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## 16

## The “Rich Bitch”

Class and Gender on the  
*Real Housewives of New York City*

Michael J. Lee and Leigh Moscovitz

As the US economy collapsed in 2008 and 2009, a record number of viewers tuned in to Bravo each week to gawk at the consumptive, ostentatious lives of six Manhattan socialites. Bravo perfected its formula for “recession-proof television” in its reality docu-drama series, the *Real Housewives of New York City* (RHW-NYC), which puts the lives of Alex, Jill, Bethenny, Ramona, LuAnn, and Kelly on display as objects of fascination, envy, and scorn (Guthrie 2009, p. 3). Between the characters’ summer homes in the Hamptons, banter about the size of strangers’ “p.p.’s” (private planes), \$30,000-per-year pre-schools with full-time nutritionists on staff, and week-long jaunts to St. Bart’s, RHW-NYC is not focused on how the “fortunate few make their fortunes but on how they spend them” (Stanley 2008, p. E1). As *Broadcasting & Cable* magazine reported, “The poster girls for conspicuous consumption are scoring record ratings while Americans are losing their jobs in record numbers” (Guthrie 2009, p. 4).

The *Real Housewives* franchise, which includes five additional shows set in Orange County, Atlanta, New Jersey, Washington DC, and Beverly Hills, is one of the most popular of a bevy of reality television programs about conspicuous consumption. RHW-NYC is, at its core, a show about rich women and, as such, resembles television forerunners about lives lived in luxury’s lap such as MTV’s *Cribs* or *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. However, as we argue in this essay, RHW-NYC complicates the scholarly conversation about the role of class on television (Gans 1995; Grindstaff 2002; Kendall 2005). Rather than valorizing the rich and demonizing the poor like its predecessors, RHW-NYC takes aim at the consumptive lives of its arriviste heroines.

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Nevertheless, the populist scorn the show provokes is not gender-neutral; its sights are set on the rich, to be sure, but only rich women, especially those who transgress the traditional gender roles of supportive friend, nurturing mother, dotting wife, and ceaseless caretaker. According to the logic of *RHW-NYC*, rich women, not rich men, spend frivolously, project false appearances, backstab, gossip, and leave their children's care to paid staff. Indeed, the failure of a different reality series about status-obsessed men reveals that when it comes to casting wealthy, out-of-touch villains, female socialites are hard to beat. Fox Reality channel's short-lived *Househusbands of Hollywood* could not leave its viewers aghast like the housewives could. Describing the "chasm in watchability" between the househusbands and housewives series, one entertainment writer quipped, "I found myself wondering what their wives were doing" (Alston 2009, p. 75).

In this essay, we employ the concept of irony to analyze how *RHW-NYC* creates rich women as objects of cultural derision, well-heeled jesters in a populist court. *RHW-NYC* primes its savvy, upscale audience to judge the extravagance of female scapegoats harshly in tough economic times. In failed quests to perform the public role of esteemed aristocrats, these women are shown as neglecting their private duties as mothers. In ironic scenes dubbed "winks" by the show's producers, *RHW-NYC* primes cultural expectations about class and gender behaviors only to show a "housewife" failing to measure up to the standard on both accounts. Their class and gender flops are inter-related; the lure of class status produces inconsiderate mothers. In the world of *RHW-NYC*, money destroys, rather than enables, self-awareness, friendships, and, most importantly, competent mothering. Ultimately, *RHW-NYC* uses ironic "winks" to produce a provocative, recession-era, post-feminist drama about rich women too crass to be classy, too superficial to be nurturing, and too

self-obsessed to be caring. These are self-professed "working mothers" who work little and mother even less.

Building on feminist media scholarship about portrayals of class and gender, this project offers the opportunity to examine the ways in which normative conceptions of class and gender cohere to produce an archetypal, trans-historical villain typified by the mythology around historical figures like Marie Antoinette, fictional television characters like *Dynasty's* Alexis Carrington, and cinematic villains like Cruella Deville, a performance we term the "rich bitch." Sacrificing motherhood, empathy, and altruism, the rich bitch, a bourgeois feminine character done up as a cartoonish trope, pursues selfish material gains single-mindedly. Always gendered (female), always classed (leisure), and almost always racialized (white), she functions at a cultural crossroads where class antagonisms can be articulated and traditional gender roles can be reasserted. The figure of the rich bitch fuels class-based contempt by reinforcing anti-feminist tropes. . . .

