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REPRESENTATIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN ON REALITY TELEVISION
AFTER THE GREAT RECESSION

by

STEVEN K. HERRO

Under the Direction of Marian Meyers, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This project is animated by two related problems. First, there are relatively few studies of the ways that African American women are represented on reality television. Second, the current literature about representations of Black women on reality television completely ignores the Great Recession as an important contextual factor. In this study, I pair the Constant Comparative Method of textual analysis with discourse analysis to answer the question: “How does reality television represent African American women in terms of gender, race, and class in the context of the aftermath of the Great Recession?” I closely analyzed reality television programs with the highest ratings in 2012: *The Voice*, *American Idol*, *Survivor*, *The Biggest Loser*, and *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. To better understand how Black women are represented on these shows, I contextualize my analysis in terms of intersectionality, post-racism, post-sexism, and neoliberalism. This analysis generated several results and conclusions. On the most popular reality television programs (all but *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*), African American women are uniquely subjected to the logic of neoliberalism by the hosts, judges, and coaches on the shows.

Placing Black women in the logic of neoliberalism puts them in a no-win situation and explains their failure in the competition on the show, and by extension, their failure in society at large. In addition, these programs employ contemporary “controlling images” of Black women: the Black Lady, the Strong Black Woman, and the Black Bitch. With regard to *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, the most popular reality television show focusing exclusively on Black women, I found a slightly more progressive representation of African American women. While the show did represent some of the women as Black Bitches, it also portrayed most of the women as strong and assertive. This program also contained positive images of Black women and Black life. But, even given their relatively progressive representations on *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, these representations are used to make money for the capitalist class.

INDEX WORDS: Reality television, representation, African American women, Great Recession, neoliberalism

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AFTER THE GREAT RECESSION

by

STEVEN K. HERRO

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2015

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2015

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May 2015

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my family. To Dolores Kampe, Radiah Herro, and Joe Herro, my grandparents, who are the three most beautiful people I have ever met. I wish they were here to see what I have done with my life. To Carol and Ken Herro, my parents, who have unconditionally supported me, even when I didn't deserve it. To Beth and Mark Herro, my siblings, with whom I have shared too many good times to recount. To Judy and Mary Ann Kampe, my aunts, who helped craft some of my dearest childhood memories and who are important people in my life to this day. And to Carrie Herro and Abbey Burmood, my wife and daughter, who provide laughter and love in my life every day.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

John T. Young and Gary Horn, my high school and college debate coaches, saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. Without them, I would have never entered the world of academia. Tony Schroder and Clark Olson gave me valuable opportunities, to obtain an M.A. and to coach for a nationally competitive debate team, that I probably did not deserve at the time. If I was at all qualified to enter a doctoral program, these four people are the reason.

My good friend Mike Davis was the person who recommended the Ph.D. program at GSU, and that decision changed my life. While at GSU, I was fortunate to study with a group of great friends: Paul Mabrey, Josh Ritter, Kim Huff, TG Pelham, Mick Souders, Sam Perry, and Kimberly Stringer. Joe Bellon quickly became a good friend and source of support. The Department of Communication's administrative staff was amazingly helpful, especially Tawanna Tookes, Lyshandra Holmes, and Marilyn Stiggers. I was also privileged to work with some truly erudite scholars at GSU. James Darsey taught me everything I know about rhetorical criticism, including the difference between a scalpel and a meat cleaver. David Cheshier's deep and vast knowledge of rhetorical theory, and his voracious reading habits, were inspirational. Both Darsey and Cheshier were incredibly supportive; they treated me like a friend and a colleague. I cannot say enough about how instrumental they were in my time at GSU. Carol Winkler has been incredibly generous with her time and support, especially when I entered the job market.

When my second dissertation adviser left GSU, I thought I might not be able to finish, but I had an incredible amount of luck when Marian Meyers agreed to take me on. Marian is a generous and brilliant person. I couldn't imagine a better adviser. Going through the work to produce this study was the single greatest learning experience I have ever had, and I thank Marian for that. I am also indebted to my committee, who agreed to work with me on short notice. This project benefited greatly from the advice of Ted Friedman, Patricia Davis, and Cindy Willette.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Problem

Reality television is perhaps the most significant programming innovation on U.S. television in the 21st century. Anticipated by ground-breaking formats from the 1940s and '50s like *Candid Camera* (ABC/NBC/CBS), *Queen for a Day* (ABC), and *Glamour Girl* (NBC), and preceded by wildly popular early '90s reality crime shows such as *Cops* (FOX) and *America's Most Wanted* (FOX), the current wave of reality television (RTV) programming was made possible in part by the massive success of four shows airing around the turn of this century: *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* (ABC), *Survivor* (CBS), *Big Brother* (CBS), and *American Idol* (FOX). Tellingly, the top ten most-watched television shows of the first decade of the 21st century were all RTV programs, with *American Idol* in the top position ("Highest-rated," 2009, p. 16).

Since 2000, American audiences have witnessed a proliferation of RTV programming on broadcast and cable channels. This proliferation was enabled to a certain extent, according to Chad Rafael (2009), by a set of political and economic conditions put into motion by the television industry in the late 1980s. Production companies and television networks responded to increasing competition for viewers and increasing production costs by cutting the number of "below-the-line workers such as technicians, engineers, and extras," eschewing union workers in favor of non-union labor, and "shifting production to regions where cheaper labor was available, such as Canada and the 'right-to-work' states of the U.S. South" (Raphael, 2009, p. 125-128). With its use of ordinary people instead of television stars, freelance production crews, and cheap production values, RTV was the perfect genre of television programming in terms of minimizing production and other up-front costs and maximizing profits (Raphael, 2009, p. 128-131).

The explosion of RTV programs did not escape the attention of scholars working in a variety of fields. Early work on the genre focused on the term "reality." Friedman (2002) edited a collection of es-

says addressing the realness or liveness quality of television (the ways that television programming reflects and refracts reality) and Kilborn (2003) evaluated reality television as factual programming. A few years later, Holmes and Jermyn (2004) suggested that it was time to stop asking the question “how real is Reality TV?” (p.12). Looking at the idea of reality in a slightly different way, Mark Andrejevic (2004) argued that RTV offers viewers “not an escape from reality but an escape into reality” by demonstrating that submitting oneself to constant observation can be a fun and educational way for viewers to interact more meaningfully with television (p. 8). Tincknell and Raghuram (2004) looked at how RTV programs constitute and engage active audiences, and Annette Hill (2005, 2007) studied the attitudes and opinions of people who watched reality television.

Laurie Ouellette and Susan Murray (2004) took what might be considered a television studies approach in their edited collection, including pieces oriented in industry, culture and power, and audience perspectives. The culture and power section of their book includes work devoted to understanding how RTV articulates perspectives on gender, race, class, and sexuality. For example, Ouellette’s contribution to the collection shows how the daytime RTV program *Judge Judy* employs neoliberal ideology “to shape and guide the conduct and choices of lower-income women in particular” (p. 224). Much of the scholarly work that followed Ouellette and Murray’s 2004 collection centers on the identity categories of gender and race.

Two problems with the current literature on reality television motivated my study. One problem that drives the dissertation is the lack of attention devoted to representations of Black women on reality television. Gender studies of reality television focus almost exclusively on white women, and race studies of reality television mostly focus on the concept of whiteness and/or Black men. The studies that do focus on representations of Black women on reality television are few and far between and are outdated. The current literature is not only problematic because it functionally ignores Black women: a second problem is that the literature about reality television almost completely ignores changes in U.S. society

wrought by the Great Recession. The financial collapse, recession, and slow recovery changed U.S. society. In the aftermath of the worst economic collapse since the Great Depression, material conditions of many Americans declined, and Black women were disproportionately negatively affected (Miller, 2011). The impact of this economic tsunami has been largely ignored in the literature about reality television published since 2010. Because most of the literature on RTV focuses on what is now considered a comparatively prosperous period in U.S. history, it tells us relatively little about reality television in the post-Great Recession context. And, given this new societal context in the U.S., previous work that focuses on the representations of Black women on RTV, like all other work on RTV, needs to be updated. Some evidence emerging in the last two years demonstrates that representations of other groups supports oppressive notions of race, gender, class and age, for instance, in film (Boyle and Brayton, 2012; Negra and Tasker, 2013) and on reality television (Brayton, 2012) but none of it focuses on representations of Black women. Because television and society are co-constitutive, new studies that update our knowledge about reality television in this new context are needed. My dissertation is the first extended project attempting to fill this gap in the literature. The primary research question of the dissertation is: how does reality television represent African American women in terms of gender, race, and class in the context of the aftermath of the Great Recession?

1.2 Preview of the Chapters

Chapter Two lays out the literature with respect to representations of African American women in the U.S. I start with a brief overview of Kimberle Crenshaw's (1991) conceptualization of intersectionality, which explains how Black women are marginalized when single axis thinking is used to attend to issues of race and gender. Crenshaw shows how perspectives about race are typically focused on the concerns of Black men, perspectives on gender are typically focused on the concerns of white women, and how both approaches functionally marginalize Black women. In particular, I dwell on Crenshaw's (1991) concept of *representational intersectionality*, which describes the ways that Black women tend to

be negatively portrayed and/or ignored in popular culture. The remainder of the chapter looks at how Black women have been represented in the U.S. historically, and on commercial television specifically. Drawing primarily on the work of Patricia Hill Collins (2000/2009) and Melissa Harris-Perry (2011), I outline what Collins calls the “historical controlling images” of African American women: the Mammy, Matriarch, welfare mother, Jezebel/Hoochie, and strong Black woman. I also describe more current representations of poor and middle-class Black women identified by Collins (2005). Next, I focus on how these and other stereotypes of Black women have been used in U.S. television programs since the 1950s. U.S. television programs engaged in stereotyping Black women and, over time, portrayed Black issues and Black life by in turn ignoring racism, treating Blacks and whites as essentially similar, and then, finally, attempting to portray the complexity of Black life and Black culture (Gray, 2000). With this background in place, I look at literature addressing race and gender on reality television to show how these studies explain representations of Black women. Work looking at women of color often has little to say about the unique experiences, struggles, and portrayals of Black women. Instead, this work tends to focus on Latinas and other ethnicities, or it homogenizes the representations of Black women within the representations of other women of color (Latina, Asian, for example). Studies focusing specifically on Black women during the period after the Great Recession are extremely limited. Besides being few in number, these studies tend to look at a limited set of texts. Since the end of the Great Recession, race and gender analyses of reality television continue to be published, but none of these studies look at representations of Black women specifically on reality television produced after the Great Recession.

Chapter Three outlines the societal context in which the reality television shows I studied circulate. I return to intersectionality theory, focusing on Crenshaw’s formulation of *political intersectionality*, which explains how race and gender politics tend to marginalize black women, and *structural intersectionality*, which focuses on how Black women uniquely suffer as a result of their intersectional identities as both women and Blacks. The next two sections of Chapter Three outline three overarching political

discourses that help us understand the current plight of Black women in U.S. society. First, I examine neoliberal ideology, which emphasizes personal responsibility, individualism, and competition in the free market as ideals for society. Second, I look at two key political discourses that address discrimination: post-racism and post-feminism. Discourses about race and racism in the U.S. are now characterized by *antiracism*, which claims that racism no longer exists, *colorblindness*, which claims that race is an irrelevant factor in success and failure, and *reverse racism*, which claims that white people are the victims of civil rights era attempts to solve systemic racism (Goldberg, 2009; Giroux, 2008). In post-gender analyses, discourses about sexism, gender, and patriarchy are now characterized by *postfeminism*, which claims that past feminist gains solved sexism and therefore current and future feminist movements are no longer needed, and *assimilation*, which claims that since more women are more successful than in the past, sexism and patriarchy are not the reason that women as a group lag in society versus men (McRobbie, 2009, Gill and Scharff, 2011). Both post-racist and post-feminist discourses start with the premise that equality has been achieved in U.S. society, and therefore any failures or problems experienced by minorities or women are not systemic or structural and those problems therefore are not properly remediated via government action. As neoliberal logic took hold in the U.S. in the past twenty years, post-racism and post-feminism discourses gained more traction since all three ideological perspectives presume equality (no racism, no sexism, and a magical market that only rewards the best competitors) and blame individuals for failure while eschewing structural or historical explanations for inequality. In the final section of Chapter Three, I show how, despite the presumption of equality throughout U.S. society described in the previous sections, the Great Recession exacerbated the structural intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) that Black women in the U.S suffer. Although individual Black women have achieved some success both before and after the Great Recession, Black women as a group are still at the bottom of the ladder in terms of employment, housing, health, poverty, and other factors (Miller, 2011).

I lay out the methodological dimensions of my study in Chapter Four. First, I identify the reality television shows I studied and explain how I selected them. Because I am focusing specifically on representations of Black women, I only studied RTV programs that feature at least one Black woman. Also, I limited my study to the most watched reality television programs that aired during the 2012 season, which is long enough after the Great Recession that changes in society are very likely to have circulated onto RTV programs, but also recent enough that the programs will be available for me to study via sources like Amazon Prime, Hulu Plus, and Netflix. I began with a list of the 150 highest-rated shows on television in the U.S., which reflects the most watched and therefore most potentially influential television shows, and then culled the list down to just reality television programs. From there, I organized the most-watched reality television programs into subgenres. Chapter 5 discusses Talent Contest reality television shows (*The Voice Season 6* and *American Idol Season 13*). Chapter 6 discusses Gamedocs (*Survivor: Philippines* and *Survivor: Caramoan*). Chapter 7 discusses Lifestyle shows (*The Biggest Loser Season 14*). Chapter 8 discusses Docusoaps (*Real Housewives of Atlanta Season 5*). Chapter 9 contains conclusions derived from the study. In the next section of Chapter Four, I explain how I plan to pair the constant comparative method (CCM) with discourse analysis. CCM allows for the emergence of categories and their theoretical properties during the textual analysis. By using this method, I avoided limiting my study to preconceived categories, which allowed me to discover ideas that might not be apparent from the start. After generating the broad categories of representation of Black women on reality television via CCM, I used discourse analysis to explore the meaning of those categories of representation in more detail.

My study is a significant effort to understand how Black women are represented on reality television after the Great Recession, and it also fills the knowledge gap in terms of representations of race, gender, and class on reality television. Since I explored a relatively broad range of reality television subgenres, my study provides an in-depth look at Black women on reality television and is the only study to

date that takes into consideration the post-Great Recession context. Television is a significant conduit of beliefs, values and attitudes for millions of Americans. Given the popularity of reality television, and its unique characteristics, my project adds new knowledge about reality television generally, representations of African American women specifically, and the working of post-recession neoliberalism within the context of reality television.

1.3 Significance of the project

In the U.S., television programs play a significant role in supporting the dominant ideology (Gitlin, 1979; Corner, 1999; Kellner, 1981). Television programs do not create dominant ideas out of thin air. Rather, they rework, repackage, and relay ideology already prevalent in society (Gitlin, 1979, p. 252). In other words, television and ideology are co-constitutive. John Corner (1999) argues that television “is culturally constitutive, directly involved in the circulation of meanings and values out of which a popular sense of politics and culture is made and which also provides the interpretive resources for viewing” (p. 6). In this way, television programs communicate the dominant ideology.

John Fiske’s (1995) account of how television tends to support the dominant order has been influential in television scholarship and in cultural studies more broadly. Fiske offers a comprehensive discussion of how hegemonic messages are embedded in television programs. I draw on this discussion to outline the potential effectivity of television, but my study will not look at audience reception or the potential for audiences to resist the dominant message in television, which is the hallmark of much of the research inspired by Fiske’s work. According to Fiske, (1995), dominant “abstract social values or agencies are given concrete representation in the program,” and the program invites the viewer to embrace these social values (p. 51). And, if the viewer embraces the meanings encoded within the program, they learn that “our dominant ideological practices, apparently, works: the meanings of the world and of our subjectivities that it produces appear to make sense” (p. 51). One way that ideas are represented concretely on television is that the characters on the programs physically symbolize them: “the physical

presence of” cast members on television programs “embody (literally) discourse and ideology” (p. 153) and the interaction of the characters on television programs is an enactment of social interaction (p. 159).

Fiske explains that television attempts to make meaning that serves the dominant interests in a society (p.1), but also emphasizes that the polysemy of the television as text allows for a range of interpretations and therefore is open to a variety of possible readings by viewers (p. 65). Any text, including the television text, is polysemic in that it always contains multiple meanings. “The polysemic material is neither boundless nor structureless: the text delineates the terrain within which meanings may be made and proffers some meanings more rigorously than others” (Fiske, 1995, p. 16). Fiske’s (1995) approach, in theory, recognizes both the way texts are structured to spotlight the preferred reading (which privileges the dominant ideology) and the ability of viewers to resist that reading when they watch television programs. He explains, “The television text is the site of a series of struggles for meaning. The dominant ideology, working through the form of the text, can be resisted, evaded, or negotiated with varying degrees by differently situated readers” (p. 41). On the one hand, the television text “invites us to make sense of” particular societal situations and contexts while “discouraging us from adopting” particular viewpoints that contradict or question the dominant class’s position (p. 52). On the other hand, the television text does sometimes challenge the dominant ideology (Fiske, 1995). And, television programs do not have a direct causal influence on viewers. The way that the TV text works to create a preferred dominant discourse “may be more or less effective according to many social factors, but it is always there, and we need to think of it in terms of its effectivity in society at large, not its effects on individuals and groups” (p. 52).

It is important to note that studies do show that television viewers are affected by stereotypical representations on television programs (Martin, 2008; Fujioka, 1999). TV programs provide viewers with information about issues like race (Brown, 1980) and they have been found to reinforce racial stereo-

types (Wilson & Gutierrez, 1996). Studies also show that viewers are affected by watching reality television. One study found that adolescents who viewed “socially aggressive reality television” tended to be more socially aggressive (Ward & Carlson, 2013). Another study found that watching reality talent contest programs affected viewers’ body image (Egbert and Belcher, 2012), and Nabi and Thomas (2013) found that watching certain reality television programs could motivate viewers to exercise more and eat a healthier diet. Orbe (1998) found that reality television programs could reinforce racist stereotypes.

