a show that focuses on the hip hop industry in Atlanta, Georgia.

Unlike television viewers before *Flavor of Love*, today's audience does not have to search tirelessly for representations or images of blackness in the media, film, or television; yet, there exist "activists and cultural critics" who continue "to monitor, boycott, and occasionally negotiate with arbiters and image makers about black visibility and representation."¹ Representation of blackness in popular culture remains extremely polemic as it is undeniable that any *one* image of blackness speaks for or represents a national community; yet, for many, national narratives of blackness, black success, and black wealth should be modified by ensuring that only positive (an inarguably subjective term) images permeate American consciousness. Representation and the arguments associated with it are intricately tied to this cultural shift from performing race to performing class. Does black class performance mean that American society has finally reached its meritocratic goals? What effects does representation have on class performance? In what ways are representations of blackness *challenged* by class performance? And finally, are all forms of representation created equal? To understand these questions and the myriad assumptions associated with both class performance and representation, it is important to identify the role that popular culture, more specifically, reality television, has on social consciousness. It is important to identify privilege not only within the context of race but also within the contexts of class and representation. Lastly, it is important to analyze the conditions in which popular culture is created and how, the cultural and widespread assumptions associated with blackness have affected the paradigmatic shift from performing race to performing class.

¹ Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), Kindle edition.

To answer these questions, this research uses popular culture icon and former *Real Housewives of Atlanta* star NeNe Leaks' rise to fame. In many ways, NeNe epitomizes the mythical American Dream as a real life representation of "rags to riches." The Black Bourgeoisie's perception of cultural characters like Flavor Flav and NeNe Leaks is interesting because it brings to light the omnipresent class struggle, not only within American culture but also within the black community. As an example of representation, characters like NeNe evoke feelings of resentment within the black middle class; yet, her *performance* of and *modification* to the existing class dichotomies functions challenge not just understandings of blackness, but cultural assumptions about class. It is essential to modify the lens through which we view this cultural character and this research focuses on the ways in which reality television and these characters challenge, disturb and disrupt national and intracommunity narratives of blackness and class.

In *Freakshow*, Jon Dovey highlights the established critical positions within reality television discourse and problematizes them as excluding the way that reality television effects ideology.² Identifying three strains of critique: "Trash TV"; "Empowerment; and "Nightmare", Dovey asserts a need to investigate the intertextuality of reality television. Scholarship regarding what he deems to be the "nightmare" position is limited; yet both trash tv and empowerment have long histories in the reality television debate. The trash TV position posits that "contemporary popular media are the product of a market-led political economy and therefore are culturally suspect" while the proponents

² Jon Dovey, *Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television* (Pluto Press, 2001) 83.

of empowerment cite “factual television has strengthened the mission of public service by fostering interactive participation in social space, releasing everyday voices into the public sphere and challenging established paternalisms.”³

Viewing any form of entertainment autonomously leads very quickly to problems. Understanding the economic drive towards reality television programming is essential to both its history and future; however, cheap production does not capture the social (or cultural?) complexities that produced reality television as a viable form of entertainment. Furthermore, this notion fails to account for the influence that the genre has on identity formation, cultural and social awareness, and hegemonic ideology perpetuation. As Dovey explains, the cost or non-cost of reality television in no way explains the content of the genre and its “emphasis on crime, accident, and deviance.”⁴ According to Dovey, reality television audiences, though consistently changing in engagement and awareness over time are relegated to a class of undesirables within this critical position.

Guided by the singularity of the trash tv position, those who view reality television as empowerment view the genre as a form that “foregrounds...real fears and anxieties” by creating a medium in which the experiences of ordinary people are highlighted.⁵ The result of this empowerment, subscribers argue, is democratizing and restores citizenship by encouraging “direct involvement and interaction.” With the media (?)⁶ Problematic within this analysis is the act of conglomerating all reality television shows as agents of empowerment. Based solely on the various subgenres within Reality

³ Ibid, 85.

⁴ Ibid, 84.

⁵ Ibid, 86.

⁶ Ibid, 89.

Television, analyzing them all using the same methods does not account for the vast content and subject matter within each show. Altering the lens through which we view reality television and its participants requires a deeper understanding of how reality television functions ideologically as well as how its stars perform.

Few genres provoke polemic debate more than reality television. Since its inception audiences, scholars, politicians, and industry professionals have all contributed to the discourse surrounding its social and cultural relevance and functioning. Recent studies of reality television dissect the ramifications of viewership on citizens, most frequently in terms of damage as opposed to enlightenment, while highlighting the ways in which the genre serves to perpetuate dominant ideological beliefs. By participating in the consumption of reality television, viewers are in effect, part of a collective culture which, based on individual experiences and understanding, interprets and creates relevant meaning from the messages brought forth by reality television programming. Even when characters operate outside of *traditional* spaces, spaces that reject white supremacy and patriarchy, critics and scholars generally view them as *agentless* and operating within these institutions. Reading characters in this way ignores how their behavior, in many ways, resists institutionalized understandings of race, class, and gender. In *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth about Guilty Pleasure TV*, Jennifer Pozner places a significant amount of responsibility on reality television producers and admonishes them for their role in resurrecting anachronistic social biases. She argues that these producers revel in the construction of narratives that perpetuate archaic beliefs about women and minorities while editing footage to fit within a predetermined direction for the show. In chapter five titled “Erasing Ethnicity, Encoding Bigotry” Pozner situates minority representation on

reality television into two epochs: Before *Flavor of Love* (BF, 2000-2006) and after *Flavor of Love* (AF):

Let us remake Black people in advertising's eternal image...So producers birthed a minstrel show and called it *Flavor of Love*, and it was bad, and Kentucky Fried Chicken was happy....people of color began to rule over their own plots of televisual land. But there was much suffering; visibility became a plague on their McMansions. Competing Cable Suits discovered Black *Housewives* in Atlanta, reformed Black and Latino men *From G's to Gents*, and taught *White Rappers* their place. And so it was, and so it still is today. We shall call this age "AF."

Pozner's remarks, though obviously satirical, imply that minority representation on television is not only problematic but riddled with disturbing images that serve to diminish any true contributions to societal understanding of minority culture. Pozner's frustration, it appears, stems from the networks inability to create constructive representations of blackness. Pozner goes on to discuss the "token" minority appearance on a variety of whitewashed shows during the BF epoch such as *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, and *Who Wants to Marry My Dad* as consistently stoking "classic racial stereotypes; yet, in some cases she argues that when minority women were *allowed* a chance to win, their ethnicity was "whitened" to make both the network and audience more comfortable."⁷ Pozner credits the creation of stock characters such as the "Black Bitch," the "Entitled Diva," the "Hootchie Mama," the "Ghetto Girl," and the "Mammy" to reality television producers and laments the BF days of invisibility when these characters' sporadic appearances were less harmful. Pozner's critique of stock minority characters is valuable but ignores the ways in which class performance plays a significant role in how audiences view these characters. Take for example, Pozner's analysis of *The*

⁷ Jennifer L. Pozner, *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth about Guilty Pleasure TV*, (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2010), Kindle edition, chap. 5.

Apprentice's Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth, the “Angry Black Woman,” “Entitled Diva,” and “Black Bitch” of the series. Pozner categorizes Omarosa as the most “famous nonwhite personality ever to emerge from network reality television.”⁸ Unlike her black counterparts on dating competition shows, at the time of *The Apprentice* Omarosa was a doctoral candidate at Howard University who previously worked for the Clinton Administration. Pozner states that by the time the show was over, producers helped Omarosa add another title to her resume: Angry Black Woman. For Pozner, Omarosa’s stereotypical portrayal, at the hands of producers and network executives, further highlighted the inherent flaws within women of color as irrational, quick to anger, and lazy. Omarosa’s sin, says Pozner, was that she “dared to discuss race” on primetime television; thus, forcing producers and audiences to cast her as a villain. While these components of the analysis ring true, Pozner ignores the ways in which Omarosa’s performance of class almost predetermined the way that producers chose to portray her. How so?

Reality Bites Back offers readers a “stock” analysis of racial stereotypes and representations of blackness in the media. This research attempts to critically examine the ways that these stereotypes and representations speak not only to race but to class performance. Pozner’s claims strip reality television performers of their agency by placing all control of representation in the hands of the producers. By analyzing class performance in conversation with that of race, it becomes clear that in many ways performing class lends an aura of authenticity to these characters that simply performing race does not. To be clear, both performances have consequences; however, performing

⁸ Pozner, *Reality Bites Back*, chap. 5.

race implies that which Pozner deems problematic: whitewashing. However, performing class, which is what characters like NeNe and Flavor Flav accomplish, accounts for that agency, which Pozner so easily disregards. Analyses operating through the lens of stock stereotypes cannot fully address the ways in which some of these characteristics, cast as stereotypes, are authentic representations of individual characteristics. Pozner's pitfalls exist when she casts any black woman with "stereotypical" characteristics as a damaging representation of blackness.

The struggles of recognition and visibility are constant in the African American community. Popular culture's significance to this visibility cannot be understated, though as Pozner and many other scholars posit, not all recognition is created equal. Creating distance between low and high culture or positive and negative representations of blackness presupposes participation in "low culture" as a lack of intellect. Herman Gray's *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* examines the ways in which "culture matters politically and politics matter culturally."⁹ Though in many ways concerned with the "quality" of black representation, Gray's analysis questions "conventional assumptions about recognition and visibility."¹⁰ Further, and perhaps most importantly, Gray is extremely critical of narrow cultural ideas that limit investigation and inquiry into the restricted realm of the stereotype. In chapter one, "The New Conditions of Black Cultural Production" Gray highlights legitimacy as a characteristic of black cultural production when there exists a relationship between that production and dominant national institutions of culture. While Gray primarily references

⁹ Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves*, 78.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

museums and theatre, Prime Time television also meets the criteria for a dominant national institution of culture. Situating NeNe Leaks within Gray's analysis highlights the ways in which legitimization follows recognition within the cultural production hierarchy. Within the capitalist model, legitimization follows the acquisition of capital. For popular culture icons like NeNe Leaks who is both legitimate and recognizable, it becomes clear how black class performance challenges national narratives of blackness. Gray is suspicious of those scholars who refuse to modify the lens through which they view blackness and encourages audiences to reject these analyses:

Activists, industry insiders, and in some cases, scholars continue to interpret the viewing habits and preferences of black, Latino, and Asian audiences, compared to whites, as the periodic expression of grievance by disaffected political subjects. This unwillingness, even inability to see communities of color as more than aggrieved political subjects is evidence of the lingering effects of a post-World War II liberal discourse of national identity.¹¹

Unlike Pozner, Gray is suggesting an alternate way of reading popular culture, one in which agents replace subjects as the primary players. Furthermore, Gray understands the complexities of black identity, the multiplicity associated with blackness and rejects, in every way, a normative black identity:

Regarding representation of blackness (in the United States), the question of who has a rightful claim on a particular version of blackness as representative, or indeed the need to delimit what constitutes blackness, no longer defines the terms of black cultural production. Most immediately, this means that the still entrenched language of positive or negative images, polemics about the commodification of blackness, and the endless search for authenticating narratives have come under critical scrutiny and finally been put to rest.¹²

¹¹ Gray, *Cultural Moves*, chap. 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, chap. 1.

Gray also makes this argument in his groundbreaking work, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*. *Watching Race* subtly engages in a discourse of difference that rejects hegemonic binaries of positive versus negative representations of blackness. Gray understands that “television itself...constituted a significant social site for shaping, defining, contesting, and representing claims about American society,” an argument which he later recants in *Cultural Moves*. Published in 1995, *Watching Race* focuses on television as the primary medium through which representations of blackness surfaced for mass consumption; however, in the decade that followed, *Gray* reflects more on the ways in which not only media but also “commodification and technology” function as “social forces and circumstances structuring the conditions of possibility within which black cultural politics are enacted...”¹³ Further, in *Cultural Moves*, (2005), Gray expresses the need for an ideological transition *from* any view that understands network television as the primary discursive site for black cultural politics. While Gray does not ignore television’s role entirely, he warns both scholars and activists that focusing solely on the role of television is “myopic” and that neglecting to account for the “profound transformations in the structure of global media and information technologies will at best produce limited political results.”¹⁴ To support these claims, Gray focuses on the ways in which cultural differences are “aggressively” incorporated into the global marketing strategy of media conglomerates; thus, fundamentally altering television’s role in structuring national identity. The art of crafting “homogeneity from difference” an idea that frames his argument in *Watching Race*, is strangely absent from

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Cultural Moves. By arguing that the global recognition of difference necessitates a need to reorganize the significance of various forms of cultural production, Gray is synonymizing recognition, acceptance, and representation, which I argue, is problematic. My research situates television, despite the ever progressing media-scape, as central to any discourse of representation in the United States. Gray's rejection of television as central to the fashioning of an integrated national identity ignores the ways in which audiences interpret culture through television. Another point of concern in *Cultural Moves* is the complete absence of reality television as a *new* source of identity articulation. When arguing that black cultural production is no longer defined by debates regarding *what* constitutes blackness and that the "polemics about the commodification of blackness" as well as the "endless search for authenticating narratives...have finally been put to rest," Gray ignores the vast majority of reality television critique both by scholars and civil rights activists.¹⁵ Pozner's work clearly engages in the very discourse that Gray argues no longer exists. In many ways, despite Gray's claims to the contrary, the discourse regarding *what* characteristics constitute blackness effectively destroys any representations that the critique deems problematic. Pozner's analysis of both *Flavor of Love* and *The Apprentice* suggest that neither Flavor Flav's nor Omarosa's blackness are acceptable. Though Pozner identifies both forms of representation as staged by and reflective of producers who type cast minorities based on stereotypes; , the argument, (the one that Gray says no longer exists), diminishes those representations as insufficient, negative, and as my research will show, not white enough.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Reality television occupies a different ideological space than the situation comedies that are the focus of Gray's analysis. Namely, reality television stars, despite critics who relegate them to a class of undesirable subjects, are in fact, responsible for their own *brand* and thus, enact a level of agency unknown to actors in the 1980s and 1990s. Unlike actors in situation comedies who are playing a character and are then interviewed as their "authentic" selves, reality television participants *perform* themselves and certain characteristics both on their respective television shows as well as in interviews. Their actions are not the actions of writers or actors *playing* characters but are rather, in some way, authentic reflections of their own identities. Despite evidence to the contrary, critics of reality television argue that its participants are, in fact operating within a preexisting narrative framework established by network executives and producers; thus, any claims to "authenticity" are invalid, misleading, and deceitful. While it is undeniable that producers stage conflicts, lie to participants, and fill houses with alcohol to illicit desired responses, reality television participants, despite the subtle nudging of producers, are still responding authentically. Therefore audience interpretation of reality television stars is in fact a reaction to an authentic person as opposed to an actor playing a character. The *performance* then, lends itself to interpretation as authentic despite the narrative structuring of executives and producers. Though network television situation comedies and reality television occupy vastly different spaces, political and cultural representations of blackness, are interpreted and viewed through the cultural and political lens of dominance. In what ways then, are views of blackness shaped by political discourse and economic climate? How is blackness, observed through a white

supremacist framework, ever deemed acceptable? Finally, how does black class performance serve to either isolate or make inclusive, the beliefs of the dominant white?

Blackness, as a cultural sign, continues to be fraught with narratives of “welfare cheats...family disintegration and epidemic drug use and violence.”¹⁶ Representations of blackness on American network television, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, became products *of* and narrators to the cultural discourse of the new right under Ronald Reagan’s leadership. As an essential component of the nation’s new conservative discourse, whiteness, by way of its rejection of *stereotypical* blackness, “helped to stage and install the neoconservative hegemony referred to as Reaganism” (Ibid.). Reaganism’s role in shaping constructions of blackness in the United States cannot be understated this ideology rejects Gray’s analysis in *Cultural Moves* that globalization and the discourse of difference have fundamentally altered critiques of authentic blackness:

American network television’s representation of blacks as expressions of social menace and male irresponsibility (and its opposite—the *Cosby Show* ideal of responsibility and citizenship) cannot be understood apart from the aggressive (and largely effective) attempts on the part of the new right to reconfigure and establish a conservative hegemony hostile to progressive notions of racial entitlements.¹⁷

In *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, Kevin Kruse traces the history of conservatism in Atlanta through the movements of what he deems “ordinary segregationists.”¹⁸ Kruse explores and then rejects the traditional segregationist narrative which places politicians at the center and ignores the goals and work performed at the grassroots level. To understand the dominance of the New Right argues Kruse, requires

¹⁶ Gray, *Cultural Moves*, chap. 1.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) 8.

an understanding of the ordinary whites involved in the white flight movement and how segregationist ideology is linked to the massive resistance of modern conservatism. Additionally, Kruse seeks to articulate the connections between “southern segregationists and modern conservatives” by recreating the framework analysis to, in some way, humanize the desires of the segregationists:

Like all people, they did not think of themselves in terms of what they opposed but rather in terms of what they supported. The conventional wisdom has held that they were only fighting *against* the rights of others. But, in their own minds, segregationists were instead fighting *for* rights of their own...the true goal of desegregation, these white southerners insisted, was not to end the system of racial oppression in the South, but to install a new system that oppressed them instead.¹⁹

By challenging the existing framework through which the politics of the New Right are analyzed, Kruse effectively modifies social and cultural understandings of whites, race, and segregation in the South. To be clear, Kruse in no way celebrates the actions and ideologies of conservatism, in fact, the contrary is true; however, his work focuses on the characteristics of southern history that continue to contribute to the national narrative of Reaganism. Primarily focusing on urban versus suburban housing, integrated schools and public spaces, Kruse highlights the complexities associated with desegregation as well as the advent of conservative language, which masked with subtleties, still carries the underlying racism of the segregationist movement. In this way, white southern conservatives who were “forced to abandon their traditional, populist, and often starkly racist demagoguery” due to the civil rights movement, successfully created a new

¹⁹ Ibid., 9.

platform “on a language of rights, freedoms, and individualism.”²⁰ White flight and the politics of the New Right provide important context to understanding not only representations of blackness in modern reality television but also the ways in which images of blackness are interpreted and internalized in the national consciousness. Historical events such as the great migration and white flight provide significant insight into the cultural and social environments through which narratives about race are actualized. In the case of NeNe Leaks’ role in the *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, much of the criticism juxtaposed with discourse on the politics of representation, has to do with the way that her behavior and class performance fails to assimilate to the characteristics deemed appropriate by the white establishment. In a way, NeNe’s class performance normalizes blackness in a way that has not been previously accomplished. She intrudes on traditional white economic spaces without assimilating to white norms and thus, simultaneously disrupts both race and class. Just as Gray highlights the role of Reagan’s politics in the shaping of a national racist discourse, one in which blackness becomes associated with a “welfare state” so too does Kruse necessitate the realization of links between radical segregationists and the politics of the new right.

No other image permeates American consciousness and challenges notions of racial entitlement more than *The Cosby Show*. Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis address the cultural and critical responses to *The Cosby Show* in *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show Audiences and the Myth of the American Dream*. Jhally and Lewis circumvent criticism of their analysis by presenting both the benefits and challenges associated with the show by structuring their text around two different interpretations; the case for and;

²⁰ Ibid., 6.

the case against. In the case for *The Cosby Show* Jhally and Lewis engage popular culture critics who view the show's focus on a black affluent family as progressive and resistant to traditional stereotypes of blackness. Though many argue that the show "lets racism off the hook," Jhally and Lewis highlight the show's quiet subtlety and provide as an example the naming of Sandra's children, the Huxtable's first grandchildren, as Nelson and Winnie. This, argue Jhally and Lewis is indicative of the show's quiet style and the primary way through which the sitcom was able to insert a quiet discourse and dialogue on race. Further, "the case for" section argues that those criticizing the show's handling of complex racial issues do not understand the strict limits that sitcoms must operate within and by their very structure, they are unable to spend significant time on "critical social disorders" that deserve "serious, thoughtful treatment."²¹ Perhaps most importantly, critics argue that *The Cosby Show* "has confronted...the deep-rooted racism of white Americans who find it difficult to accept racial equality" and that in many cases it forces this very audience to "view black folk as *human beings*."²² Just as Dovey, Gray, and Pozner emphasize the importance of profit and ratings, *Enlightened Racism* traces production decisions, writing, and disputes to a streamlined focus on profit margin, ratings, and a crossover appeal through which white audiences could respect, admire and identify with. In the "case against," Jhally and Lewis present an argument more clearly in line, it seems, with their own ideologies and the remaining sections of the book. *The Cosby Show*, they argue, functions as a great deceiver, ignoring the systemic injustices inherent to American society and uplifting the ideal of the mythical American dream.

²¹ Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream*, (Westview Press, 1992). 5

²² Ibid.

Almost strictly aligned with the politics of the new right (Reaganism), the *Cosby Show*, much like Oprah Winfrey's rise to success in the 1990s, served to perpetuate the mythical American dream as achievable by all through hard work and dedication. Further, the "we're just like you" representation allowed white audiences to interpret the Huxtables as normal and ignore the obvious social, cultural and political inequalities that prevent upward mobility for many black Americans. This falsehood associated with mobility is even more problematic as it not only ignores economic barriers (the working poor are hard working but in no way mobile) but provides white audiences with an *out* as it pertains to representations of blackness and black cultural production. *The Cosby Show* then, further alienates the black underclass and provides a dangerous example for political conservatism.

Jhally and Lewis' text is important to my research, primarily because it examines the way in which performing race, in accordance to white standards, contributes to the Reagan era discourse of equality and success availability for all who seek it. This is not to say, as some argue, that *The Cosby Show* is not black enough, but rather to expose the inherent fallacies in the way that the show ignores the limits to mobility and normalizes middle class life. Further and perhaps most importantly, *The Cosby Show* and shows like it are used as proof that racism is no longer an issue or that the only barrier to a truly meritocratic society is material success and work ethic. Once black people achieve middle class status, like the Huxtables, then surely racism will no longer be an issue. This is not an intention to negate the success and benefits of *The Cosby Show* but rather to illustrate the ways in which this alleviation of responsibility serves to create a social environment in which white audiences and leaders no longer see the need for structural

change. Allowing white audiences to internalize a black presence in the national consciousness on the basis of class ignores the majority of black families whose membership into the middle class is just as mystical and mythical as the material success promised through the fulfillment of the American dream. Though reality television provides a different perspective, particularly in regards to representations of race, class, and even gender, characters like NeNe Leaks' rejection of race performance does, at least, lend an air of authenticity to conversations about race. Surely NeNe Leaks and Bill Cosby occupy distinct cultural spaces; however, where Cliff Huxtable fails to represent even the most remote facets of the black community, NeNe Leaks' raw vernacular, unruly children, and marriage problems are not just funny but relatable to black audiences. Undeniably more economically *successful* than the Huxtables, NeNe Leaks obtained financial freedom in a way that rejects the conservatism so associated with Reagan era politics. Claire and Cliff Huxtable represent upper middle class black professionals whose journey included undergraduate degrees from a fictional historically black college, Cliff, an MD and Claire a JD, their family is composed of married parents who visit weekly, an enormous brownstone and the proverbial white picket fence. This *normalcy* accounts for neither the family nor economic crisis in the black community. The Huxtables effectively perform both race and class; however, the performance does little to normalize blackness. *The Cosby Show* fails to manage or contribute to the discourse of difference by normalizing the upper middle class Huxtables. When juxtaposing this type of race/class performance with characters like NeNe Leaks, it becomes clear how, despite critics like Pozner, differing representations of blackness, even those that are perceived as "negative" successfully contribute to a discourse of

difference. White audiences may not necessarily relate to Atlanta's most infamous housewife; however, they *see* her through a lens that better manages cultural difference.

In their qualitative audience study, Jhally and Lewis interviewed working class white people who found that *Cosby* is *much better* (compared to other black sitcoms)...*the actors are much better...they're a lot funnier than the other two...like Amen and 227*. One respondent explained that she couldn't relate to *Amen* as it was *not quite a family show...I shouldn't say that..it's just not like ours*.²³ Both *Amen* and *227* featured all black casts and families, much like *The Cosby Show*; however white audiences perceived these working class? black families as unrealistic despite the fact that both contained more realistic representations of black family life than *The Cosby Show*. Just as white audiences fail to understand the familial component of shows like *Amen* and *227*, it is likely true that *Real Housewives of Atlanta* fails to capture the white imagination as realistic. The important component to recognize is that class performance changes the dynamic through which characters are viewed; thus allowing people like NeNe Leaks and Flavor Flav access to *white* social spaces that in many ways they reject simply because of their refusal to perform race.

Ellis Cose's *The Rage of a Privileged Class*, though not concerned with popular culture representations of blackness, discusses the social and cultural disconnect between the black middle and underclass. Focusing primarily on race and class in the workplace through a series of interviews, Cose uncovers the "rage" of the middle class as invisibility. *Rage* works in direct opposition to the meritocratic, color-blind discursive functions of the new right that guarantee acceptance through hard work and material

²³ Jhally and Lewis, *Enlightened Racism*, 25

wealth-the characteristics that compose the American dream. Alienation, a recurring theme in many of the interviews, stems from achieving the desired components of the American dream; yet, still being relegated to the status of *other*. For critics like Jhally, Lewis, and others, this reality is where representations like those in *The Cosby Show* miss the mark. Clair and Cliff Huxtable spend significant time ensuring that their children know black history, musicians, literature, and art; however, the show spends almost no time navigating the terrain of racism that surely a successful attorney (Claire) and prominent doctor (Cliff) would experience in their work lives. Black management consultant Edward W. Jones who specializes in racial issues remarked that “if we think just education middleclass values, and proper enunciation will be adequate, we’re making a serious mistake.”²⁴ This “serious mistake” is apparent in the criticism identified by Jhally and Lewis in *Enlightened Racism*. Cose also explores the seemingly unbridgeable chasm that exists between black and white interpretations of “basic facts of American life.”²⁵ Identification, relatability, and representation are in some ways classless, argues Cose. In the example of the Rodney King beating, a group of UCLA researchers who examined and explored the intricacies of the existing chasm were astonished to discover that blacks, economically removed from Rodney King’s world, even cared about the incident:

Economic success is no remedy for despair over what blacks perceive as deeply rooted racial inequities. *But why should that be?* Why shouldn’t blacks who are affluent, well-educated, and blessed by life acknowledge their good fortune and be content? Why should blacks making six and seven figure incomes identify with the likes of Rodney King?²⁶

²⁴ Rage 12

²⁵ Rage 182

²⁶ Rage 184

Cose highlights this apparent anomaly to explain how blackness, despite intra-community socio-economic gaps, is itself, identifiable, a concept which many white Americans struggle to understand. *Rage* provides numerous examples in which the “benefits of material success do not include exemption from being treated as a nigger,” a social and cultural reality that many *The Cosby Show* ignores and the conservative politicians pretends does not exist.²⁷ Working in direct opposition to the middle class values and ideas of mobility favored by conservative ideology, I argue that while alienation is not likely to be reduced by economic mobility, characters like NeNe Leaks perform class in a way that is *resistant*. This resistance, despite their accumulation of material wealth, shirks traditional class ideology and refuses to be seen as anything other than black. What *Rage* offers to this discourse is a community of black middle class *success* stories in which emotional turmoil and alienation exist, despite the promises of acceptance by the dominant ideology. Cose’s work is powerful in that it emphasizes the ways in which blackness is a site of resistance in American culture. Reality television personalities and the critiques that accompany their *performances* remind us that to be a representation of blackness is to be criticized as not black enough or too black for white consumption. In an industry defined by profit and ratings, television has, for too long managed the ways in which black identity should be articulated and then generated for mass consumption. NeNe Leaks and others like her resist the confines of white supremacist ideology by performing class in a unique way, one in which *blackness* is not covered or hidden but celebrated and encouraged.

²⁷ *Rage* 190

There are more and more examples of this type of resistance through modern black images. For examples, there are organizations dedicated to a reimagining of Eurocentric standards of beauty in which black hair is celebrated rather than turned into a political statement. There are *successful* black women in politics, radio, film, and television that consistently but more importantly, intentionally, resist the confines of assimilation and middle class values that are repeatedly normalized in the United States. This category of women consists of lesbians, heterosexuals, wealthy, poor, teachers, entertainers, housewives, and business women, all of whom, in their own ways, share in the politics of blackness and express, *authentically*, a black identity that manages and contributes to a discourse of difference.

Introduction

Whether it's Beulah, Julia, Get Christy Love, Thea, or Moesha, one of the most pervasive problems of representation on American television has been the lack of scope and depth offered in its purview. African-Americans' furious responses to images of themselves have been directed less toward specific programs than toward perpetually limited roles, histories, and reflections of Black life portrayed on American and world television monitors.

Beretta E. Smith-Shomade

With its multitude of subgenres, larger than life personalities, and fifteen minutes of fame offerings, reality television has quickly changed the face and economics of television culture. Media and popular culture scholars have long expressed interest in the politics of representation on television; the popularity of reality television elicited an entirely new thread of scholarship—one focusing on *authentic* representation. The *unscripted* though undeniably *provoked* plot paired with the absence of professional actors only added to the mass frenzy associated with the reality television phenomenon, which initially, caused major networks to scramble in an attempt to produce the next prime time reality television hit. In its earliest incarnations, it was clear that reality television would forever change the relationship between the network, performers, and viewers. Surely, critiques of mass media production did not begin with reality television; however, the very name of the platform—“reality”—elicited emotional responses from un(der) represented communities who viewed either the absence or representation(s) of their communities as inaccurate or biased. Inarguably, the very foundation on which *reality* television is built takes the core argument surrounding the politics of representation, and turns it upside down. The primary tenets of representation in media scholarship operate under the assumption that cultural production operates

by and through white (patriarchal) supremacist ideologies. Reality television however, reminds those activists and scholars concerned with representation that in fact, reality television stars are *performing* as themselves; thus, shifting the responsibility of representation to the performer.

America's black community has always had a troubled relationship with television. Requests for truly representative images were often met with more typecasting as slaves, mammies, maids, or jezebels. The advent of reality television and the *performances* associated with the new platform were met with hopes of images that would reject the old tropes and highlight the richness of the black cultural experience. Some black audiences were disappointed by what they deemed the networks' negative portrayal of the black American experience, while others felt redeemed to just *see* images of blackness on their screens. For their part, black reality television performers were forced to navigate their new roles as representatives of an entire community. In this way, the reality television platform occupies a unique space in the national consciousness, in which those performing on reality television are given the task of speaking for and representing their entire community.

My aim in this thesis is to simultaneously expand and complicate scholarship that views representations of blackness, specifically on television, in terms of authenticity. As a subgenre, Reality Television is an interesting point of departure, due both to the way that it is marketed—*reality*—and to mass audience consumption. This work seeks to shift the conversation away from positive versus negative representations of blackness and black cultural performance to the

significance of the dialogue that these images create. To understand what role *performance* plays in the way that we view various images of blackness on reality television, this research uses *Real Housewives of Atlanta* star NeNe Leakes' rise to fame. In many ways, NeNe epitomizes the mythical American Dream as a real life representation of "rags to riches." As an example of representation, characters like NeNe evoke feelings of resentment within the black middle class; yet, her performance *of* and modification *to* the existing class dichotomies challenge not just understandings of blackness, but cultural assumptions about class.

Reality and performance may seem etymologically antonymous; yet, even a cursory viewing of any reality television show highlights their coexistence. Reality television as performance has never been more on display than in Bravo's *Real Housewives* franchise. Bravo Television introduced the world to what would eventually be known as *The Real Housewives* franchise on March 21st, 2006 with the premier of *The Real Housewives of Orange County*. The premise of the show, to expose "life beyond a wealthy, gated community" quickly captured the interest of American viewers and forever secured a place in the reality television canon.²⁸ To date, the franchise has run for 49 seasons, has over 710 episodes, and a multitude of spinoffs following the lives of the show's most watched characters. *Real Housewives of Atlanta* and *New York* premiered in 2008, *New Jersey* in 2009, *DC* and *Beverly Hills* in 2010, and *Miami*, the most recent incarnation, premiered in 2011.²⁹ Just as

²⁸ "Bravo: The Real Housewives of Orange County," accessed November 7, 2014, www.bravotv.com/the-real-housewives-of-orange-county/season-1/episode-one.

²⁹ "Bravo Ratings: The Only Source for All Bravo TV's Nielsen Ratings," last modified August 14, 2014, accessed November 7, 2014, <http://bravoratings.com/housewives/>.

scripted television before it, reality television has a troubled relationship with minorities and representation. The initial *Real Housewives of Orange County* (RHOC) followed an all white, affluent, female cast and primarily focused on the often troubled relationships between the women, their roles in their communities, and of course, the way that they spent their money. Premiering on October 7, 2008, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* quickly catapulted to the top of the franchise. Featuring a primarily black cast, the series opens with images of grandeur and applauds conspicuous consumption. Just as RHOC before it, RHOA's focus on wealth, troubled relationships, and violent outbursts made it an instant success amongst viewers-it's first season opened to 1.5 million viewers.³⁰ Despite the show's success, critics found its portrayal of black femininity damaging, dangerous, and inaccurate. The politics of respectability, particularly as they pertain to Black womanhood, require that black women behave in a way that rejects commonly held societal beliefs about blackness. Historically, white women were "urged to avoid the public sphere" and were relegated to the realm of domesticity, while Black women's lives were and remain, extremely public. Essentially, the actions of one black woman could become representative of the entire race. As such, Black respectability operates under the expectation "that black women would represent the race by fighting for racial equality."³¹ In *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism & Politics of Respectability* E. Frances White explains that respectability operates as a "discourse of resistance" that primarily focuses on the morals of black women as positive; thus,

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Frances White, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism & Politics of Respectability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 36.

rejecting stereotypes that target them as “innately inferior.”³² Unfortunately, respectability politics serve to “authorize” racist stereotypes by focusing energy on the ways in which white people perceive black bodies, actions, and souls.³³ The problem with respectability politics and the Black community’s adherence to them is that they work by way of assimilation and function to create a “we’re just like you” culture that deems blackness as problematic, flawed, and inherently wrong.

The *Real Housewives of Atlanta* is an interesting case study, not only because the cast is primarily Black but because of the way in which the women’s behavior is characterized by fans and critics alike. Whereas the women on *Orange County, Beverly Hills, New York*, and *New Jersey* are free to behave as they wish without the burden of carrying an entire culture (though *New Jersey’s* primarily Italian cast may feel some of these hardships) the Atlanta cast’s behavior is seen and accepted as “uniquely black, a confirmation of a host of stereotypes about poor, ignorant, urban people; loud, angry black women; and shiftless black men.”³⁴ More than any other cast member, *RHOA* star NeNe Leakes takes the idea of respectability politics and turns it on its ugly head. Leakes’ personality rejects the idea of quiet manners, church-going morality, and shuns the responsibility of being a representative image of blackness. On the show, NeNe’s behavior is rude, crude, and socially unacceptable; yet, she argues that what we see and encounter week after week, is her own personal truth. The idea that her behavior is representative of an entire community of eye-rolling, neck snapping, tongue popping black women, seems

³² Ibid., 36

³³ Ibid., 36

³⁴ Tamara Winfrey Harris, "No Disrespect," Bitch Media, last modified 2012, accessed November 8, 2014, <http://bitchmagazine.org/article/no-disrespect>.

ludicrous; yet more than any other community, black critics are the most vocal regarding her behavior.

The Real Housewives of the World Wide Web: Consumption, Reception, and Analysis

Let us remake Black people in advertising's eternal image...So producers birthed a minstrel show and called it *Flavor of Love*, and it was bad, and Kentucky Fried Chicken was happy...people of color began to rule over their own plots of televisual land. But there was much suffering; visibility became a plague on their McMansions. Competing Cable Suites discovered *Housewives* in Atlanta, reformed Black and Latino men from *G's to Gents*, and taught *White Rappers* their place. And so it was, and so it still is today.

Jennifer Pozner

Despite what some will try to get you to believe, diverse representation in film, television, fashion, etc is important and I am someone who truly believes it can make a difference. When you have Lupita Nyong'o standing up and saying that she never felt beautiful until Alek Wek exploded onto the scene or that she didn't believe she could be an actress until she saw Oprah Winfrey in *The Color Purple*, how can you ignore the impact of seeing others like yourself onscreen?

Kara R. Brown, *Yo, I'm Just Sayin*

Scholar and author of *Reality Bites Back* Jennifer Pozner interprets a vast majority of black representation on reality television as troublesome. She acknowledges that "people of color began to rule over their own plots of televisual land," on reality television, but deems the commodification of minority cultural experiences problematic.³⁵ Conversely, blogger Kara R. Brown realizes the impact of "seeing others like yourself onscreen" and admonishes the view that relegates reality television, specifically shows with primarily black casts, as trash.³⁶ Denying that *Real Housewives of Atlanta's* NeNe Leakes' behavior on the show may feed into dominant ideological beliefs about black

³⁵ Jennifer Pozner, *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth about Guilty Pleasure TV*, (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2010), Kindle Edition.

³⁶ Kara R. Brown, "Why I Like 'Bad' TV," *Yo, I'm just sayin...*, last modified March 13, 2014, <http://yoimjustsayin.com/2014/03/13/why-i-like-bad-tv/>.

womanhood is counterproductive. On the contrary, what we are seeing more and more is the *recognition* that her actions are often over the top; yet, black women tune in to watch, support, and claim her as one of their own. Prior to the proliferation of reality television, the black experience was defined by drive by shootings, gang violence, drug abuse or distribution, poverty, absentee fathers, and prison. Films like *Menace to Society*, *Boyz in the Hood*, *South Central*, *New Jack City*, *State Property*, and *Belly* exposed the world to one, albeit problematic, element of the Black (male) American experience—as a result, this cultural component became to be understood as the all encompassing, authentic representation of Black American culture. The family business mentality that frames many discussions and debates about RHOA acknowledges the problems with the behavior without relegating those participating in the viewing as agentless, subjugated, coerced masses. The current season’s (7) flair for the dramatic, outbursts, and altercations elicit a variety of responses ranging from trash to empowerment to enlightenment.

There are countless blogs, op-eds, and tweets highlighting the cultural impact of both NeNe Leakes and the *Real Housewives of Atlanta*. More than any other social media outlet, however, Twitter provides a space for Black users to create a society “centered on the interest of young blacks online.”³⁷ Black Twitter, a unique society within Twitter with “inside jokes, slang and rules” acts as an “extension” of the black experience and perhaps most importantly, “increases visibility of black people online.”³⁸ This enhanced visibility, is precisely what the reality television experience accomplishes, despite the

³⁷ Soraya Nadia McDonald, "Black Twitter: A virtual community ready to hashtag out a response to cultural issues," The Washington Post, (2014), http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/black-twitter-a-virtual-community-ready-to-hashtag-out-a-response-to-cultural-issues/2014/01/20/41ddacf6-7ec5-11e3-9556-4a4bf7bcbd84_story.html.

³⁸ Ibid.

various critical responses. Black visibility on television, film, and the internet effectively demolishes the belief that white is the *only* standard. In the blogosphere, one of the appeals of *Real Housewives of Atlanta* is that the show features all types of black women and girls, and it is through the exposure to *difference* that young black women can begin to authentically articulate their own unique identities:

These shows featured all kinds of black women and girls—professionals and artists, smart and dumb, women with mounds of natural hair and those who unabashedly wore weaves, and more than a few carefree black girls. Their stories also showed that not every single issue that comes up in the lives of black people is directly related to blackness—sometimes they’re just about humanness.³⁹

Just as some believe shows like RHOA provide diverse images of black women and complicate the way that the world views, interacts with, and understands the black cultural experience in the United States, many believe shows like RHOA only serve to perpetuate negative stereotypes surrounding the black experience. Ta-Nehisi Coates is a national correspondent at *The Atlantic* who writes about cultural, political, and social issues effecting marginalized groups in the United States. Described as one of the most “provocative, original, and perceptive voices in American culture,” as well as one of the most “elegant and sharp observers of race in America,” Coates’ work on race and blackness has won him top honors.⁴⁰ Though Coates has not formally critiqued or supported the *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, he uses social media as a forum to discuss his opinions about the show:

³⁹ Kara R. Brown, “Why I like ‘bad’ TV.”

⁴⁰ Donna M. Owens, “Baltimore-born Ta-Nehisi Coates makes his case,” *Baltimore Sun*

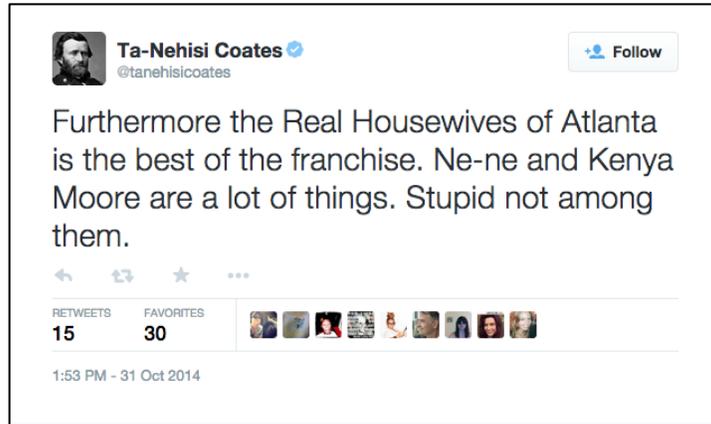


Figure 1

His tweet, outlined in Figure 1 subtly addresses the criticism that NeNe and Kenya (a newer addition to the show) are “stupid.” In Figure 2, we see responses from his followers, some who agree with his assessment, and others like Michonne and Eliyahu Flink who view not only the show, but the housewives as “vapid garbage.”⁴¹



Figure 2



Figure 3

41

User @ErickaSimone even goes as far as to address respectability politics; yet, based on her responses to Coates’ twitter feed, still deems the portrayal of NeNe as inaccurate. This argument, though not uncommon, fails in its disregard for the dialogue that NeNe’s behavior generates. At its core, this statement is a contradiction as it suggests that one accurate portrayal of black women does exist—just not on Bravo’s *Real Housewives of Atlanta*.



Figure 4

Michonne’s belief that RHOA “doesn’t rep” her, feeds not only into the fallacy of respectability politics but also attacks the viewers who see the show in a favorable light as incapable of discernment. Users like Team Twirl (@ariannataken) understand RHOA, not as a representation of all things black, but as one of many variations on the black experience.

In a “bitchmedia” blog post titled “The 99%: Why the Real Housewives of Atlanta Aren’t ‘Our Kind of People’” poster Gretchen Sisson describes the women on RHOA as “caricatured and over-representative of what we think wealthy black women should look like.”⁴² In her critique of the way that black women are represented on the show, Sisson notes that her concerns are not solely about race but also about class; she states that most viewers know that the franchise’s other incarnations are not featuring the “real upper class,” because there is a different white upper class represented elsewhere:

Today’s *Real Housewives*, by virtue of their excessive wealth rather than mere upper-middle class stability, represent an even narrower demographic. When one of the few shows that overtly portrays black wealth...is mostly a montage of “catfights” and shopping sprees, it is problematic. Without counterpoints, misrepresentations like these feed the narrative that black people “don’t deserve” or “can’t handle” money (ibid.).

Though Sisson views the “catfights” and “shopping sprees” as problematic, her larger concern is that there aren’t enough counterpoints to balance these types of images. There hasn’t been a televised variant of black wealth since *The Cosby Show* and *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*; when reading RHOA in this context as the only evidence of black wealth, we can see how this, as Sisson states, “feeds the narrative” about black people.

In an article discussing respectability politics and RHOA, Tamara Winfrey Harris addresses the critics who claim characters like NeNe Leakes are setting black

⁴² Gretchen Sisson, “The 99%: Why the Real Housewives of Atlanta Aren’t ‘Our Kind of People,’” (*bitchmedia*, January 18 2012,) <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/the-99-real-housewives-of-atlanta-aren%E2%80%99t-our-kind-of-people-feminism-class-television>

women back generations. She argues against the policing of black women's behavior as the answer to gaining mainstream respect:

The goal of respectability politics may be noble, but the execution is flawed, damaging, and ineffective. By indulging in respectability politics, we acquiesce to the racially biased idea that the actions of individual black people are representative of the whole. We add to the pre-existing burdens of racism and sexism. And we fail to solve our problem, because we move the responsibility for eradicating race and gender biases from the powerful institutions and systems that perpetrate them to those oppressed by them.⁴³

Harris' argument against the implementation of respectability politics as the road towards acceptance is important, particularly in the way that we view figures like Leakes. Yes, NeNe Leakes *is* black, she is not however, representative of the entire black cultural experience, the entire black brand, or the entire black image. Leakes' brand as it stands, does not function microcosmically as indicative of an entire community of black womanhood. There exists no one type of blackness. The black cultural experience is rich, diverse, varied-complicated, unique, and beautiful. Public figures like NeNe contribute to the varied discourses that construct narratives of blackness. In many ways, NeNe's refusal to participate in a discourse that polices her behavior and the behavior of other black women marks a transition in the way that some individuals in the black community articulate and authenticate blackness.

Reading the show as resistance does not negate the multitude of ways that this show serves to destabilize black progress, nor does this work seek to ignore scholarship that views representations of black women on reality television in this way, rather, this work seeks to understand the participants and viewers as agents—as able to simultaneously enjoy and problematize the show.

⁴³ Ibid.

Chapter I: “I don’t keep up with the Joneses...I am the Joneses:” Black Identities in the Black Mecca

On the other hand, at a certain point in their existential experience the oppressed feel an irresistible attraction towards the oppressors and their way of life. Sharing this way of life becomes an overpowering aspiration. In their alienation, the oppressed want at any cost to resemble the oppressors, to imitate them, to follow them. This phenomenon is especially prevalent in the middle-class oppressed, who yearn to be equal to the ‘eminent’ men and women of the upper class.⁴⁴

-Paulo Freire *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

So, who are you? Or Who are your parents? they want more than just a name. They want to know how many generations of Atlanta you represent, what year your grandparents graduated from Spelman and Morehouse, which literary club your great-grandmother belonged to, what street in Collier Heights your parents lived on in the sixties, and who in your family goes to Friendship Baptist Church.⁴⁵

-Lawrence Otis Graham *Our Kind of People*

During the opening credits of the first season of *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, images of luxury cars, homes, and events fill the screen. These images, accompanied by voiceovers from each cast member, provide visual insight into the lives of the women on the show and expose a significant historical struggle within Atlanta’s Black community—class division. NeNe Leakes describes the city as a “mecca for wealthy African Americans,” Shereé Whitfield asserts that Atlanta is “new money,” and Kim Zolziak, the show’s only white cast member, claims that “in Atlanta, money and class do give you power.” Described by one housewife as an “elite society of African Americans going to galas, fashion shows, and living in luxury gated communities,” shows like *RHOA* and *Love and Hip-Hop Atlanta* represent an Atlanta scorned by the traditional black elite. These nouveau riche or as Whitfield states “new money” Atlantans are far removed from the working class; yet, they are

⁴⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 62

⁴⁵ Lawrence Otis Graham, *Our Kind of People*, loc 6513

without the pedigree, education, and social club membership required to be considered as members of the city's traditional Black elite.

Widely known as the "Black Mecca," the history of Atlanta's black community is the history of class division. It is characterized by codification, separation, inclusion, and exclusion. Understanding the history of the Black elite helps us to analyze and identify their relevance to cultural modernity, their impact on representations of blackness generally, and their influence on the ways in which certain audiences internalize or reject images of blackness from their city. Further, identifying the separation between the elite and the nouveau riche provides a lens through which we can better determine exactly what spaces characters like NeNe Leakes disrupt as well as how their behavior challenges the way that we think about class in the black community. The origins of Atlanta's black elite are the origins of black class performance and are a direct result of the community's desire for inclusion, recognition, and credibility. The race, class, and gendered spaces that are being challenged by *RHOA* are spaces that the black elite has historically occupied. What does it mean to be a member of the Black elite in Atlanta? How is "elite" defined and how is that definition changing? What relationships exist between Atlanta's working class and elite black communities? Are these communities the same? The answers to these questions matter because they inform the way that we interpret meaning within the cultural signs of blackness. Knowing the history of class distinction in Atlanta helps us to define the cultural and social spaces that these shows both occupy and disrupt. Lastly, this line of questioning exposes the way that certain images of blackness influence the populist American imagination as

well as black cultural narratives in the United States. Defining Atlanta's black elite from its inception and based on its ideologies provides a lens through which we can examine the cultural relevance of Reality TV shows featuring contemporary Black Atlanta.

The Ideology of the Joneses

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Friere describes the ideological and institutional conditions that underscore the behavior of alienated and oppressed communities. Despite and because of their alienation, "the oppressed want at any cost to resemble the oppressors, to imitate them, to follow them." The urge to resemble the oppressor, according to Friere, is born out of a desire for equality and not out of an innate yearning to assimilate. Friere's concepts regarding the behavior of the oppressed not only inform the way that we understand the behavior of the black elite but also the way that various groups within the black community interpret modern images of blackness. Intentionality aside, the black elite's desire for equality often led to a perceived assimilation—much of which caused dynamic ideological distinctions between them and their working class counterparts.

The origins of the Black Elite began with the division of slave labor on southern plantations. The distinction between house and field labor, decided by complexion, resulted in lighter skinned black slaves learning to read, being "introduced to upper-class white traditions" and being permitted to "play or interact with white family members" while darker skinned slaves' exposure was limited.⁴⁶ The caste system characterized by light skinned blacks on one end and darker

⁴⁶ Ibid 356

blacks on the other was further complicated when, due to a unique set of circumstances, such as a white father, some blacks were freed while the vast majority of others remained slaves. Though the number of free blacks in the South was not large—the few who were able to obtain an early freedom created a legacy for their future generations by accumulating “modest wealth” through property ownership and paid work.⁴⁷ After the Civil War, black families with access to education learned marketable skills that led to the creation and expansion of the black elite. The black elite was formed on university campuses and in church congregations, inside funereal homes, banks, and insurance offices, and within the fields of politics, medicine, dentistry, and law.

Tracing their family roots back at least four generations, Atlanta’s Joneses have such strict criteria for inclusion that recognizable names like Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph David Abernathy are considered *new money*. Black professionals from all over the country relocate to the Black Mecca; yet, “you can make a million dollars a year and live in the nicest house in Buckhead, but you’ll never be accepted by the old black elite in this town.”⁴⁸ Met with a unique set of challenges, further complicated by their perceived complicity in the degradation of black working class culture, Atlanta’s black elite’s history is a history of assimilation for the sake of equality. Operating within what DuBois terms “double consciousness,” the Black elite’s behavior and ideology so strongly resembled that of the oppressor that their efforts to uplift the community were met with severe distrust from the working class. The black elite’s yearning for recognition from white Atlantans was not

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid., 6410

individualistic in nature but rather an attempt to secure education, facilities, and resources for the entire black community. Recognition from white Atlantans would provide black politicians and community organizers a seat at the table through which they could work to develop and create opportunity for the community at large. Despite this fact, the Black elite's outward assimilation to white cultural and social norms and their internalization of the oppressor's ideology created intra-race tensions that persist in the city today.

Equally subject to Jim Crow racism, black elites and black working class Atlantans imagined revolutionary change and solutions differently. It is through the complexity of the black experience and through the black elite's imitation of the oppressor that we can begin to understand the various dimensions of the cultural sign of blackness. The Black elite's disdain for Atlanta's *Real Housewives* is shaped, not by hatred, but by fear rooted in a desire to be publically and socially recognized as equal to elite whites.

Operating simultaneously within and outside of white supremacist ideology, Atlanta's black elite perceives representations of blackness on reality television as problematic, namely in the way that narratives of blackness are expressed.

Class Division and the Politics of Respectability

Fear of Black domination led to the Atlanta riots of 1906. The riots marked "the triumph of white supremacy in the city" and ushered in the era of Jim Crow under which black and white Atlantans lived "more separately than ever before."⁴⁹ This event and the resulting suppression of the city's entire Black community resulted in

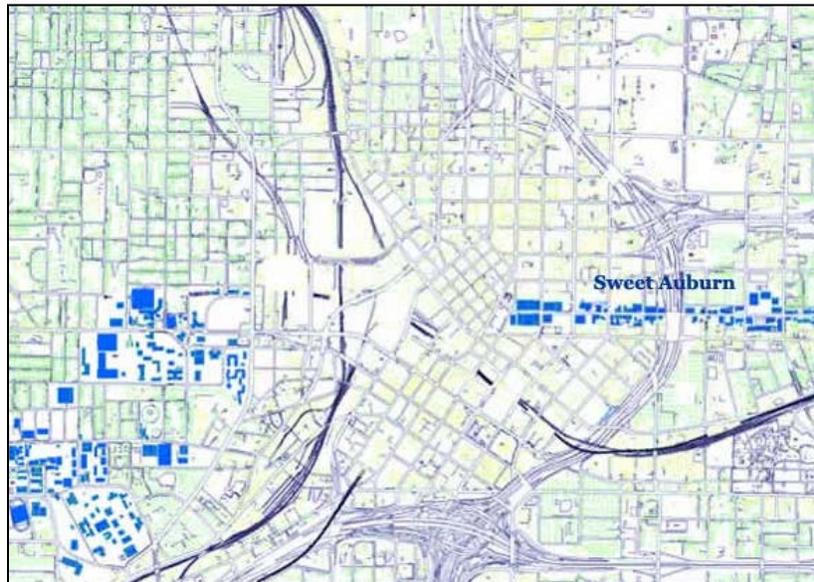
⁴⁹ Karen Ferguson, *Black Politics in New Deal Atlanta*, 22.

the emergence of a city within the city. By the 1930s, Black Atlantans were desperate to escape the atrocities of Jim Crow and thus “intensified their concentration in black Atlanta’s most established neighborhoods” within the Auburn Avenue business district. These enclaves contributed to the success of black schools and black business. Entrepreneurs benefited greatly from having the economic support of their own community. Social service organizations, focused on community “self help” sought to educate working class blacks on the ways to become, in many ways, tolerable to the mainstream white community. Operating within racial uplift ideology, the black elite believed that “the improvement of African Americans’ material and moral condition through self-help would diminish white racism” and that the race’s image could be rehabilitated by “embodying respectability, enacted through an ethos of service to the masses.”⁵⁰ Reminiscent of Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Compromise, the city’s black elite sought to make black working class culture palatable by encouraging respectability. For black elites, respectability proved that racism and racial discrimination were unfounded. Here, the term respectability refers to mirroring the behavior, in demeanor, style, and actions, of the white community in an effort to showcase African Americans as equal to their white counterparts. Though well intentioned, racial uplift ideology and the politics of respectability as practiced by the black elite required the degradation of the black working class or poor as a counterpoint, thus unintentionally contributing

⁵⁰ James L. Conyers, *Racial Structure and Radical Politics in the African Diaspora*, 34.

to the legitimization of stereotypes that dehumanize the poor—many of which still exist today.⁵¹

Unfortunately, the well-meaning actions of the black elite did more to separate than unite the community. Due to overcrowding and subpar living conditions, the more prosperous members of the black community relocated to the city's west side, directly across from the affluent black universities. Separated both geographically and ideologically, the working class black community aimed to exist independently and apart from both the black elite and white society.



Eventually, the community outgrew the Auburn Avenue and Atlanta University Center and the more prosperous members of the black community began to move further west near Atlanta's black universities. Separated both geographically and ideologically, the working class black community aimed to exist independently and apart from both the black elite and white societies.

⁵¹ Ibid 36

Atlanta's black working class rejected the representative images perpetuated by the black elite while the black elite consistently challenged the representative images perpetuated by and through white supremacist ideology. The black elite's unintentional contributions to institutional racism vis-à-vis their rejection of various unique black cultural markers provides the context for their interactions with the nouveau riche and the way that they perceive the new black narratives through which the nouveau riche operate.

The New Joneses and the Politics of (Dis)Respectability

Despite their faults, Atlanta's black elite was built on and remains a space through which racial pride operates as the center. Activists against racial inequality, the traditional black elite used their affluence to enact change and challenge injustice. Though in many ways their ideologies contributed to institutional racism, their efforts impacted the collective black community in positive ways. Perhaps it is this characteristic that so separates the traditional elite from the nouveau riche. For the black elite, respectability, above all else, is the vehicle through which equality, visibility, and recognition can be obtained. For the nouveau riche, economic status is the leading contributor to visibility and the vehicle through which the community obtains equality. Products of entertainment and Hip-Hop culture, the city's new Joneses are reconceiving the concepts of respectability and racial uplift ideology and disrupting the spaces of black visibility and citizenship originally conceived by the black elite. Here, citizenship refers to full access *in* as well as rights *to* the American experience—as lived and experienced by the dominant class. For the black elite,

citizenship should be achieved through respectability; in word, deed, and action. Conversely, the nouveau riche buys access to the American experience.

Performing Blackness: The Neoliberalization of Hip-Hop Culture and the New Black Elite

The black collective imagination was reborn by and through Hip-Hop music. During the late 1970s, Hip-Hop emerged as a modern expression of Black Nationalism encouraging black America to respond to social, cultural, and institutional attempts to oppress black consciousness. As a form of cultural expression, Hip-Hop music publicized private black discourses about race, class, and the conditions of blackness in urban ghettos of the United States. For the Hip-Hop generation of this time, this form of expression was not only intended to bring awareness to the conditions of blackness but to rebel against the suppressive ideologies of silence and assimilation. As an unconventional form of activism, “Hip-Hop engages with and potentially challenges American democracy by creating an autonomous space in which to practice citizenship.”⁵² This era of Hip-Hop, ranging from 1970 to 1996, became a social, cultural, and political movement that established modern resistance identities and engaged in the politics of recognition, citizenship, and rage. For urban youth participating in this movement, Hip-Hop provided a space to articulate citizenship and belonging. In *Rebels Without a Pause: Hip-Hop and Resistance in the City*, Martin Lamotte emphasizes how Hip-Hop music works to publicize discourses

⁵² Martin Lamotte, “Rebels Without a Pause: Hip-Hop and Resistance in the City,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 2014, 690.

of marginalization through a “hidden transcript.”⁵³ Using James Scott’s framework from *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, Lamotte highlights the hidden and public transcripts of disenfranchised populations positing that power relations in a society determine what dominated people say to certain social audiences. Hidden transcripts are the “backstage discourse of the dominated” and are hidden from the sight and influence of the dominant group. As an emotional response to domination, hidden transcripts provide a physical and social space through which the emotions of the collective can be expressed. Thus in Hip-Hop’s earliest incarnations, the discourses of the hidden transcripts remained from view of the dominant—it became a form of cultural expression that articulated the struggles in a “for us by us” collective imagination. Coming of age during the rise of neoliberal ideologies that reinforced policies of social disengagement, Hip-Hop music highlighted the effects of this neglect on urban communities. Confrontational, political, and revolutionary, Hip-Hop anthems like NWA’s “Fuck tha police” criticized assumptions that the problems of black Americans were the result of social and cultural pathologies. The lyrics put the police on trial for the dominant’s atrocities against the collective black community, for Reaganism’s denial of institutionalized racism, and for “attributing black failure to lack of initiative” and “impoverished values.”⁵⁴

Fuck the police coming straight from the underground/A young nigga got it bad cause I’m brown/And not the other color so police think/they have the authority to kill a minority/fuck that shit, cause I ain’t the one/for a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun.⁵⁵

⁵³ Ibid., 689

⁵⁴ Janice Peck, *The Age of Oprah*

⁵⁵ N.W.A, “Fuck tha Police,” *Straight Outta Compton*, Ruthless, 1988.

Public Enemy's 1989 "Fight the Power" became a revolutionary anthem—one in which the hidden transcript encouraged black youth to actively fight against the "powers that be." Public Enemy's "Fight" was for representation, recognition, and citizenship; their lyrics rejected the immoral and irresponsible images of blackness that were at the center of Reagan's ideological agenda:

Elvis was a hero to most/but he never meant shit to me you see/straight up racist that sucker was/simple and plain/mother fuck him and John Wayne/Cause I'm Black and I'm proud/I'm ready and hyped plus I'm amped/Most of my heroes don't appear on no stamps/Sample a look back you look and find/Nothing but rednecks for 400 years if you check...Power to the people no delay/To make everybody see/In order to fight the powers that be.⁵⁶

Publicizing the hidden transcripts of Hip-Hop, due in large part to the commercialization of the genre after 1996, fundamentally changed the dynamics of the music and the culture associated with an entire generation of listeners. Post-1996 Hip-Hop culture draws heavily on the same ideological beliefs and practices that the earliest forms of the art rejected. Focused on individual success as opposed to the success of the collective, modern rap music promotes a lifestyle of excess and consumption. The Hip-Hop tradition from which reality television was born exists as a part of this public transcript. The private discourses of black identities and struggle are now commoditized, sampled, and used to entertain global audiences. They put on display the most "problematic forms of representation" that work to destabilize black progress.⁵⁷ The black nouveau riche was in large part, established

⁵⁶ Public Enemy, "Fight the Power," Motown, 1989.

⁵⁷

as a result of modern Hip-Hop and the economic success associated with its commercialization.

To understand how the nouveau riche's expression and performance of class draws on modern Hip-Hop cultural traditions, it is important to analyze the broader social and cultural conditions that influence modern Hip-Hop culture. Neoliberalism changed the way that problems within marginalized communities were addressed and understood by the dominant class in the United States. Rather than viewing issues within the Black community as political problems to be solved, neoliberal ideology understands these issues through the lens of essentialism. The turn towards neoliberalism in the United States has had a tremendous effect on the expression of the black political ideas that influence popular culture. From the way that neoliberalism defines success to the emergence of a culture touting individual responsibility, modern Hip-Hop cultural practices are aligned with this tradition. In *The Age of Oprah: Cultural Icon for the Neoliberal Era*, Janice Peck describes neoliberalism as a "conception of how authorities should use their powers to improve national wellbeing, the ends they should seek, the evils they should avoid, the means they should use, and, crucially, the nature of the persons upon whom they must act."⁵⁸ Operating within the philosophies of individual responsibility and colorblindness, this form of conservatism performs under the guise of meritocratic ideals and uses its subscribers of color to loudly and vehemently denounce "identity politics."⁵⁹ Neoliberal ideology demonizes the individual for failing to attain

⁵⁸ Janice Peck, *The Age of Oprah*, 118.

⁵⁹ Angela Dillard, "How the New Black Elite Peddles Conservatism," *New Labor Forum*, 32.

success without considering the systemic and institutional conditions that prohibit success for large communities of people. Modern rap artists do not denounce racial affiliation explicitly, nor do they ignore the challenges associated with the black experience; however, the content of music has changed significantly since it originated in the 1970s. Commercial rap music no longer responds to social and cultural oppression, nor are artists uplifting the race through community activism and protest. Modern Hip-Hop culture influences class politics within black communities through its participation in the collective logic of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism produces a collective logic that normalizes racial inequality; its policies disproportionately effecting marginalized groups. The normalization of racism under neoliberal policies makes racism more difficult to combat by denying the existence of institutional racism.

For neoliberals, the “most effective means of combating racism are developing entrepreneurial capacities in populations, institutions, and spaces deemed as non-white,” thus; in practice, this ideology contributes not only to inter-racial inequality but also to intra-racial inequality and politics.⁶⁰ It is through the dynamics of intra-racial inequality that we begin to see how neoliberalism is reproduced within “and not simply on” the black community. Class inequality within the black community is not just a problem between the traditional black elite and the working poor. On the contrary, the most disturbing examples of intra-community inequality are those perpetuated through Hip-Hop and entertainment culture. Intra-racial wealth inequality has always been greater in Black communities

⁶⁰ Lester K. Spence, “The Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, 146.

than in white communities. In 2013, the white gini coefficient, which is used to measure the “extent to which the distribution of income within an economy deviates from a perfectly equal distribution, was .47 while the Black gini coefficient was .49. While these numbers have increased across communities since the inception of Hip-Hop in the 1970s (the white Gini was .35 and the black gini was .39), it is important to note that wealth inequality amongst the black community is consistently “depicted in cultural terms rather than in structural terms” by prominent members of the black community, whereas white income inequality is rarely articulated in these same terms⁶¹. If one of the goals of neoliberalism is to encourage black people to act “according to market principles” then both the traditional black elite and modern Hip-Hop artistic community perpetuate the idea that an individual’s failure to succeed is a moral dilemma as opposed to a systemic one. The idea of entrepreneurship as the solution to black people’s problems is consistent with the neoliberalization of black politics as well as a consistent and recurring theme in Hip-Hop music. Artist Jay Z describes himself and his success in neoliberal terms as a “hustler—“ Hip-Hop’s answer to neoliberal entrepreneurship. In “U Don’t Know” Jay Z responds to critics who lament the commercialization and commoditization of the genre by listing the ways that he has been able to build, maintain, and reproduce capital. Urban Dictionary defines a hustle as “anything you need to do to make money, be it selling cars, drugs...If you’re making money, you’re hustling.”⁶² A successful hustle is one in which the hustler makes financial gain from their initial

⁶¹ Ibid., 148

⁶² Urban Dictionary, “Hustle,”

<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Hustle>

investment. As a philosophy in urban communities, hustling is a game through which the individual can “come up” or obtain wealth. In “U Don’t Know” Jay Z reproduces neoliberal narratives through his lyrics:

I came into this motherfucker a hundred grand strong/Nine to be exact, from grindin G-packs/Put this shit in motion ain’t no rewindin me back/Could make 40 off a brick but one rhyme could beat that/and if somebody woulda told’em that Hov’ would sell clothing/Not in this lifetime, wasn’t in my right mind/That’s another difference that’s between me and them/I smarten up, open the market up/One million, two million, three million, four/In eighteen months eighty million more/Now add that number up with the one I said before/You are now lookin at one smart black boy/Momma ain’t raised no fool/Put me anywhere on God’s green earth, I’ll triple my worth/Motherfucker—I, will, not, lose.⁶³

In this verse Jay Z communicates the necessity of the hustle as the means to achieving financial success. He implies that his understanding and application of market logic makes him smarter and better equipped to succeed when he states, “that’s another difference that’s between me and them/I smarten up, open the market up.” Promoting self-governance, a primary tenant in neoliberal ideology, Jay Z’s “U Don’t Know,” blames the problem of poverty on the individual, not the system.

Hip-Hop culture represents an opportunity for the type of individual success legitimized by neoliberal rhetoric and conservative ideals. The previously transformative qualities of Hip-Hop have morphed into a form of corporate rap that rejects collectivism, one of the founding principles of the genre. At a time when rap music is most able to challenge the discourses of the American population, its publicized conversations work to reify negative images of black femininity, masculinity, and culture.

⁶³ Jay Z, “U Don’t Know,” *The Blue Print*, Roc-A-Fella, 2001.

The way that the nouveau riche performs class aligns with the post-racial ideologies of neoliberalism that celebrate individual achievement and absolve the collective responsibilities that have always been a large part of racial uplift ideology and black community activism. Operating within the cultural created and established by Hip-Hop, the nouveau riche are products of this black cultural tradition. Their performance contributes to the reproduction of neoliberalism within the black political imagination.

Engaging with the Real: The Myth of *Reality* in Reality Television

Today, most expressions of black popular culture are born from or participating in modern Hip-Hop cultural and social traditions. Black reality television programs engage in the social and cultural dynamics of Hip-Hop and perpetuate neoliberal logic that depicts black people as criminal, lazy, promiscuous, and “culturally dysfunctional.”⁶⁴ Atlanta’s *Real Housewives* certainly participate in this tradition; however, they are also participating in Hip-Hop’s artistic traditions.

Scholars interested in popular culture consistently challenge the term reality, in reality television, as a misnomer. Much of what the audience sees has been carefully staged by producers who create scenarios that cause conflict between cast members. When the conflict doesn’t naturally present itself, producers edit hours of film to create the perfect and sought after images that make up much of what we see on reality television. Despite this well-known truth and industry-accepted practice,

⁶⁴ Lester K. Spence, *Stare in the Darkness: The Limits of Hip-Hop and Black Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 15.

it is important to note that “reality TV is not, well...real.”⁶⁵ A *Reader’s Digest Magazine* article titled “13 Secrets Reality TV Show Producers Won’t Tell You,” outlines the tactics and techniques used by producers to shape a story:

True, there’s no script, but we have writers who craft plot lines, twisting and tweaking footage to create conflict and shape the story. Oh, and we redo things all the time. On *Biggest Loser*, the contestants have to walk up to the scale about five times so the producer can capture all the angles on camera.

Describing themselves as “masters of manipulation” producers admit to taking various clips and editing them together to make them sound like “one conversation.” These tactics often take the original conversation out of context and change the meaning. Frankenbiting, the term for manipulating content and creating “complete sentences from scratch,” is one of the many tactics that problematizes the idea that Reality TV is anything but television without real actors.⁶⁶ The real in reality for shows like *Real Housewives of Atlanta* is apparent in the way that the show deals with the complexities of black womanhood as well as the way that reality television allows, to some extent, participants to articulate their true identities. Black reality television in general shares Hip-Hop’s obsession with the real, using it as a way to authenticate and assert their identities. Within the Hip-Hop tradition, “keeping it real,” communicates the depth of a person’s character while simultaneously proving or realigning that individual with the origins of struggle within their community.

The real is an authenticating device responding to the removal of rap music from the organic relationship with the communities creating it. It demands that artists maintain or use symbols asserting their allegiance to black youth

⁶⁵ Crouch, Michelle, “13 Secrets Reality TV Show Producers Won’t Tell You,” *Readers Digest*, September 2013 <http://www.rd.com/slideshows/13-secrets-reality-tv-show-producers-wont-tell-you/>.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*,

populations, or subgroups within that community. The real for Hip-Hoppers means setting the terms for allegiance. It does not disallow fiction, imaginative constructions, or Hip-Hop's traditional journey into myth. Rather, it is an explicitly political stand against selling one's soul to the devils of capitalism or assimilation as one sells the art form and lives life. The frequent calls in the Hip-Hop community to keep it real not only require the maintenance of an authentic black urban identity; they also constitute a theoretical space that functions as a living testimony to African American experience. Being "real" is a call to authenticity that becomes a political act.⁶⁷

Consumption of "the real" drives this narrative as consumers use it as a "key determinant of truth" from which they can "judge and situate the African American experience."⁶⁸ This obsession with the "real" is evident through the way that conflict between the women plays out on *Real Housewives of Atlanta*.

Both critics and proponents of the show use online discussion boards to create a virtual discourse of sorts surrounding the women's behavior. The desire for the "real," particularly from fans of the show is evident not only in blog posts, but in the comments and discussion following these posts. What we see are fans who idolize "realness" and admonish inauthenticity or what they deem to be "fake." The comments following a blog post on realitytea.com regarding the most recent reunion of RHOA are filled with posts that characterize or judge the women and their actions as real or fake. Poster Ms. Thang states that "Kandi is soooo fake it's ridiculous. She throws the rock and hides her hand...I can't wait for her to fall on her face."⁶⁹ Because "the real" is intricately tied to the way that these viewers

⁶⁷ Lester K Spence, *Stare in the Darkness*, 20.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 20

⁶⁹ Mary, "Real Housewives of Atlanta Reunion Recap: DejaView Part Two," May 4, 2015 (blog), <http://www.realitytea.com/2015/05/04/real-housewives-of-atlanta-reunion-recap-dejaview-part-two/>

internalize and authenticate the black experience that is being represented on television, to categorize Kandi as someone who “throws the rock and hides her hand,” is not only a challenge to Kandi’s authenticity, but also devaluing her contributions to the diverse images on the show. If the images on RHOA are to be perceived as resistance, they must also be perceived as authentic. Another poster under the name Authentic, expresses frustration that housewife Phaedra consistently talks about money.

As a black woman I cringed listening to Fakedra saying ‘I make plenty of money’ Noooo...you don’t share that with the world when you’re so new and just moved out of your tract home yesterday. She could be back on air mattresses tomorrow. Noooo Phaedra, nooooo!”⁷⁰

Phaedra is one of the only formally educated housewives who also had a successful career before the show. She is the managing partner of The Parks Group, “a boutique law firm specializing in entertainment, intellectual property rights, civil, and criminal litigation.” Originally from Athens Georgia, Phaedra considers herself the epitome of southern gentility and her book *Secrets of the Southern Belle: How to Be Nice, Work Hard, Look Pretty, Have Fun, and Never Have an Off Moment* promises to teach readers how to become a Southern Belle. In this example, the original poster challenges Phaedra’s class authenticity by implying that she will have to sleep on air mattresses and move back into her tract home. It is important to note that these critiques of both Phaedra and Kandi have little to do with the content of the show but about how viewers perceive them in terms of authenticity and realness.

⁷⁰ Authentic, “Real Housewives of Atlanta Reunion Recap: DeJaView Part Two,” May 4, 2015 (blog), <http://www.realitytea.com/2015/05/04/real-housewives-of-atlanta-reunion-recap-dejaview-part-two/>

For reality television as a whole, authenticity and realness, are constructed labels. For those shows operating within modern Hip-Hop traditions, with primarily black casts, the audience understands “the real,” not in terms of the show’s content, but as individual and moral characteristics of the cast members. It is important to distinguish the show’s content from the characteristics of those participating in the show, as it is through the audiences’ connection with the lived experiences of the cast that makes the show so successful. Black audiences understand reality television as “fake;” yet, often use “the real” as a way to describe their love or disdain for certain characters. Within this construct, to label someone as “fake” negatively affects his or her cultural capital. In this same way, to label someone as “real” increases his or her cultural capital. If we understand respectability to mean “modeling sexual conservatism, patriarchal family relations, financial sobriety, reserved comportment, and intellectual achievement” then both the poor and nouveau riche fall outside of its confines.⁷¹ Because of this, the black elite is rarely characterized as “real.”

The nouveau riche’s disruption of respectability politics is critical to reimagining the black woman as agent rather than subject. The narratives surrounding respectability limit the ways in which black women function within society as a whole as well as the way in which they function within their individual communities. The nouveau riche answers the call to respectability with “the real;” however, this perspective still contributes to intra-racial class division by privileging the “historically black voiceless over the historically black articulate

⁷¹ Ibid. 34

elite.⁷² The real also privileges the male voice and perspective. Operating in direct opposition to respectability politics, women like those on *RHOA* create a space through which the varied and complex identities of black womanhood can be realized. Whereas the Black elite understands respectability as influencing the behaviors of an entire group of people; thus, collectivistic in nature, the new Joneses perceive the politics of the real individualistically—characterized by the behavior of one person. The individual then, is responsible for keeping it real by maintaining and articulating their truth. In this context, failure to keep it real has dire consequences and results in the loss of social and cultural capital.

⁷² Ibid., 22

“When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life:” Signifying as a Site of Resistance in *Real Housewives of Atlanta*

Zora Neale Hurston⁷³’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* “takes on the task of understanding the heart of a woman and thereby exposes meaningful political truths about hierarchy, oppression, and liberation.”⁷⁴ The novel exposes how assumptions about the character and identities of black women shape the way that they navigate and experience the world while attempting to “preserve their authentic selves.”⁷⁵ As a black woman living in the rural south, the protagonist Janie Mae Crawford resists the gender and race expectations of her grandmother, husbands, and community, to emerge and discover her authentic self. Throughout her journey Janie learns that she must preserve herself, her truth, and her freedom even though she risked offending and disappointing those around her. During her second marriage, Janie enacts her agency by engaging in African American male expressive traditions, despite her husband’s attempts to stymie her voice. As his attempts to dominate her intensify, he forbids her to participate in the signifying sessions that take place on the porch of his store. As she ages, he ridicules her appearance in front of the group and the conflict in their marriage climaxes as Janie signifies on him in front of the porch sitters by stating, “when you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life.” Janie’s entrance into male signifying marks her rhetorical freedom:

It is significant that she uses as image which in its application simultaneously implies a de-sexing, and an androgyny which is essentially sexless for it is by

⁷³ Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Illinois: Harper Collins, 2006, 75.

⁷⁴ Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 165

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 165

her female passage into male linguistic territory that she is able to free herself from the hierarchical sexual difference prescribed within the roles of her marriage. She figures both the appropriation of male signifying power and the obliteration of sexual difference.⁷⁶

In African American cultural traditions, signifying in this context represents a power struggle and is used “explicitly for domination.”⁷⁷

The expression of rhetorical freedom in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* draws from a long tradition of verbal sparring, signifying, or playing the dozens. Characterized as a “competitive oral competition,” playing the dozens “combines humorous insults and oral skills in a battle to shock and ultimately silence one’s opponent.”⁷⁸ As Janie does in Hurston’s novel, the women on *Real Housewives of Atlanta* who participate in this tradition resist societal expectations and assert their dominance within their individual spaces of blackness. The dozens is not solely about humor, it is an expression of agency through language in a society that relegates black women to an underclass of agentless subjects who are acted upon rather than participating in the creation of their own lives and truths. Signifying is about using language to communicate truth and in this struggle of truth-seeking, the person being signified on generally suffers a loss in the form of social or cultural capital. For Janie’s husband Jody, her comments lead to a loss of social capital, he feels emasculated and disrespected and he responds to these emotions with physical violence. The turn from harmless insults to physical violence does not

⁷⁶ Cynthia Bond, “Language, Speech, and Difference in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Harold Bloom *Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 49.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Raymond Codrington, “In the Beginning: Hip Hop’s Early Influences,” *Oxford African American Studies Center*, <http://www.oxfordaasc.com/public/features/archive/0806/essay.jsp>

occur often on *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, though, the “loser” of the dozens experiences the same level of embarrassment that Jody feels when Janie remarks that “he looks lak de change uh life.”

When the housewives play the dozens, we see the way that this tradition can challenge the politics of respectability and disrupt hegemonically prescribed spaces of class. When the women take a trip to Puerto Rico, former stripper NeNe Leakes and television and radio personality Claudia Jordan signify on each other based on existing tensions within their all female group. As their verbal sparring escalates, Claudia accuses NeNe of being manipulative by referring to her as a “puppet master,” to which NeNe responds that she is a “puppet master on these jobs.” Throughout the altercation, NeNe emphasizes the amount of money that she has—an oft-repeated strategy that she has used in the past—and says “you wish you had what I have in the bank darling!”



Figure 5⁷⁹

The women continue to insult the other's morality and character; NeNe calls Claudia a whore and calls into question the number of men that she's rumored to have slept with and Claudia responds by calling NeNe a stripper. As the argument escalates, the crowd of women resembles Hurston's porch sitters as they contribute collective laughter, gasps, or exclamations. In an intercut confessional scene, NeNe admits that she "slid down the pole" to take care of her child, but unlike Claudia, she "ain't sliding down all these men's dicks." The argument ends with Claudia insulting NeNe's husband by describing him as a weak "personal slave," and NeNe commenting on both Claudia's ethnicity (she's bi-racial) and perceived sexual indiscretions:

Honey, the things that you have, I don't want. Bags, purses, shoes, a personal slave by the name of Greg Leakes.
What you got? This half-breed shit...it's not Atlanta.
Oh, you don't like half-breeds?
You are a WHORE. You've slept with everybody. Your clit has left your body!

On the surface this type of signifying could be mistakenly relegated to catty name-calling and a reasserting of patriarchal stereotypes about black women and their relationships with one another. This reading of the conflict on *RHOA* does not account for the ways in which the women utilize the dozens to resist voicelessness and engage the real. As NeNe and Claudia tear each other to shreds, we can see just how far the nouveau riche is removed from the respectability politics of the black elite. From the language that they choose to their specific insults, Claudia and NeNe are expressing and asserting their rhetorical freedom solely by engaging with this

⁷⁹ Radar Online, "Has NeNe Met Her Match," Last modified Jan 18, 2015.

tradition. This conflict does not make up the whole of the show and these types of arguments do work in some ways, to perpetuate damaging stereotypes about blackness; however, their engagement with the masculine form of expression, resists both the respectability of the black elite and the calls to silence from the dominant class.

In another episode, NeNe Leakes argues with her friend Cynthia's husband, Peter. The most notable moments during their exchange are when NeNe signifies on Peter, thereby resisting traditional feminine roles; yet simultaneously encourages him to stay out of what she considers "women's business." NeNe's asserts her dominance during this interaction in a number of ways; she states in an inter-cut camera confessional that she "happens to like Peter better than Patricia;" she tells Peter that he is the "only husband, boyfriend, fiancé, whatever, who is always in women's business;" and finally, she tells him that he is acting like a "bitch."⁸⁰ Just as Janie did in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, NeNe emasculates Peter in front of their peers. She asserts her dominance by participating in a Black male tradition; however, she genders Peter's behavior and characterizes him as a woman. NeNe's husband Gregg Leakes attempts to protect her during the altercation but in a show of independence, she pushes him away to "handle" Peter herself (ibid.).

Every insult challenges the recipient's authenticity and the call to keep it real requires the women to respond in a way that reasserts dominance. To label something as real is to consider it or characterize it as representative, which is what makes the women's behavior on the show and during these arguments so

⁸⁰ *Real Housewives of Atlanta*.

problematic. To discuss or describe any image of blackness as representative ignores the complexities and lived experiences of large portions of the African American population. Governed by the drive of realism, the behavior that we see in the *Puerto Rican* example damages the way that black women are perceived and understood within the dominant's imagination. In this way, the women are participating in the perpetuation of narratives that view black women as whores and are responsible for reproducing these ideologies within their individual communities. By using the real to govern their behavior, the women oppose the respectability of the elite but also participate in reproducing negative stereotypes about blackness and womanhood.

Their behavior, characterized as “ratchet”—“a choice word describing the indecent actions of a particular caliber of African Americans” in black popular vernacular, exists as the antithesis of what many would deem appropriate behavior; yet, it is by and through the way that they engage in this “ratchet” behavior that they disrupt the way that we understand the dynamics of femininity, blackness, and class.⁸¹ Just as the use of the word “ghetto” before it, the term ratchet invokes specific images of race and class. The When NeNe attacks Claudia's identity by calling her a “half-breed” and a “whore,” the other women express disgust—it is clear that NeNe's remarks transitioned into the realm of disrespect.

In Everyday Intimacies: The Politics of Respectability in Post-Recessionary Southern Reality Television, Chelsea Bullock argues that *The Real Housewives of*

⁸¹ Nadia E. Brown and Lisa Young, “Ratchet Politics: Moving Beyond Black Women's Bodies to Indict Institutions and Structures,” *National Political Science Review* 17 (2015), 18.

Atlanta operates “in the space between the ‘diss’ and the respect of respectability and are finding ways to enact resistance, maintain visibility, and proclaim multiplicities of identity.”⁸² But who or what are the women on *Real Housewives of Atlanta* resisting? How does their performances of the real and class destroy monolithic discourses of black womanhood? The confines of respectability prohibit diverse expressions of the black experience and it is through the multiplicities of identity expression that *RHOA* performs a counterhegemonic role. The women on the show do not just reject the respectability politics of the black elite; they also reject the institutional hailing to subjugation as defined by the dominant ideological group. They resist oppression by and through their performances of class. When NeNe boasts of her wealth, she engages a neoliberal tradition that has had damaging effects on the black community; however, she is also resisting monolithic representations of class by this same tradition. NeNe’s interpretation and articulation of class draw from both neoliberal and black cultural traditions. She expresses her cultural identity and navigates her own space for citizenship utilizing elements from both of these traditions. In this way, she creates dynamic spaces that encourage the complex expression of black culture.

⁸² Chelsea Bullock, “Everyday Intimacies: The Politics of Respectability in Post Recessionary Southern Reality Television,” (PhD diss., 2014).

Chapter II: “Because we were Underpaid and Overworked, we Accepted Consumption as Compensation:” *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* and the Consumption of Authenticity

The curse of poverty has no justification in our age. It is socially as cruel and blind as the practice of cannibalism at the dawn of civilization, when men ate each other because they had not yet learned to take food from the soil or to consume the abundant animal life around them. The time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct and immediate abolition of poverty.⁸³

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Let us be dissatisfied until the tragic walls that separate the outer city of wealth and comfort from the inner city of poverty and despair shall be crushed by the battering rams of the forces of justice.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, Robin D.G. Kelley

provides insight into what it means to live and work on the margins of the struggle.

For Kelley, resistance does not have to occur through membership in labor

organizations nor does it require an active acknowledgement as being a part of a

movement; resistance occurs during any fight on which the battleground is cultural.

As a McDonald’s employee, Kelley admits to liberating “McDonaldland cookies by

the boxful,” volunteering to clean the parking lot so that he could socialize with

friends, and accidentally cooking “too many Quarter Pounders and apple pies near

closing time.”⁸⁴ Kelley explains these behaviors as a form of rebellion: “because we

were underpaid and overworked, we accepted consumption as compensation.”⁸⁵ In

Kelley’s example, consumption as compensation refers to the literal consuming of

⁸³ Martin Luther King Jr., *Where do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010)

⁸⁴ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels*, (Free Press, 2004) 3.

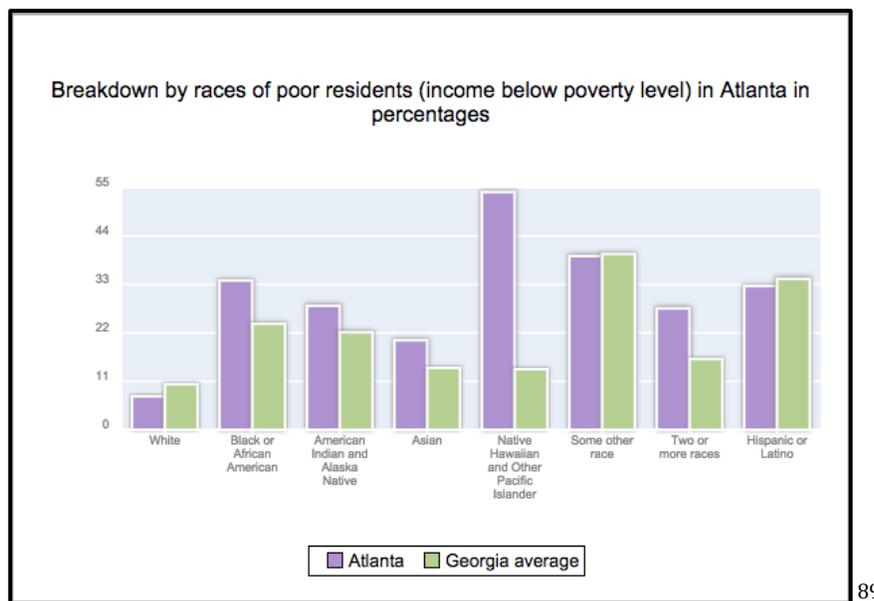
⁸⁵ Ibid. 4

food; however, we can use “consumption as compensation” as a framework to analyze *RHOA*’s relationship to the city’s working poor. If *Real Housewives of Atlanta* challenges linear narratives of blackness through its presentation of varied black identities, it does little to expose some of the city’s more problematic social and political issues. In Atlanta, 33.9 percent of people who identify as black or African American fall below the poverty line; yet, the images portrayed on shows like *Real Housewives of Atlanta* celebrate opulence, excess, and glamour. Lacking access to these experiences due in part to the neoliberal turn in black politics, most black Atlantans are drastically removed from the glamorous lives on the show. If *RHOA* does not represent the typical black experience, why is the show so successful amongst black audiences? What dangers are associated with the way that black Atlanta is represented and more importantly, why don’t the housewives address the politics and class dynamics that exist in their home city? The answers to these questions will help to contextualize the work of resistance, how it operates, and why, even for those operating at the margins of the struggle, it matters.

Atlanta has a poverty problem. In an article titled “Yes, Atlanta is the Black Mecca,” M. Alexis Scott references Atlanta’s transformation from small Southern town into a “serious contender as a cosmopolitan international city.” Home to the largest number of black colleges in the nation, Atlanta boasts an established black middle class that “has been at the forefront of the fight for social injustice” and 40 consecutive years of black leadership.⁸⁶ According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the city of Atlanta is 54 percent black, 38 percent white, and makes up approximately

⁸⁶ Kenya King and M. Alexis Scott, " The black Mecca 50 years later," *American Planning Association* 80, no. 1 (2014): 48.

one-third of Metro Atlanta’s population of 5.4 million people.⁸⁷ Additionally, 31 percent of all businesses in Atlanta are black owned, compared to only 16 percent in New York City and 6 percent in Los Angeles.⁸⁸ It is easy to see, based on these numbers, and a host of personal success stories, how the city of Atlanta came to be known glowingly amongst the black elite in the United States. Yet, when we look at the “Breakdown by races of poor residents” in Atlanta, the statistics reflect neither Scott’s Mecca nor the images of luxury so prevalent on *Real Housewives of Atlanta*.

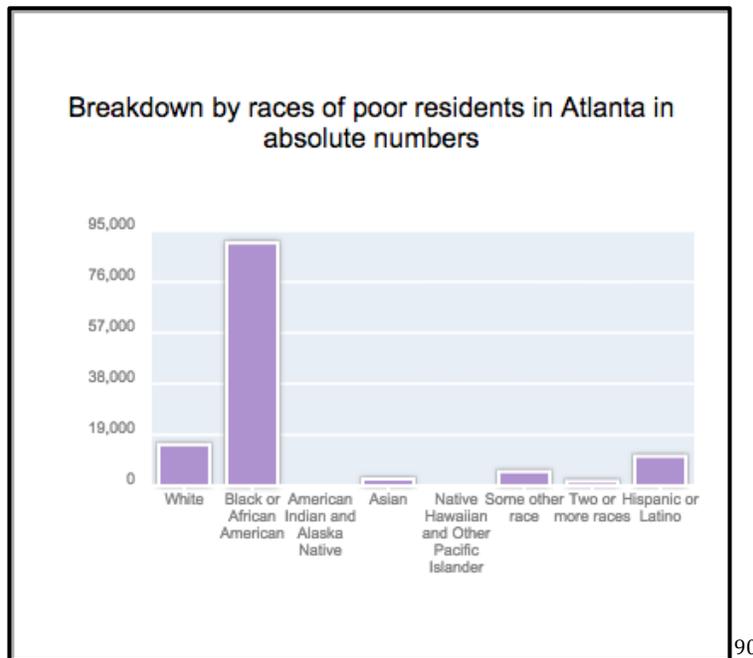


Graph 1

⁸⁷ United States Census Bureau, State and County QuickFacts, accessed November 1, 2014, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/13/1304000.html>.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ City-Data, “Atlanta, Georgia Poverty Rate Data,” <http://www.city-data.com/poverty/poverty-Atlanta-Georgia.html>



Graph 2

While the elite and active middle classes have “been at the forefront of the fight for social injustice” in the city, the black poor is often underrepresented in the narratives of Atlanta’s new Joneses. Between 2000 and 2011, the city’s suburban poor population grew by 159 percent and is consistently increasing amongst younger people.⁹¹ Given this landscape, it seems odd at best and irresponsible at worst, that no one is using the platform or accompanying fame, to highlight the drastic class discrepancies in Atlanta. Though separated by income, lifestyle, and experiences from most of Atlanta’s population, the Atlanta iteration of the *Housewives* franchise is the most popular in Bravo history. When asked the key to their success, NeNe Leakes attributes it to the relatability of the cast. In an interview with theGrio.com Leakes explains “we’re more relatable, our issues are real, and we

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Alana Semeuls, “Suburbs and the New American Poverty,” Last modified January 7, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/01/suburbs-and-the-new-american-poverty/384259/>

have the least amount of plastic surgery, while some of these other girls are nipped and tucked. We are just very real.”⁹² It is the presence of the real that black viewers of the show consume. One would be hard pressed to argue that the lives of the women on the show represent the “real” Atlanta; yet, we still watch and it is through watching that rebellion takes place. According to Nielsen’s data, black audiences watch 37 percent more television than other demographics and “their consumption proclivities are equally influential.”⁹³ What compensation does the black community receive through the consumption of shows like *RHOA*? Post-racial neoliberal ideology views poverty as the result of cultural pathology and ignores the institutional and systemic elements of modern society and politics that contributes to rampant poverty in the black community. Despite the intra-racial class divisions between the wealth on the show and its surrounding communities, viewers are consuming lived black experiences. If as Kelley suggests, resistance occurs during any fight on which the battleground is cultural, then even the images of Atlanta’s housewives work to resist normative views of black identities. Many of the women on the show become wealthier as a result of their participation. The producers and networks; however, are the real financial recipients of the show’s success. Despite this fact, black viewers turn out in droves, every week, to consume authenticity.

When the show is not highlighting the various tensions, conflicts, and infighting that occurs between the women, it focuses on issues that are “relatable to Black women”

⁹² Andrea Morabito, “Real Housewives of Atlanta Just Peachy after 6 seasons,” *New York Post*, January, 2014 <http://nypost.com/2014/01/20/real-housewives-of-atlanta-just-peachy-after-6-seasons/>

⁹³ Courtney Garcia, “Nielsen report confirms blacks watch more TV than any other group,” *the grio*, September 27, 2013. <http://thegrio.com/2013/09/27/nielsen-report-confirms-blacks-watch-more-tv-than-any-other-group/>

and that reflect the complexities of blackness and womanhood. In spite of their wealth, the women on the show deal with a variety of issues such as “social appearance, romance, professional advancement, and friendship.”⁹⁴ While these topics are abundantly represented for white viewers in various forms of mass cultural production, the same is not true for black audiences. Black women are generally characterized one dimensionally on television; thus, shows like *RHOA* provide a platform for black women of various backgrounds to see representations of themselves, their circle of friends, and their lives that are as complex and multifaceted as their own lived experiences. The desire for authenticity amongst black audiences is both a result of and response to alienation. For marginalized communities, this alienation is heightened by institutional subjugation. Consumption of authenticity then, is compensation for the social, cultural, and economic effects of alienation.

In *Watching Race*, Herman Gray describes three categories of classification for Black television; assimilationist; pluralist; and multicultural. Multicultural black television constructs black people as “authors of and participants in their own notion of America and what it means to be American.”⁹⁵ *RHOA* has a secure spot within this category as a program that keeps blackness as its primary focus. The show of course, is not without its problems. Unlike some of their viewers, the

⁹⁴ Hawley, Alexander Cooper. “An Image Rarely Seen: The Real Housewives of Atlanta and the televisual image of the African American Woman,” (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2014).

⁹⁵ Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 87.

women on *RHOA* have the benefit of class privilege, even when they are providing authenticating images of black experiences.

Chapter III

Why it Matters: *Real Housewives of Atlanta* as Social Commentary

Yet 'transformations are at the heart of the study of popular culture. I mean the active work on existing traditions and activities...so that they come out a different way: they appear to 'persist' – yet, from one period to another, they come to stand in a different relation to the ways working people live and the ways they define their relations to each other, to 'the others' and to their conditions of life. Transformation is the key to the long and protracted process of the 'moralisation' of the labouring classes, and the 'demoralisation' of the poor, and the 're-education' of the people. Popular culture is neither, in a 'pure' sense, the popular traditions of resistance to these processes; nor is it the forms which are superimposed on and over them. It is the ground on which the transformations are worked.

Stuart Hall "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular"

Popular culture, expressive forms, and vernacular practices are contemporary sites where black countermemories, desires, fantasies, and representations are produced and circulated. These are major sites for the expression and engagement of the national (in this case American) racial imaginary.

Herman Gray *Watching Race*

Stuart Hall's seminal essay, "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular," highlights popular culture as the primary site through which capitalist power is negotiated.

Hall interprets the popular as the space "where hegemony arises and where it is secured"—it is the site of both affirmation and opposition. For Hall, popular culture and the dynamics associated with it are transformative and operate symbiotically within the hegemonic order insofar as their relevance and roles change depending on their social, cultural, and historical moment. The role of cultural production in our society is less important than understanding how these roles shift depending on both their institutional relevancy and institutional support. Here, institutional refers to the various social, political, and cultural institutions that manage, maintain, and support dominant ideological practices and beliefs. These institutions target individual ideology as a means to maintain and solidify dominance and power. In

this way, we can understand popular culture as the vehicle through which frustrations are expressed *and* the vehicle through which power is maintained.⁹⁶ What, if any, institutional relevance exists within reality television generally, and Atlanta's real housewives specifically? How does institutional support or rejection of the cultural sign of Blackness on RHOA affect our perception of representations of race on the show? These questions are critical to understanding how various critiques of the show are informed as well as to identifying why certain audiences respond to it more favorably than others.

Representation and the Cultural Sign of Blackness on *Real Housewives of Atlanta*

First, it is important to distinguish between blackness and the cultural sign of blackness. As an adjective, blackness can describe the actual and varying cultural and social practices operating within the black community. We can understand blackness as a constructed way of being, thinking, feeling, and performing. The cultural sign of blackness however, is that which is produced through the hegemonic order and is a direct reflection of the ideology of the dominant power structure. Gaining a strong foothold during the Reagan administration, the contemporary cultural sign of blackness is often understood in direct opposition to American ideals and morality, which translates to whiteness within the ideological structure. The politics of representation and the cultural sign of blackness that first circulated during Reagan's "decade of feel good politics" still exist, are maintained, and are consistently circulated through television. As a form of cultural production,

⁹⁶ Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular," *People's History and Socialist Theory*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

television, and the representations that it circulates, are influenced and informed by the way that the power structure understands blackness specifically and race generally. Understanding that television not only circulates but produces and reproduces power means that we must also consider the way that images are created and constructed to support various political, social, and cultural agendas. For Reaganism, the moral crisis and dependence on the welfare state in addition to poor family values, all contributed to the loss of true American values and identity—in this way, Ronald Reagan functioned as the cultural and historical sign of the “real America” and ushered in an era in which the return to true American values became paramount. As a sign of otherness, blackness was “constructed along a continuum ranging from menace on one end to immorality on the other, with irresponsibility located somewhere in the middle.”⁹⁷ Though these images of blackness still persist, they have, as Stuart Hall notes, “come to stand in a different relation to the ways working people live and the ways they define their relations to each other.”⁹⁸ Unlike during the Reagan era of the 1980s in which blackness worked to strengthen the politics and appeal of Reagan’s economic policies, the sign of blackness today influences the globe and is recognized and interpreted globally as a site of rejection and resistance to hegemony. The images persist but the interpretation and influence have changed significantly. Highlighting television’s role in the construction and circulation of the cultural sign of blackness in the 1980s contributes greatly to the way that we understand how the *Real Housewives of Atlanta* functions in modern

⁹⁷ Herman Gray, *Watching Race*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 17.

⁹⁸ Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular,”

society and how audience perceptions of the show complicate understandings about race in America.

If television is the “cultural battleground” and site of resistance over the cultural sign of blackness and if Black folks continue to introduce counterhegemonic images of blackness then the relevance of these images to dominance and power changes. Though more important than the images, is the way in which the audience receives, analyzes, and interprets them. This is why the use of the cultural sign of blackness produces different meanings for black and white audiences, but also different meanings depending on socio-economic status and class.⁹⁹ The counterhegemonic qualities of these images is only legitimized if the audience interpretations and responses circulate them as counterhegemonic—if not, the images remain as tools that formulate the American imagination regarding blackness and race. So it is the case with NeNe Leakes and *Real Housewives of Atlanta*. RHOA calls to focus the internal tensions and conflicts within the black community through its portrayal of violent women and incarcerated fathers while simultaneously reminding white America that black stereotypes transcend socio-economic class and that rich or poor, black women can indeed be categorized as jezebels, mammies, and sapphires. This is why many of the show’s strongest critics are black—the airing of the proverbial dirty laundry, not only for all of white America to see, but also for the viewing pleasure of the global community is deemed problematic by many in the black community. In Herman Gray’s *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation*, he comments on critic, Tommy

⁹⁹ Herman Gray, *Watching Race*, 35.

Lott's representation of black consumption of damaging or destructive images as "racial malpractice." Gray writes: ¹⁰⁰ (cut note here and include the information in the citation below)

By viewing, laughing at, and consuming these images, black folk were directly complicitous in all the stereotypes, ill-considered humor, and worst impulses of our black selves...then, like now, such violators needed to be called out...as if this weren't enough, 'bitches, niggas, hos, dogs, and mothafuckas' were so common in the music and social language of black vernacular that it took Professor Henry Louis Gates to mount a cultural defense of black American youth's right to cut-up in the American public sphere. ¹⁰¹

If black folks make ownership claims to the cultural sign of blackness, then any participation or consumption of stereotypical images makes each member of the community complicit in the construction and circulation of these images. As is common in communities of color, some black folks' identity and sense of self is strongly connected to the positive accomplishments of other African Americans; thus, also linking individual identity to destructive representations of African Americans.¹⁰² The passionate views shared by black people who love or hate the show, are generally connected to the ways in which these individuals interpret or construct their own identities. These fictive kinships within the black community intricately connect each member in a way that elicits pride for "positive" behavior and embarrassment for "negative" behavior. Because there are relatively few images of black wealth on television, black female viewers are more likely to deem the representations on *Real Housewives of Atlanta* as problematic. Despite the various

¹⁰⁰ Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation*, Location 1588

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Melissa Harris Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011) loc 1465.

instances of violence, cat fights, baby daddy drama, and arrests on the show, many of the traditional images of blackness have been repositioned and reimagined as a new black cultural sign—one in which the nouveau riche are celebrated and the black body as commodity is no longer interpreted as objectification but as a means to achieve economic success.

Love it or hate it, the global pervasiveness of modern black culture contributes to the black cultural narrative while simultaneously creating, constructing, and circulating discourse surrounding blackness in America.

NeNe Leakes and the New Cultural Sign of Blackness

The creation of a new black cultural sign coincides with the emergence of a new young, black, and wealthy class—the nouveau riche. The new cultural sign of blackness, established in part by and through the nouveau riche’s articulation of blackness, is expressed as both counter-memory and counter-narrative to the images established by the new right in the 1980s and by the black elite. Hip-Hop music and culture, professional sports, and reality television have all contributed to the global visibility of this new cultural sign. Defined as “an individual’s resistance against the official versions of historical continuity,” the black nouveau riche oppose and reject not only those narratives of blackness in the popular? American imagination but also those understandings of blackness articulated by the black elite. Their money, albeit new, creates a space for them to resist the confines of respectability politics, racial politics, and most importantly the politics associated with black representation in mass media.

NeNe Leakes and the entire RHOA cast exist as a part of this global cultural sign of blackness. NeNe performs class in ways that violates the black community's policies regarding representative images; thus, much of the criticism of the show is from black audiences who view NeNe as "ghetto" and "classless." For NeNe however, race is a non-issue. In some ways she reinforces the traditional American ideas regarding success making it easy to understand why some viewers find her appalling; yet, it is through this very persistence that we can see the cultural sign of blackness shifting away from a responsibility to discuss and interpret race in the public sphere.

In the show's fourth season, Shereè Whitfield argues with NeNe over a missed financial opportunity and accuses NeNe of "taking money out of her pocket."¹⁰³ During the argument Shereè laments black womanhood claiming that the problem with black women is that "nobody wants to see nobody succeed" and that "everybody is always clawing" their way to the top. NeNe questions Shereè's focus on race by asking when "this became a black issue." NeNe denies the accusations, dismisses Shereè's comments about race as inconsequential, and uses her wealth to defend her honor against the claims that she usurped Shereè's financial opportunity:

Here we go, Star Jones...Black women! When did this become a black issue? What you don't understand is while you were running your mouth, I was running to the bank depositing a Trump check sweetie. Donald Trump? I am rich. I don't need ANYTHING from you."
You are the one losing houses and cars sweetheart. I am VERY rich bitch!¹⁰⁴

How does NeNe's focus on material wealth and dismissal of an oft articulated struggle within circles of black women, violate the unspoken policies of the black

¹⁰³ Real Housewives of Atlanta, Season 4

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

community? As she is in fact “rich” by most standards, what do her statements do for or against images of black women in the media? For some, NeNe and others like her have a cultural responsibility to portray images of blackness that negate historical stereotypes by challenging damaging perceptions of blackness, particularly in the United States. Others see NeNe’s behavior as an expression of freedom against a ubiquitous view of blackness that characterizes the behavior of one black person as the behavior, beliefs, and experiences of all black people. NeNe’s wealth and status as a reality television star provide her with a unique platform to address race yet, she has never gone on record to acknowledge what, if any, social responsibility she feels as a result of this platform. NeNe and the entire *Real Housewives of Atlanta* may serve to destabilize black racial identities for some members of the black community by validating “the worst stereotypes of black folks for people whose contact with actual black people is limited;”¹⁰⁵ however, their relevance persists both within and outside of their unique social spaces and their performance of class in the public sphere is ushering in a new black cultural sign.

¹⁰⁵ Justin Simien, “Dear White People: Reality TV is the New Blackface.” *Vulture*, (November 2014,) <http://www.vulture.com/2014/11/why-reality-tv-is-the-new-blackface.html>.

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