### Ironic Portrayal and "The Bravo Wink"

*RHW-NYC* depicts the lives of five New York City "real housewives" whose day-to-day lives are comprised of gala events, high-profile charity auctions, see-and-be-seen functions, and, to a far lesser extent, motherhood and familial bonds. Each program is divided into vignettes that accentuate the cultural type each housewife occupies. Ramona Singer, to provide one example, the entrepreneur and self-described "MILF," frequently organizes "girls-only" events such as group Botox trips. Jill Zarin, the established "Jewess" socialite whose husband oversees a family-owned fabric company, obsesses about the remodeling of her posh Manhattan apartment. Bethenny Frankel, the youngest of the housewives and now subject of her

own spin-off reality series, is tagged the "runaway bride" whose celebrity chef career complicates her personal relationships with men. LuAnn de Lesseps, a former model and countess by marriage, is cast as the stereotypical, if unconvincing, "classy" socialite: wealthy, snooty, and judgmental. Alex McCord, a graphic designer whose marriage to an eccentric hotelier is a topic of ridicule among the housewives, is marked as a social climber on the outside of the elite circle of the fabulously wealthy. Kelly Bensimon, the author, model, equestrian, and, in her words, Manhattan "tastemaker," was a second-season addition to *RHW-NYC*.

These wealthy characters violate, both consistently and flagrantly, the performative conventions of wealth and femininity. Disrupting long-held linkages between wealth and manners, economic class and behavioral class, these wealthy characters are rough and rude even though their cultural type suggests formality and urbanity. We use the concept of irony both to make sense of how *RHW-NYC* is a vivid post-feminist narrative in which wealthy stars contravene class and gender norms out of indifference or ignorance.

. . . What generally signifies an ironic move is the violation of an audience assumption that is deeply engrained or has been recently primed (Booth 1974; Burke 1969). . . . Irony is a code that invites participation in the completion of a communicative act. Sarcastic irony is an illustrative example. When a friend declares *Desperate Housewives* to be "the greatest show in television history," auditors are prodded to discern whether the speaker's hyperbolic formulation, peculiar over-emphasis of "greatest show," or sly smirk are evidence that the intended meaning was the exact opposite of the statement's literal meaning. . . . Given its utility in shaming, ridiculing, inducing laughter, and exposing hypocrisy, some cultural critics have even heralded irony's potential in "creating the conditions of possibility for a genuine

democratic environment to develop" (Tabako 2007, p. 27; Rorty 1989).

Irony is central to the production, composition, and narrative of *RHW-NYC*. Even the show's basic premise, showing audiences the lives of "real housewives," is itself a layered irony. These so-called "real housewives" live lives most would find surreal, and none are actual housewives. Two of the six women, moreover, are not even married. Beyond these fundamental ironies, the show depicts several other, but no less galling, ironies: a group of friends who are not actually friends, rich people with no class, and wealthy who profess, but do not conduct, hard work.

Ironic framing is, in fact, the Bravo producers' chief métier. Andy Cohen, Bravo executive and host of the Real Housewives reunion specials, explains that the show is intentionally coded to highlight hypocrisy: "We do something with the editing that is called the Bravo wink. We wink at the audience when someone says 'I'm the healthiest person in the world' and then you see them ashing their cigarette. We're kind of letting the audience in on the fun" (Cohen 2009). This ironic viewing is only possible because the show is framed for Bravo viewers, television's most educated and upscale audience that considers itself "hip to television" (Dominus 2008).

Such ironic scenes are, nevertheless, not unique to Bravo. Some reality television shows, as Dubrofsky notes, gain dramatic purchase in climactic scenes in which female contestants, previously portrayed as well-mannered contenders, are overcome by uncontrollable emotions and display them "in a way that is unexpected and breaks social norms" (2009, p. 356). Such scenes are structured as acts of unmasking in which a hidden truth about a person is revealed in a surprising, even shocking, way. Even without the emotional spasm, "wink" scenes are of a similar species in the sense that they are designed to expose and reduce female characters and engage the viewing audience in the process. As a housewife brags



about being a doting mother or a hard worker, *RHW-NYC* cuts to images of ignored children and a luxuriating mother. These are scoff-inducing scenes in which a housewife says something so patently false, so comically contradicted by several shows' worth of evidence, that the housewife becomes ridiculous and other-worldly, someone who must have descended from another planet ill-equipped to manage life on this one.

### Class Transgressions

Economic class, of course, is definable in strictly economic terms: as personal income, as familial wealth, as net worth, or, in Marxist terms, as the relationship of an individual to the mode of production (Kendall 2005, pp. 12–13). Class, nevertheless, is also definable as a cultural construct tethered to a range of behavioral expectations. As Laura Grindstaff clarifies, "Class, especially in the context of television, is also a performance, a social script involving, among other things, language use, mannerisms, and dress" (2002, p. 31). Although the recent scholarly focus on class as a performance is often indebted to contemporary theorists, foundational thinkers about class were also sensitive to issues of culture and identity. Writing in 1899, Thorstein Veblen notes how the "consumption" of "excellent goods" signified wealth whereas a lack, in either quantity or quality, of such goods was viewed as a "mark of inferiority or demerit" (1967, p. 74). The enactment of personal taste, nevertheless, would collapse minus the delicate, polished manners useful in projecting an "apparently natural" image of effortless class (Lane 2000, p. 52). What Veblen calls "manners and breeding," decorousness and etiquette befitting social hierarchies, were vital when exhibiting a "reputable degree of leisure" (1967, p. 46).

Extending Veblen's focus on the repertoire of upper-class signifiers, Pierre

Bourdieu explores how the performance of upper class-ness is more a symphony than a solo; it requires the integration of seemingly disparate elements into a fluent whole. Typical conversational "banalities" about art or literature, for example, are "inseparable from the steady tone, the slow, casual diction, the distant or self-assured smile, the measured gesture, the well-tailored suit and the bourgeois salon of the person who pronounces them" (Bourdieu 1984, p. 174). These status markers are, in Bourdieu's terms, cultural capital, the means of reifying class hierarchy. As he explains, the "manner" in which "symbolic goods" are employed is an "ideal weapon in strategies of distinction, that is, as Proust put it, 'the infinitely varied art of marking distances'" (Bourdieu 1984, p. 66).

Veblen was an early chronicler of the process by which the cultural meaning of wealth was disciplined in the late nineteenth century. Gentility and refinement, two markers of behavioral class, became strongly correlated with the upwardly mobile economic classes during the period (Veblen 1967, pp. 48–49). The expectation that the wealthy would be well-mannered and personally reserved was popularized in etiquette manuals, finishing schools, and broader social and educational trends in the nineteenth century (Grindstaff 2002, p. 268). Such socialization was not uniform across social stratas, however; the expectation of etiquette "was especially true for upper-class white women, whose participation in public life was precarious, and for whom the stakes of transgression were high" (Grindstaff 2002, p. 268).

Whereas the management and suppression of public emotion has been construed as a middle and upper-class phenomenon, the embodiment of emotion has been construed as a working and lower-class phenomenon; this perception has been persistently reinforced by myriad talk shows and reality television programs (Grindstaff 2002, p. 246). It is un-ironic to see the impoverished inhabitants of a trailer

park come to blows on a nationally televised daytime talk show because public displays of physicality and emotionality are associated with poverty. The link between "class and emotional expressiveness" rests on the faulty assumption that the working poor are innately predisposed toward public paroxysms and that the rich are naturally geared toward private, mannered dispute resolutions (Grindstaff 2002, p. 143). By this cultural logic, it would be highly ironic for hedge fund managers to throw chairs at one another on the same daytime program. Rich people, quite simply, do not publicize their hysterics because they do not profit from social scorn; they do not televise their outbursts because they do not need the money. It is one thing for even the newly moneyed to commit a social indelicacy that would attract the judging eyes of an elite strata within the upper class and quite another to participate in a shouting match at a charity dinner (Season Two, Episode Four). The latter behavior might be judged as boorish across classes. . . .

### Wealth and Social Class

Nearly every aspect of the characters' economic lives is framed ironically in ways that lampoon a character as bumbling, mindless, or disgraceful. Typically, an *RHW-NYC* episode is edited to couple audio of a character's platitudinous pontifications about "class" or "grace" with video of the character's tactlessness. The characters defy nearly every image of the poised, high-society sophisticate committed to social graces and well-mannered to a fault. . . .

LuAnn is coded as the prototypically pretentious socialite. When this code is coupled with the show's ironic frame, LuAnn is exposed before viewers as a judgmental hypocrite. *RHW-NYC* becomes a prosecutorial vehicle. Much like the cigarette-ashing health nut described by the show's producer, audiences are presented video

evidence of LuAnn's professed values followed by images of her contradictory behavior. The producers pursue this ironic line through much of the second season as LuAnn parlays her new, Bravo-driven celebrity status into a book deal, *Class With the Countess*. The dramatic irony, demonstrated unobtrusively in "wink" scenes, is that the joke is on LuAnn. With Bravo's assemblage of audacious quotations about class and footage of her behavioral record, viewers can see her missteps, point out her hypocrisies, and evaluate her class performance. As Bethenny quips about LuAnn's repeated gaffes, "Not very countess-like. It's dis-countess" (Season Two, Episode Nine). Ultimately, LuAnn has performed her class incorrectly.

Like LuAnn, the show paints the other housewives as obsessed by questions of personal authenticity. Each housewife frets over whether she projects a "real," "genuine," "ladylike," "down-to-earth," and, of course, "classy" image. Of equal importance, *RHW-NYC* depicts these women as militant enforcers and harsh critics of the ways in which their acquaintances live up to these standards of authenticity as well. The women become the class police who misunderstand the concept they attempt to enforce. Ramona, for example, polices other characters' class performances while violating her own standards. After Jill refuses her second-row seat at a fashion event—"This is bullshit," Jill exclaims—Ramona stares intently into the camera and snidely isolates a point of difference between them: "I'm not into that kind of status. I could care less who sits where. It was not a normal reaction, or ladylike, or classy, or elegant, more importantly" (Season One, Episode Four). Ramona states that she and Bethenny are united as friends because each is "anti-hypocrisy" (Season Two, Episode Five). Ramona dismisses Alex and Simon for similar reasons: "They aren't real, and I don't have time for people who aren't real." (Season Two, Episode Three). Bravo frames these class ironies as perpetrated by women with no shame, women whose money

obstructs self-examination. The characters are highly conscious of the high-ideal of the poised socialite yet framed as doubly incapable of attaining the ideal or of realizing the disparity.

### Wealth and Social Life

A second irony of class performances on *RHW-NYC* is that money precludes a rewarding social life. *RHW-NYC* dramatizes the housewives' relational difficulties by implying that wealth and anomie among women are linked. To be sure, several principal characters on the show espouse basic feminist bromides. All of the housewives profess to be strong, independent women. All of the housewives have successful careers. "In New York, women work. Women have to work," Jill instructs (Season Two, Episode Nine). All of the women profess a desire to bond with other women and maintain an active social life. The original cast members later berate the newcomer, Kelly, for fixating on men. "You are not a girl's girl," Bethenny yells. "I am a girl's girl," Kelly protests (Season Two, Reunion One). In the same vein, all are suspicious, in some senses more than others, of traditional gender roles with regards to household duties like cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing. Viewers even witness Ramona, in several scenes, use painful examples from her childhood to teach her daughter feminist lessons. Ramona urges her daughter to avoid relying on men, exhorting her "to make her own money" to achieve "the greatest self-worth" and "independence as a woman" (Season One, Episode Six).

The cast members speak a language of women's empowerment; nevertheless, in their relationships with other women, their consumerist lifestyles, and their obsession with personal appearance, the characters become post-feminist cautionary tales rather than feminists. Put differently, the characters dress consumerist desires in a

feminist idiom. . . . The housewives figure plastic surgery, losing weight, looking youthful, going out, and dressing provocatively as the liberation of their essential womanhood. Ramona, for instance, sees plastic surgery as sisterly bonding. She says to her friends in a plastic surgeon's office, "I believe women should share . . . and I have this friend who is a doctor who has some new machines to make us look beautiful." "To good girlfriends and a great doctor," she toasts in a scene typifying the Bravo "wink." Same-sex closeness between women is achieved by indulging their common desire to look "eighteen forever" (Season One, Episode Eight).

Conflict is not a prelude to greater inter-personal connectedness; it is the basis of their relationships. In many cases, the housewives' competitive tensions bubble over into televised catfights, produced and edited for the delight of audiences. When Ramona and LuAnn offer Bethenny competing dating advice at a cancer benefit, Ramona dismisses LuAnn's comments as nonsense: "What do you know? You got married very young. You married a man twice your age" (Season Two, Episode Four). Similarly, a spat between Kelly and Bethenny at an arthritis event reveals their animosity to be mutual and visceral. Kelly establishes social hierarchy: "We're not the same." "This is you," she says holding her left hand low, and "this is me," she concludes raising her other hand above her head (Season Two, Episode Four). When asked about the incident at the reunion show, Bethenny is direct; Kelly is a "piece of shit" (Season Two, Reunion Two).

On the surface, *RHW-NYC* shares much with *Sex and the City*, another show that addressed issues of class, sex, and inter-personal relationships by conjuring consumerist and post-feminist narratives about a group of affluent white women in Manhattan (Arthurs 2003; Brasfield 2006; Gerhard 2005). Several of the New York housewives make sense of their social lives in terms of iconic *Sex and the City* images (Season Two, Episodes 11 and

12). Nevertheless, *RHW-NYC* can be productively read as the anti-*Sex and the City*. The *Sex and the City* characters live fabulously in Manhattan; they maintain strong inter-personal bonds and buy Jimmy Choo shoes. They can "have it all," and even though they may fight, they can have each other too. In *RHW-NYC*'s ironic portrayal of class, the housewives' drive for material possessions and social status destroys the sisterhood; the cattiness overwhelms the camaraderie. In *Sex and the City*, class facilitates social fulfillment. In *RHW-NYC*, women become so consumed by class that their inter-personal connections suffer. . . .

### Bad Mommies in Manhattan

These real housewives may not be housewives, but four of the five are mothers, and the fifth regrets not having children. (The fifth housewife, Bethenny, became a mother after these shows aired.) One central dynamic in the *Real Housewives* is the collision of the temptations of the housewives' glamorous lives with their motherly obligations. The housewives are shown consistently choosing socializing over mothering and self-maintenance over nurturing, inviting a harsh criticism of mothering which only serves to justify misogynistic gender divisions that presume that "women remain the best primary caretakers of children" (Douglas & Michaels 2004, p. 4). *RHW-NYC* uses gender stereotypes to re-signify the upper class and uses catty and conspicuously consumptive behaviors to reinscribe the notion that mommy should be at home with the kids.

Producers direct much of the audience's attention toward instances of failed mothering, as opposed to failed parenting, participating in a larger overall trend of what Ruth Feldstein (2000) refers to as "mother-blaming." Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels (2004) have written extensively about the ways in which media culture

construct our common-sense notions of how mothers ought to behave, celebrating the "best" mothers and punishing the "worst" mothers. Recent mediated "mommy wars" between falsely polarized "working moms" and "stay at home moms" have turned motherhood into the latest "competitive sport" (Douglas & Michaels 2004, p. 11). As images of intensive mothering drown out notions of egalitarian parenting, "ridiculous, honey-hued ideals of perfect motherhood" dominate popular culture (Douglas & Michaels 2004, p. 2).

In direct violation of these standards of "new momism," viewers of *RHW-NYC* are invited to critique these women as mothers who have chosen their superficial lives over the development of their children (Vavrus 2007). Consistent with the show's cultivation of irony, the mothers' behavior, in some cases, becomes so egregious that the mother-daughter relationship is upended; the mother is childish and the child is authoritative. In a role reversal exemplifying the show's ironic frame, Ramona's twelve-year-old daughter, Avery, adopts the motherly role and scolds her mother about her revealing outfits, her lewd language, and her "embarrassing" behavior. Avery, who is asked in interview segments to critique her mother's behavior, repeatedly refers to her mother's hyper-sexualized dress and conduct as "ewww," "disgusting," "gross," and "unlady like." After witnessing her mother start a poolside bikini-wrestling match, Avery screams at Ramona: "Oh my god mom, don't! You're such an evil woman," before storming off. Ramona laughs away her daughter's concerns in sexual terms: "We're just a bunch of MILFs" (Season One, Episode Two).

When mothering is prominently featured, producers employ the "Bravo wink" to construct these real mothers as ineffective, neglectful, selfish, superficial, and juvenile. The housewives' relationships with their children are depicted as empty, built on consumptive behaviors and unsolicited, shocking, and even dangerous advice. Excess means are blamed tacitly for



the shortage of mothering; a life brimming with extravagance and temptation provides the “pull” that draws mothers outside the home, away from their rightful duties of child-rearing. . . .

### Neglecting Home Life for Social Life

The housewives’ home lives and social lives are framed as forced choices, rearticulating post-feminist tensions in leisure-class terms. In a standard scene, a housewife dresses for a night out at a charity events or drinks with friends, and the children are left behind, sullen and abandoned. The scene depicts the glitzy housewife leaving the house and, as a melodramatic score plays, a close-up shot of a sad child fills the screen. The forced choice these women face is not between parenting and work (production), but between mothering and consumptive socializing (consumption): “me-time.” What makes their choices even more transgressive of social expectations of mothers is that the “work” they perform at the perceived expense of competent mothering is not really work, but pretend. The housewives are cast as worse than working moms because they choose social obligations and maintaining their external beauty over motherhood, all under the guise of “hard work.”

This trope is exemplified by LuAnn, who is often shown siding with sociality over her two children. Noel, her ten-year-old son, at one point begs to come out with his mother and she lies and explains that “children don’t go to this restaurant” (Season One, Episode Seven). In the following scene, viewers witness what LuAnn “deserted” her children for: a “girls night out” of drinking, clubbing, and “window shopping” for dildos at a sex shop with her twenty-three-year-old niece, violating not only her responsibilities as mother and nurturer, but normative boundaries assigned by her age and social status. LuAnn arrives at

the “bohemian” bar clearly exasperated, greets her niece who is half her age, and directs the bartender who is pouring her cocktail to “make it on the stronger side.” To her niece, Nicole, she exclaims, “Yippee! You don’t know how happy I am to get out of the house because it has been so grueling” (Season One, Episode Seven). Employing the “wink,” producers juxtapose these scenes that mount evidence of absentee mothering with LuAnn’s admission to viewers that it “feels great to get out” of the house when her husband is out of town and “forget about being a mom.” Rather than identify with and celebrate LuAnn’s “escape” from her motherly duties, viewers are primed to jeer at her pathetic attempt to reclaim her youth as she buys gaudy trinkets, giggles girlishly at dildos in a sex shop window, and pretends to enjoy the band playing at the “bohemian” dive bar. . . . Her desperation to drink from the fountain of youth is not only rendered a failure but an unworthy diversion from her legitimate role of familial caretaker.

### Outsourcing Motherhood

Highlighting another irony of “working motherhood” on the *Real Housewives* series, the housewives’ children are not nurtured by their mothers but by an expensive array of *au pairs*, live-in nannies, wellness centers, and high-end pre-schools. Motherhood is outsourced. LuAnn’s children are “raised” by their second mother, a Pilipino housekeeper named Rosie. In one telling scene, LuAnn is busily preening for an evening out with a girlfriend and ordering Rosie what to make for the kids’ dinner. Noel, clearly upset, accuses his mother of neglect: “All my friends, their parents are home every single night. Are you going to be back early?” In a separate interview, LuAnn justifies to viewers: “They [the children] always try to pull the guilt trip on me. I, of course, feel for him, but I don’t let

it override me and what I have to do in my own social life.” It is up to Rosie to counsel Noel: “When he asks ‘When are my parents going to be back?’ I just say ‘They love you very much,’ and he says, ‘I love you, Rosie’” (Season One, Episode Five). Rosie directly addresses LuAnn’s absenteeism and the consequences of outsourcing motherhood in a personal interview. Rosie says to viewers, “I want them [LuAnn and the Count] to spend more quality time with the kids. I don’t want the children growing up saying, ‘You weren’t there.’”

In this family, viewers are repeatedly reassured that Rosie plays the role of the substitute mother. Rosie, LuAnn explains, “is like mom when I’m gone.” While LuAnn socializes, she employs quality paid labor to provide the nurturing, care, and love the children are otherwise missing from their relationship with their parents. Rosie explains, “I raise them how I raise my kids. They treat me like a second mother. I am always there for them whenever to give them whatever they need.” In contrast to negative working class depictions on television, viewers are invited to empathize with Rosie’s plight, to “side” with her and see her as the true mother-figure in the household. Rosie does the heavy-lifting in the household, not only in terms of the care and upkeep of the home, but also in the rearing and nurturing of the children.

As LuAnn farms out the domestic work of parenting and housework to Rosie, Jill attempts to solve problems facing her thirteen-year-old daughter Ally by sending her to a posh “detox” center in Martha’s Vineyard. Through careful editing, it becomes evident that “detox” is code for “weight loss,” despite Jill’s failed attempts to mask the trip as being primarily about curing Ally’s “arthritis.” The center is run by the author of *How to Lose 21 Pounds in 21 Days*, and video footage of her time there makes it clear the program focuses on purge dieting made up entirely of liquid meals. Jill is thrilled when Ally returns a week later eleven pounds thinner, drastic weight loss

for a young teen. In a scene intended to make audiences squirm uncomfortably, Jill pokes at her daughter’s mid-section while she screams in delight at the prospect of weight loss, “Oh my god! Where’d my daughter go?” (Season One, Episode Three).

### Classing Children

The housewives’ failures as mothers are not limited to absenteeism or substituting shoe shopping for emotional intimacy. Alex’s failures, in particular, stem from her attempts to manufacture worldly, learned adults out of young children. Her class anxieties have infiltrated her parenting style, and frequent scenes of Johan and Francois running, screaming, and defiant attest to her limitations as a mother.

. . . As involved, hyper-attentive parents, one narrative arch involves Alex and Simon’s often barely concealed attempts to break into the right social circle, and the importance of their children in that quest. They named them pretentiously (Johan and Francois); they employ a French *au pair*; they try to cajole the children to order food in French at fancy restaurants; they tour fifteen Manhattan preschools.

Alex, of all the characters, hews most closely to popular media representations of “new momism,” a logic that naturalizes “intensive mothering” (Douglas & Michaels 2004). But in this social climate, this kind of dotting only serves to destroy effective parenting practices. These children are spoiled, and even the best, most well-intentioned attempts to set boundaries, instill work ethic, and inspire a fulfilled life inevitably fail. Johan and Francois are shown violating the standards of good behavior expected from children of such a wealthy family. At the formal dinner party that concludes Season One, Alex and Simon sit idly as the children scream incessantly and poke guests’ food, ruining a thirty-dollar hamburger in one instance.

The camera focuses intently on the other housewives as they exchange judgmental glances, eye rolls, and catty commentary. Ramona scolds: "My daughter would never be able to do that . . . I've never seen that before in my life." This dinner party footage is replayed repeatedly, slowed down for dramatic effect, and colored in sepia tone to place it in the past. It serves as ammunition for another powerful "Bravo wink" whenever the Van Kempens espouse their views on effective parenting, especially in Season Two when they reveal they are writing a book of their "collection of experiences" they gleaned from raising their children. The Van Kempens are subjected to the ridicule of their show-mates, as producers juxtapose the footage of the dinner party as LuAnn makes a mockery of their book: "The way the Van Kempen children behave, I wouldn't say they would be the authority on writing a book about childhood behavior." Just as the housewives police one another's class performances, they also criticize each other's mothering skills; they fail to adhere to the standards they preach in both instances. Not only are viewers invited to level harsh criticisms against the characters' failed attempts at mothering. Often these criticisms are channeled through the characters themselves, who act out their own version of the "mommy wars" for the delight of TV audiences.

### Conclusion: The Downside of the Populist Promise

The ironies of the housewives' performances of class and gender alienate viewers from identifying with the six women of *RHW-NYC* on two levels. First, the characters, through some outlandish display of wealth or an ill-considered comment about another character's looks, spouse, or parenting, mark themselves as poorly behaved. In these instances, any judgment viewers make about the characters' excessive purchases

or materialistic values draws upon the audience's latent senses of class consciousness and social decorum. Such judgments are primed by displays of the characters' deviant behaviors. Second, these primed judgments are reinforced by standards the characters set for themselves. That is, the show uses outlandish behavior to mark these characters' difference, and deviance, from an audience's most basic aspirations of tactful consumption and social grace, but it also highlights through "winks" their failure to live up to their own criteria. By juxtaposing the characters' stated behavioral ideals with their numerous televised transgressions, *RHW-NYC* compounds many viewers' latent judgments with an explicit invitation to label these women as hypocrites. In the end, these women are a far cry from hegemonic conceptions of motherhood perpetuated by popular media forms. The show is entertaining precisely because they fail to meet these standards. As one reality producer said, "*Housewives* isn't as much about them being rich as it is about them being spoiled, senseless and self-obsessed. No matter what the economy is, people are always going to tune in that" (Guthrie 2009, p. 4).

The show, of course, is not a cultural phenomenon solely because it broadcasts rich bitch villains; that is only part of its force. Fans of *RHW-NYC* are empowered as judges and invited to conclude that those with the most deserve the least. Many viewers delight in witnessing "the women on the show program bicker nakedly, flaunting diamonds—and talons—with equal hauteur" (La Ferla 2009, p. 2). On *RHW-NYC*, as with other reality TV formats, viewer-judges are supplied evidence of repeated violations of class performances: vulgar behavior, conspicuous consumption, poor relationships, and bad mothering. The host of the season-ending reunion episodes showcases this audience empowerment by reading viewers' condemnatory emails and blog posts on air. For instance, regarding Jill's consumptive

lifestyle, the host says, "We got thousands of viewer emails, many of them very pointed," before asking, "Do you feel any responsibility for the [economic] crash?" (Season Two, Reunion One). Another email read during the reunion show illustrates how the producers feature emails that are pointed and personal. One viewer tells Kelly, "You need to seek professional help." Many of these emails feature an accusation of hypocrisy by an angered viewer. One viewer, for example, emailed Kelly: "If you're so private, why would you do a reality show?" (Season Two, Reunion Two).

On these season-finales-as-trials, the characters have to explain themselves and atone for bad behavior. Such scenes, when coupled with hours of footage of the rich defiling themselves in numerous ways, reflect deep class anguish within the US political culture and express a potentially powerful populist sentiment. The upper-class is not evidence of an economic system that rewards hard labor or elite education. They are neither models for imitation or spectacles for amazement. Reading critical emails that identify the hypocrisy of these rich women is the mass mediation of a leveling of social hierarchy. The rich not only become accessible and accountable for their behavior, they become less than the audience. They are scapegoats for economic crises, figures of scorn and pity, morality tales of lives led wastefully. Their Manhattan social lives, their profligate purchases, the location of their summer homes, and the baroque renovations of their high-rises are motivated by status anxiety. They appear as simple rats unaware of their unnecessary race, rich automatons enslaved by extravagance. . . .

*RHW-NYC*, to be sure, is not overt, class-based vitriol, but it has an antagonistic undertone. Historically, images of villainous or buffoonish elites have fueled progressive class politics in which the downtrodden, priced-out farmers, and even the forgotten middle class has exposed a fat cat banker or a corrupt robber-baron

to highlight gross inequalities in the social conditions produced by industrial capitalism. Whether motivated by Marx, the Christian social gospel, or simple egalitarianism, whether decried as the "super-rich," in Huey Long's words, or the "economic royalists," in Franklin Roosevelt's language, a critique of the rich as too rich has accompanied calls for income redistribution, social safety nets, progressive taxation, workers' rights, and, ultimately, social democracy (Kazin 1995, p. 110).

Considering Bravo's upscale branding to some of the most desirable audience demographics on television, however, the populist promise of *RHW-NYC* may be limited. It is not the downtrodden, laid-off worker who is empowered but a relatively affluent and well-educated audience that is encouraged to see themselves as superior to the extremely wealthy. The show's themes may nourish class antagonisms, but Bravo's audience is not exactly the working-class heroes of Left fables. Bravo dubs its audience "affluencers," a catchy name for its young, chic, stylish, and upward-aspiring demographic, a quarter of whom make over \$100,000 a year (Dominus 2008). The show's mockery and prosecution of tremendously wealthy women may also let the merely affluent Bravo audience off the hook. In their role as viewer-judge, they may conclude that some rich people do their class comically wrong and nothing more politically potent than that. As one television programmer explained, "Viewers can enjoy all the vapid consumerism . . . without imagining that they're falling sway to the very forces that make that show catnip for advertisers" (Dominus 2008).

Potentially empowering though this critique may be, its seductiveness also exists at the intersection of populist class ideals and anti-feminist gender tropes. Viewers of *RHW-NYC* are invited to conclude that the rich are undeserving because these women violate traditional gender roles so flagrantly. The housewives are convicted for failing to live up to the June Cleaver



image of mom as an omnipotent nurturer. Moreover, parental mistakes on the show are consistently framed as maternal mistakes. When the children act up, the ostensible judgment is that the mother should become a better disciplinarian. In the world of *RHW-NYC*, strong fatherly figures are noticeably absent, but only mothers, not fathers, are persecuted for their absence. This economic morality tale mirrors other vaguely Faust-ish tales in which individuals sell their souls for social status. Money, so the bromide goes, is the root of all evil. In the case of *RHW-NYC*, however, the evil that money engenders is specific to women, specific to the stereotype of the pampered rich wife, and specific to six women transgressing their roles as mothers and caregivers. Although *RHW-NYC* offers the viewing public a wealthy villain to judge, scapegoating women during an unfolding economic crisis smacks of retrograde gender politics.

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