Since hegemony is never complete and settled, the dominant ideology must constantly be re-asserted, and opposing ideas must be consistently assimilated or rejected (Gitlin, 1979, p. 264). Antonio Gramsci (1971/1984) argued that an economic crisis in and of itself does not cause societal change but rather that it produces an environment that might be “more favorable for the dissemination of certain modes of thought” (p. 184). In other words, creating and maintaining hegemony involves struggling over and trying to settle the dominant ideas in a society in the context of the conditions of that society. Particularly in the worst of times, or after the worst of times, TV programs register, respond to, and make sense of social changes (Kellner, 1981, p. 43). For example, media scholars have examined how television responded to new social conditions after World War II (e.g. Lipsitz, 1990; Spigel, 1992; Samuels, 2001; McCarthy, 2010). George Lipsitz (1990) argues that U.S. television shows of the 1950s played an important role in explaining and justifying transformations in the postwar U.S. in response to the general anxiety wrought by social change in that decade (p. 42). Television responded to the new economic order by validating and valorizing consumption (p. 44) and represented changes in what was considered the ideal family (p. 55), with the television show *I Remember Mama* tracking debates about the family and its role in society. Changes in the TV show over time “offer a significant index to the transformations in family life and family images in that period, as well as to the ways in which social pressures altered the forms and purposes of the family” (p. 81). Television also helped set public opinion against communism during the Cold War (Kellner, 1981), and Spigel (2004) demonstrated how television in the U.S.

responded to the attacks on 9/11 by helping viewers “process fear” in order to allow for a return to everyday life and “to the normal flows of television and consumer culture” (p. 239).

Because of its status as the most watched and most profitable genre on television, a number of scholars have attempted to understand how reality television supports the dominant order, sometimes contextualizes reality television within current social events. But, despite the fact that the financial collapse and Great Recession of 2008-2009 fundamentally impacted the economic, political, and cultural terrain of U.S. society, no one has attempted to analyze and evaluate comprehensively reality television within this context. In addition, almost no one has applied intersectionality theory concerning gender, race, and class to understand representations of Black women on reality television within the context of post-recession neoliberalism.

2 Literature Review

The purpose of this review of literature is twofold. First, it demonstrates that more research is needed on the ways that Black women have been represented on reality television in the U.S after the Great Recession. Despite the contributions made by scholars studying RTV from an intersectional perspective, there are few studies that focus on stereotypical representations of Black women on RTV, and there are no studies that look at various sub-genres of RTV systematically and in the context of the discourses and ideologies laid out in Chapter 3. Second, this chapter establishes some of the foundational stereotypes of Black women in the U.S. and how these stereotypes might be playing out on RTV since it became popular (at the beginning of the 21st century) and after the Great Recession of 2008-2009.

2.1 Intersectionality

The overarching concept that guides my study of reality television is intersectionality. According to Hayden and O’Brien Hallstein (2012), “intersectional thinking involves attending to the multiple and

intersecting axes of power that form identities and upon which instances of oppression and resistance are enacted” (p. 97). Women whose experiences were not integrated into the dominant line of feminist theory in the 1970s and 1980s, drawn primarily by white middle class heterosexual women, produced a variety of theories and metaphors (including interlocking, double jeopardy, and multiple jeopardy) to attempt to show how women were oppressed and marginalized by virtue not only of their gender, but also because of their race, sexuality, ethnicity, and/or class location (Griffin & Chavez, 2012, p. 3).

Kimberle’ Crenshaw introduced the term “intersectionality” to expose how “the inability to think outside of singular axes of identity has detrimental effects for women of color” (Griffin & Chavez, 2012, p. 4). Crenshaw first used to the term in her 1989 article, “Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics,” in which she argued that Black women “often experience double-discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women—not the sum of race and sex, but as Black women” (p. 63-64). Crenshaw (1991) expanded upon this notion of intersectional thinking to develop a theory of intersectionality. Drawing on the works of feminists of color and on legal critical race theory, Crenshaw argues that “racial and sexual subordination are mutually reinforcing, that Black women are commonly marginalized by a politics of race alone or gender alone, and that a political response to each form of subordination must at the same time be a political response to both” (p. 1283). Crenshaw’s work in this article forms the basis for much of the scholarship on intersectionality.¹

In addition to forwarding the metaphor of intersection as a way to think about multiply enmeshed identity categories that result in unique forms of oppression, Crenshaw (1991) also provided three ways that intersectionality is carried out in society. *Structural intersectionality* calls attention to the unique material affects that women of color suffer because of their intersectional identities (p.

¹ Crenshaw (1991) focuses on African American women, but her theoretical outline of intersectionality is not limited to Black women.

1245). *Political intersectionality* denotes the ways in which women of color are marginalized in political efforts to address discrimination via single axis thinking (p. 1245). *Representational intersectionality* references the ways that women of color are depicted in popular culture (p. 1245). These different perspectives on intersectionality help me to organize and clarify my thinking in terms of the theories I engage, the contextual features I highlight, the way I understand the current literature, and my methodology.

Political intersectionality calls attention to *societal discourses*, whereas structural intersectionality calls attention to the *material results* when society follows certain discourses as a guide to how people should be treated, how it operates, and how rules and laws are formulated. According to Patricia Hill Collins (2005), “a discourse is a set of ideas and practices that, when taken together, organize both the ways a society defines certain truths about itself and the way it puts together social power” (p. 17). Of particular interest for my study are discourses around discrimination of Black women—post-racist and post-feminist discourses—and how these discourses have been influenced by neoliberal ideology. Because women of color experience both sexism and racism, their oppression is subject to or addressed separately by both feminist and antiracist discourses, but because these discourses are “shaped to respond to one *or* the other, women of color are marginalized within both” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). Intersectionality helps to conceptualize the idea that understanding and combating racism and sexism (and other forms of discrimination) are not mutually exclusive projects.

Political intersectionality highlights the ways that feminist discourses have favored white women, the ways that antiracist discourses have favored black men, and the way that both discourses have marginalized the concerns of women of color (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252). Feminist gains were often made at the expense of people of color in general and women of color in particular, and gains made by antiracism movements often resulted in further oppression of women of color (p. 1252). Rather than pursuing ideas that view ending sexism and racism as mutually exclusive goals, intersectional thinking

requires thinking about the ways that both forms of oppression combine to uniquely affect women of color (p. 1242).

Representational intersectionality calls attention to the ways that Black women are represented in popular culture (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). Crenshaw (1991) focuses on “how the production of images of women of color and the contestations over those images tend to ignore the intersectional interests of women of color” (p. 1283). She explores this problem using the case study of the 2 Live Crew (2LC) obscenity trials in the early 1990s in Florida (p. 1283), looking at the legal reasoning in the case and the public discourse attacking and defending 2LC’s music. Her analysis of the public debate over 2LC’s lyrics shows that attacks on 2LC used anti-sexism discourses that were supported by racism while defenders of the group used anti-racism discourses that were supported by sexism. According to Crenshaw (1991), George Will’s attack against 2LC used concerns about women being raped (anti-sexism) while it employed traditional stereotypes about Black men (that they are sexually violent predators) and marginalized the unique concerns of the Black women by shifting the focus from the victims in 2LC’s music to the case of a white woman who was raped by Black men in Central Park (p. 1291). Henry Louis Gates defended 2LC’s music as artistic expression rooted in African American cultural traditions of oral communication that were attempts to explode racist stereotypes about Black men by using humor to “show the ridiculousness of racism” (p. 1292), but Crenshaw demonstrates how this defense “marginalizes Black women and exposes them to violence in the service of anti-racism” (pp. 1292-1295).

In terms of an analysis of the representation of Black women in 2 Live Crew’s “art,” Crenshaw’s work is limited. She devotes two paragraphs to listing some of the objectionable lyrics in 2LC’s music, noting that the lyrics are crude, misogynistic, and violent (p. 1283-1284). Most of her analysis is focused on the legal issues covered in the obscenity trial and the public discussion of the group’s music, neither of which provides insight into how the lyrics represent Black women using stereotypes that are uniquely harmful to Black women. Crenshaw (1991) does note that, with regard to representation,

scholarly work outside the field of law focuses on the stereotypical portrayals of Black women in popular culture and how those representations connect to broader societal discourses about discrimination in the U.S. (p. 1282).

The remainder of this chapter focuses on representational intersectionality of African American women in society, on television in the U.S., and on reality television in particular. I address political and structural intersectionality in the next chapter.

2.2 Stereotypes of Black Women in the U.S.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins (2000/2009) writes about what she calls “controlling images” (p. 77), which are overarching stereotypical representations of Black women. These hegemonic representations of Black women in U.S. society “are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (p. 77). They function as “powerful ideological justifications” for the various forms of intersectional oppression Black women suffer (p. 76), and they can also be the ground on which resistance occurs (p. 79). Beginning in early American history as justification and excuse for the treatment of enslaved Africans, these representations have changed over time to meet the needs of the dominant group (p. 79). In the 20th and 21st centuries, hegemonic representations of Black women continue to be re-fashioned and re-circulated in popular culture (p. 93). This section briefly addresses each of the historical controlling images, in order to provide context for the more current versions of the controlling images of African American women, which are more relevant to my analysis of reality television programs.

2.2.1 The Mammy

The mammy is the original controlling representation of Black women. The mammy is “the faithful, obedient domestic servant” to the white slave master, his wife, and his children (Collins, 2000/2009, p. 80). Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) notes other traits of the mammy: she is selfless, reliable, and trust-

worthy in her service to her white family (p. 72). The mammy was an image of the idea black woman and mother, but only in relation to her care for her white family, not for her black children, black family or black community (pp. 72-77). The figure of the mammy has been a significant impetus for intersectional subordination in the U.S. (Collins, 2000/2009, p. 80). The mammy image encourages Black mothers to raise their children to be docile and obedient: “By teaching Black children their assigned place in white power structures, Black women who internalize the mammy image potentially become effective conduits for perpetuating racism” (p. 80). The mammy image also undergirds racism by supporting “the racial superiority of White employers, encouraging middle-class White women in particular to identify more closely with the racial and class privileges afforded their fathers, husbands, and sons” (p. 80). And the mammy was constructed to hide the economic exploitation of class. Mammies, “no matter how loved they were by their White ‘families,’” accepted their subservient position even though they remained poor themselves (p. 81). As society changed, the modern mammy came into prominence (Collins, 2000/2009, p. 78). According to Harris-Perry (2011), the modern mammy image drives Black women to exhibit “mammy-like devotion to white domestic concerns” (p. 49). In popular culture, modern mammies solve problems for white women “without ever hinting at their own oppressive circumstances” (Collins, 2000/2009, p. 78). The portrayal of mammies shifted emphasis from devotion to White families to Black women’s jobs and employers (p. 81).

2.2.2 *The Matriarch*

Another hegemonic representation of Black women in U.S. culture is the Black Matriarch. According to Collins (2000/2009), “the matriarch symbolizes the mother figure in Black homes. Just as the mammy represents the ‘good’ Black mother, the matriarch symbolizes the ‘bad’ Black mother” who spent too much time working rather than staying home to take care of her kids (p. 83). “From the dominant group’s perspective, the matriarch represented the failed mammy, a negative stigma applied to African-American women who dared reject the image of the submissive, hardworking servant” (p. 83).

This representation of Black women was a response to the civil rights gains made by and for Black women in the twentieth century (Collins, 2000/2009, p. 82). Like the mammy stereotype, the matriarchal representation of Black women justified intersectional oppression. First, it explains and justifies the lower-class location of African Americans as a logical outcome of the effects of failed Black mothers (Collins, 2000/2009, p. 84). Black society fails to climb the ladder of success in America because, according to the stereotype, “Black children lack the care and attention allegedly lavished on White middle-class children” (p. 84). This cultural logic obscures structural causes of inequality that are a part of capitalism and support blaming the victim (p. 84).

2.3 More modern images of African American women

2.3.1 *The welfare mother*

A more modern hegemonic representation of Black women in the U.S. is the welfare mother, who avails herself of government benefits to which she is rightly able to receive (Collins, 2000/2009, p. 86). “While the matriarch’s unavailability contributed to her children’s poor socialization, the welfare mother’s accessibility is deemed the problem. She is portrayed as being content to sit around and collect welfare, shunning work and passing on her bad values to her offspring” (p. 87). Like the mammy and the matriarch, the welfare mother image reflects intersectional oppression. Since the welfare mother is not married, her failure is framed as an example of the dangers of not being involved in a heterosexual marriage (Collins, 2000/2009, p. 87). The way that the stereotype blames the Black mother for living in poverty takes attention away from the structural causes of poverty inherent in capitalism (p. 87). And since the welfare mother is represented as failing to teach her children a proper work ethic, this supposed failure supports stereotyping African Americans as lazy (p. 87).

2.3.2 *The Jezebel/Hoochie*

The jezebel image was circulated to justify white men's sexual assault of Black women in slavery (Nelson, 2008, p. 189), and this image has been revised into the modern hoochie, who represents "deviant Black female sexuality" (Collins, 2000/2009, p. 89). Hoochies cannot get enough sex; they are sexually voracious, sexual aberrations (p. 91). According to Harris-Perry (2011), the jezebel constitutes Black women as "particularly promiscuous and sexually immoral" (p. 54). Collins (2000/2009) outlined four iterations of the hoochie: plain hoochies are simply sexually assertive women; club hoochies wear revealing clothes to clubs and dance like sluts; gold-digging hoochies look to get money by getting pregnant by rich men and therefore trapping the men; and the hoochie mama is the poor Black woman who has kids and uses sex to get money (pp. 90-91). The figure of the hoochie circulates prominently in popular culture. In hip-hop culture in the 1980s and early 90s, Black women rappers attempted to speak about sex and sexuality, using the music as a venue "to speak their own truths" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 65). But by the mid-1990s hip-hop featured Black women rappers, who, according to Harris-Perry, were a degraded caricature of the early women of hip-hop (p. 65). During this phase, "hip-hop made black women into silent, scantily clad figures who write willingly behind male artists" (p. 65). Harris-Perry also points to the portrayal of the hoochie figure of white women on reality television programs like *Sixteen and Pregnant* (MTV), but she does not discuss how the Black women are portrayed on these shows (p. 66). Like the matriarch and welfare mother myths, the hoochie figure "allows public discourses that blame the victim and ignore societal causes of failure" (p. 67).

2.3.3 *The Sapphire*

According to K. Sue Jewell (1993), the image of the Sapphire "is predicated upon the presence of the corrupt African American male, whose lack of integrity and use of cunning and trickery provides her with an opportunity to emasculate him through her use of verbal putdowns" (p. 45). Jewell continues, explaining that Sapphire "demonstrates her virtues and morals compared to those of the African Ameri-

can male” (p. 45). According to bell hooks (1981), “As Sapphires, black women were depicted as evil, treacherous, bitchy, stubborn and hateful” (p. 85). hooks (1981) writes that the Sapphire character on *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, “the nagging, shrewish wife of Kingfish,” was used “primarily to create sympathy in viewers for the black male lot” (pp. 85-86). According to Collins (2005), the “Black bitch” stereotype defines working-class African American women and is a model of what to not do to gain access to the middle class, and this same logic explains how the Sapphire functions in this case. If Black women want to succeed in U.S. society, they should not be rude, bitchy, or stubborn.

2.3.4 The strong Black woman

The final hegemonic representation of Black women I address here is the strong Black woman. According to Melissa Harris-Perry (2011), the strong Black woman is the “motivated, hardworking breadwinner who suppresses their emotional needs while anticipating those of others. Their irrepressible spirit is unbroken by the legacy of oppression, poverty, and rejection” (p. 184). Strong Black women are self-reliant, strong willed and smart, they are always supportive of their family even if this means sacrificing themselves, and they do all of this without complaining about, or even referring to, the racism, sexism, and other injustices they suffer along the way (p. 21).

On the one hand, the strong Black woman is a source of positive images of Black women because she is represented as using these qualities to gain success in life, and this success is particularly impressive because of the barriers she overcomes and her grace in doing so (p. 184). On the other hand, the strong Black woman image is the source of negative constraints for Black women. Because the strong black woman is characterized as succeeding despite all hindrances, Black women who do not succeed are subject to blaming and shaming (p. 185). The logic works like this: if the strong Black woman can do it, why can’t all Black women? The strong Black woman image creates unrealistic expectations for Black women because it compels them to “fulfill a mandate for self-reliance while having few personal, social, and economic resources available to them” (p. 187). And, since the strong Black woman image is

impossible to emulate, it “encourages black women to believe persistent racial and gender inequality is deserved” (p. 189). Finally, like the other stereotypes and myths discussed here, the strong Black woman image justifies the inequality Black women suffer and supports victim blaming (because it is their own fault), and obfuscates the role that structural causes of inequality play in the social location of poor Black women (p. 190).

2.4 Updated Stereotypes of Black Women in the U.S.

Patricia Hill Collins updated some of the stereotypes discussed above in her 2005 book *Black Sexual Politics*. My focus here is on Collins’s discussion of the distinctive ways that representations of Black women in the current climate of post-racism and post-sexism are classed. Collins argues that these new images functioned to explain the success and failure of Black women in the post-civil rights context where everyone is presumed equal. On the one hand, the representations of poor working-class Black women show that they “allegedly lack the values of hard work, marriage, school performance, religiosity, and clean living attributed to middle-class White Americans” (Collins, 2005, p. 177). On the other hand, representations of middle-class Black women “describe the space of respectability for newly accepted Black people. These Black people are different from middle-class Whites, but the representations of middle-class Black people are not a threat to power relations” (p. 178). The success or failure of Black women is framed by these representations “in terms of the unwillingness of poor and/or working-class Black people to shed their Blackness and the willingness of middle-class Black people to assimilate” (p. 178).

2.4.1 Stereotypes of Working-class Black Women

Collins (2005) identifies and explains two controlling images of Black women specific to poor and working-class identities: the “bitch” and the “bad Black mother.” The image of the bitch “depicts Black women as aggressive, loud, rude, and pushy” (p. 123). Using the term “bitch” in reference to women is

intended to put them in their place, and it also works to “defeminize and demonize them,” (p. 123). According to Collins, “the term *bitch* becomes a way of stigmatizing poor and working-class Black women who lack middle-class passivity and submissiveness” and works to rationalize racial and sexist discrimination encountered by African American women (p. 138). Examples of this stereotype include Pam Grier’s characters in the films *Sheba, Baby* and *Foxy Brown*, the main character in Sister Souljah’s book *The Coldest Winter Ever*, and rapper Lil’ Kim (Collins, 2005, pp. 124-127). Working-class and poor Black women are also stereotyped as bad Black Mothers (Collins, 2005, p. 130). According to Collins, “bad Black mothers (BBM) are those who are abusive and/or who neglect their children either in utero or afterward” (p. 130). BBMs are usually young, unmarried, extremely poor, and are the recipients of government assistance (p. 130). A version of the historical matriarch stereotype discussed in the previous section, BBMs include crack mothers, welfare mothers, and welfare queens (pp. 131-132). An example of this typecast is Halle Berry’s crack addicted character in *Losing Isaiah* (p. 131). According to Collins (2005), the image of the Black bitch and the bad Black mother “functions as ideology to justify new social relations of hyper-ghettoization, unfinished racial desegregation, and efforts to shrink the social welfare state” (p. 137). In other words, these new stereotypes of poor and working-class Black women work to support neoliberal ideology and its social outcomes for Black women. These negative images of poor and working-class Black women are normalized in popular culture as “an authentic Black culture” and positioned as an example for Black women and society of what not to do in order to join the middle class: “African American women must reject this gender-specific version of authenticity in favor of a politics of respectability” (pp. 138-139). This version of respectable Black womanhood is articulated through stereotypes of middle-class Black women.

2.4.2 Stereotypes of Middle-class Black Women

Collins (2005) identifies three representations of middle-class Black women in U.S. culture: the “Black lady,” the “modern mammy,” and the “educated Black bitch.” Controlling images of middle-class

Black women are an attempt to demonstrate how African American women should act in order to escape the working-class. African American women who aspire to middle-class status have to reject the “gender-specific version of authenticity” in which working-class Black women are defined as bitches and bad Black mothers (Collins, 2005, p. 139). They also have to reject “the unbridled ‘freaky’ sexuality now attributed primarily to working-class Black women” (p. 139). In addition, “because middle-class Black women typically need to work in order to remain middle-class, they cannot achieve the status of the lady by withdrawing from the workforce” (p. 139).

The Black lady image is designed to be a rejoinder to the sexualized image of Black women propagated by the Jezebel. According to Collins (2005), achieving middle-class status means that Black women have rejected the unbridled ‘freaky’ sexuality now attributed to working-class Black women” (p. 139). The prototype for the Black lady image is the character of Claire Huxtable, the mother on the *Cosby Show* (p. 139). The Huxtables were an upper-middle class Black family who lived in a very nice house, and whose lives were apparently not touched by common societal problems like drugs or teenage pregnancy (p. 139). Collins (2005) explained that Clair Huxtable was “beautiful, smart, and sensuous,” and she was a successful lawyer who earned partner despite the fact that she was rarely shown outside the home (p. 139). In order to represent the kind of Black women able to join the middle class, the modern mammy image was put forward. According to Collins (2005), the modern mammy is required to negotiate “a delicate balance between being appropriately subordinate to white and/or male authority, yet maintaining a level of ambition and aggressiveness needed for achievement in middle-class occupations” (p. 140). The modern mammy has to be aggressive, but only in the service of others and never for herself (p. 140). Oftentimes, this stereotype is combined with the “Black lady” stereotype in television programs like *Law and Order*, a television show that cast S. Epatha Merkerson, a black woman, as a lieutenant in the New York City police department (Collins, 2005, p. 140). The educated Black bitch “has money, power, and a good job,” she is beautiful and sexy, and she is in charge of her body and her sexu-

ality (p. 145). Educated Black women can become educated Black bitches if they are perceived as untrustworthy, if they do not properly support Black men, or “if they have character traits that make them unappealing to middle-class Black men” (p. 146). Examples of educated Black women in popular films include the character of Jacqueline (Robin Givens) in *Boomerang* and Lysterine (Vivica Fox) in *Booty Call* (p. 144).

In the next section, I look more closely at the way these and other controlling images of Black women are have been played out on television programs in the U.S.

2.5 Representations of Race and Gender on U.S. Television

One approach to the study of African American women in television examines how characters played by black women on TV shows reflect the hegemonic representations discussed previously, as well as variations of those images and new images of black female characters. Most studies trace these stereotypical portrayals of television programs historically, looking roughly at each decade of the twentieth century, starting with the advent of commercial broadcast television in the 1950s.

In the 1950s, television programming adopted the racist and sexist stereotypes of blacks from earlier iterations of popular entertainment like radio and vaudeville (Johnson, 2008, p. 169-170). These characters, typically maids or cooks, were based on the mammy image, (Gray, 2000, p. 286). “Mama,” a character in the TV show *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, was written as a mammy character and *The Beulah Show* featured a black woman paying a maid who solved the problems of her white family/employer (Smith-Shomade, 2002, p. 11). In general, television programs that aired in the 50s involved stories about “happy people with happy problems” and did not attempt to address societal concerns (Smith-Shomade, 2002, p. 11). Black women portrayed as mammies on TV were capable of running white households and raising white children, “but they could not be trusted with the social and civic responsibilities of full citizenship as equals with whites” (Gray, 2000, p. 286). Black mammy characters on TV in the 50s also “functioned to defuse any sense that black Americans had either legitimate complaints about their op-

pression within America, or that, given equal standing and opportunity, they would be able to capitalize on it” (Johnson, 2008, p. 171).

In the 1960s and early 70s, television programs treated racism and other social ills as individual problems (Nelson, 2008, p. 196), and the stereotypical representations of women of color were more innocuous than those in the 1950s (Gray, 2000, p. 287). During this era, race was downplayed and black female actors played roles that were written around the features, experiences and concerns of white women (p. 287). Overt stereotypes of black women were essentially written out of the characters that black female actors played (Johnson, 2008, p. 174).

In the context of the employment and economic gains made by blacks as a result of the civil rights movement and changes in the rules for broadcast television industry, the 1970s saw television shows that were more diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and class (Johnson, 2008, p. 175). In the 70s, white TV producers created programs that they thought were credible stories of poor, urban, black life (Gray, 2000, p. 288). Black characters were represented as “good-humored and united in racial solidarity regardless of their condition,” and the programs “reaffirmed the commonsense belief that such ideals and the values they promoted are the rewards of individual sacrifice and hard work” (p. 288). Many of the TV shows of this era limited black female characters “to the primary role of mammy or sapphire,” characters who were bossy and cruel (Smith-Shomade, 2002, p. 15). The strong black woman, portrayed by black women whose characters were written to be tough, smart, strong, sexy and attractive, also made an appearance on some TV shows during this time (p. 15).

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, TV programs about black life shifted focus to “black upward mobility and middle-class affluence” (Gray, 2000, p. 289). Instead of representing earlier stereotypes, black characters embodied values and ideals that were grounded in white privilege: the valorization of heterosexual family structure, individual effort as the means to success, and a general preference towards white middle-class sensibilities (p. 290). Black female television characters were “materially-

driven individualists who possess the education, ability, and means to achieve goals, all through their own efforts” (Smith-Shomade, 2002, p. 22). The sapphire was commonly depicted on sitcoms and included Marla Gibbs’s character Mary Jenkins on *227* and Jaleesa Vinson-Taylor, played by Dawnn Lewis on *A Different World* (Nelson, 2008, p. 200).

In the 1990s, black women’s experiences are still peripheral in the main storyline of television programs (Smith-Shomade, 2002, p. 39). Black female characters continued to be represented “in supporting, mammified, and one-dimensional capacities” (p. 68). These shows portrayed black female characters playing narratively white women who just happened to be black (p. 68). And the Fox Network was “consistently under fire for repackaging old minstrel stereotypes” (Nelson, 2008, p. 177).

A slightly different approach to understanding racism on television programs is to look at how societal issues are or are not addressed in the show’s storyline. Herman Gray (2000) argues that there are three discourses that television programs present with regard to how societal problems are addressed and negotiated by characters in the show’s narrative: assimilationist, pluralist, and multicultural (p. 294). According to Gray, these discursive practices “construct, frame, and narrate” issues of race in the context of current social and political discourses about race and racism (p. 294).

Assimilationist constructions of black issues and black life on television shows treat “social and political issues as individual problems” and they depict the causes of and solutions to racism to be individual attitudes (Gray, 2000, pp. 294-295). According to Gray, “when they exist, race, class, and gender inequalities seem quite extraordinary and they always seem to operate at the level of individual experience” (p. 295). Assimilationist television programs ignore historical bases for racism and the racial discourses that constitution the society in which the television programs circulate, and they do not portray African Americans as having distinctive or unique perspectives or experiences on societal issues (p. 295). On assimilationist television programs, race is invisible and people (and society) are colorblind (p. 295).

In other words, assimilationist television is characterized by a denial of race and racism on its shows and in society.

Pluralist discourses on TV portray African Americans as separate from but equal to whites (Gray, 2000, p. 296). According to Gray (2000), on pluralist television programs, "African Americans face the same experiences, situations, and conflicts as whites except for the fact they are separate but equal" (p. 296). On these kinds of television programs, "blacks and whites are just alike save for minor differences of habit and perspective developed from African American experiences in a homogenous and monolithic black world" (Gray, 2000, p. 296). These shows explicitly recognize race "as the basis of cultural difference (expressed as separation) as a feature of U.S. society," but "the social and historical contexts in which these acknowledged difference are expressed, sustained, and meaningful are absent" (p. 296). Blacks are separate from whites on pluralist television shows based on flattened, superficial cultural differences, but they are equal to whites in that they are included in the normative middle class order, within which they are supposedly treated as equal individuals while "the impact (and responses to it) of structured social inequality and the social hierarchies that are structured into it" are ignored (p. 298).

Where pluralist discourses on television are shallow efforts to portray cultural difference while representing social equality oblivious to the real racism existing in U.S. society, multiculturalist television programs "explicitly engaged the cultural politics of diversity and multiculturalism within African American life (Gray, 2000, p. 299). African American life was represented on these shows as complex and contradictory rather than monolithic (p. 299). Multiculturalist television programs portrayed "black experiences from multiple subject positions" (p. 299). These kinds of programs acknowledged and critiqued social inequality and treated social problems, including the problems inherent in inclusion of blacks into normatively white U.S. social order, "from multiple and complex perspectives within blackness" (p. 300). Middle class perspectives were still the norm on multiculturalist television programs, but black middle class viewpoints were foregrounded and hegemonic class whiteness was less of a factor (p. 299).

2.6 Studies of Gender/Race on U.S. Reality Television Programs

By looking at the various studies of race/studies of gender, it will become clear that Black women have been functionally excluded from the literature, and this justifies the need for serious attention to representations of Black women on reality TV. Because these are studies of reality television before the Great Recession, their results cannot be generalized to RTV in the post-recessionary context.

One approach to understanding representations on reality television is from a feminist theoretical perspective. Reality television programs are heavily gendered (Webber, 2009), and many dimensions of this axis of power and oppression have been illuminated in the literature. The narratives circulated on *The Swan* (TLC), an extreme makeover show that includes plastic surgery to fix “ugly” women, “create a moral justification for plastic surgery” (Marwick, 2010, p. 252). Alice Marwick (2010) argues that all women’s flaws are interpreted by the show as “problems with their body” or “problems they believe were caused by their body” (p. 256). Marwick concludes that, on the show, cosmetic surgery is characterized as “an empowered feminist practice” (p. 263). Established gender roles about childbirth and the ideal mother are reinforced on *A Baby Story* (TLC), a RTV program that documents women going through the end of their pregnancy and childbirth (Sears & Godderis, 2011, p. 181). On the show, the “normal” birthing woman is white, heterosexual, married and not poor (p. 188); she submits to, and therefore supports, the medicalization of birth (p. 189-190); and she was “calm, quiet, and relatively passive, which served to reinforce dominant gender roles and racial norms” (p. 190). Rachel Dubrofsky (2009) compares the emotionality of women on reality television to “the money shot” in pornography. This approach allows her to show how *The Bachelor* (ABC) represents women who are excessively emotional as dangerous, threatening, and therefore unfit for love (p. 355), and in the process “recruits women into the job of governing the behavior of other women” (p. 356). These studies did not explore how the gendered logic on reality television applied to Black women.

Paralleling the literature examining gender and reality television, studies of race on RTV tend to ignore or under-analyze the unique representations of Black women on the shows. Debra Smith (2008) focused on representations of Black fatherhood on RTV sitcoms. Katrina Bell-Jordan (2008) argued that RTV programs have used race “as a point of contention among casts and dramatized scenarios that reinforce racial stereotypes and myths about people of color as well as whites” (p. 353). Despite the fact that Black women were prominent on all of the shows she studied, Bell-Jordan’s (2008) focus is almost exclusively on the way Black and white men on the shows are represented. Rachel Durofsky and Anoinette Hardy (2008) argued, “while it is true that *Flavor of Love* animates racial stereotypes, it also allows for fluid and complex understandings of Black identity through active claiming of identities—in contrast to the restrictive naturalized White identities on *The Bachelor*” (p. 373).

Although they are interested in racial portrayals in general, Durbofsky and Hardy do unpack the stereotypical representations of Black women on *Flavor of Love* (VH1). Black women are overly sexual and their bodies are objectified along the lines of the historical bodily images of Black women (p. 383). And, they are too strong, too aggressive, and too loud (p. 383). Many of the Black women on the show fit the “ghetto stereotype” (p. 385). They also express love and affection for the star of the show (p. 385). The authors see the possibility for Black women to resist these negative stereotypes on *Flavor of Love*, which might make it unique from other RTV programs:

RTV fosters the proliferation of long-held and pernicious stereotypes of Blacks, yet sometimes allows for complex performances of Blackness not permitted in traditional television programming. Participants on *Flavor of Love* can embrace their sexuality, show a three-dimensional “ghetto girl” or “pimp” persona and express a desire for Black love absent mainstream television. Here, women can sob, fight, laugh, get revenge or reconcile without penalty or judgment. (p. 386)

But, as the authors point out, this potentiality might normalize certain stereotypical performances as authentically Black. Durofsky and Hardy (2008) note that as more Black women are featured on RTV,

this negotiation between damaging stereotypes and the possibility of “critical resistance” to those portrayals will necessitate more study (p. 386).

2.7 Studies of Black Women on Pre-recession U.S. Reality Television Programs

Although many studies about race are focused on whiteness and/or men, a handful of studies have examined stereotypes of Black women on reality television programs. Shannon Campbell et al (2008) focused on the Jezebel and Sapphire images that Black women played on the VH1 series *I Love New York*, a dating show with a single Black woman who is looking for love (New York) as the star of the show. According to Campbell et al, New York is portrayed as the stereotypical Jezebel. She is “exotic and hot” (p. 24). New York’s Jezebel characterizations include having a massive sexual appetite and being adept at sex, and she uses her sexuality “in concert with her authority as the show’s star” to emotionally abuse the men who hope to end up being chosen (pp. 22-23). She challenges the men’s masculinity and attempts to elicit emotional responses from them (p. 23). New York’s mother, Sister Patterson, is represented via the Sapphire image. Patterson is shown to be confrontational, rude, negative, and sharp-tongued (p. 24). She expresses these qualities via eye rolling, scowling and her use of sarcasm (p. 24).

Rather than looking at a single RTV program, Tia Tyree (2011) studied stereotypical representations of African Americans on a variety of shows and over multiple seasons. Looking for historical and new stereotypes of Blacks, Tyree found that Black women were not represented via the historical images such as the mammy or matriarch. Instead, Black women were portrayed primarily through two relatively newer images: the angry Black woman and the hoochie (p. 404). Features of the angry Black woman included “shaking her head, folding her arms and using harsh facial expressions” when involved in disagreements, head and neck movements, being bossy, having a bad attitude, being a diva, being verbally threatening, and provoking confrontation (p. 405). Features of the hoochie figure included being uneducated, drinking and smoking, wearing tight revealing clothes, being promiscuous and/or being accused of being licentious, and being loud and combative (p. 406).

Other studies focused on the way that race was discursively managed on *America's Next Top Model* (UPN/CW), a modeling talent contest featuring a racially diverse cast of models. These studies are important to my dissertation because they situate *America's Next Top Model* (ANTM) in terms of neoliberal racism (post-racism). ANTM mimics and reinforces the features of the neoliberal market. The competition to become the next top model is presumably fair, and success is won through hard work and personal responsibility (Hasinoff, 2008, p. 331). The model's enthusiastic participation in the contest signals their faith "in the fairness of the outcome of the competition and the larger economic system it reflects" (Hasinoff, 2008, p. 331). According to Amy Hasinoff (2008), the models are subject to several distinct imperatives that align with the discourse of neoliberal racism: "TM imagines race in a uniquely neoliberal way—it transcends race by denying institutional racism and embraces race by transforming racial difference and through the process of imagining racial difference into lucrative marketable commodities" (p. 332). Neoliberal racialization of the models is based first and foremost on the normalization of whiteness where women of color are prompted to emphasize their racial beauty and where the race of white women is not mentioned except to establish whiteness as the standard of beauty (Hasinoff, 2008, p. 333).

Women of color are consistently implored to embrace their racialization thereby making use of the supposed features inherent to their race and/or ethnicity the key to success on ANTM. This imperative is communicated by the judges of the show via "familiar stereotypes about women of color and white women" (Hasinoff, 2008, p. 334). Although women of color on the show are pushed to perform stereotypical racializations (Hasinoff, 2008, p. 334), according to Mary Thompson (2010), the push to embrace racial stereotypes is depoliticized, "meant to be a strategic engagement with the fashion industry's fascination with the 'exotic'" (p. 340). In addition to being constrained to non-political racializations, on ANTM choosing to embrace a particular racial image is akin to choosing a bracelet or a necklace: a racial image is a style or accessory "that should be turned on and off according to particular de-

mands of neoliberal ideology in any given situation as it affords the individual model ‘cultural capital’” (Thompson, 2010, p. 342). Thompson (2010) points out that framing racialization as strategic choice depoliticizes race by disconnecting race from structural history and conditions (p. 342). Thompson also notes that while models on ANTM are encouraged to embrace their ethnicity, being “too” ethnic or racialized allows the judges to characterize the models’ look as not being flexible enough to flourish, and this is often the reason why the models are voted out of the competition (p. 343). Finally, neoliberal racism is upheld on ANTM: since racializations on the show are the model’s personal choice, being eliminated from the competition is represented as a result of individual failure and not the result of racism on the part of the judges, the fashion industry, or the society (Thompson, 2010, p. 347).

Also, it is imperative that the racial stereotypes that the models embrace are marketable, saleable, and profitable on ANTM (Hasinoff, 2008, p. 335). The show constructs a “neoliberal rhetoric of racialization” that demands that “women of color represent their racial identities exclusively as specific marketable aspects of personal pride and beauty, obscuring all other issues” (Hasinoff, 2008, p. 335). On the show, women of color who have light skin are positioned as uniquely valuable commodities because “of their ability to adapt to the market’s demands and leverage their ambiguity to appeal to a wide audience” (p. 335). This creates untenable situations for women of color where it is imperative, professionally and financially, that they embrace their racial qualities (real or imagined) but where making a false step (being “too ethnic”) is a sign of failure in the neoliberal logic of the program (Thompson, 2010, p. 344). Hasinoff (2008) and Thompson (2010) claim that ANTM depoliticizes the individual and commodifies racialization while it simultaneously assumes “that institutional and structural change is unnecessary and celebrates rather than laments the fact that the only way to succeed is to work hard to conform to existing norms” of both racial stereotypes and whiteness (Hasinoff, 2008, p. 340).

Siobhan Smith (2013) published the results of a quantitative content analysis of representations of African American women and men as they occurred on the 2006 and 2007 seasons of *College Hill*

(BET), a RTV program that features mostly college-aged African American cast members (p. 40). The study looked at how cast members were portrayed in terms of their personality traits, such as displaying a negative or positive attitude, humility, kindness, niceness and emotional strength, and their physical appearance, such as being sexy, well groomed, and whether their skin was relatively light or dark (pp. 44-46). The author concluded that African American women were represented in a negative light and that African American men were positively depicted. The author initially discusses a wide range of stereotypes of African American women, including the Mammy, the Matriarch, and the Jezebel (p. 41)—and men—such as the Brute, the Criminal, and the Buck (p. 42) and situates the women within this context. Stephen Giannino and Campbell (2012) published an analysis of the first two seasons (2005 and 2006) of *Flavor of Love* (VH1), a dating show starring a former rapper (Flavor Flav) searching for love. They argue that the show depicts women of color in ways that reinforce racial stereotypes (p. 64).

My dissertation advances the literature about Black women on reality television programs by adding new knowledge through exploring stereotypes in the context of the aftermath of the Great Recession so as to understand how this important change in U.S. society might have been worked out on reality television shows. Even relatively recent studies included here are about pre-recessionary RTV programs (e.g. Smith, 2013 and Giannino and Campbell, 2012) do not take the recession into account as an important contextual factor. Also, I broaden the current literature by studying several programs within each major genre of reality television. In terms of the literature placing RTV in the context of neoliberal racism, my project adds new knowledge in two important ways. Since my study looks at several reality television programs in every major genre of RTV, I am able to make more expansive theoretical claims than currently available in the literature. Second, my study is distinguished by the context I focus on. By looking at the representations of Black women on post-Great Recession reality television programs, my dissertation will contribute new knowledge about how, if at all, reality television might have

interpreted and made use of the challenges created by the economic downturn and the material impacts the Great Recession had on Black women.

2.8 Studies of Post-recession U.S. Reality Television Programs

In this section I focus only on literature that attempts to understand issues of race, gender, and/or class on reality television after the Great Recession. Each of the studies in this section marginalizes or ignores Black women, does not conceptualize the Great Recession adequately, or falls into both categories.

In 2013, *Television & New Media* published a special issue on gender and reality television, focusing on how issues of gender and national identity intersect on reality TV programs in Canada, Ireland, the U.K., and the U.S (Negra, Pike, & Radley, 2013, p. 187). The issue includes one essay studying the gendered notions of national identity in each country. Tiara Sukhan's (2013) contribution examined how weight loss RTV programs in Canada play off of and reinforce hegemonic ideas about femininity. Anne Sexton (2013) wrote about postfeminism in the neoliberal context in Ireland, focusing on model and RTV star Katy French. And Paula Gilligan (2013) argues that RTV in the U.K. highlighted and supported the shift from a left-wing concern for the poor to a right-wing view that blames the poor for their status in society. All three essays address the gender axis, but none speak to issues of race in general or of Black women's issues in particular.

Mimi White's (2013) contribution to the special issue of *Television & New Media* focuses on the U.S. version of *House Hunters* (HGTV), a RTV program that features people searching for a home to buy. The key finding of her study is that the narrative structure of *House Hunters* represents certain central issues buyers desire in a home as particularly gendered, and these gendered notions are repeated in every episode of the program (p. 235). Men's top priorities are a "man cave," an outdoor grill, a workshop, and a shower (pp. 236-7). Women's top priorities are a hobby space (usually not an entire room dedicated to the hobby), laundry area, a tub (not a shower), and double sinks in the bathroom (p. 237).

Men and women both covet good storage and closet space (p. 238). White concludes that the way that the preferences for certain home features are gendered on the show confirms traditional gender roles (p. 238). She notes that the shoppers are diverse in terms of identity categories—gender, race, class, sexuality, nationality, age, occupation, and family status—and in terms of the constraints of their house hunt—budget, city, and neighborhood—but her focus is on who is included and not how Black women are represented on *House Hunters*. Also, White does mention the 2008 financial collapse but does not attempt to explain how that significant societal change might have affected the features desired or the way the various shoppers might have been represented in terms of their identities.

Michael Lee and Leigh Moscovitz (2013) focus on the intersections of gender and class in the first two seasons of *The Real Housewives of New York City* (Encore). They argue that the show represents the housewives, all of whom are white, as “rich bitches” — “rich women too crass to be classy, too superficial to be nurturing, and too self-obsessed to be caring. These self-professed ‘working mothers’ who work little and mother even less” (p. 65) were juxtaposed against the context of a recession that is taking its toll on average Americans (p. 64). The show, they argue, blames the rich women for violating traditional gender roles, but it never blames rich men (p. 65). According to Lee and Moscovitz, the rich bitch “pursues selfish material gains single-mindedly” and is “always gendered (female), always classed (leisure), and almost always racialized (white)” (p. 65). Since the entire cast of the NYC show is white, Lee and Moscovitz do not explore the black rich bitch representation. Also, although they gesture towards the importance of the economic collapse that occurred in 2008-2009 (p. 64) and the “growing economic recession” (p. 65), Lee and Moscovitz do not take into account or explain that contextual factor in any meaningful way. More and deeper work is needed to understand representations of Black women after the Great Recession.

One study starts with the Great Recession as the key contextual and justificatory argument. Sean Brayton (2012) argued that a certain type of reality television programming—paid labor reality

shows focusing on white, male lumberjacks and gold and coal miners—“can be read as an implicit response to the current crisis in the American manhood” that was thought to be the result of the Great Recession (pp. 236-237). The RTV programs Brayton studied represent the value placed on laboring white masculine bodies: as he writes, labor is “*re-embodied* on reality television after the economic crisis” (pp. 237-238). Brayton’s study did not examine how race is represented in terms of stereotypes about African Americans. And since they do not appear on these programs, his study doesn’t contribute to an understanding of how Black women are represented on RTV. Brayton’s findings are limited to how white men are framed on the shows he studies, but there is much more to learn in terms of racism, sexism, and class on reality television.

3 Theory and Context

This chapter outlines the hegemonic ideas that have shaped U.S. society and its dominant perspectives on discrimination in the last 30 years. Section 3.1 traces the shift to the neoliberal version of capitalism in the 1980s and how neoliberalism became hegemonic in the U.S. in the beginning of the twenty-first century. In section 3.2, I discuss how neoliberalism has factored into changes in anti-discrimination discourses in the post-civil rights era that aided and abetted post-feminism and post-racism in the present. I conclude this section by arguing that the recent political climate in the U.S. might be characterized as post-intersectional, or post-everything. These two sections establish an outline of the political intersectionality of the current context in the United States. I end this chapter in section 3.3, by documenting the worsening of structural intersectionality during the Great Recession. These are the main contextual discourses that define the place of African American women in the U.S. The purpose of my study is to discover how Black women are represented on reality television after the Great Recession. A lesser concern is developing a deeper understanding of neoliberalism.

3.1 Neoliberal hegemony in the U.S.

The rise and dominance of capitalism has been one of the most significant developments in U.S. history. As an economic system, capitalism directly affects the material conditions of the nation and its citizens. As a set of ideas that influence how citizens think about their lives and how the world works, it has profoundly shaped civil society. Since modern capitalism in the U.S. is first and foremost a system based on competition, it necessarily breeds winner and losers and is therefore the foundation of a class-based society. Capitalism is not a static ideology: it maintains a flexibility supported by the powerful position the rich maintain in society, and this capacity to adapt is key to the ability of the capitalist class to improve their profits and continue to accumulate wealth.

Since the turn of the twentieth century, there have been three periods of capitalism in the U.S. (Duménil and Lévy, 2010). The Long Depression of the 1890s spurred “a new institutional framework for capitalist relations” in the U.S. and spawned modern capitalism (Duménil and Lévy, 2010, p. 10-12). The guiding principle of this period of capitalism was to create “the optimal conditions at a given moment for accumulation” (Campbell, 2005, p. 190). Its goal was “the unbounded quest for high income” (Duménil and Lévy, 2010, p. 34). Duménil and Lévy (2010) characterize this first period of U.S. capitalism as a “financial hegemony” in which the dominant class enjoyed “a rather unchecked capability to lead the economy and society in general, in accordance with their own interests” (p. 15). This era of self-interested capitalism, characterized by spectacular accumulation of wealth and fast growing class disparities, came to an end with the Great Depression of the 1930s and World War II (Campbell, 2005, p. 189).

In the second period of U.S. capitalism, often referred to as “Keynesian compromise” capitalism, the capitalist class was amenable to increased government intervention to regulate the economy and to establish social safety net programs that helped Americans with employment, health, retirement, and education (Duménil and Lévy, 2010, p. 16). This involved a pivot away from a focus on profit at any cost

to a focus on growing the domestic economy as a necessary precondition for increasing and sustaining consumption and therefore profits (Duménil and Lévy, 2010, p. 16). In other words, the managers who worked for the capitalist class decided that the best path to profits was to improve the economy, thus putting the lower classes in a position to be active consumers (Duménil and Lévy, 2010). Worried about the effects of declining post-war spending, the elite accepted this Keynesian compromise because they believed it would be “beneficial to the process of capital accumulation *at that historical moment*, particularly in comparison with the poor record of accumulation...during the Great Depression” (Campbell, 2005, p. 198).

Keynesian compromise capitalism began to erode in the 1970s as a result of a variety of domestic and international factors: “the social and economic dislocations associated with the Vietnam War era” (Palley, 2005, p. 21), Ronald Reagan’s victory over Jimmy Carter in the 1980 U.S. presidential election, the OPEC oil price hikes, and actions of the U.S. Federal Reserve to increase interest rates to attempt to control inflation, also known as the “Volcker shock”² (Harvey, 2005, p. 23-27). These were the main factors contributing to an economic decline that the elites believed could only be reversed by undoing Keynesian economic approaches (Palley, 2005, p. 21). The decline of the U.S. economy in the 1970s and the perceived failure of Keynesian compromise capitalism led to the emergence of the third period of capitalism: neoliberalism (Duménil and Lévy, 2010, p. 1). The Keynesian version of capitalism was forsaken “under the belief that neoliberalism could improve its profit and accumulation performance” (Campbell, 2005, p. 189). By the late 1980s, neoliberalism had become the dominant economic model and one of the dominant discourses in the U.S. (Munck, 2005, p. 63).

Duménil and Lévy (2010) describe this shift to neoliberalism as a “second financial hegemony,” a return to unchecked, self-interested accumulation (p. 18). The elite pivoted away from attempts to grow

² Paul Volcker was the chairman of the Federal Reserve under Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. Under his leadership, the Fed increased interest rates to combat inflation, which resulted in the worst recession in the U.S. since the 1930s (Callinicos, 2006).

the economy as a means to increasing profits, once again favoring “new class objectives that worked to the benefit of the highest income brackets, capitalist owners, and the upper fractions of management” (Duménil and Lévy, 2010, p. 8). This movement had two goals—to increase not only the income of the elite but also to strengthen their position and power in U.S. society (Duménil and Lévy, 2010, pp. 1-8). Simply put, “restructuring of the social architecture” was seen as a significant part of the neoliberal project (Hall, 2011, p. 278).

In place of the welfare state, neoliberal capitalism has attempted to fashion society on the model of the free market. At its core an economic theory for organizing capitalist economies (Lapavistas, 2005, p. 30), neoliberalism dictates that “the market should be the organizing principle for all political, social, and economic decisions,” with the free market the “model for organizing all facets of everyday life” (Giroux, 2004, p. 2-3). Starting with the precept that the laws of supply and demand in a free market maximize profit—i.e. lead to the best, most just decisions (Palley, 2005, p. 20-21)—neoliberalism assumes that “the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market” (Harvey, 2005, p. 3).

The push to look at social concerns through the lens of market logic has resulted in a discursive view in which it has become increasingly difficult to maintain social justice and equality focal points. In neoliberalism, “reference to ethics, equality, justice, or other normative principles that prioritize democratic values over market considerations” is devalued (Giroux, 2008, p. 63). Instead, under neoliberal ideology, individualism and competition are advanced as “the only normative measures to distinguish between what is right or wrong, just or unjust, proper or improper action” (p. 65). This discursive arrangement shifts the burden of guaranteeing equality from society to the individual, who must take full advantage of the market as a means to gain social and economic position. According to Phillip Mirowski (2013), neoliberal logic assumes that “since any economic transaction, no matter how studded with

booby traps, is freely entered into by the ideal entrepreneurial agent," the market therefore "is prima facie noncoercive or free of exploitation" (p. 122).

Neoliberalism has created an unprecedented level of precarity, which was only exacerbated by the Great Recession. Precarity is a condition of uncertainty and exploitation created by the loss of stable employment, threats to homeownership, increasing consumer debt, the disappearance of welfare, and the simple lack of time available to build and sustain "affective personal relations" that are necessary to feeling secure (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008, p. 52). Neoliberalism creates relatively few winners and many losers, and "those who do not succeed are viewed either as failures or as utterly dispensable" (Giroux, 2008, p. 65). Neoliberalism creates and proliferates precarity precisely because of this double-bind people find themselves in: people who are disposable suffer more insecurity and material disadvantages, which in turn marks them as more disposable (p. 153). Neoliberal ideology attempts to justify this by granting "legitimacy to a fiercely competitive ethos that offers big prizes to society's winners while reproducing a growing insensitivity to the plight of the suffering of others" (p. 162). Giroux (2008) specifically points to reality television as a source of this production of insensitivity; it provides "the ideological undercurrents of a neoliberal politics of disposability" under the guise of entertaining people (p. 162).

Neoliberalism is characterized by what Pierre Bourdieu (1998) calls "the absolute reign of flexibility" (p.3). At the economic level, this flexibility is prompted by globalization and advances in information technology that "ensures an unprecedented mobility of capital" (p. 2). As market competition expanded to a global level and information technology made it possible for multi-national corporations to search for and compete for profits anywhere in the world, these corporations had to "adjust more and more rapidly to the exigencies of the markets, under penalty of 'losing the market's confidence,' as they say, as well as the support of their stockholders" (p. 3). Stockholders apply downward pressure to expand and exploit the flexibility of the organization at all levels in order to maximize profits, and this imperative for utmost flexibility ultimately reaches the individual workers via:

Establishment of individual performance objectives, individual performance evaluations, permanent evaluation, individual salary increases or granting of bonuses as a function of competence and of individual merit; individualized career paths; strategies of 'delegating responsibility' tending to ensure the self-exploitation of staff who, simple wage labourers in relations of strong hierarchical dependence, are at the same time held responsible for their sales, their products, their branch, their store, etc. as though they were independent contractors. (p. 3)

The neoliberal imperative for flexibility reaches "the nuances of individual's subjectivities as citizens, producers, consumers, migrants, tourists, members of families, and so on" (Freeman, 2007, p. 252).

In order to mold neoliberal subjects capable of accepting the challenge presented by the imperative to be flexible, people are pushed and prodded to constantly work on themselves to adapt to the constantly changing demands of the neoliberal economy and social order: to think of themselves as entrepreneurs of the self (Freeman, 2007, p. 252). Like market logic and the imperative for flexibility, this self-entrepreneurialism has penetrated all sectors of society, including the academy and artistry (Harvey, 1991, p. 171). Entrepreneurs of the self undertake the work of re-fashioning themselves—their appearance, disposition, and self-presentation—in order to "master the uncertainties of everyday life" and to gain personal success in the context of market competition (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 103). In other words, market logic demands flexibility wherever it is applied, and people who want to be able to compete wherever market logic is applied work to make themselves competitive in the context of constantly changing demands. The necessity to transform oneself, according to neoliberal logic, is never-ending, and the neoliberal subject is ultimately "judged by the psychological capacity to succeed," and "the ability to handle uncertainty" (Walkerdine, 2003, p. 240).

Entrepreneurs of the self are taught/learn techniques of the self, which are the historically contextual strategies to be followed to achieve self-transformation (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, pp. 78-79). According to Ouellette and Hay (2008), reality television has played a considerable role in "demonstrating

and enacting” technologies of the self (p. 79). The techniques taught on RTV shows “often have something to do with the cultivation of self-empowerment through personal responsibility and choice,” and usually include instruction on carefully planned decision-making (pp. 79-82). With respect to talent contest RTV programs, Ouellette and Hay found that contestants were pushed to be “self-enterprising” (p. 127), and to “embrace constant reinvention” (p. 128). Talent contest shows rewarded people who demonstrated the capacity to handle neoliberal flexibility (p. 129). For example, Ouellette and Hay found that one show redefined the American Dream in terms of upward mobility, “by joining it to the new requirements of ongoing adaptability, flexibility, innovation, and potential for change” (p. 130).

Rather than worrying about inequality, economic and social disparities are considered necessary conditions for the effective functioning of the market. Neoliberal logic understands imbalance as a natural outcome of a fair system. According to this logic, “Inequality is not only the natural state of market economies from a neoliberal perspective, but it is actually one of its strongest motor forces for progress. Hence the rich are not parasites, but a boon to mankind. People should emulate the rich. Demands for equality are merely the sour grapes of the losers” (Mirowski, 2013, p. 63). This validation of inequality as a motivating force shifts the focus of analysis of winners and losers from society and the system to the individual. This results in:

the endless reproduction of the much narrowed registers of character and individual self-reliance as substitutes for any rigorous analyses of the politics, ideologies, and mechanisms of power at work in socially created problems. All problems are laid on the doorstep of the individual, regardless of how unlikely the individual might have been involved in creating them. This makes it more socially acceptable to blame the poor, uninsured, homeless, jobless, and other disadvantaged individuals and groups for their problems. (Mirowski, 2013, p. 26)

Not only does it become easier to blame the individuals who fail to prosper, it also shields the rich from blame for perceived inequalities in society because they are represented, in neoliberal ideology, to have

achieved their dominance based on their character and their ability to turn self reliance into success. Giroux (2008) calls this a power-evasive strategy: “freedom becomes an exercise in self-development rather than social responsibility,” which makes political analysis and social critique “quite indifferent to how power, equality, and justice offer the enabling conditions for real individuals and collective choices to be made and acted upon” (p. 67). But, as Mirowski (2013) points out, this ideology of how society is presumed to work “elevates the market as a site of truth for everyone but themselves” (p. 98). The neoliberal emphasis of privatization is applied differentially, only for the benefit of the white male heterosexual upper class, as Lisa Duggan (2003) pointed out: “When the state acts to support ‘private’ business interests—providing subsidies and bailouts for instance—that can be good. But when the state acts in the ‘public’ interest—providing housing for the poor or protection for the environment—that can be intrusive, coercive, and bad” (p. 13). This points to the pharisaical character of neoliberal ideology: privatization is not necessarily a natural societal process; it functions to protect and extend the power of the capitalist class even as it pretends to favor no one.

Neoliberalism formulates a vision of society in which the market ensures equal opportunity and where self-reliance determines success, but material conditions do not bear out this vision. “Neoliberalism in fact *has* a cultural politics,” Lisa Duggan (2003) argues, which “can be detected in policy debates like welfare reform, which has an economic and socio-cultural character” (pp. 11-12). Privatization and personal responsibility in neoliberalism are not value neutral. Rather, they arrange “material and political life *in terms of* race, gender, and sexuality as well as economic class and nationality, or ethnicity and religion. But the categories through which neoliberalism classifies human activity and relationships *actively obscures* the connections among these organizing terms” (p. 3). This obfuscation hides the fact that material outcomes in neoliberalism “reflect and enact identity and cultural politics invested in hierarchies of race, gender and sexuality as well as class and nationality” that result in significant economic and hegemonic gains for the upper class (Duggan, 2003, pp. 14-15). Not only does neoliberal ideology in

effect cover for material inequality by placing the locus of power in the individual, the preference for freedom over equality has shifted the way that discrimination is viewed in U.S. society. According to Duggan (2003), “a neoliberal brand of identity/equality policies” promotes post-racism and post-feminism (p. 44).

3.2 Neoliberalism, post-racism, and post-feminism in the U.S.

In the U.S., neoliberalism has changed public discourse about racial inequality. Emphasis on privatization and personal responsibility disconnects individual actions and historical inequality from their social outcomes (Giroux, 2008, p. 72). According to David Theo Goldberg (2009), “the privatizing message of personal responsibility has a long history as a vicious racial code for denying and evading the myriad of structural forces...that endlessly blame poor minorities of color and class for their fate” (p. 6). In addition to race blaming, neoliberalism makes it exceedingly difficult for the state to intercede against racism (Giroux, 2008, p. 71) and it also opens the door for more “socio-racial interventions— demographic exclusions, belittlements, forms of control, ongoing humiliation and the like,” which are “mostly beyond state delimitation” (Goldberg, 2009, pp. 334-335). More specifically, neoliberal racism shifts discussion from antiracism to antiracialism and privileges a colorblind “post racism” discourse.

Antiracism is an attitude against the veracity of claims of race-based discrimination (Goldberg, 2009). Within neoliberalism, “the terms ‘race’ and ‘racism’ are rejected and efforts to draw attention to issues of race are met with resistance, ridicule, and reactionary politics” (Enck-Wanzer, 2011, p. 25). Antiracist dogma, which “suggests forgetting, getting over, moving on, wiping away the terms of reference,” has crowded out a commitment to antiracism in popular public discourse (Goldberg, 2009, p. 21). Starting with the initial premise of a race-neutral society, this version of racism is used to “attack minorities of color and to appropriate victim status by whites who suggest that people of color are the ‘real’ racists” (Goldberg, 2009, p. 89). Claims of racism are reversed such that antiracism itself is charged with producing racism, and as a result “programs designed to remedy racism (affirmative action, social ser-

vices, desegregation, etc.) become the targets of critique, drawing cries of reverse racism” (Enck-Wanzer, 2011, p. 25). The charge of reverse racism produced through neoliberal ideology “suggests rather ironically that whites, rather than people of color, are the real victims of personal and institutional racism and points to a kind of historical amnesia that rewrites the meaning of racism” (Goldberg, 2009, p. 85-86). When antiracism is replaced by antiracialism, “the end of racism is confused with no more than being against race, the end of race substituting to varying degrees for the commitment to—the struggle for—ending racism...racial refusal is thought to exhaust antiracism” (Goldberg, 2009, p. 1).

Colorblindness is a dogma of racial refusal. A colorblind perspective argues that racism in the U.S. has been solved, “that race has no bearing on an individual’s or group’s location of standing in contemporary American society” (Giroux, 2008, p. 64). This means that in a colorblind world inequality can no longer be blamed on race. Advocates of colorblindness often argue that the modern civil rights movement solved institutional racism, concluding that as a result of this success there is no longer a need for “programs designed to dismantle the historical legacy and effects of racism in all dimensions of the social order” (Giroux, 2008, p. 71). Ironically, advocates of a colorblind perspective of society often invoke Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous line about judging people based on the content of their character rather than the color of their skin, conveniently ignoring that MLK did not believe that such conditions existed in 1963. Colorblindness functions to thwart antiracism in several ways. First, it reinforces the normativity of whiteness by denying, “how racial histories accrue political, economic, and social weight to the social power of whiteness. Colorblindness deletes the relationship between racial differences and power” (Giroux, 2008, p. 69). It also relieves white guilt, excusing whites from thinking about their own privilege and allowing them to ignore historical inequality built on racism. “If one effect of colorblindness is to deny racial hierarchies,” maintains Goldberg (2009), “another is to offer whites the belief that America is now a level playing field and that the success whites enjoy relative to minorities of color is largely due to individual determination, a strong work ethic, high moral values, and a sound invest-

ment in education” (p. 88). But this logic isn’t applied universally to all members of society: “advocates of colorblindness and neoliberal racism often step outside the privatizing language of rights and have little trouble appropriating victim status for whites while blaming people of color for the harsh conditions under which so many have to live in this country” (Giroux, 2008, p. 73-74).

Perhaps not surprisingly, discourses about gender have undergone modifications similar to discourses about race. Angela McRobbie (2009) calls this the gender logic of neoliberalism. In neoliberalism, the presumption of equality—the idea that equality of opportunity has been achieved and that society is unbiased and therefore that the market can produce the most just decisions and outcomes—is “promulgated as a prevailing cultural norm, as though to say in capital letters ‘girls and women are now equal’” (McRobbie, 2011, p. xi). The presumption of equality for women in the U.S. in the neoliberal order has been relatively impervious to critique because of the gains made recently by women, but along with these gains “modes of patriarchal retrenchment have been digging in, as these conditions of freedom are now tied to conditions of social conservatism, consumerism, and hostility to feminism in any of its older or new forms” (McRobbie, 2011, p. xi). In short, neoliberalism uses feminism “for everything these days except the fight for true equality, as almost anything can be considered feminist—shopping, watching porn, prostitution, even war and occupation” (Kennedy, 2013, p. 7). Many scholars have characterized these revisions to gender equality as postfeminism.

Postfeminist arguments start with the presumption of equality to displace feminist critique, forging an anti-genderism similar to the antiracism described by Goldberg (2009). In *The Aftermath of Feminism*, Angela McRobbie (2009) describes how postfeminism “positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasize that it [feminism] is no longer needed” (p. 11). In postfeminism, feminist ideas are “presented as if widely accepted and assumed, even while taking distance from feminism as a politics of the past” (Lazar, 2011, p. 38). According to Andrea Press (2011),

feminist viewpoints are “both assumed by the general population and actively rejected as a belief system” (p, 117). In other words, feminist concepts have been rendered into common sense even as feminism is rejected. Postfeminism replaces feminist ideals with new neoliberally-modulated imperatives for women. Neoliberalism and postfeminism are both “structured by a current of individualism that has almost entirely replaced notions of the social or political or any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or influences from outside themselves,” and the way neoliberalism attempts to fashion the subject “bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism” (Gill and Scharff, 2011, p. 7). These “resonances” between neoliberalism and postfeminism lead Gill and Sharff (2011) to aver that postfeminism has a distinctive neoliberal sensibility (p. 7).

A significant feature of postfeminism is the way that it incorporates feminist gains to attempt to forestall feminism. As Shelley Budgeon (2011) argues, “far from being a simple backlash against feminism this discourse depends upon the selective incorporation of feminism for its efficacy. Only by recognizing the legitimacy of feminist success can feminism then be declared redundant; the suggestion is that gender equality is important and thankfully has now been achieved” (p. 281). But this move to preclude feminism has deleterious effects on social justice. First, the postfeminist shift to individualism pushes political concerns into the private realm (Lazar, 2011, p. 219), which results in blaming women for the gender inequality they might suffer. According to this logic, “Women today, we are told, can have it all if only they want it enough. Women who feel they are treated unequally or unfairly only have themselves to blame; they need to examine their own behavior and cast aside their victim mentality” (Kennedy, 2013, p. 5). The logic of individualization and privatization displaces the ability and utility of systemic critique.

For example, maintaining a coherent empowerment narrative consisting of autonomy, individuality and personal choice requires a denial of the effects that external influences have on the realization of individual success and as such the classed and raced constitution of the “successful”

feminine subject is obscured. This leads to a fundamental misrecognition of the causes of social disadvantage as explanations for inequality are seen to reside in the ability or motivation of individuals to “make good choices.” (Budgeon, 2011, p. 285)

Postfeminism also results, ironically, in the reinscription of gender bias. Constituting possibilities for women under the presumption of equality and in terms of effective self-entrepreneurship, free choice, and positive consumption ignores that society is still “structured by stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to race and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability as well as gender” (Gill & Scharff, 2011, p. 287). Postfeminism conceptualizes female empowerment in concordance with patriarchy and capitalism, rather than in opposition to those forces of power in society (Budgeon, 2011, p. 287). Budgeon (2011) concludes that this reformulation of empowerment reproduces “the status quo at the expense of understanding the classed and ‘raced’ divisions which render empowerment discourses to problematic” (p. 287).

Given continual inequality in the U.S., the presumption of equality has grown into a pretext for all kinds of post-feminist and post-racial discourses. The pretense of equality supports claims that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed, citing selective examples of success of individual minorities. The public biography of Oprah Winfrey, for example, positions the way that she overcame sexism and racism and achieved massive success to support the idea that if Oprah can do it, so can anyone who tries (Cloud, 1996). On a societal level, this discourse assumes the success of equality movements in order to argue that society has been fixed and therefore more movement is no longer needed. The double meaning of the word “fixed” reveals how this rhetorical move works. In arguing that society has been mended (and therefore more social redress is not needed), the assumption is that the current state of affairs should be permanent. This is a key adaptive strategy of neoliberalism—this presumption of equality as a way to quell dissatisfaction and prevent more change—that has crept into debates about social justice. A pretense becomes a discursive pretext when the claim made (equality has been achieved, for exam-

ple) becomes taken for granted common sense and when the empirical facts contradicting it are actively ignored.

The pretense of equality was able to become a discursive pretext in neoliberalism in part because of the neoliberal presumption in favor of the market as the model for all modes of intercourse in society. The way that the market works is “magical,” according to John Clarke (2010a): “Unlike cumbersome, intrusive, domineering states, markets were the flexible friends of humanity. Markets, we were told, make things work. They offered the most efficient and effective means of coordinating human action. They were dynamic and responsive, innovative and open” (p. 375). The market can only do its magic, then, absent government interference and by turning a blind eye to the inequality it creates. In other words, the market is necessarily blind to inequality. The market doesn’t care about a person’s race, gender, sexual preference, or other identity category. Three features of market discourse contributed to this seemingly magical quality of markets: 1) Markets are represented as unbounded because they are supposedly dynamic and because the market is argued to have the capacity to improve any sphere of human activity; 2) Markets are represented as containing the promise of possibility in the sense that, even after a loss, there is always the possibility of bigger gains tomorrow and a net profit in the end; and 3) Markets are represented as productive in that they are supposed to be able to generate “more wealth, more goods, more results, more possibilities” (Clarke, 2010a, pp. 376-377). More possibilities equal more hope, and more hope makes for greater possibilities.

The magical quality of the market is the precondition for all other significant tenets of neoliberalism. For example, government regulation is reviled because of its supposed negative effects on the function of the market (Andrejevic, 2010, p. 409). Government safety nets are problematic to the extent that they allegedly make people less competitive and self-interested, and therefore less motivated market actors.

For neoliberalism, competition, like the market, is not the result of the “natural play” of appetites, instincts, or behaviors. It is rather a “formal play” of inequalities that must be instituted and constantly nourished and maintained. Thus, appetites and instincts are not given; only inequality has the capacity to sharpen appetites, instincts and minds, driving individuals to rivalries. (Lazzarato, 2009, p. 117)

Neoliberalism as an ideology embraces the market under the pretense of equality through a process of repeating the claims of equality and stories of success until this becomes a common sense way to look at how society works and what is our role in society.

Taken together, post-racism, post-feminism, and other post-discrimination discourses, compounded by the discursive pretext of equality grounded in neoliberal ideology, have created a “post-everything” political culture in the U.S., the result of which is “a proliferation of depoliticized multiplicities” (Mohanty, 2013, p. 968). These increasingly taken for granted post-discrimination discourses under neoliberalism are moving U.S. society to “post-intersectionality,” which “would suggest the irrelevance of institutionalized processes of racism, hetero(sexism), nationalism, and class exploitation” (p. 968). This neoliberal intersectionality shifts efforts to fight discrimination from the political (public) to the individual (private) realm of society (p. 968). According to Mohanty (2013), neoliberalism successfully shifted the debate about success in society to the individual level, obviating the importance of shared experience and marginalizing the need for shared accountability: “Questions of oppression and exploitation as collective, systemic processes and institutions of rule that are gendered and raced have difficulty being heard when neoliberal narratives disallow the salience of collective experience or redefine this experience as a commodity to be consumed” (p. 971). Mohanty (2013) concludes that these discursive

changes—anti-racism to post-racism, feminism to post-feminism, for example—threaten the disappearance of intersectional thinking in terms of political discourses³ (p. 986).

3.3 The worsening structural intersectionality of the Great Recession

Structural intersectionality points to the fact that the material conditions of women of color in the U.S. are significantly different than that of white women (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). Along this line of thought, bell hooks (1984) wrote that “race and class identity creates differences in quality of life, social status, and lifestyle that take precedence over the common experiences women share—differences which are rarely transcended” (p. 4). For many women of color in the U.S., material conditions resulting from structural intersectionality essentially create brutal conditions in everyday life. The problems poor women typically face (poverty, lack of child care, and meager job opportunities, for example) are worsened as a result of the racist oppression poor women of color face, such as systematic discrimination in employment and housing (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1245-6). Being at the bottom of the social structure exposes women of color to racism, sexism, and classism more so than any other group in the U.S. (hooks, 1984, p. 14). On top of all this, “intervention strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same class or race background will be of limited help to women who because of race and class face different obstacles” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1246).

Given the optimistic claims of post-everything discourses in the U.S.—that racism and sexism are a thing of that past and that anyone willing to work hard and take risks will be rewarded with economic gain by “the market”—it is worth asking; how did women of color fare when the financial system in the U.S collapsed and caused the worst economic decline in the U.S. since the Great Depression? The an-

³ Mohanty (2013) argues that this shift is also occurring in feminist theory (p. 972), and in the next chapter I show how this shift seems to be prevalent in the literature about reality television, in which there is little work to understand the unique representations of Black women on reality television.

swer is that Blacks and women suffered the brunt of the Great Recession and women of color got the worst of it.

Neoliberalism was spectacularly successful at putting more money and power into the hands of the rich, but it was interrupted, however briefly, by the most recent economic crisis. Each period of U.S. capitalism was inaugurated and interrupted by a structural crisis (in the 1890s, 1930s and 1970s), and the Great Recession of 2009 marks the fourth structural crisis of capitalism, this one a crisis of neoliberalism (Duménil and Lévy, 2010, p. 1-2). This crisis, like the 1970s crisis, has many causes, all of which trace back to the primary feature of financial hegemony: the unrestrained and self-interested pursuit of profits by the capitalist class. Unemployment skyrocketed to record highs, big businesses and banks failed (many to be bailed out by the federal government), the stock market lost significant value, people lost their homes to foreclosure (or just abandoned them), consumer confidence slumped, and the federal government teetered on the brink of insolvency (Huertas, 2010). The economic collapse wasn't caused by the actions of an opposing group (socialists, for example) or ideology (socialism, for example). Rather, it was an implosion in which the system crashed in on itself (Rustin, 2012, pp. 31-33). By 2009, the consensus was that this was the worst economic crisis in U.S. history since the Great Depression (Foster and Magdoff, 2009, p. 11).

The financial collapse and Great Recession had an enormous impact in the United States. According to the Financial Crisis Inquiry Committee (2011), the U.S. economy lost 3.6 million jobs in 2008, which was the largest loss since jobs numbers were tracked. That record was broken the next year when 4.7 million jobs were lost, with the unemployment rate having peaked in December 2008 at 13.4 percent (p. 390). Bouncing back from a bout with unemployment isn't easy: the "scar of unemployment" causes the unemployed to "fall behind while others gain experience, many [unemployed] desperately settle for work that requires less skill than they have, and few ever catch up with their peers who were not unemployed" (Seefeldt, Abner, Bolinger, Xu, & Graham, 2012, p. 2).

Chronic and widespread unemployment triggered other significant problems for U.S. homeowners. Home prices fell 32 percent from 2006 to 2009, and home ownership was imperiled for millions of Americans: “Since the housing bubble burst, about four million families have lost their homes to foreclosure and another four and a half million have slipped into the foreclosure process or are seriously behind on their mortgage payments” (Financial Crisis Inquiry Committee, 2011, pp. 391-402). The effects of the financial collapse and Great Recession rippled throughout the U.S. economy: “almost 40 percent of households have been affected either by unemployment, negative home equity, arrears on their mortgage payments, or foreclosure” (Hurd & Rohwedder, 2010, p. 21).

These economic drivers caused U.S. households to lose massive amounts of personal wealth, \$17 trillion in net worth was lost in 2008, of which “about \$5.6 trillion was due to declining house prices, with much of the remainder due to the declining value of financial assets” (Financial Crisis Inquiry Committee, 2011, p. 391). The loss of net worth was compounded by “a \$6.8 trillion run-up in household debt from 2000-2007” (p. 391). In other words, in the years prior to the crisis, families accrued record amounts of debt (which worked to the benefit of the capitalist class since it allowed lower classes to consume more), and then the ground caved in around them when the financial system collapsed. In 2009, 1.4 million households filed for bankruptcy (p. 394). One common strategy used to cope with financial problems—using consumer credit and borrowing to make ends meet—became increasingly difficult to use because, as a response to the financial collapse, banks “tightened lending standards, reducing lines of credit on credit cards, and increasing fees and interest rates” (Financial Crisis Inquiry Committee, 2011, p. 394).

Predictably, the number of Americans living in poverty increased. According to Kellogg (2011), 36.5 million people were living in poverty in 2006, and that number increased 27 percent by 2010 when 46.2 million Americans fell below the poverty line. Since then, the poverty rate has remained fairly steady, with 46.5 million people living in poverty in the U.S. in 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).

The effects of the Great Recession were widespread, but minorities were disproportionately impacted, and the recovery left women and people of color farther behind compared to white Americans (Miller, 2011). As a result of the Great Recession, “communities of color face ongoing systematic economic inequalities in the 21st century” (Weller, Fields, & Agbede, 2011, p. 15), with women of color suffering more than any other group (Miller, 2011). Some commentators referred to the Great Recession as a “mancession” because men lost more jobs in the slowdown (Hayes & Hartmann, 2011). Hout and Cumberworth (2012) explain that: “by occupation and industry, men are more heavily concentrated in construction and building trades, which were hit the hardest by the recession” (p. 2). Despite this disparity, the Great Recession caused more economic uncertainty for women than men (Hayes & Hartmann, 2011). And, according to Miller, 2011 there was a corresponding “mancovery” in terms of improvements for men as opposed to women after the recession ended.

Rising unemployment rates hit minorities harder than whites. According to Hout and Cumberworth (2012), “unemployment among African Americans and Hispanics was substantially higher than among other groups prior to the recession and rose to the greatest height as the recession progressed” (p. 3). This imbalance remained as the recovery proceeded (Weller et al., 2011, p. 2). But these numbers do not fully account for the impact of the recession on minorities because the data do not include people who do not reside in a household (a status that describes many African Americans of the lower classes) and because education doesn’t help African Americans as much as it does whites or Asian Americans in terms of finding a job or keeping one (Hout & Cumberworth, 2012, pp. 3-4).

Minorities were also hit harder in terms of home ownership. In the same way that unemployment rates jumped higher faster, home ownership rates fell more rapidly for minority Americans (Hout & Cumberworth, 2012, p. 2). According to Kellogg (2011), “blacks are nearly twice as likely as whites to have already lost their homes” as a result of the Great Recession. He explains that because “blacks have more wealth tied up in their homes,” losing the home has a more significant overall economic impact for

them. Prince George's County, Maryland exemplifies this disproportionate impact, says Kellogg. The county became more affluent as it got blacker and is "wealthier than 90 percent of all counties in the United States," but more than a third of Maryland's foreclosures were in Prince George's County (Kellogg, 2011). In other words, a high economic status did not necessarily protect African American's from the effects of the recession.

The net worth of minority Americans was affected disproportionately too. According to Kochhar, Fry & Taylor (2011), "from 2005 to 2009, inflation-adjusted median wealth fell by 66 percent among Hispanic households and 53 percent among black households, compared with just 16 percent among white households" (pp. 1-2). More than twice as many minority households "had zero or negative net worth in 2009" as compared to white households (p. 2). The negative impact of the Great Recession on minority households in terms of net wealth was twice that of white households (p. 1). Women of color suffered even more in this category. According to Johnson (2013), white men have an average net worth of \$43,800, whereas the typical single black woman has a net worth of \$100. In the end, minorities ended up in poverty more than whites. According to Seefeldt, et al. (2012):

The increase in the rate of poverty has not been uniform across subgroups. The increase in poverty since 2006 has been greater among Hispanics and African Americans than among whites, greater among children than among elderly, and greater among female-headed households than other households. (p. 5)

And, since women-headed households are "particularly prevalent in African American families" (Seefeldt et al, 2012, p. 18), it shouldn't be surprising that "among all adult women in poverty, women of color are more likely to be impoverished than are white women" (Henrici, Helmuth, Zlotnick & Hayes, 2010, p. 3).

Aside from, indeed because of, the precarious position that millions of Americans found themselves in, the financial collapse and the Great Depression put neoliberalism and neoliberal ideology into question (Crouch, 2011, vii). In the context of the long history of capitalism as the dominant order in the

U.S., “the crisis of 2008-9 offered a moment of disruption, dislocation or disjuncture in its inexorable logic. Crisis marks discontinuity; the possibility of the end of neo-liberal thinking” (Clarke, 2010b, p. 339). Several scholars argue that one of the effects of the collapse was that the basic tenets of neoliberalism were destabilized. For James Hay (2010), the collapse resulted in a “crisis of economic knowledge” (p. 299). For Randy Martin (2010), this disruption of the logic of capitalism was a failure of economic knowledge “where it was supposed to rule” (p. 356). John Clarke (2010b) argued that the financial collapse put neoliberal ideology in imminent danger (pp. 339-342). In *Cultural Studies*, John Clarke (2010a) argued that the current moment is a “crisis of neoliberal governmentality in which the modes, sites, and discourses of governing the present have become destabilized” (p. 386).

But neoliberalism was not up for debate for long. Opponents of neoliberalism were never able to effectively voice a cogent attack that gained any traction. As Pantich, Albo and Chibber (2011) put it:

Even while the public stands disgusted with the speculative orgy that neoliberalism unleashed, even while the mythology of market fundamentalism has been discredited, and even while public sentiment is hostile to the bank bailouts—the response of the capitalist states has been to shore up, however they can, the very model that brought the economy to ruins. (p. x)

According to Mirowski (2013), this response amounted to nothing more than “monotonous repetition of neoliberal ideology” (p. 8). A common perspective after the crisis was that “neoliberals should pretty much keep doing what they had been doing all along even if the crisis appeared a little scary” (p. 7). Rather than worrying about the crisis, the defenders of neoliberal ideology “had gotten back up, dusted themselves off, and discovered renewed strength” (p.5). Mirowski concludes that, in the aftermath of the Great Recession, “the political right had emerged from the tumult stronger, unapologetic, and even less restrained in its rapacity and credulity than prior to the crash” (p. 2).

The neoliberal order survived without serious damage, and neoliberal common sense is still the way most people understand how society works and what is their place in it (Mirowski, 2013, p. 28). Ac-

According to Goldberg (2009), neoliberalism “is still a powerful cultural and educational force to be reckoned with” (p. 26). Mirowski (2013) suggests that neoliberalism survived because “neoliberalism as a worldview has sunk its roots deep into everyday life, almost to the point of passing as the ‘ideology of no ideology’” (p. 28). An important dimension of everyday neoliberalism is what Mirowski calls a “defensive schadenfreude” (p. 130). In neoliberalism, people are trained to take pleasure in the pain of the poor. We accept that what the market decides is final and even logical and natural, and those who fail to succeed exasperate us (p. 130). And, according to Wrenn (2012), neoliberalism teaches us to “construct an identity and connection to others through that moral indignation as a defining characteristic of one’s self as well as demonstrating the individual’s moral superiority” (p. 409). As Mirowski put it, “the fundamental narcissism encouraged by neoliberalism demands that we participate in an active externalization of the experience of insecurity and vulnerability to reevaluation” (p. 133). In the context of the Great Recession, Mirowski concludes that people activate defensive schadenfreude, enjoying the mediated experience of what it feels like to be super rich when others are so poor (p. 130).

In crisis then, more well off Americans benefit from displacing their worries and doubts about the economy onto the poor. According to Wrenn (2012), “economic insecurity for both the middle class and the working poor, especially during a period of uncertain employment, heightens moral indignation and sharpens it” (p. 408). Mirowski (2013) argues, “this is how neoliberalism works. First it moves heaven and earth to induce you to manage your own portfolio and assume more risk; then it demonizes the victim when the entire structure comes crashing down, as it inevitably must” (p. 124). Since most visible victims of the recession were the poor, they became the easiest group to target (Mirowski, 2013, pp. 131-148). Robinson (2013) describes this process of targeting the poor “a rapid political polarization” that involves racism, sexism and homophobia in addition to class annoyance and anger (p. 195).

4 Method

4.1 Text Selection

As I worked to identify and select reality television programs that would allow me to best understand how African American women were represented on RTV after the Great Recession, several decision-making criteria emerged. First, I decided to focus on RTV programs that aired in 2012. This increased the likelihood that the programs I planned to study would be available in full, i.e. that complete episodes for the entire season would be available for viewing from one source or another. Also, I thought that narrowing the study to programs aired in 2012 allowed sufficient time for the possible effects of the Great Recession—material, political, and representational—to filter into television content.

Second, I used year-end ratings data to list and rank all RTV programs that aired in 2012. Ratings success translates into influence: higher ratings means more people are watching the show, and more people watching the show means more people potentially influenced by the representations of African American women on the show (Sears & Godderis, 2011, p. 187). I started with lists of the 150 highest rated network television programs (Patten, 2013) and the 20 highest rated cable television programs for 2012 (Rice, 2012), both of which were based on end-of-year Nielsen data. End of year cable television ratings lists are few and far between, so I also researched the ratings of individual cable RTV programs that I thought might be worthy of inclusion in the study. I planned to only study highly rated RTV programs.

Third, I grouped the highest-rated RTV programs into relevant sub-genres in order to allow me to study and make conclusions about representations of Black women within and across the various kinds of reality television programs. In order for a genre to be included in the study, it needed to include at least two shows in the top 150 highest rated list. Murray and Ouellette (2009) suggested several genres of RTV relevant to my study (p. 5). Gamedocs are programs that document cast members competing over the course of the season to win a game. An example of this genre of RTV is *Survivor* (CBS): cast

members are “stranded” on a desert island, and they compete in the game to be the last person voted off the island. Talent contests are similar to gamedocs but the focus of the competition is a common talent all the contestants share (such as singing, dancing, or cooking). For example, *American Idol* (FOX) is a singing contest and the winner receives a recording contract. Dating programs feature a format in which a person interacts with a group of potential romantic partners. As the season progresses, the group of potential partners is narrowed until one person is chosen. On *The Bachelor* (ABC), a man is presented with a group of women who are potential romantic partners and the show features the process of the cast members interacting while the bachelor narrows the field and eventually makes his choice. Lifestyle programs are centered on helping people make one or more changes in their lives. On *What Not To Wear* (TLC), for example, people (usually women) with poor style get help from experts to improve their appearance by getting a new wardrobe, hairstyle and makeup. This genre of RTV can be further divided into weight loss (*The Biggest Loser*, NBC), identity (*Made*, MTV), appearance (*What Not To Wear*, TLC), family (*Wife Swap*, ABC), and living space makeovers like TLC’s *Trading Spaces* (Orbe, 2008, p. 347). Docusoaps are designed to follow people as they live their lives on a daily basis. An example of this genre is the *Real Housewives* line of programs, on which the daily lives of rich women living in the same location (Atlanta for example) are documented. Reality sitcoms are similar to docusoaps, whereas docusoaps tend to be dramatic reality sitcoms focused on humorous situations. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* is a reality sitcom that features the family of Alana Thompson (Honey Boo Boo), the breakout star of TLC’s *Toddlers and Tiaras*. There are also celebrity versions of many reality television programs. For example, *Celebrity Fit Club* (VH1) was a makeover show that featured b-list celebrities trying to lose weight.

Since the goal of my project is to understand how African American women in particular are represented on reality television, I only selected programs that featured at least one African American

woman (Tyree, 2011, p. 402).⁴ The absence of African American women on RTV programs has obvious implications in terms of how gender and race are understood, and as I noted in Chapter 2 there are many studies of normative whiteness on reality television. I did not feel that reality television programs that are composed of all-white casts, or those that include women of color only in bit parts, would contribute to my study. I omitted the dating show and sitcom genres because no African American women were featured.⁵

Finally, two new subgenre or RTV were present in 2012 but I did not include them because they do not fit into in this study's criteria. One new subgenre is composed of at least two RTV programs: *Undercover Boss* (CBS) and *Secret Millionaire* (ABC). Both of these programs focus on members of the upper-class (CEOs, owners of companies, and millionaires) interacting with and eventually helping lower-class persons (employees of large companies and people working for charities). Neither of these shows was highly rated in 2012: *Undercover Boss* was the 89th most watched television show, and *Secret Millionaire* did not make the top 150. The other new genre, what I am tentatively calling Transaction TV (TTV), is a version of reality television that began to appear on U.S. television stations at the end of the Great Recession. TTV programs focus on turning economic transactions into entertainment by proclaiming and modeling market ideology, which is the foundation of neoliberalism and the capitalist class. Material items are endlessly evaluated, bought, sold, and traded. The RTV programs in this subgenre include *Pawn Stars* (HIST), *Storage Wars* (A&E), and *Auction Kings* (DISC). None of these programs feature Black women. That said, these kinds of reality television programs might contain discourses that reflect changes in neoliberalism after the Great Recession. As such, they would be important texts to study in another research context.

⁴ For shows I was unfamiliar with, I determined the status of the cast by looking at cast photos and then researching the women of color to determine if they were African American.

⁵ *Duck Dynasty* (A&E) is a reality sitcom that was the highest rated show on cable television in 2012, but its cast does not include a Black woman. *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (TLC) was not highly rated in 2012 and does not feature a Black woman on the cast.

Using the aforementioned criteria, I decided to study four genres of reality television, each containing highly watched programs featuring at least one African American woman.

- In the talent contest genre, I studied *The Voice* (NBC) and *American Idol* (FOX), the two most highly rated reality television shows in 2012.⁶ In this grouping, *Hell's Kitchen* (FOX) and *Masterchef* (FOX) were also highly rated. I excluded *Masterchef* because it did not include any African American women. Although one season of *Hell's Kitchen* included one African American woman, I excluded it because it would have been the only cooking show I studied.
- In the gamedoc category, I studied *Survivor: Philippines* (ABC) and *Survivor: Caramoan*.
- In the lifestyle category, I studied *The Biggest Loser* (NBC), which had one African American woman cast member and was tops in its genre.
- In the docusoap category, I studied *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (Bravo), which had a cast composed of six African American women and one white woman. In the docusoap category, I excluded *Jersey Shore* (MTV), *Dance Moms* (Lifetime), *Teen Mom II* (MTV), and *Real Housewives of New Jersey* (Bravo) because they did not feature African American women.

As my study progressed, I decided to not include some of the programs that I originally proposed in the prospectus. The main reason for this was that the shows I excluded did not have high enough ratings to warrant inclusion. At the time of the proposal defense, I thought that attaining ratings in the top 150 was a good indication of social importance and possible influence. But as I did more research about the ratings, ad sales, and integrated marketing of *America's Next Top Model*, *Celebrity Wife Swap*, *Wife Swap*, and *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*, I decided that, at least as of 2012, the shows were not worthy of inclusion. Also, I decided that each of the higher-rated shows in the genre deserved closer

⁶ Because previous seasons of *American Idol* and *The Voice* are not available, I studied the current seasons of both shows, which started at the beginning of 2014.

attention. I felt that *The Biggest Loser's* focus on obesity would provide more than enough material to study. Similarly, since *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* included a cast of six African American women, I felt that one season of the show would provide plenty of content to analyze. Finally, in the Gamedoc chapter, I intended to study *Amazing Race* (ABC), but none of the 2012 seasons included an African American woman.

In addition to the gamedoc, lifestyle, talent contest, and docusoap sub-genre, other sub-genres were represented in my initial list of RTV programs but were excluded because the shows in that sub-genre were not highly rated enough to be included and/or did not feature Black women.

4.2 Method of analysis

4.2.1 *The Constant Comparative Method of Qualitative Textual Analysis*

In approaching television programs as text, the goal is to understand the meanings borne in these programs (White, 1992, 9. 177). Textual analysis of television shows aims to understand the way that characters are represented through stereotypes and other socio-political discourses like racism, sexism, and class politics, and the interaction of these oppressive ideologies as explained by intersectionality theory, as well as the “narrative logic and patterns that structure the programs” (White, 1992, p. 179).

I used the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) to guide my qualitative textual analysis of the representations of African American women on reality television programs that aired after the Great Recession. Rather than starting with a pre-determined set of themes and patterns of representation that limit the analysis to those and only those initial categories, the constant comparative method (CCM) allows themes and patterns to emerge from the analysis of texts, and it builds in a flexibility to allow those themes and patterns to evolve as the analysis of more texts might eventually suggest (Glaser, 1965, p. 437-438). The constant comparative method of qualitative textual analysis is an inductive method that generates a theory that is provisional or developmental rather than one that is final and

static (Glaser, 1965, p. 444). According to Glaser (1967), CCM “is *not* designed (as methods of quantitative analysis are) to guarantee that two analysts working independently with the same data will achieve the same results” (p. 438). Rather the CCM is intended to *suggest* “a theory which is integrated, consistent, plausible,” and faithful to the data analyzed (p. 437).

The first step of the CCM is “comparing incidents applicable to each category” (Glaser, 1965, p. 439). For the purposes of my study an incident was defined as any representation of African American women that occurred on the RTV programs selected for study, and a category was defined as a provisional description of that incident. For example, if an African American woman were portrayed as pursuing a relationship with a man for his money (an incident), I would note the category “gold digger” and code the details of that incident in the category. In the beginning stages of CCM, the goal is to note as many categories as possible and to code every incident in every applicable category (Glaser, 1965, p. 439). The CCM directs the analyst that, as each new incident (of representations of African American women, for example) is noted and coded into a category, it should be compared “with the previous incidents coded in the same category” before looking for the next incident (Glaser, 1965, p. 439). This process, in which each incident is constantly compared to all prior incidents in the same category, “very soon starts to generate theoretical properties of the category” (p. 439). If and when the theoretical descriptors of a category become complicated or contradictory, the procedure suggests that the researcher “stop recording and record a memo on ideas” (p. 440). The purpose of the memo is to tentatively resolve the complication before returning to “more coding and constant comparison” (p. 440).

The next step in the Constant Comparative Method is to “integrate categories and their properties” (Glaser, 1965, p. 440). At this point, an incident is no longer compared to past incidents in a category. Instead, incidents are compared to the properties of the category (p. 441). Glaser (1967) explains that in this stage of analysis, “different categories and their [theoretical] properties tend to become integrated through constant comparisons which force the analyst to make some related theoretical sense

of each comparison” (pp. 440-441). Comparing textual incidents with “existing categories for their fit” results in the possibility of creating new categories “while previous categories may be eliminated or combined” (Meyers, 2013, p. 16).

The final step in the CCM is delimiting the theoretical properties of categories as well as “the original list of proposed categories” (Glaser, 1965, p. 441). In this phase, theoretical properties of categories no longer need to be integrated except to achieve “logical clarity” by eliminating irrelevant properties or revising relevant ones, for example (p. 441). According to Glaser (1967), the key revision at this point is “reduction,” in which the properties of categories or categories themselves are narrowed to “a higher level, *smaller* set of concept, based on discovering underlying uniformities in the original set of categories or their properties” (p. 441). Also, when categories are “*theoretically saturated*,” the categories become more constrained (p. 441). According to Glaser (1967):

After one has coded incidents for the same category a number of times, it becomes a quick operation to see whether or not the next applicable incident points to a new aspect of the category. If yes, then the incident is coded and compared. If no, the incident is not coded, since it only adds bulk to the coded data and nothing new to the theory. (pp. 441-442)

Glaser also notes that when a new category emerges after the analysis is well underway, it is not necessary to “re-code all previously coded” incidents if “the new category becomes theoretically saturated” since “theoretical saturation suggests that what has been missed will in all probability have little modifying effect on the theory” (p. 442). In other words, when a new category emerged after coding was well underway, I did not stop at that point to re-code past textual incidents. I coded future incidents for that category. If the new category reached saturation by the end of the analysis, no re-coding was necessary. However, in the case where the late emerging category became important for the theory *and* if it did not become saturated by the end of the analysis, then would have been necessary to go back and re-

code past textual incidents to attempt to saturate it (p. 442) to gain the benefits of delimiting the category. This scenario, of a late-emerging category, did not come up in my study.

Once all of the texts selected for study were subjected to this process of incident-to-incident comparison, incident to category comparison, and delimitation of categories and their theoretical properties, the next step was to use discourse analysis to delve deeper into the categories and their theoretical properties.

4.2.2 Discourse Analysis

A discourse is a way of thinking about, understanding, and talking about how society works that “implies patterns and commonalities of knowledge and structure” (Wodak, 2008, p. 6). According to Patricia Hill Collins (2005), discourses “organize both the ways a society defines certain truths about itself and the way it puts together social power” (p. 17). Our understanding of the way the world works and the way we talk about it is not an “objective truth (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002, p. 5). Rather, discourse and society are co-constitutive: “discourse is a form of social practice which both *constitutes* the social world and is *constituted* by other social practices” (Wodak, 2008, p. 61). Discourses are also characterized by a “historical and cultural specificity” (p. 5), which means that they are contingent on the specific historical and cultural context in which they circulate (p. 5). Finally, because it is socially created, contingent on, and constitutive of the context in which it resides, “discourse is a form of social action that plays a part in producing the social world—including knowledge, identities, and social relations—and thereby in maintaining specific social patterns” (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002, p. 5). In other words, discourse creates, maintains, and can challenge the features of power relations and inequality in society.

The goal of discourse analysis, then, broadly speaking, is to “investigate power relations in society” (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002, p. 2). Whereas discourse is an all-encompassing systematic way to understand and talk about the world, a text is “a specific or unique realization of a discourse” (Wodak, 2008, p. 6). In the context of the variety of approaches taken by researchers using discourse analysis

(Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002; Wodak, 2008), my approach used it to “investigate the relationship between representation, meaning and power, and the construction of identities and subjectivities” as they can be found by looking at texts in their context (Meyers, 2013, p. 102). Following the procedure outlined by Potter and Wetherell (1987), once research questions were formulated, texts justified and gathered, and thematic categories within the texts generated via coding, deeper thematic analysis was the next step (pp. 160-176). Since I used the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) to generate the broader categories of representation, I used discourse analysis to focus on a deeper investigation and explanation of the ways that race, gender, class, and neoliberal ideology affected the various categories of representations of Black women (Meyers, 2013, p. 101). In discourse analysis, close study is achieved by reading and re-reading the texts (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 168). In my situation, reading meant viewing episodes of reality television, so I viewed and re-viewed the texts. Beyond the process of reading and re-reading, discourse analysis attempts to understand “the *intertextual and interdiscursive relationships*” relevant to the study (Wodak, 2008, p. 2).

According to Phillips and Jorgensen (2002), “*interdiscursivity* occurs when different discourses and genres are articulated together in a communication event” (p. 73). This means that when I engaged in the discourse analysis of reality television texts, I worked to identify, understand, and explain how Black women were represented on the shows in terms of race, gender, class, and/or neoliberal discourses. Interdiscursivity supports the dominant order when “discourses are mixed in *conventional ways*” and it challenges the dominant order when “discourse types are combined in new and complex ways” (p. 73). In my analysis, then, I worked to identify the valence of interdiscursivity. For example, one contemporary stereotype of Black women is the “Black bitch” (Collins, 2005, p. 123). This discourse could be employed on RTV with neoliberal ideology, whereby the negative connotations are drawn on to the detriment of Black women. Or, “Black bitch” could be mixed with other discourses to contest the negative valence of the stereotype (Collins, 2005, p. 123). Intertextuality “refers to the condition where-

by all communicative events draw on earlier events” (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002, p. 73). Intertextuality operates in several ways in discourse analysis, two of which were relevant for my approach: it can be established “through continued reference to a topic or main actors” and/or through reference to social contexts outside the communicative act (Wodak, 2008, p. 3). In my study, intertextuality was exhibited when an incident occurred in the course of an episode of an RTV program and then was referred to again either later in the same episode or later in that season. For example, on MTV’s *The Real World*, a black cast member was the victim of a racist incident in the course of the storyline, and this event was discussed by him and other cast members later in that episode and in other episodes of that season, and this intertextual discussion of the event had implications for the ways that race was framed on the show (Bell-Jordan, 2008). In addition, intertextuality occurred when the cast members of that program referenced an event outside the storyline of the RTV program.

5 Talent Contest Reality TV Shows

Talent contest reality television shows feature contestants competing to be recognized as the best at a particular skill or ability. This subgenre of RTV has its roots in U.S. televised variety shows that aired in the 1940s and 1950s. *Arthur Godfrey’s Talent Scouts*, which aired from 1946-1958 on CBS and whose contestants included Patsy Cline, Elvis Presley, and Buddy Holly, determined the winner of its weekly show based on the results of an applause meter that judged the preference of the studio audience (Intini, 2003/2004). *Ted Mack’s Amateur Hour* (1948-1960) decided each show’s winners by audience postcard and telephone voting, and its alumni include Gladys Knight and Pat Boone (“Remembering when,” 2013). A more recent predecessor of the subgenre is CBS’s *Star Search* (1983-1995), which was hosted by Ed McMahon. *Star Search* used a panel of expert judges to decide the winner of the show. There are not many notable names included in the list of champions crowned by *Star Search*, but the show did host quite a few contestants that would go on to be stars, including Brittany Spears, Be-

yoncé, Alanis Morissett, and Justin Timberlake (Torgovnick, 2010). In the 21st century, the talent contest subgenre of reality television has included singing competitions (*Making the Band*, *American Idol*, *The X Factor*, *The Voice*), dancing competitions (*Dancing with the Stars*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, *America's Best Dance Crew*), variety show competitions (*America's Got Talent*), modeling competitions (*America's Next Top Model*), cooking competitions (*Hell's Kitchen*, *MasterChef*, *Top Chef*), style and design competitions (*Project Runway*, *Shear Genius*, *Stylista*)—and even a show for inventors to compete on—*American Inventor*.

This chapter explores the representations of African American women on post-recessionary singing talent shows *American Idol* and *The Voice*. My analysis revealed that *American Idol* and *The Voice* position Black women within the logic of neoliberalism. Black women are instructed that they should become entrepreneurs of the self by learning techniques and states of mind that allow them to be flexible in the face of the ever changing demands of free market competition. African American women on both shows are portrayed as more or less successful based largely on their ability to be flexible in terms of their confidence and control. They fail because they lack self-control or are too controlling; they fail because they lack confidence or are over-confident. Black female contestants were also portrayed as undergoing self-transformation as they attempted to learn to be flexible in order to adapt their control and confidence, and the expert judges and coaches praise these struggles with the self. In addition to these discourses, *American Idol* represented African American female contestants as natural singers, while *The Voice* portrayed the most successful Black female contestant on the show in the modern controlling image of the Black lady.

5.1 The Shows

American Idol and *The Voice* are currently the two most viewed reality television shows in the U.S. For *American Idol*, this popularity has translated into a wide cultural reach that few, if any, television shows have been able to match. Debuting on FOX in 2002, *American Idol* was the American version

of the U.K.'s *Pop Idol*, both of which were produced by Simon Fuller (Rushfield, 2011). The show features a competitive talent contest format to find new singing talent and culminates by naming the winner an *American Idol*. The winner receives a recording contract with a major record label. *American Idol* starts with a series of audition shows, which attract thousands of idol hopefuls. The audition episodes focus on potential contestants singing in front of the three celebrity judges. The judges evaluate the person's performance and decide whether or not to send the person to Hollywood, which is where the remainder of the competition occurs. Once in Hollywood, the contestants go through a number of rounds of competition where the judges gradually cut more and more singers from the roster to eventually create the group of finalists who will sing on the live shows. Once the finalists are decided, viewer voting determines which contestants are eliminated and, eventually, who wins the title.

The first episode of *American Idol* aired in 2002 and was viewed by more than 9 million people, and the Season 1 finale was watched by over 22 million (Downey, 2002a; Downey, 2002b). The show was panned by critics despite the impressive ratings it garnered (Rushfield, 2011, pp. 61-62). In the next three years, *American Idol* became the most popular non-sports television program in the U.S., and this dominance lasted through 2011 (Rowe, 2011). The show's ratings numbers increased every year from 2002 through 2008, from 9.8 million to 33.48 million (Rowe, 2011). *American Idol* was such a ratings juggernaut that other networks went out of their way to not schedule their top programs on the same night and time slot (Rushfield, 2011, pp. 161-162). Even though *American Idol's* ratings have been in decline in the last few years, industry analysts predict that the show will continue to be a significant presence on the TV landscape (Hibberd, 2013). The wild success of *American Idol* elevated the FOX network to the station most watched by viewers age 18-45 (LaMonica, 2007).

The popularity of *American Idol* resulted in significant social impact in terms of cultural production and profit creation. The key to this cultural influence lies in part, according to Henry Jenkins (2006), in the way the show uses viewer voting to generate the results of the contest. Jenkins argues that this

viewer voting is an indication of the affective connection the show is able to make with people: they vote because they are emotionally connected to the show and its contestants. About 750 million votes were cast during the show's tenth season, and over 4.8 billion votes have been cast since Season 1 (Turner, 2011).

One of the most significant arenas that *American Idol* has touched is the music industry. Idol contestants hit number one on the Billboard charts 345 times in the first ten seasons of the show (Bronson, 2012). The first 14 winners of *American Idol* have all generated a minimum of \$1 million in record sales (Bronson, 2012). Carrie Underwood (Season 5) and Kelly Clarkson (Season 1) are the two *Idols* with the most success in record sales. Carrie Underwood has released four albums that generated over \$14 million in sales and Kelly Clarkson has released six albums that earned over \$12 million (Stahler, 2012). Even contestants who did not win the show have gone on to sell millions of albums (Trust, 2011). The influence of *Idol* isn't limited to album sales. Contestants on the show have gone on to amass over 136 million digital song downloads, with Clarkson (30 million) and Underwood (29 million) leading the way (Stahler, 2012).

The value of the *American Idol* brand extends far beyond TV ratings and record sales. *American Idol* has generated billions of dollars in ad sales for FOX over the years. By Season 3, which aired in 2004, *American Idol* overtook *Friends* (NBC) as the number one network television show in terms of ad prices, where a 30 second commercial earned \$658,333 for *Idol*, compared to \$473,500 for *Friends* ("American Idol charges," 2004). Ad sales for Season 5 set a new record for network television, with a single 30-second ad selling for over \$700,000 (McClellan, 2005). In 2006, a 30-second ad on that season's finale cost \$1.3 million ("Goodbye Bucky," 2006). Total ad revenues for the 2009 season were \$903 million, which doubled the sales in 2006 (Wyatt, 2009). Even as ratings for *American Idol* have declined, the show remains the top non-sports television program in terms of ad sales, coming in second to *Sunday Night Football* (Steinberg, 2012).

American Idol has also profited greatly from sponsorship deals with some of the most iconic companies in America, including Coca Cola, Ford Motor Company, and AT&T. Ford and Coca Cola both paid around \$10 million in sponsorship deals for Season 1 (Carter, 2003). For Season 7, Coca Cola, Ford, and AT&T each paid around \$35 million for their sponsorship deals (Dehnart, 2008), and by Season 10 the price went up to \$50 to \$60 million (Graser, 2011). The level of brand integration that these sponsorship agreements involve was and is industry leading. For example, the judges drink from iconic Coca Cola cups on stage during the show, the contestants relax in the “Coca Cola Red Room” when not performing, *Idol* contestants are featured in Ford ads that run during the show, and the show runs special promos during the results episodes that feature Ford cars and trucks. In addition, the final two contestants win a Ford motor vehicle. AT&T is the official service provider for voting via text message, and as a result of a recent sponsorship deal with Apple, contestant performances are available exclusively on iTunes. Another income stream is the yearly *American Idols LIVE Tour*. In 2002, the first tour included 30 shows with a total audience of over 250,000 and gross sales of over \$8 million (Donahue, 2009, p. 18). In 2006, the tour recorded its most success, playing 59 shows with a total attendance of over 646 thousand and gross sales of over \$35 million (Barnes, 2008).

Another result of the massive success of *American Idol* was that it spawned other talent contest reality programs related to dancing—*Dancing with the Stars* (ABC), *So You Think You Can Dance* (FOX), and *America’s Best Dance Crew* (MTV)—general entertainment—*America’s Got Talent* (NBC), *The X Factor* (FOX)—and its main ratings rival, *The Voice* (NBC) (Kaplan, 2013).

The Voice premiered on NBC in April of 2011. Carson Daly, who was the popular video jockey of MTV’s *Total Request Live* and who also hosts NBC’s *New Years Eve with Carson Daly*, hosts the show. The concept for the show varies from *American Idol* in at least three significant ways. First, *The Voice* uses “blind auditions” to form each celebrity coach’s team. There are four celebrity coaches on the show, each of whom sits in a large red leather chair that turns away from the stage. Each blind audition begins

with coaches sitting in the chairs, unable to see the stage. Once the contestant begins, the coaches can hear the performers singing but cannot see them perform. If a coach wants a contestant to be on their team, the coach pushes the button affixed to a panel on the front of their chair, and the chair turns around to let the coach see the stage. If only one coach turns their chair for a contestant, that contestant is automatically on their team. If more than one coach turns their chair for a contestant, then the contestant gets to decide which team to join. Second, *The Voice* divides contestants into teams. Each celebrity coach selects a team of 16 contestants during the auditions. Over the first six seasons of the show, U.S music stars Blake Shelton and Adam Levine have been coaches every season, and other coaches included Cee Lo Green (Seasons 1-3, 5), Christina Aguilera (Seasons 1-3, 5), Usher (Seasons 4 & 6) and Shakira (Seasons 4 & 6). Third, once the teams are finalized, *The Voice* has a series of Battle Rounds, where teammates perform one song together and their coach decides the winner, who then moves on in the competition. Following the Battle Rounds are The Playoffs, a series of eliminations where the coaches cull their teams until they each have three contestants, who move into the live shows. Once the live shows start, viewer voting determines which contestants advance from week to week and who eventually wins the competition. The winner of the show receives \$100,000 and a recording contract.

The Voice consistently competes with *American Idol* for the highest rated reality television program in the U.S. It was the 20th most watched TV show in 2010, attracting over 12 million viewers in its first season and only trailing *Idol*, *Dancing with the Stars* (ABC), and *Survivor* (CBS) in reality television ratings (Gorman, 2011). The next year, *The Voice* moved up to number 9 in the U.S. with over 15 million viewers (Gorman, 2012) and ended 10th in 2012 with over 14 million viewers (Bibel, 2013). In 2013, *The Voice* moved past *American Idol* with over 14 million viewers, which made the show the 7th most watched TV program in the U.S. and the second most popular reality show (The Deadline Team, 2014).

While *The Voice* has ratings comparable to *American Idol*, and therefore significant reach in terms of number of people who watch the show, that is where the comparisons, in terms of social impact, begins to fade. In terms of record sales, the winners of *The Voice* have not been successful. The most successful winner of *The Voice*, Danielle Bradbery, peaked at #19 on the U.S. Billboard charts with more than 100,000 album sales, and her most successful single sold 375,000 copies (Valdez, 2014; Bjorke, 2014). While Bradbery is the most successful, Season 2 winner Jermaine Paul never released an album after his win, and Season 1 winner Colon left his record label after his first album failed to sell (Valdez, 2014). To put these numbers in context, *American Idol's* least popular winner sold 146,000 albums and William Hung, an *Idol* reject, sold over 200,000 (Highfill, 2013). In addition, the value of *The Voice* franchise has yet to reach the levels enjoyed by *American Idol*. After its Season 1 success, *The Voice* brought on Kia Motors (automobiles), Starbucks (retail coffee), and Sprint (telecommunications) as sponsors (Goetzl, 2012). Contestants are seen on the program driving Kia vehicles, coaches and contestants drink from Starbucks branded cups, and Sprint sponsors the audience voting (Goetzl, 2012). *American Idol* was tops on *Forbes Magazine's* "TVs Biggest Moneymakers" list, earning over \$6 million in ad sales per half hour (Nededog, 2012). The tenth place show on the list generated about \$2 million per half hour, and *The Voice* did not make the list (Nededog, 2012).

5.2 The Literature

Researchers have taken a variety of perspectives when studying *American Idol*.⁷ Ouellette and Hay (2008) contend that the central place of viewer voting on the show emphasizes a neoliberal perspective on citizenship and governance in the U.S. Henry Jenkins (2006) claims *American Idol* was created and marketed to "shape the emotional context through which we watch their shows" with the intent to transform regular viewers into faithful, committed consumers (p. 91). Bell (2010) and McClain (2011) look at how celebrity is defined and portrayed on the show. Several scholars have examined the ways

⁷ To date, no scholarly studies of *The Voice* have been published.

that the American Dream has been articulated on *American Idol*. Webber (2009) found that *American Idol* signifies the American Dream through its emphasis on the importance of progress and the transformation of the contestants (pp. 46-47). McClain (2011) found that the show highlighted the transformative rags-to-riches version of the American Dream by portraying the contestants as earning their stardom because of their legitimate talent, authentic personality, and their ability to connect with viewers. Meizel (2009) argued that the case of *American Idol* reject-turned-star William Hung supported a version of the American Dream that relies on ambition, authentic individuality, and the necessity of failure as the precursor of success.

McClain (2011) outlined a set of character types that are used on the show to describe and distinguish contestants: the blue-eyed soul singer, the singer-songwriter, the girl/guy next door, and male and female versions of the rocker, the R&B singer, the urban singer, and the country singer (pp. 53-56). Male and female R&B singers tended to be African Americans while the urban singers, which were characterized by their alignment with hip-hop culture, were white (pp. 73-79). Referring to the first seven seasons of *American Idol*, McClain concluded that, because it was not explicitly discussed on the program, race was “erased from the show itself” (p. 87). Taking a different route to a similar conclusion, Hobson (2012) contended that the disappearance of African American women among the top contestants on the show after Season 7 functioned to support post-racism ideology by reinforcing the perspective that anyone can win in America because race, gender and class are no longer barriers to success (p. 41). Finally, Denham and Jones (2008) conducted a study of the demographic features (race, gender, age and hair color) of cast members on several reality television programs. Based on the higher frequency of African Americans appearing on *American Idol*, an entertainment contest, in comparison with the relative lack of African Americans on *The Apprentice*, a show about succeeding in the business world, the authors conclude that reality television supports the stereotype that Blacks are natural entertainers and

whites are more inclined to succeed in business. None of the studies of singing talent reality television programs focus on representations of African American women or post-recession reality television.

5.3 Findings/Discussion

I studied Season 13 of *American Idol* and Season 6 of *The Voice*. Both shows aired in the first part of 2014. On *American Idol*, the celebrity judges were Jennifer Lopez, Keith Urban, and Harry Connick Jr. I studied all episodes of the show until the last Black woman was eliminated, which included six audition episodes, the Hollywood and Group episodes, and the two Semifinalist episodes, focusing on the two African American women—Majesty Rose (age 22) and Malaya (age 17)—who advanced to the Top 10 “girls.”⁸ Carson Daly hosted *The Voice*, and the coaches were Adam Levine, Shakira, Usher, and Blake Shelton. I studied all episodes of the show until the last African American woman was eliminated, which included the Blind Auditions, the Battle Rounds, the Playoffs, and three weeks of live shows, focusing on the two African American women—Deja (age 16) and Sissaundra (age 44)—who were finalists on the show.

5.3.1 Fairness of market competition

Both *American Idol* and *The Voice* contained discourses vouching for the fairness of each show’s singing competition. Since the fundamental assumption of neoliberalism is that all aspects of society should operate using market logic, through which unrestrained competition is believed to be a priori fair and impartial and therefore assumed to produce the best outcomes, the idea that the competition on the singing talent RTV shows is fair supports neoliberal ideology. As I argued in Chapter 2, the presumption of equality has become a pretext in U.S. neoliberalism: the assumption that society has been rid of inequality has become a taken-for-granted common sense belief that is used to justify post-racism, post-

⁸ This is the terminology used on the show despite the fact that most of the female contestants are, in fact, women. I decided to stick with the show’s terminology in order to avoid confusion and to make my references to the program easier to follow.

sexism, and ultimately to establish the neoliberal assumption that any failure of Black women to succeed in market competition has everything to do with their individual effort and ability and nothing to do with the unique and various forms oppression they suffer—because neoliberal intersectionality rejects the notion of systemic oppression.

By vouching for the fairness of the competition on the show, *American Idol* and *The Voice* communicate a key tenet of neoliberalism. But, as I argue in Chapter 1, hegemonic ideas, such as the fairness of market logic, must constantly be re-asserted and maintained. The maintenance of hegemony is accomplished in large part via popular culture, and in particular, on television shows. And, as I argued in Chapter 3, reality television has been actively conveying and maintaining neoliberal ideology, post-racism, and post-sexism in the U.S. for at least the last 15 years. Although the Great Recession was a threat to neoliberal hegemony, it was quickly neutralized by the constant reassertion of the principles of the ideology. *American Idol* and *The Voice* rework, repackage, and relay the idea that society is fair, and that competition produces the best results, in such a way as to contribute to the hegemony of neoliberalism, and in the process, this supports continued racism, sexism, and intersectional oppression.

The primary theme that supported the presumption of fairness was the claim of equal opportunity. On *American Idol*, the idea that anyone has a chance to be an American Idol was highlighted throughout the season that I studied. For example, at the beginning of the second auditions episode, Ryan Seacrest tells the viewers, “It doesn’t matter where you start. It doesn’t matter who you are. It takes a nation to make an idol. They come from all corners of the country with dreams bigger than you can imagine” (Episode 2). Once the top 30 contestants were selected, the contestants were introduced in alphabetical order (Episode 11), which is an organizational technique used to avoid the appearance of preference, special treatment, or any kind of rank ordering.

Equal opportunity was also emphasized on *The Voice*. The fact that the auditions were “blind”—that the coaches could not see the contestants until they turned their chair—implied a fair and equal

chance to be chosen for the show. Contestants remarked upon this theme often. According to the contestants, the blindness of the auditions leveled the playing field in terms of appearance and age. Country singer Kristen Merlin, who looked like Ellen DeGeneres and might be characterized as “butch,” said, “*The Voice* is the perfect show for me because I’m going to be able to showcase my talent before I’m ever judged by my looks” (Episode 1). Tanner Linford, a short, thin, white, 16-year-old male, was also happy to be able to be judged solely for his singing: “*The Voice* is really unique because they are not judging you based on how you look or how small you are. I’ve been cut from a couple of things because of my size, so this is a really cool opportunity for me to be judged just by my voice” (Episode 1). Allison Bray, a 16-year-old white female, noted that the coaches couldn’t judge singers based on age, either: “This show is so important to me because I don’t think age plays a big role in this competition. Now I have the opportunity to be recognized specifically for my singing voice” (Episode 3). Tyler Montgomery, a relatively older (24) white male, explained that the blindness of the auditions meant that “no matter how old you are, no matter how banged up you’ve been, no matter what kind of road you’ve come down, you get the same opportunity as everyone else” (Episode 5). None of the African American women on the show articulated this benefit of the blind auditions.

The celebrity coaches on *The Voice* also talked about the equal opportunity that the blindness of the auditions provided to the contestants. Adam Levine, one of the celebrity coaches and a pop music star, made this claim at the beginning of Episode Three: “The only thing that matters in the blind auditions is discovering amazing voices. That is why we are here.” This claim was expanded upon at the start of Episode Four, in a pre-recorded package. Celebrity coach and country music star Blake Shelton told the camera, “The blind auditions are about one thing and one thing only, and that is finding an amazing voice.” As video from the previous episode of Sissaundra, one of the African American women contestants, was shown singing, Shelton continued: “Every artist is here for a different reason but they all have the same goal. They want to win *The Voice*.”

The blindness of the auditions on *The Voice* was authenticated by the reaction of extreme surprise from coaches who did not turn their chair until the contestant was done singing. This reaction indicated that the way the contestant sang didn't match the coaches' preconceived ideas about her or his appearance. This kind of reaction happened several times during the auditions, but the reaction to Stevie Jo, a white male with long hair, singing an Usher song in a high voice, is illustrative. This interaction occurred between Shelton and Levine, who did not turn their chairs around, and Usher, who did. Shelton: "What? That's not who was singing that!" Levine (singing): "It's a white maaaaaaan! I was pretty sure that you weren't a white guy, and you're a white guy!" He continued, "That's a pleasant surprise to see someone that is like the exact opposite of what you might have thought. It blows away all preconceived ideas of everything, and that's why we're here, and that's why we love music." Usher chimed in, "I was really blown away because I thought you were Black, too," to which Levine responded, "He sounds like Usher and he looks like Blake." While this exchange suggests that the auditions might be blind, the fact that the coaches clearly think about the race of the contestants belies their claim that blindness guarantees equality. Also, the blindness valorized here only begins and ends with each contestant's audition performance. Once the audition is over, the supposed benefits of blindness disappear long before the actual competition begins. Being chosen for one of the coach's teams is only the start of the show. From there, each contestant is in full view of the coaches and the audience, which allows for racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination to factor into who wins the competition.

In addition to the equal opportunity theme, the contestants on *American Idol* were consistently represented as being equal in terms of talent. Starting with the cut to the top 30 contestants, a constant theme spoken by the judges and Ryan was that this was the most competitive season ever, and the most difficult to judge, because all of the contestants were exceedingly talented and deserving. The difficulty for the judges was mentioned multiple times every episode, beginning with the final cuts to the Top 30. Jennifer Lopez articulated this quite clearly when explaining the cut the judges had to make to get down

to the Top 10 final girls: “This is very difficult for us because we only get to choose ten to sing tonight of the fifteen. We really believe in every single one of these girls. We think they’re all amazing. So, again, another tough night for us to do this” (Episode 11).

Another way that the presumption of equality was rendered on *The Voice* was in terms of the diversity of musical genres on the show. As with post-feminism, where the successes of feminism and individual successful women are referenced to imply that sexism no longer exists, the show’s genre diversity discourse suggests that equality exists on the show because a diverse group of musical genres are represented. The categorization of contestants by musical genre was the most consistently occurring discursive element of the Blind Auditions. Throughout the auditions, all but a few contestants were placed into the following popular musical genres: Country, R&B, Rock, Indie, Blues/Soul, and Pop. In Episode 6, when each coach selected the final member of his or her team, Blake Shelton noted, “Team Blake for Season 6 couldn’t be more diverse. I have R&B. Country. I have pop. I have a duo. I have rock.” When Shakira’s team roster was full, she explained that her team was “very well-rounded—it’s multidimensional. I have pop singers, I have R&B singers, and that was kind of my plan this season, to get the best of each world.” This theme was extended in the Best of the Blind Audition episode, which showed clips from the Blind Auditions and was divided into segments introducing each coach’s team. As contestants were reintroduced to the audience as team members, they were also tagged with the music genre into which they fit. For example, when four of Blake Shelton’s team members were featured, Carson introduced them as “aspiring pop artist,” “country singer,” “country duo,” and “rocker.” This emphasis, articulated by the coaches, on selecting singers that fit neatly into specific musical genres denies and devalues singers who are able to cross, combine, or transcend the traditional forms of music and singing. This kind of border policing stifles the possibility of intersectional musical genres and of the ability of artists to cross those borders.

Both shows constructed a discourse of equality in terms of the competition. In their own ways,

both shows asserted that anyone, no matter what, could win the contest as long as they were great singers. This creates the context for the rest of the show, namely, how the judges and coaches evaluate contestants, and how decisions are made as to who is cut, who gets to compete, and who ultimately wins. More specifically, the discourse of equality on these shows implies that the judges, the audience, and those who vote for contestants are essentially blind to issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality. All that matters is singing talent. The discourse of equality found on these shows is analogous to the presumed equality of the market, where anyone is able to compete and win regardless of anything outside of the market logic.

5.3.2 Flexibility

Black female contestants on *American Idol* and *The Voice* were addressed and coached to be flexible as they attempted to improve their chances for competitive success. This was evident in the coaching of the Black female contestants, and is similar to the way that market logic successfully spread beyond economic transactions into the social, so that “the primacy of flexibility at the microlevel of individual movements, ingenuity, performance, and self-invention is at the heart of the current neoliberal agenda” (Freeman, 2007, p. 252).

The two discourses through which flexibility was stressed on *American Idol* and *The Voice* were control and confidence. Black female contestants on both shows were coached to be in control, but not too controlled, and to be confident, but not too confident. Contestants on the talent contest RTV shows are subject to several priorities that push them to be flexible. Similar to the way flexibility is key to managing the risk of losing the market’s confidence (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 2), contestants on *American Idol* and *The Voice* need to win the hearts, minds, and ultimately, the votes of viewers to stay on the show. Talent contest shows are ultimately competitions to get viewers to vote, and being flexible is imperative to this endeavor. Also, similar to the way that flexibility helps keep the support of the shareholders (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 2), contestants on both shows need the confidence and support of the celebrity judg-

es/coaches. The support of the coaches and judges translates into advice and coaching, through which the contestants can improve, and it also can have an effect on the way viewers think about the contestants, and ultimately how viewers vote. In the face of uncertainty that flexibility creates, the neoliberal subject is “supposed to be sustained by a stable center” and “an ego of capable resilience” (Walkerdine, 2003, p. 241), and in the face of the uncertainty contestants face on the talent contest RTV shows, the “stable center” Walkerdine refers to translates into control—not letting the emotions get the better of oneself in pressure situations, but not being too rigid. The ego Walkerdine mentions is confidence—the ability to believe in one’s talents in the face of difficulty, but to not be overconfident or conceited. Although the competitive format of these shows seems to demand that all contestants, no matter what race, sex, age, or sexuality, be flexible in order to win, only the African American women on the show were subjected to this discourse by the judges.

5.3.2.1 Control

African American women who were contestants on *American Idol* were implored to adapt to the need to control themselves and their performance. Flexibility was needed by the Black women, according to the judges and coaches, so that they could be in control, but to not be too controlled. Five Black women were included in the Top 15 “girls” on *American Idol*, and all of them were given the same advice for improvement: they all needed to learn to be more disciplined. Three of the women, who did not advance to the Top 10 girls, were coached in terms of this imperative of self-transformation through discipline. Bria Anai (age 16) was confident in her singing and performing, but on the Top 15 night, the judges mainly talked about her lack of vocal control. Harry Connick Jr. told her that “the specificity of what you were trying to sing got lost a little bit” because she failed to control her passion, which caused her to sing too loud and too “big” (Episode 11). Keith Urban concurred with Connick’s assessment, and Jennifer Lopez noted the need to be in control, too: “It’s hard because there are first night jitters and you’re excited and they call your name. As you get more and more excited, the crowd gets with you. It

can take over. You have to stay in control. They [the audience] can get out of control. You can't" (Episode 11). Like Bria Anai, Marielle (age 17), who is another Black woman in the Top 15 girls, was portrayed as struggling with control. Adam Lambert, who won *American Idol* and who was acting as a coach during rehearsals, told Marielle that her singing felt "rushed," to which she replied, "I've got to learn how to not get so carried away with a song because I'm feeling it" (Episode 11). After her performance, the judges noted her struggle to keep control. Keith Urban said that it was clear that she was trying to control her performance, which was on the brink of "calamity." Jennifer Lopez noted that although she struggled throughout the song, she showed "tremendous poise at the end." Harry Connick Jr. suggested that her attempt to pull off a "giant production number" made controlling her performance more difficult and said that he thought she was better on earlier episodes when her performance was less polished and more "raw."

In contrast to the portrayal of Bria and Marielle, