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Like Poison for Medicine: Understanding, Arbitrating, and Negotiating the Mark of Collective Dysfunction in Reality Television

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in Sociology

by

Quintarrius Shakir Mayers

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June 2015

The thesis of Quintarrius Shakir Mayers Mayers is approved.

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June 2015

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by

Quintarrius Shakir Mayers

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To the Black folk in Memphis who wanted me to remember where I came from,

who wanted me to bring our culture and politics

to the academy.

This is for you.

ABSTRACT

Like Poison for Medicine: Understanding, Arbitrating, and Negotiating the Mark of Collective Dysfunction in Reality Television

by

Quintarrius Shakir Mayers

Reality television has faced intense criticism for its negative depictions of African American women and their husbands engaging in personal and group disputes. “Reality shows often cast relatively diverse groups with the intention of seeing whether conflict or harmony will result” (Montemurro 2007:84). The tension between conflict and harmony provides dramatic tension that builds audience investment and engagement. It is a commonplace of reality television to portray families riddled with gendered and generational tensions and antagonisms. When the main characters in the show are Black, however, conflict and harmony take on an added resonance.

The history that has given African Americans a linked fate makes harmony a survival strategy while rendering conflict as a threat to that survival. Moreover, the long history of imputing pathological dysfunction in Black families as the cause of Black suffering, a move that absolves white racism of responsibility, makes representations of Black family fights damaging to all Blacks in a way that does not apply to similar representations of white families.

Presentations of dysfunction in Black families and social circles can be used to indict all Black people through the dynamic that sociologist Albert Memmi calls “the mark of the plural,” the process through which any failing by any member of a socially subordinated group is taken as evidence of the unfitness of the group as a whole (Memmi 2013:129). Yet Black families and social circles are not immune to the dysfunctions that appear in all social groups. The cumulative vulnerabilities created by generations of exploitation, oppression and cultural demonization impose intense pressures of Black sociality and solidarity.

In this thesis, I argue that the same reality television portrayals that may well reinforce impressions of Like Poison for Medicine also provide Black viewers with a forum for understanding, arbitrating and negotiating the mark of collective dysfunction.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary imagery of African Americans often depicts them struggling with each other in large measure according to petty disputes motivated by pathological dysfunction. Reality television shows like The Real Housewives of Atlanta (RHOA) are criticized for portraying problematic depictions of women who aim to transform racial and gender television boundaries.

Even shows like Married to Medicine, which centers on the personal and professional lives of Black female doctors and doctors' wives, have not been exempt from this scrutiny. Before Married to Medicine aired, an online petition from medical students at Howard University surfaced proclaiming that the show exploits educated, professional Black women, associates them with "materialism… and unprofessionalism," and will make obtaining residencies harder for Black women. Beyond this petition lies a more distinct truth: women, especially Black women, are not afforded the opportunity to engage in aggressive behavior on stage or in everyday life without real consequences, consequences that activate particularly powerful racial and gendered stereotypes.

In this paper, I will draw on material from an ethnographic analysis of audiovisual content on reality television to examine the importance of race, gender, and conflict as it emerges in everyday encounters between African American women and men. I first provide an overview of literature that explores women and racial minority representation in media domains centered in the United States. I then show how this imagery can intentionally and unintentionally inflict real-world injuries on the community it portrays. In showing this, I also explain how these images shape the perceptions of white people in the United States and produce real consequences for racial minorities. After this, I move away from

stereotypical imagery towards imagery that depicts African Americans as pathological; I, then, argue that pathological imagery, unlike stereotypical imagery, can be therapeutic in its uses, producing positive psychological effects for the community these representations portray. Finally, I center my research object, The Real Housewives of Atlanta, into a conceptual framework that considers this form of television as reinforcing perceptions of pathology and helping its victims to heal from them at the same time. Out of this framework, I tease out a concept called "Pathological Personality Engineering," which describes the "in-between" culture the reality television participant lives in and provides the reader with insight into how the participants in this study are framed as pathological.

This study examines how Black people (and others of African American descent) living in Atlanta, Georgia who juggle professional careers and intimate relationships negotiate gender, gender interactions, and everyday personal disputes. Although I privilege the experiences of the female participants in this study, I move between their portrayals those of their male spouses. I am interested in what brings friends and family members together and what drives them apart as they display what seems like dysfunction in public. I offer an empirical analysis of interaction between Black men and women that challenges notions of the Black family as pathological. The main goal of this study is to provide a theoretically grounded analysis of the ways that pathological imagery of everyday cultural practices can have unexpectedly therapeutic dimensions. Readers interested in a sociological analysis of the ways that Black people complicitly remanufacture historical tropes on their own and degrade the public's perception of the African American community at-large will not find this here. This project describes instead how people imagine and enact ways to "stay human," make mistakes, and bravely live out the consequences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

African American Representation and Gender Stereotypes

The U.S. film and television industry has long promoted depictions of African American social pathologies. These depictions are constructed through dominant and dominating discourses about sexuality and race, specifically whiteness (Gray 1995). Representation has been a central theme in African American intellectual traditions. Historians and Black feminist cultural critics have located, analyzed, and deconstructed stereotypical images of Blackness from minstrelsy to the "jezebel," from the "buck," to the "Black bitch." (Huggins 1971; bell hooks 1992; Lott 1993; Roediger 1999; Collins 2004). This rich body of scholarship provides critical tools for examining representations of Black people on reality television shows and identifying the causes, consequences, uses, and effects of contemporary tropes about Like Poison for Medicine in U.S. television.

The literature on racial representations in the media employs two popular concepts: (1) symbolic annihilation and (2) stereotype. George Gerbner (1972) first introduced symbolic annihilation as a concept in a comparative study of the quantity and quality of violent programming in television from 1967-69. This concept describes how the fallacious treatment of racial groups in the media contributes to social inequality and disempowerment. Further, the concept is designed to explore how the symbolic absence of individuals and groups in the media can erase them from public consciousness. Gerbner did not apply his concept of symbolic annihilation to any particular group, but scholars of Blackness have applied this concept widely throughout the humanities and social sciences to explain racial minority representations in a range of media forms. Stereotype analysis has also loomed large in studies of Black representation, Robin Means-Coleman and Yochim Chivers (2008)

define a stereotype as a “conventional, formulaic, oversimplified concept, opinion, or belief” that promotes an unvarying depiction of a group. The stereotype is often negatively associated with portrayals of racial minorities on television.

From the 1980’s to the 2000s, the prevalence of African American characters on primetime television shows plummeted dramatically. In the 1980s, African American actors comprised 22% of roles on primetime television, in comparison to 78% of white actors, but twenty years later, African Americans actors occupied only 9% of the acting roles on primetime television in comparison to white actors at 83% (Tukachinsky, Mastro, and Yarchi 2015). In the 1990s, news networks such as NBC Nightly News with Tom Brokaw, African Americans were significantly more likely to be absent from network news coverage than whites, and when African Americans were present in network news, they were significantly more likely to appear as criminals than victims or police officers (Dixon, Azocar, and Casas 2003).

Controlling images deployed by mass media in the United States are and have been used for centuries to excuse and justify mistreatment toward African American men and women. Stereotyping is an unavoidable form of social cognition, and in the United States, racial stereotyping through overt expressions has declined but racial inequality remains the same (Forman and Lewis 2006; Omi and Winant 2014). As offered by Hill-Collins (2004) stereotypes are historically responsible for “objectifying Black women agricultural workers as mules” and “the institutionalized rape of enslaved Black women spawned the controlling image of the jezebel or sexually wanton Black woman” (56). Black feminist scholars have approached the issue of African American representation in media contexts by examining past and present media imagery to highlight negative depictions of Blackness. Collins does

not directly draw upon symbolic annihilation as a concept but instead argues that stereotypical images of Black women such as the “jezebel” and the “mammy” provide “powerful ideological justifications [for] intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality” (2000:69).

Contemporary racist imagery of Blacks in the media draws upon stereotypical underpinnings that presume that African Americans are aggressive and prone to violent behavior when attempting to resolve interpersonal conflict. The implication of this imagery is that Blacks operate under repressive social pathologies (crime, uninhibited lust, generational family trauma). African Americans frequently object to the representations of Black people in reality television failing to resolve dysfunctional conflicts because they contend these depictions activate and mobilize longstanding negative ascriptions. Black people have to defend themselves from the charge that they are the cause of the social problems they confront. Understandably, they critique representations of themselves as pathological. Ruthless in its duties of policing social categories, stereotypical imagery is scrutinized as having no purpose other than to shape thoughts of the powerful and powerless, and maintain racial dominance.

Studying the persistence of historical negative representations explicitly dehumanizing Black people highlights common forms of discrimination that often go unrecognized. Sociologists, communication scholars, and psychologists have studied the Black community and the impact racism has in terms of life opportunity, family structure and moral psychology. The research generated in this field often focuses on the construction of stereotypes in mass media and the effects of distorted depictions on the public’s consciousness. Past and present research in social psychology has revealed that white

Americans' attitudes are directly influenced by racist imagery of African Americans, and this media exposure contributes to white people's construction and perpetuation of their racial perceptions and anxieties (Dixon and Maddox 2005; Tukachinsky, Mastro, and Yarchi 2015). Work in this area investigates the effects exposure to television portrayals of African American criminals has on viewers' real world judgments (Mastro et al. 2009). Regardless of self-reported racial attitudes, white college students mistakenly remember Black people as perpetrators of violent crimes in newspaper stories they have read (Oliver and Fonash 2009).

We know that historical representations are associated with contemporary outcomes, and that stereotypes shape implicit knowledge structures. Implicit bias is responsible for an array of discriminatory consequences directed towards Black people. Sociologists have been concerned with trying to figure out if traditional Black culture. Some charge that the Black family structure is responsible for maintaining social inequality through the development and inheritance of deep-rooted social pathologies. Others challenge this approach by conducting systematic studies that aim to understand the logic of Black teen pregnancy (Kaplan 1997), how dominating ideas of strength stimulate depression (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2007), and how violence constructs Black feminine identities in urban neighborhoods (Jones 2010). African American feminist scholar Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) conducts focus group interviews with Black women. The women in her study describe their experiences challenging stereotypical myths about their public image. Her observations provide key examples of how Black women work to resist dominating depictions that are always working to constrict them.

Research on the operation of stereotypic associations reveals that that white people unconsciously associate Black people with primates (Goff et al. 2008), police officers associate Black people with the specific concept of crime and often misidentify Black as criminal suspects (Eberhardt et al. 2004), and in death sentencing cases, jurors' decisions are influenced by the extent to which a defendant appears stereotypically Black (Eberhardt et al. 2006).

The number of African Americans on primetime television has dwindled. Primetime news coverage depicts African Americans as socially deviant. Research suggests both the presence of stereotypical representations and absence of racial minorities on television work in concert to legitimate and perpetuate social inequality.

The Black Family as Pathological

As suggested in the introduction, stereotypes produce not just symbols of social and sexual deviance but also assert and reinforce ideological justifications of racism and other oppressions experienced by Black people. Interrogating these justifications requires that we think critically about how pathological imagery illuminates new ways in which social inequality is maintained through under- and misrepresentation of racial minorities. It is my contention, however, that rather than being purely negative, representations of Black pathology can sometimes serve positive purposes in their uses and effects, by instructing people how to operate in public and providing a symbolic terrain for vicarious engagement with intimate everyday life problems.

"Pathology" is a field of medical study. As a unit of analysis, this is a hotspot for the study of social problems, especially those dealing with the existence of Black people and African American culture. I use pathology as an umbrella term to reference and categorize

everyday behaviors that inhibit wellness and well-being. From this perspective, I treat dysfunctional conflict and representations of it as pathological.

Humanities scholars have studied the alleged cultural incongruence between Black people and American (white) culture. This research has explored Black family formation during 19th century slavery to disprove arguments that link Black inferiority to family structure and pathology (Gutman 1976; Kulikoff 1986). Other scholars interrogate dominating misunderstandings of black culture. Robin Kelley (1997), a historian of Black popular culture, shows how these misunderstandings are woven into social policy and everyday American life. These scholars contest a prevailing sexist epistemology that criticizes women's leadership and decries allegedly diminishing Black masculinity in Black kinship networks.

Yet contemporary imagery of Black people in the mass media depicts them struggling with each other precisely because of pathological dysfunction. This imagery is controlling, and distorts public perceptions of Black people in the real world. Because of this, Black people have to defend themselves from charges that they are the causes of their own social problems; in effect, they critique representations of themselves as pathological.

A year after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law, a report titled "The Negro Family: The Case For National Action" was published by the U.S. Department of Labor. In the fourth chapter titled "The Tangle of Pathology," sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965) attempts to explain with sexist logics why Black poverty persists. He arrives at the conclusion that a matriarchal family structure and Black female domestic leadership places "the Negro American… at a distinct disadvantage." He writes, "In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is to out

of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well." In short, Moynihan surmises that Black households' matriarchal family structures unnaturally challenge the patriarchal nuclear family to the detriment of the Black community.

The Moynihan Report is only a signifier for a much larger dismissal of the Black family. Barack Obama used similar rhetoric in a speech addressing the protests that emerged in Baltimore in response to the death of Freddie Gray. Obama (2015) mentions "communities where there are no fathers who can provide guidance to young men" as a social determinant in periods of conflict between police and African American communities. Being an absent Black father, or a *weak nigg*a, constitutes an important framework where Black men are expected to fail in marrying a woman and supporting a family, which also signals a failure to meet the criteria of hegemonic masculinity. As controlling depictions of Black family life, images like strong Black woman and weak nigga present working-class Black partnerships as pathological, primarily because these two pairings lack the appropriate Euro-American qualities of the patriarchal nuclear family.

Black cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1981) encapsulates the effects of popular culture has on shaping the public perceptions of the individual. "We can be certain that other forces also have a stake in defining 'the people' as something else: 'the people" who need to be disciplined more, ruled better, more effectively policed, whose way of life needs to be protected from 'alien cultures', and so on," he poignantly writes (453). Black men are depicted as absent or irresponsible fathers, in comparison to Black women who are depicted as unmarried sexual deviants who solely support a family of multiple children conceived by

multiple others. Both these depictions are used to evidence dysfunction in the Black community and distract from the real consequences of systemic racial oppression.

In truth, the Black individual is not a pathological product of a broken family but rather a member of an oppressed group constantly combating an ongoing crisis that threatens to tear apart the Black family. Though the Moynihan report is a lie, there is a partial truth, however, in that Black families pay a terrible price for cultural demonization. Pathological representations illustrate some of what happens to Black families and communities as a result of race and class oppression. It is also true that pathological representations embody the formal cultural codes and procedures that shape and regulate Black people's behavior in public and private. Pathological representations tap into pre-existing reception framings about what it means to be Black, and what it means to look at Black people deal with comedy, tragedy, and pathos in television and film (Huggins 1971).

Pathological forms of representations may be the most threatening to the Black community. But, if the mass media only promoted Cosby ("respectable" Black representations) images, then, the claims Moynihan made in his report are not truly discredited. Only exceptions to his claims have been created, exceptions in which the public says, "The father should be a doctor, the mother a lawyer, and every problem solved with a joke." In a way, images depicting Blacks as respectable are dishonest portrayals of Black lifestyles, in a way, because they do not really address the fragmentation of the Black family in the public's consciousness.

Research on racial and ethnic representation in reality television reveals persistent racial stereotyping among African American participants on reality television shows. For example, communications scholar Tia Tyree (2011) completed a textual analysis of reality

television shows on traditional and cable networks, including BET, VH1, and NBC. Her findings were that reality television shows stereotype more than half its African American participants. African American women participants are framed as angry Black women, hoochies, and chicken heads, and African American men as Uncle Toms and coons.

Because women—temporally real, "reality TV" real, or fictional characters—are disproportionately stigmatized on television, some critics opine portrayals of Black women's conduct on television as problematic and controversial. Other critics laud new representations of Black femininity in television and treat them as unique forms of pleasure and engagement. Currently Black women actors occupy some leading roles in primetime television: Kerry Washington as Olivia Pope (*Scandal*), Viola Davis as Annalise Keating (*How to Get Away With Murder*), Gabrielle Union as Mary Jane Paul (*Being Mary Jane*), and Taraji Henson as Cookie Lyon (*Empire*). These roles' storylines primarily begin with a character falling in love with a married man. Results from a Nielson and ESSENCE Consumer Report study (2013) reveal that African American viewers prefer to watch television programs that include characters that reflect Black lifestyle and culture, though not always reflecting "how typical blacks *act*." Roles in which Black female characters juggle everyday demands from high status occupations, family, and men fit into this criteria.

The first season of *Being Mary Jane*, for example, centers on its leading character, a successful news anchor named Mary Jane, searching for a husband in Atlanta, Georgia. According to the creator Mara Brock Akil (2014), it "tells one Black woman's story" that intends to resonate with audiences. Being Mary Jane relies on complicated characters with pathological tendencies to set its mood and ambience. In her search, she falls in love with a married man and struggles to stomach her new vulnerabilities without her internal tensions

affecting her career and family life. In a 2015 interview with *Yahoo! Style*, Gabrielle Union is asked if her character is a homewrecker. Union explains her character's side of the story, stating:

> "I think initially he is a home wrecker. He was dishonest. He started a relationship under false pretenses [by not telling her he was married], but I think she became a bit morally bankrupt on the way. That narrative is important to tell, which is why I was all for the story line. It shows what happens and all of the people who are affected in an affair. I look at it as a morality tale."

Readers can see that Mary Jane's life choices anchor the show. Union's comments echo Akil's intention to show more complicated images of Black family life in television. Author and attorney Iyanla Vanzant (2010) poignantly writes, "The family sets up the pathology and the patterns that you are called to heal in your lifetime" (25). As pathological imagery, Mary Jane and her relationships with men and family reflect mainstream assumptions about the Black family. Not only does the show directly address the idea of fragmentation and divisiveness in the Black community, it also tells how the community can come back together.

Pathological imagery can provide an opportunity for airing out tensions and dangers. Pathological imagery functions like medicine and poison, at the same time. Pathological imagery in a metaphoric sense is similar to caduceus, the snake on the stick in the pharmacy window, in that it the thing that can kill you can also cure you if you use it in the right dose. For example, pathological rhetoric harms the Black community when it constitutes ethnic blame discourse (Dixon and Linz 2006). Pathological representations can be therapeutic if represented as lessons about dangers and how to get through them. The same community

this imagery targets can also therapeutically use these images for positive effect. In order for pathological imagery to work as medicine, it has to have a little bit of disease in it. This bit of disease does not corrupt the medicine; it means that it can help you.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Reality-based television is a genre of television with its own stylistic components and conventions, and these conventions distinguish this television format as its own genre. A common way reality television shows featuring Black ensemble casts construct pathological representations is through a routine highlighting of points of contention in friendship, business, and kinship circles. Because respectability is an issue for Black women, displays of non-respectable conduct engage audiences. The participants on the show live in a culture of ferocious theatricality, where they throw out styles, deploy insults, and make people deal with them.

Reality television is a capacious and intoxicating form of television because it allows viewers surveillance into the lives of people who are always being considered deficient. The over-determined emphasis on intimate-sphere public explosions and conflicts is a staple of the genre. In this genre, shows are littered with simple symbols that people can identify with and predictable signs to provide viewers with something to expect. The cast members on the show are constructed as characters with clear identities, and this convention is used to allow viewers to become involved in what a character is doing. The signs and symbols in the show are modes that determine predictable expectations of mood and ambience.

RHOA, like *Being Mary Jane*, depicts Black family life in ways that reinforce the cultural subordination of the Black family but also resist them at the same time. Like Mary Jane, the participants on the show wittingly or unwittingly are made objects of ridicule and

pleasure; on the other hand, they are living grandly and boldly, making big decisions and seeing themselves as important. *RHOA* portrays lifestyles in which you have a lot of people telling you what to do, how to act, and when to move on. You also have critical family members, close friends, and personal enemies doing the same thing: instructing you on how to behave and training you for a judgmental society where some small thing can be used against you.

In reality television, conflict is often created through the development of alliances and strategic relationships and the process by which these unions are formed and torn apart. *RHOA* could be considered a social experiment because of its systematized broadcasting of seemingly pathological behavior (Montemurro 2007). I observe the show instead as a forum for airing tensions about normativity and non-normativity in the Black community. This study sees pathological representations of Black people in reality television as demonstrations of people finding alternative forms of mutuality, affection, and support. These performances of non-normativity are considered sources of repair in the making of a community and insight into the ordinary things that people deal with.

In *RHOA*, upper class African Americans are responsible for managing tension in intimate settings and maintaining (unwanted) contact with one another over an extended period of time. The racial demographics and landscape of The Real Housewives of Atlanta cast (and Atlanta, the city) stamps Blackness onto the show; thus, the omnipresence of race is visible and relevant. Individuals meet one-on-one and in groups to discuss latent hostilities, broken marriages, artificial friendships, business ideas, and each other. The presence of “shade” (sadiddy or illegitimate language and behavior) in an encounter determines the trajectory for disputes. I argue that in order to understand the contemporary

racial dynamics between media and society, we need to turn our attention to pathological representations. I enter this conversation asking the question, "How do people live the lives that are open to them without judgment or consequence?"

To that end, I introduce a concept, which I call pathological personality engineering (PPE). PPE describes exercises in self-branding that are intended for the self as well as others. This exercise reflects the racial, gender, sexual, and economic dynamics between people and a media-dominated society. It is a concept that deals directly with how in-between celebrities (reality television participants) construct their identities in popular culture. PPE embodies the formal codes and procedures that shape the public perceptions of Black women as a collective group and structure the culture in which they live. PPE reveals social costs and consequences for all types of dysfunctional behavior. This concept has profound implications for how African Americans live in media and in the world. Although Black people on reality television can generate millions of dollars along with millions of fan letters when performing this exercise, the concept cannot be divorced from the social, economic, and cultural conditions from which it emerges. For a lot of people, all they have is a sharp tongue. Members of aggrieved groups more specifically have developed speech into a high art. Seeing reality show characters as people who turn their mouths into guns helps to paint a more complete picture of what's brewing behind the scenes.

In the current historical context, understanding how personality engineering works may be important to understanding how social inequality is lived.

RESEARCH QUESTION

As reality television shows proliferate on channel lineups, I would like to turn attention towards a 2011 study by The Nielson Company and National Newspaper

Publishers Association reporting that The Real Housewives of Atlanta was the 2nd most watched primetime television show among African Americans aged 18-49. In 2013, African American viewership for the show totaled 1.4 million, as compared to 1.1 million viewers for the multicultural American Idol.

"The Real Housewives" reality television franchise has grown exponentially since 2006, such that its most popular spinoff-series The Real Housewives of Atlanta has dominated Sunday night television ratings. On the Bravo network, the Atlanta version's sixth season ratings spiked at a 4.63 million weekly viewership after airing a fistfight between two men.

My research questions are: (1) How do media representations of Black men and women in conflict produce a "personality engineering" that spreads itself in and between the domains of race, gender, and class-status? (2) How do these controlling images in reality television produce a terrain of conflict? What is the meaning of these conflicts with respect to the deep contradictions of Black lives?

DATA AND METHODS

The Video Data

The research upon which the current study is based is drawn from thirty-five hours of video data (52 episodes in total) collected from the sixth season and seventh season of the American reality television show The Real Housewives of Atlanta. Data were collected though digital video records (DVR) over the course of six months, from November 2014 to May 2015. The sixth season of this franchise is distinct in that it was the first reality television show on the Bravo TV network to have an all-Black, rather than, predominately Black cast. The seventh season includes the addition of a new cast member, Claudia Jordan.

This study revolves around 13 distinct instances of personal disputes between and among cast members and other parties. The disputes I examine emerged between the cast members, their husbands, and their close friends and family members. I analyze the ways in which social conflict emerges within personal encounters, the themes emanating from these personal disputes, and how the lives of elite African American women and men are portrayed.

I encountered two methodological challenges encountered when analyzing personal disputes in reality television. The first is, like social conflict in an individual's everyday life, it can be difficult to track the beginning and ending of an interpersonal conflict and the ways in which parties align and array themselves around conflict. In the show, a dispute emerges between two or more parties, but becomes difficult to track over a series of multiple encounters. The second is that the level of analysis in which personal encounters take place is difficult to illustrate comprehensively in writing. Two methods are employed here to address these challenges: ethnographic content analysis (ECA) and conversation analysis (CA). This project relies exclusively on video data and generates empirical findings from the application of CA and ECA.

CA is a qualitative method used to study verbal and non-verbal conversational interaction in everyday life. CA focuses on how interactional rules and practices are linked not only to individual personality and identity but also macro-level social structures. Conversation analysis provides detailed and true transcripts of data that can be reanalyzed. In this project, CA is employed to produce a grounded analysis of race and gender in talk, to illustrate the ways in which personal conflict is constructed within discourse, and to maintain readability of arguments.

CA has been employed by researchers in sociology, medicine, and feminist studies, in doing so making significant scholarly contributions to these fields (Raymond 2003; Hudak, Clark, and Raymond 2012; Stokoe and Smithson 2001). CA research has pragmatic uses for professionals who work in these fields. Medical educators can incorporate CA research into their medical curricula to improve doctor-patient relationships (Maynard and Heritage 2005). Neurology clinics benefit from the detailed guidance offered in studies focused precisely on how to involve patients in decision-making during consultations (Reuber et al. 2015).

ECA is a qualitative technique used to study documents such as television and movies. ECA requires that ethnographic research approaches be applied to content analysis in order to "document and understand the communication of meaning, as well as to verify theoretical relationships" between a study's participants and their culture (Altheide 1987). Ethnography is a powerful approach to examining human cultures and how they exist in society. ECA has been employed by media researchers to understand portrayals of romantic relationships in reality television and highlight connections with potential structure inequalities and religious minority populations (Kuhn-Wilken et al. 2012; Laird 2007). In this project, I use ECA to describe how people exist in reality television and examine the role of conflict in reality television shows featuring predominately black casts.

One limitation in using CA, identified by Stokoe and Smithson (2001:265) is that CA underutilizes culture and common sense knowledge of study participants and analysts. A limitation in using ECA is that the data provided may be coded in different ways if other researchers helped to complete this project. Although all research methods have limitations,

my mixed methods approach has advantages over qualitative researchers who choose to employ a single method.

The first advantage in using CA and ECA means that I will produce a systemic mapping and analysis of my data. Second, ECA can analyze mediated images in an associative, holistic, and non-linear approach way. Using both CA and ECA to study media documents means that one can produce a systemic analysis of the audio and visual components of the data. Finally, the concepts and arguments generated from these methods will be grounded in observation and memory. An example of these advantages at work is employing CA to recognize gendered patterns in talk-and-interaction and ECA to identify racist tropes that appear from previous imagery.

The People in the Study

Table 1 illustrates the subjects included in my dataset referenced to by name in this paper. The table includes information about the main participants in The Real Housewives of Atlanta and their spouses. Seven women work on the show as main cast members: Cynthia, Kandi, Claudia, Nene, Kenya, Phaedra, and Porsha. All of the women are of African American descent. Claudia identifies as a mixed-race (African American and Caucasian) cast member. Although the show is titled "real housewives," not all of the women are married, and none of them fit the modern-day definition of "housewife." A couple of the women, like Kenya and Claudia, are single and have never been married. The relationship status of some of the women in the group changes over time. For example, Porsha is referenced as "Porsha Williams-Stewart" in some episodes, but after her long pending divorce from her husband is finalized, she is referenced to as "Porsha Williams." The types of relationships vary and include single, engaged, married, and divorced.

All of the women on the show work outside of the home. Domestic work and caring for the family is not a main priority and is only one of many occupations the women hold. Some viewers would assume these participants to be middle-class or upper-middle class because of the status symbols presented in the show (immaculate hair and make-up, luxury brand cars, designer clothes, owning multiple properties and businesses). I am ambivalent about applying the terms middle-class to describe this group and offer them instead the term "black-celebrity class" to describe the participants.

It is difficult to measure the economic capital (income, wealth, assets, and liabilities) and social capital (access to media elite) of these women and their spouses without collecting the data directly. I was not able to collect this information from public searches. These are the reasons why I do not consider these women and their spouses "middle-class" or "upper-class" African Americans. I instead conceptualize these participants as part of the "black celebrity-class." This term not only takes into consideration their income and occupational personae, but also emphasizes their public visibility. In terms of social stratification, the women are part of the "upper-upper," instead of the middle-tier of the African American occupational and income structure.

Table I. Cast Members, Marital Status, and Spouses

Housewife	Marital Status S6	Marital Status S7	Current Spouse
Cynthia Bailey	Married	Married	Peter Thomas
Kandi Burruss	Engaged	Married	Todd Tucker
Nene Leakes	Married	Married	Gregg Leakes
Kenya Moore	Single	Single	
Phaedra Parks	Married	Married	Apollo Nida
Porsha Williams	Separated/Divorced	Single	Kordell Stewart
Claudia Jordan		Single	

DATA ANALYSIS

The Reality TV "Confessional"

Reality TV uses unscripted exchanges among participants to construct narratives, develop personalities/characters, etc. However, because these exchanges are excerpted from participants' ongoing relations with one another, those participants draw on shared biographies and other background information that audience members cannot be presumed to have. How can a dispute be studied if one does not know how it started and what is at stake for the participants?

The concept of the reality TV *confessional*, a device used in reality and documentary television, is a tool researchers can use to help understand sets of exchanges. The confessional entails one cast member "confiding" to the camera. As a storytelling device, it has two uses. First, it frames the exchanges that follow in a dispute, providing viewers interpretive keys (or a set of interpretive keys) to make sense of what they see. Second, it solves the background knowledge problem for viewers. Unlike scripted television, the participants on the show are not following a plotline or reading a script, but actually living their lives.

The confessional informs the viewer of impending arguments or signals to the viewer that a participant should be seen as selfish. The viewer does not know everything about the participant's life, and in a dispute, key information, particularly participant motivations and intentions, are discreetly revealed over time. For example, two friends may argue for three episodes about respect, but the causes of the argument may not be apparent to the viewer. Important questions arise for the viewer, such as, *who demands respect, and*

to whom should it not be given? Why does this person want respect? How will this person achieve this?

The confessional provides key information to the viewer to help make sense of an encounter. The confessional provides viewers access to a snippet of a relationship that they have not been directly involved in. Furthermore, it gives viewers the illusion that they understand what is happening in the participant's life. When watching an ongoing dispute, the viewer is essentially an over-hearing audience with access to a snippet of a relationship and little background knowledge about the encounter and its participants.

The confessional provides key information about people and events, and this information is useful to behavioral scientists studying reality television video recordings of natural talk-and-interaction. The confessional assists the researcher in identifying and tracking life/plot developments, teasing out participants' concerns and orientations, and contextualizing the landscape upon which the participants live.

When studying disputes in reality TV, the viewer is essentially observing interactions that emerge from multiple ongoing relationships, and these relationships change over time. Not all information about an argument is apparent to the viewer. The viewer is tasked with identifying and tracking the developments of disputes and the factions that form as a consequence. The viewer is able to identity a set of contentious interactions as an argument, but figuring out what is at stake or why a participant takes a particular position in a dispute is more challenging.

The Content of a Confessional

Television show producers create a confessional by intensively interviewing participants in isolated locations, in front of a recording camera. The producers ask the

participants questions pertaining to the show's main footage. The question topics usually cover a particular person or event. Participant responses are spliced into smaller clips and inserted into regular footage in order to narrate the development of major events over a course of time.

Participant Use of the Confessional

In *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Michele Foucault (1976) innovated an analysis of confessing by placing Western society at the center. He offers a way to examine the confessional as the main source of domination in society, and further argues that Western cultures have developed into singularly "confessing societies." Confessing societies believe that people are inherently bad and that confessing brings out the truth in them. These societies believe that people need to be made to confess, and they use the confession to maintain unequal power relationships:

> It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell to anyone else, the things people write books about. (Foucault 1976:59)

As a theoretical framework, Foucault provides a way to understand how unequal power relations are maintained and reproduced in a manner leaves people structured in dominance. Foucault describes the confessional as a technique used in the West to produce

truth. He argues that Western cultures institutionalize the confessional by linking truth with freedom and silence with power. The confession process is a shimmering mirage, "imbued in relations of power," mystified and justified through a misconception that articulating rewards freedom and liberation (Foucault 1976:60). People act out this inverted image of power in their everyday life; they get together, trot out their dysfunction, and describe themselves and others as if they are asking for forgiveness. Are overbearing in the demands for confession.

I analyze the confessional as ritual of discourse with curative functions, producing psychological effects. My aim in complicating Foucault is to add a new dimension to his sophisticated analyses of confessions and describe how confessing can choreograph conflict and cooperation among aggrieved groups. These groups constantly negotiate and arbitrate collective dysfunction because the mores of society have developed to oppress them. Black people's confessions perpetually demand rigorous support because rationales based on beliefs of cultural inferiority are continually directed towards them. Black people, in their collectivity, work through their dysfunction to heal themselves in an environment that is hostile towards them. To confess and reveal their most honest feelings about a particular person, group, or situation in public is to place themselves in targeted positions, because criticism invites constant retaliation.

As an invention of television, the confession functions like a Greek chorus. In ancient Greek plays, the chorus is a group of masked actors who narrate and explain, through collective analytical commentary, the characters and events in a play. The reality TV confessional is a theatrical device that works to emphasize dramatic plot points and give the audience information that them helps follow the performance. It provides my subjects

with a platform upon which they can establish their own reputation by critiquing the reputation of others participants.

Reality television confessionals provide participants with a platform upon which one can establish their own reputation by critiquing the reputation of others. At the same time, a participant who issues a critique should anticipate an attack on their reputation in kind. An attack on one's reputation can function as a potent weapon. Participants use the confessional to characterize others as petty, vengeful, inherently unlikeable, and deserving of all negative criticism aimed at them. Participants who use these tactics in confessionals aim to inspire fear and insecurity in others but often fail, only to invite fierce judgments and slanderous comments from their enemies.

Participants do not always use the confessional to negatively depict another participant or situation. Sometimes participants use the confessional to boast of the success of other participants or offer generous compliments to enhance their public reputation. An example of this occurs in Lifetime's *Bring It!* Diana Williams, the female coach of a hip-hop majorette dance team, often highlights the positive characteristics of the members in the troupe.

The confessional can be used to please and impress other participants and the viewer. For example, participants positively campaign for close friends or allies in confessionals to make allegiances more apparent to the viewer. A stained reputation can be established anew by successfully swaying the opinions of other show participants and the audience. Participants critique the behavior of others as good or bad, with hopes of inspiring respect from the public. Viewers are taught to survey and confess their behavior to re-inscribe the power of normativity.

The Confessional in Action

In the clip that follows, Rasheeda, a cast member on Love & Hip-Hop Atlanta, is meeting fellow castmate, K. Michelle, at a restaurant. The two women are having a meeting to discuss allegations that a close friend to Rasheeda assaulted K. Michelle and threatened to kill her son. In her confessional, Rasheeda forewarns the viewer of an impending conflict that could emerge between her and K. Michelle as they deal with the issue. “Maybe he’s not doing that because that’s not something that he did to you,” (line 23-24) Rasheeda remarks to K. Michelle. K. Michelle bangs on the table, yells, and cries after Rasheeda expresses doubt that K. Michelle was a victim of domestic violence. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, a conflict emerges, like the confessional foreshadowed.

CONFESSIONAL

1 Rasheed: K. Michelle wanted to meet-up and talk to me about the
2 performance she had the other day at “Saving Our Daughters.”
3 And, I’mma keep it real: I been dreading this whole little
4 situation, right here. I mean those are my friends, my real
5 friends that she’s talking about. And she and I are trying to
6 develop a relationship, so it puts me in a really, really funny
7 place that I don’t wanna be in.

SCENE

8 K. Mich: Right before I got on stage, I got a tweet, and it was (…)
9 him. And the tweet was like, you know, “I bought you teeth. I
10 bought you this, you know. I made you.” After I read that,
11 everything, you know, took over. And for me not to spazz out

12 against him, that's a little bit of growth. So, I just thank you
13 for not taking sides in the situation.
14 Rasheed: You know, I don't know. I just feel like, (PUTS HAIR BEHIND
15 EARS) it could be just be handled different.
16 K. Mich: If you can say those type of things towards me without
17 saying, "I'm sorry," it still affects me.
18 Rasheed: But if he says sorry, then, what-wh-where does that put you?
19 Does that take you to another place? I mean [why do you-why do
20 you—
21 K. Mich: You know what it does. It at least—it at least makes me feel
22 like there is some good.
23 Rasheed: Maybe he's not doing that because that's not something that
24 he did to you.
25 K. Mich:(LEANS OVER TABLE) Rasheeda, he did that to me. I had scars
26 all on my leg, carpet burns from fighting. How would you feel if
27 a towel was over your face? Smothered! He needs to apologize. I
28 have every text message-when you tried to say you would kill my
29 son. So if I was a evil chick, I would'a sent that to a blog
30 right now. I ain't done it. But if ya' keep on, I am. So, you
31 need to take yo' ass on down the street cause you wasn't there.
32 Three years my career was ruined 'cause I could not talk! I
33 don't have that no more! I don't (POINTS AT SELF WITH BOTH
34 HANDS) care what nobody got to say about me. (BEGINS TO CRY)
35 Cause that's my shit! None of y'all was there! None of y'all!
36 This motherfucker (BANGS ON TABLE) is still (BANGS ON TABLE)
37 fucking with me! I got my ass beat! And I gotta explain to the
38 world what the fuck happened to me! What happened to saying,
39 "I'm sorry that happened to you?" That man beat my ass, and I

40 had to deal with that! So I don't give a fuck about what nobody

41 think about what I got going on! (LEAVES FROM TABLE)

END SCENE

In the confessional, Rasheeda provides the viewer with three key pieces of information that frame her encounter with K. Michelle as potentially contentious. First, she explains to the viewer why she is meeting with K. Michelle (line 1-2). Second, she reveals her personal feelings about the upcoming encounter. "And she and I are trying to develop a relationship," Rasheeda explains, "so it puts me in a really, really funny place" (line 5-7). Finally, she gives an account of her relationship with K. Michelle (line 6), describing it as friendship developing in the midst of latent hostility.

In this instance, the confessional is used to provide the viewer with background knowledge about an encounter and the feelings that manifest because of it. Rasheeda's message to the viewer in the confessional defines the upcoming encounter as one dealing with divided loyalty. The women in the clip are caught in a system of relationships where one or more people in a group struggle through conflicting feelings. Rasheeda describes her present position as one that is being tugged by two important friendships. She is committed to a friendship with a man who is accused of domestic abuse, and she is developing a relationship with K. Michelle, who alleges that she is a victim of the close friend's abuse. The confessional segment communicates to the viewer that K. Michelle will discuss Rasheeda's friend. This raises an issue for Rasheeda: "*Who's side is she going to take?*" The scene that follows the confessional answers this question.

Pathology in the Confessional

The confessional in the segment above serves as an interpretive key for explaining how images of people are framed, particularly images of Black people. The first set reflects ideas about aggression and victimization. This scene depicts Black women's friendships as works-in-progress, relationships that are under constant re-development and re-definition. K. Michelle discloses that an apology for the abuse (line 15-6) from Rasheeda's close friend would imply that there was "some good." Without the apology, there is no good in the situation; regardless, K. Michelle is not an "evil chick" willing to strike back against the close friend (line 26).

In the confessional, a set of meanings dealing with female participants in conflict provides an interpretive context for understanding media framings as "pathological." In the transcript, it becomes apparent that K. Michelle's story evokes themes of violent traumatic aggression at the hands of an enemy (line 33-36). Though she is in constant fear of her aggressor striking again (physical or through text message), she refuses to respond to his threats under the assertion that she is not an evil chick. K. Michelle taking the high road indicates the conditions under which she may respond are constantly being negotiated. Thus, K. Michelle is caught between the forces of aggression and victimization.

The upshot of the confessional is this: the confessional frames for the viewer what they are watching and provides information into what stances the participants take in a scene. The confessional helps the viewer to make sense of what they are seeing. For the reality television participant, a confessional functions as a media device for airing opinions, ideas, and tensions. In this sense, the confessional has therapeutic functions. Finally, the confessional can be used to represent a participant as pathological, and this indicates that reality television uses the confessional as a fundamental convention to construct character

representations. Yet the confessional also shows how people respond to seemingly pathological situations with codes of behavior that attempt to bring order to a disorderly reality.

The Gender-Specific Conflict Rule

My first preliminary finding indicates that people often fail to resolve conflicts dealing with infidelity in a marriage, betrayal in a friendship, or personal disrespect. The group treats a participant who is wronged or insulted by another as an injured party. The injured party often seeks justice as a form of resolution. Failures to resolve tensions manifest themselves socio-psychologically as personal injuries. Good intentions do not ensure good outcomes for the participants because of the complexity of the conflicts and their social impact. These conflicts are difficult to resolve because the injuries are never fully healed, emotional triggers open old wounds, and new arguments about the same issue are brought to the surface. This finding builds on the literature dealing with studies of African American portrayals in broadcast television and its powerful connection to real-world gender and class social structures.

In the video analysis that follows, I will provide five examples of people complaining and conforming to a rule that restricts certain forms of action and conduct between parties of the opposite sex. The rule is that women handle disputes with women and that men handle disputes with other men. There are strict limitations on what can be said and by whom to a member of a couple.

When participants violate this rule, the group and others treats this as problematic. By analyzing participant invocation of this rule, this study illustrates gendered standards for governing the production of interaction between the sexes.

Example I. I Will Drag You In This Bitch

In this segment from the show, the cast is having a late night pajama party in a hotel room. In the course of playing a game, Kandi, Mallory, Cynthia (Mallory's sister), Peter (Cynthia's husband) and Nene, argue after Cynthia insults Kandi's husband Todd. This leads to a physical confrontation in which Mallory pushes Todd and Kandi while Peter attempts to intervene. In an effort to break up the emerging fight, Nene and Todd hold onto Kandi and pull her away, while Mallory, Cynthia and Peter remain in the middle of the room. Once the parties are separated, Kandi yells a threat (line 1-2), "I will fucking drag you in this bitch!" However, just whom exactly Kandi has threatened turns out to be a source of trouble.

```
    SCENE
1   Kandi: (after being pushed by Mallory) I will fucking drag you in this
2   bitch!
3   Peter: Whatever you say.
4   Kandi: I wasn't talking to you Peter! I ain't no man! I ain't talking
5   about—let me walk away.
```

As Nene and Todd pull Kandi away from the center of the room, Peter continues the argument, telling Nene to let Todd go (so that he can resume the fight with Peter; data not shown). While being held by Nene, Kandi (line 1) yells back to the other group, threatening that she will physically drag "you" across the hotel room ("this bitch"). Given the confusion of the moment, the way that the parties are assembled, and the way that Kandi composes the threat (using the address term "you"), however, Peter apparently hears the threat as directed to him (as the last speaker). We can note, then, that Peter (Mallory's brother-in-law) rejects the threat with "whatever you say" (line 3). Kandi corrects Peter's assumption, noting that

she “wasn’t talking to you, Peter”, adding that “I ain’t no man,” thereby suggesting that her threat could only have been directed to a woman (e.g., Mallory).

In this exchange Kandi evidently relies on the rule, “women fight with women” to disambiguate who she would be heard to threaten. In her view, her threat could not be directed to Peter because she is not a man. In this respect, Kandi treats the rule regarding gender and conflict as something that can be – and indeed should be – presupposed by all who are present as a method for figuring out who she could be yelling at, and thus who she could be fighting with. In effect, she treats her own status as a woman as something that the other participants will take into account in making sense of what she is doing.

In this instance, a female participant invokes the rule to reject responsibility for threatening a male participant. Kandi did not injure (verbally or physically) a male party in the group. Women and men try to avoid being in direct conflict with one another, but attempts to abide by the rule are not always successful. In the next case, the rule is invoked to police the interactions between a participant’s husband and the women as a group.

Example II. Stop Trying to be a Damn Bitch!

On the final night of Kenya’s group trip to Mexico, a personal dispute emerges between Nene’s and Cynthia’s husbands. Gregg confronts Peter about a prior incident in which Peter approached Nene and scolded her for (what he felt was) indecent behavior at a masquerade ball. In criticizing Nene’ conduct about a situation, Peter has broken the gender-based conflict rule and created a situation for himself.

As the argument between Peter and Gregg grows more fierce, Nene, Cynthia, and others step in and separate the two. The conflict is temporarily suspended when Cynthia and Nene interrogate their husbands in order to figure out what the two men are fighting over. When Peter references the masquerade ball to Cynthia (line 11), the conflict resumes (line 15); this time, however, Gregg and Nene together confront Peter (lines 22 and 34-36).

SCENE

1 Nene: What y'all arguing about?
2 Todd: They just started talking about—some event y'all were having. I
3 don't even know.
4 Lawr: Uh—he—Kenya's mascaraed ball.
5 Kand: I'm not used to Gregg being upset. What happened? (rubs Gregg's
6 shoulder)
7 Cynt: What's going on?
8 Pete: (to Cynthia) Baby, we gotta leave here at 4 o' clock in the
9 morning. I just wanna go to the room and get back.
10 Cynt: I know, but what are you Gregg arguing about?
11 Pete: The Kenya mascaraed ball. Nene said something to me, and I said,
12 "I'm mad at you because I'm not proud of how you acted tonight."
13 He never said nothing. Okay, but he been harboring it. Okay, and
14 he's tell me if I ever step to his wife face—
15 Greg: But I know you won't do it no mo'!
16 Pete: Man, I'mma tell you what I just said nigga.

CONFESSIONAL

17 Nene: I never would have expected Gregg and Peter to get into it, when
18 me, Gregg, Peter, and Cynthia are all friends. But, friend or no
19 friend, when you cross the line, you deserve a little check,
20 too.

SCENE

21 Nene: Nigga? Hold on now. You ain't fixin' go with the whole [nigga]
22 thang (gets close to Peter's face).
23 Pete: Okay.
24 Nene: You was speaking to me all (rolls neck) motherfucking crazy. You
25 was speaking to me—
26 Peter: How crazy w—what did I say crazy?

CONFESSIONAL

27 Cynt: This is crazy. Am I the only sane person in this room right now?
28 Peter and Gregg fighting is crazy.

SCENE

29 Nene: I was never invited to the event.
30 Keny: That's not you Gregg (holds him back from Peter). That's not
31 you.
32 Nene: So for you to be going off on me like I had did something that
33 was fucked up—
34 Greg: (pulls from Kenya) Let me go! Let me go! Don't hold me!
35 Keny: (pulling Gregg) Please? Please Gregg? Please Gregg? Please?
36 Nene: (to Peter) I'm not gone be disrespected!

CONFESSIONAL

37 Keny: Everything that I've worked so hard for seems to just be
38 evaporating right before my eyes.

SCENE

39 Pete: My friend have rised so much, okay, and with a hundred people
40 there, you came in and cut the way you did.
41 Nene: Mmhmm.
42 Pete: That's (pats chest) what I was upset about.
43 Nene: Okay, I get that. But let me just tell you what you need to do.
44 (Gregg) Hold on (turns towards Gregg and puts hand in his face)!
45 Let me just say this. Listen, let me just say this, Gregg.

46 Greg: (to Peter) But yo' delivery was wrong! Yo delivery was wrong.

47 Nene: (to Peter) This what you need to do. You need to stay out of

48 women's business. You are causing shit problems. You are the

49 only husband-boyfriend-fiancé that gets involved in women's

50 business.

CONFESSIONAL

51 Nene: We happen to like Peter a whole lot better than Patricia.

SCENE

52 Pete: What woman business was I getting into?

53 Nene: You always involved. What we do as women is between us. You need

54 to roll with these fellas and not try to roll with these women!

55 Pete: I'm not taking—I'm not—I don't roll with nobody baby. I'm Peter

56 Thomas. Okay?

57 Nene: Well you need to stop trying to roll with the damn women!

58 Pete: I'm not rolling with y'all. I don't even hang out with y'all!

59 Nene: You need to stay out of women's business! You stop trying to be

60 a damn bitch!

After Gregg and Peter are separated, Cynthia (line 7) questions her husband Peter to figure out what is at stake in the dispute. Peter reveals to Cynthia the dispute is

about confronting Nene ("step to his wife face") in the past and offering an unwanted critique of her behavior. Nene, then, enters the conversation after Peter refers to Gregg as a "nigga" (line 16), crossing the gender-line and violating the gender-based conflict rule. When Nene breaks the rule, no one raises this as an issue. The conflict escalates as Peter and Nene debate one another over specific details about the masquerade ball. Peter says to Nene, "You

came in and cut the way you did… that's what I'm upset about." In response, Gregg yells (line 44) at Peter and describes the way in which Peter conveyed his criticism as incorrect ("delivery was wrong"). At this point in the dispute, Nene invokes the gender-based conflict rule by composing a set of rules for Peter to follow in the future: socialize with men (line 51 and 54), avoid confrontation with women (line 64), and cease attempting to be a woman ("be a damn bitch").

In the confessional (line 48), Nene produces a feminized characterization of Peter that relates to Peter's past sanction of Nene's behavior. The rule itself is invoked to regulate the contact Peter has with the men and women in the group. "You need to roll with these fellas and not try to roll with these damn women," Nene tells Peter. This complaint is produced to bring attention to Peter's direct contact with the women in the group. The words "need" and "try" are important to the design of Nene's complaint because they indicate women's affairs ("women's business"). For a cast member to "roll" with the women and be involved in their affairs, one "need" possess the status of "woman." Peter is a man, which blocks his membership into this fraction of the group. Thus, Nene treats the rule as an instruction of directive action for men who "try" to insert themselves in women's affairs. A man (Peter) "needs" to "roll with the fellas" and stay out of women's "business."

In the confessional, Nene reveals to the viewer Peter is better regarded by the women in the group ("we") when he acts like "Peter" (a man) and not "Patricia" (a woman). Nene's insult in the confessional links Peter's infraction to feminine aspirations, a desire to "roll" with the women and not the fellas. It is in this way that the confessional sets-up the impending conflict as one in which Peter's behavior can be

classified as feminine and masculine. Nene instructs Peter to “stay out of women’s business” and “stop trying to be a damn bitch.”

It is at this point that we can see that Nene treats Peter’s conduct in the past as uniquely feminine in relation to the other men in the group. “Rolling with the women” is treated as a “category-bound activity,” which is specifically designed for participants who possess female membership status (Schegloff 2007). Nene uses the rule to chastise Peter for talking to the women in the way that he does. In effect, Peter has invited others to categorize him as a woman. The lesson the viewer learns from Nene’s invocation of the rule is men who violate it do not treat it as a presupposition and aspire to achieve women’s status.

Example III. I Wear No Scarlett Letter

The first thing to be said about the preceding examples is that participants in disputes with one another invoke this rule to emphasize membership categories. The rule is also invoked to make sense of confusing exchanges between parties of different sexes. In this instance, two participants of the same sex are in conflict with one another. This time, however, the rule is invoked to police romantic communications between men and women.

In this segment from the show, Nene invites the women to a sushi bar so that Kenya can make amends with other participants in the show. Nene orders drinks for the women, and Kenya, then, begins to apologize to Phaedra for flirting with Apollo in past encounters. In a prior reunion among the women (lines 5-7), Kenya revealed to the group that she and Apollo exchanged text messages that were “perfectly friendly at first,” implying a relationship other than platonic friendship was developing. When

facts leading up to this event are discussed between Phaedra and Kenya, a dispute emerges over the procedure by which a woman is able to text a husband that is not hers.

SCENE

1 Kenya: I had as conversation with Nene, and she said some things—how
2 people perceived what was said so let me make something
3 perfectly clear. When the text messages came up, my offer to
4 show those text messages was to say, "I have not done anything
5 wrong."

BEGIN FLASHBACK

6 Kenya: Apollo has always initiated text with me, and they were
7 perfectly—they were perfectly friendly… at first.
8 Apollo: Oh really? At first?

END FLASHBACK

SCENE

9 Kenya: There was never any inappropriate text message between Apollo
10 and myself from him or from me. When he said, "Oh I just don't
11 really care for her and da-da-da-da-da"—well then don't text
12 message me in a friendly way.

CONFESSIONAL

13 Cynthia: Kenya was wrong for texting Apollo. However, he was wrong for
14 texting back. And Phaedra should be mad at both of 'em.

SCENE

15 Phaedra: The general rule is, is you shouldn't be texting nobody's
16 husband. And you did imply that something inappropriate
17 happened.
18 Kenya: No I did not—I said that because—exactly—they did. Exactly,
19 that's exactly right.
20 Phaedra: Everyone obviously misinterpreted.

CONFESSIONAL

21 Nene: Girl I brought you here to try to work with these girls. You
22 working yourself on out the door.

SCENE

23 Nene: I mean hold on. I don't really care if you was talking about
24 going to get a bag of chips or if you look great today. I feel
25 like it's inappropriate period.
26 Kenya: If Phaedra would've sent me a text message, "Hey Kenya! I don't
27 feel comfortable with you and Apollo communicating, at all."
28 Porsha: I don't think that she felt like she had to say that. I think
29 that's something we all should understand.
30 Kandi: Everyone knows that (puts hand on Phaedra's shoulder) this my
31 dog right here, and I felt like with you guys having this
32 serious issue between each other, it definitely made it awkward
33 for me. It made me feel like, okay, that's kinda like a
34 character thing had you been texting him that way. It just made
35 me feel like well dang—
36 Kenya: (to Kandi) Okay let me stop you right there. (to Pheadra) I
37 don't want your man. Let's make that perfectly clear. Okay? (to
38 the group) I'm not going to walk around wearing some scarlet
39 letter on me, you know. People calling me whores and things like
40 that. I am nobody's whore, and I am nobody's fool.

Invoking the "general rule" (the gender-based conflict rule) (line 14-15), Phaedra says to Kenya, "The general rule is you shouldn't be texting nobody's husband. And you did imply that something happened." These lines show that in this instance the violation is more than about gender. It is also about marital relations, as Phaedra links the rule to her relationship with Apollo.

Phaedra constructs her complaint by indexing two infractions enacted by Kenya: Kenya texts Apollo, which is a violation of a rule, and Kenya implicates an inappropriate exchange occurring between Apollo and her. Kenya does not contest the first infraction, that she should not text any of the women's spouses, but does contest the accusation the text

messages sent between Apollo and her were inappropriate (line 8). Nene (line 21) emphasizes the general rule, "I feel like it's inappropriate period." Porsha tells Kenya (line 26-27) that the understanding of the rule is shared by the group and can be reasonably expected without debate. Finally, Kandi (line 29-31) says to Kenya, "I feel like it's a character thing that you had been texting him that way." It is at this point Kenya defends herself to Kandi (as the last speaker) and the group, "I don't want your man. Let's make that perfectly clear."

When Porsha tells Kenya, "I don't feel like she had to say that," it becomes apparent that the gender-based conflict rule is treated as a presupposition by her and others in the group. Nene Kandi, and Phaedra also treat the rule in this way. This explains why it appears the women have formed a faction against Kenya. Kandi espouses her viewpoint on the rule differently from Porsha and Nene and more similarly to Phaedra. Kandi mentions her close friendship to Phaedra ("this my dog") as a presupposition ("everyone knows"), and, then, follows that violation of the rule raises questions about moral character.

The transcript does not indicate if Kenya, now, treats the rule as a presupposition. But we can see Kenya, unlike the rest of the group, fiercely challenges (line 34-37) Kandi's reasoning that violating the rule is indicative of immoral character ("a character thing").

What is learned in this dispute is that marital status matters in how this rule is applied and to what effect. In this instance, a wife invokes the rule to police communication between her husband and female party member. Others in the group treat the wife as individual deserving justice, while the other female party is the subject of sanction. Even though Phaedra's husband is the subject of this discussion, he is not in attendance for it. This fact remains true in the next instance where the rule is invoked again to police exchanges between married parties and others.

Example IV. Feeling Froggy? Jump!

In this segment of the show, the cast and their spouses have taken a vacation to Mexico, a trip planned and organized by Kenya. On the final day of the trip, the whole group gathers to play an icebreaker game. Shortly after the game is finished, Kenya asks the men to leave so the women could work through unsettled problems. The men leave, and the women begin to exchange views on each other's behavior. The women exhaust each other from various criticisms of one another's conduct. One issue put on the table deals with how the women should conduct themselves around each other's spouses.

In the course of having the discussion, Kenya attempts to ease tensions between Phaedra and her. Kenya starts the conversation and makes a remark about an "elephant in the room" (line 1). Kenya addresses a situation in which she is found communicating with Phaedra's husband in an isolated location inside of a bar. "When you came in and Apollo and I were speaking, you got upset and left," Kenya tells Phaedra (line 2-3). In this instance, Kenya has violated the gender-based rule. As the women exchange reasons for not having developed a friendship with each other, a dispute emerges.

SCENE

1 Keny: That brings me to you know the elephant in the room, um,
2 Phaedra. Obviously the other night when you came in and Apollo
3 and I were speaking, you got upset and you left.
4 Phae: First of all, I have asked you not to speak to my husband
5 outside of my company. You should respect that if you think that
6 we will ever have a friendship, because you're crossing the
7 line. And you've done it so many times. So my first thing is
8 like, "Do I slap the dog shit out of her?"
9 Nene: (laughs)
10 Keny: Oh no, well that's not gonna happen. No that's not gonna happen.
11 Phae: Uh, it could happen. No, it could happen.
12 Keny: Not today! Not today sweetheart!

CONFESSIONAL

13 Keny: Why does Phaedra always have to drag things down to the gutter
14 in such a vulgar way? And now she's threatening me. I'm just
15 trying to make amends.

SCENE

16 Keny: That's not gonna happen, okay. So you can go ahead and, and
17 without trying to tell me what (inaudible)
18 Kand: Let Phaedra talk 'cause you don't normally get her to say her
19 side.
20 Nene: Yeah Phaedra, go ahead.
21 Keny: (to Phaedra) You feeling froggy? Jump.

SCENE

22 Phae: Stop trying to chat with my husband! We don't want to be your
23 friend! Let that be known.
24 Keny: You know what? I know you don't wanna be my friend, but please
25 don't speak for your husband!

26 Phae: I’ll speak for him because he’s my husband, and we’re a team!

27 Keny: Okay! Well then, yesterday that’s not what he said!

CONFESSIONAL

28 Kand: Why is Kenya talking to Phaedra as if she knows Apollo better

29 than Phaedra does? Come on now, Kenya. Stop.

SCENE

30 Keny: What he tells you Phaedra is one thing, but Phaedra he—

31 Phae: What he tells me is one thing? Okay, Homewrecker. Really?

As illustrated above, the dispute begins when Kenya expresses dissatisfaction with Phaedra’s conduct in a previous encounter. Kenya references a situation (line 2-3) in which she was found speaking with Apollo at a bar. In response, Phaedra mentions having in the past requested that Kenya not talk to her husband without her being physically present (line 4-5). In the same turn, Phaedra emphasizes Kenya has violated the gender-based rule (“crossing the line”), making friendship impossible for the three individuals (“if you think we will ever have a friendship”). “Do I slap the dog shit out of her,” Phaedra rhetorically questions to herself. This sets in motion a back-and-forth spat between the two about Kenya developing a friendship with Apollo (line 22-25).

In this exchange Phaedra invokes the rule that “women must speak with women” to eliminate a range of possible exchanges between the women in the group and her husband. Though Phaedra promotes the notion she and Apollo marital union allows them to operate as a single unit; it is apparent that Apollo does not always invoke or obey this rule: Phaedra found him socializing in a bar with Kenya, much to Phaedra’s dismay. Because of this fact, Phaedra’s declaration (line 22) that she and Apollo do not desire Kenya’s friendship is

contested by Kenya. Phaedra and Kenya disagree on whether friendship can develop between Kenya and Apollo, with Phaedra exclaiming that the two ("a team") do not want to be her friend. The conflict develops more complexly when Kenya (line 24-25) suggests that Apollo tells conflicting stories about wanting to be friends with her. Phaedra, then, responds that Kenya is a "homewrecker" for suggesting that Apollo's loyalty is divided.

In regard to marital status, Phaedra invokes a female authority to block romantic exchanges between her husband and other women. Kenya argues to Phaedra that Apollo has his own personal motivations and seeks friendship with her. Phaedra disagrees and extends the disinterest in building a friendship beyond herself to her husband. In deploying her marital status (line 26), Phaedra invokes the rule on behalf of Apollo to construct a boundary between Kenya and her husband. The two are married and operate as a single unit; thus Phaedra's disinterest in Kenya's friendship is shared with Apollo.

An individual party can invoke the rule behalf of another party if they are married. Married individuals do not have to follow this rule, and in effect, this creates problems for their spouses and others involved. In the next instance I observe, the rule is invoked to produce different meanings and responses, particularly character critiques and apologies. The following clip highlights a relevant way in which this happens.

Example V. But YOU Slept with a Man Fresh Out of Prison

In this segment from the show, the women gather at a sushi bar to air their tensions with one another. Kandi asks Phaedra if she will participate in future activities with the group after Phaedra sanctions Kenya for sending text messages to Apollo. Phaedra answers, "Well, I'm mature enough to be around anybody, but I mean there won't be a relationship… She definitely crossed the line." Phaedra mentions an insult in which Kenya suggests that

Phaedra have an AIDS test (line 8-9). Kenya apologizes to Phaedra for the first infraction, violating the gender-based conflict rule, but not the second, the insult.

SCENE

1 Kandi: I guess well a question would be in going forward would be: if
2 you felt like we did do anything together [would you still be a
3 part of it?
4 Phaed: Well I'm mature enough to be around anybody, but I mean there
5 won't be a relationship. I mean 'cause sometimes people really
6 cross the line, and she definitely crossed the line.
7 Kenya: I agree. Some people really cross the line.
8 Phaed: Well it's not even about the text messages. You know, I thought
9 when you accused Apollo and I of having AIDS, I thought—
10 Nene: (surprised) AIDS?!
11 Kenya: Ah nobody accused you of that. No one accused you of that. [No
12 I did not accuse them of having AIDS.
13 Nene: Really?
14 Kandi: You said it.
15 Phaed: What you should be doing Phaedra is making sure that you have
16 and AIDS test to make sure you don't have AIDS.
17 Kenya: I know I didn't say that. I know I didn't say that.
18 Phaed: Uh, you did.
19 Kenya: I know I didn't say that.

CONFESSIONAL

20 Nene: WHAT? That is shocking. The AIDS? I-I-I had never-I couldn't
21 remember her saying that.

FLASHBACK

22 Kenya: Next time use protection with a man that just is fresh out of
23 prison. You might want to get an AIDS test.

END FLASHBACK

SCENE

24 Kenya: Phaedra you can't pick and choose insults that I've thrown at

25 you, and me not respond with insults in kind.

26 Nene: Okay, so you did say it. Okay, so—

27 Kenya: (to Nene) I did say—shut up!

Confessional

28 Kenya: What was said was in the heat of the moment in an argument we

29 both took part in. Don't try to make it one-sided.

Scene

30 Kenya: If at any point you felt uncomfortable with any exchange that

31 we had, I apologize to you for it. I don't wanna secretly sleep

32 with your husband. So we might have our issues, but you don't

33 have to worry about this one (gestures to self) with your man.

Phaedra makes Kandi aware that Kenya "crossed a line," and this makes the possibility of friendship developing impossible (line 7). Kenya sarcastically agrees with Phaedra and responds, "Some people really cross the line." Phaedra informs Kenya of another infraction in which Kenya composes an accusation that Apollo and Phaedra carry a sexually transmitted infection. Kenya tells Phaedra that no one in the group accused Phaedra of having AIDS. As Kenya and Phaedra disagree on if this exchange actually occurred, Nene yells (10) and asks, "Really?" A flashback clip, then, plays and shows the viewer that Kenya in fact did insinuate (line 22-23) Phaedra and Apollo carried the AIDS virus. Kenya does not issue an apology for this particular infraction. Instead, Kenya defends what she said to Phaedra. Kenya discreetly acknowledges having made this accusation, saying to Phaedra, "You can't pick and choose insults I've thrown at you, and me not respond in kind." In response, Nene airs this infraction as explicit knowledge to the group ("So you did say it.").

Responding to concerns dealing with texting another participant's husband, Kenya issues to Phaedra a conditional apology (line 30). Kenya designs an apology that applies to her past interactions with Apollo. If Kenya were to apologize for a single infraction based on Phaedra feeling insulted means that Phaedra can conjure new infractions from her previous encounters with Kenya.

DISCUSSION

In this study I provided compelling evidence that pathological representations aim to capture the "human" dimensions of the Black experience, even if on the surface the content appears disparaging. As long as the men deal with the men and the women with the women, there will be harmony between the sexes. This is not always the case. This finding provides evidence for a narrative that a constant disruption threatens the group dynamics. All of the video segments that I analyzed for this study included a participant invoking a rule to structure communication and interaction between themselves, their spouse, or another person. My evidence reveals that the entire group, along normative lines, carefully polices sexual behavior. But dissolution of the group is as much or more of a threat to the participants than sexual non-normativity.

There is evidence that violating the rule incites others to sanction and engineer a guilty party's personality. The people in this study displayed a wide range of behaviors, even though others employed PPE to limit the range of ways another participant's depiction could be interpreted. An instance of this happens in Example II, in which a male participant is labeled a "bitch" because of the way in which he speaks with women. This has implications not only for the framings of Black femininity and masculinity in television but also for people in the real world. It suggests that this rule is not specific to this particular

show or community, meaning that this rule may or may not be distinct to a particular racial, regional, or religious population in the United States. This rule does appear in other reality television shows featuring predominately Black casts, which suggests that this may be a formulaic convention used in the genre to incite disputes between cast members. Since I do not have access to the study's participants, I cannot generalize these findings to other communities other than African American families living in the southeastern United States.

The confessional allows researchers to examine the differences between what is happening in a show and what the producers of the show are emphasizing to the viewer. Confessionals are used to narrate events and provide the viewer with information about an event from the perspective of a show participant. Show participants are asked to describe and discuss a range of topics including other participants' biographies and behaviors, social procedures, events, and personal motivations and intentions. In this instance, the viewer is essentially an overhearing audience with access into a snippet of a relationship that they have not been involved in. For the reality television genre, the confessional serves as a type of narration that helps viewers to identify the thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors that structure the social interactions performed by participants in the regular show footage.

Foucault's (1978) work on confessionals in discourse teaches us that society believes people are bad and the confession brings out the truth in them. My understanding teaches that people face their demons when they face off with each other. In this study, at first glance the confession functions in a similar way to Foucault. After a closer look, the confessional possesses a more complex function because the show producers choose which truths to reveal to the viewer. In this study, the confessional works as surveillance, a

panopticon in which a participant is always being watched and under constant evaluation by the viewer.

My main research finding reveals that one significant aspect to the construction of pathological imagery in reality television is in how people orient towards a rule governing conduct and use gendered logic to apply it. These depictions are contingent on a participant injuring another party in some way, and the injury that most frequently appears in this study deals with communication, gender, and relationship status. This finding both supports and expands research of previous race scholars of representation by providing specific cases in which African Americans in reality television are able to engineer their own personality and others' to construct pathological representations. This finding also illustrates that a fundamental way in which conflict emerges on the show deals is in accusations that someone aims to sever meaningful romantic partnerships.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

"Every image has its power to harm or to heal… a point too often neglected in discussions of communication is the responsibility of the viewer. Before expressing negative critique or rejecting a message, both its nature and apparent intent should be understood. All these aspects require attention and energy," writes J. B. Colson (2011:68) in an essay explaining how imagery can work to heal a community. It is important to be careful not to essentialize (or demonize) working class African Americans. The focus should be on how the behavior of the middle class African Americans in "Housewives of Atlanta" activates preexisting public perceptions of African Americans as "uncouth," "lacking in constraints on behavior," which are largely based on racist stereotypes derived from the perceived behavior of the working class. Accordingly, these folks on "Housewives" are in part

complicit in perpetuating and reifying stereotypes of African Americans that help deflect attention away from and diminish the public appreciation of the accomplishments of those African Americans who have succeeded in overcoming the barriers of race and class.

This expression is far from being alienated from the norms of patriarchy. Like Kaplan (1997) argues about the girls living in Oakland's housing projects, the problem is not that Black families are tangled in pathology. Rather Black families have fully bought into normative gender roles in an

There are not many communities on Earth who have to defend their race's family contributions. The African American community is one who has to defend its collective reputation in public because it is under constant surveillance from those who observe with contempt and pity (Du Bois 1903). These people may not believe they bear any responsibility for "representing" African Americans and the outcomes of their behavior in terms of public perceptions. But, what they ignore is that the "bad" behavior of individual African Americans are more often than not used to make judgments about the entire African American community. African Americans have rarely had the luxury of being judged simply as individuals. Individual behavior, particularly that which has historically been deemed as lacking in civility and decorum, is inevitably the standard used to judge all African Americans. This project aimed to intervene in this process.

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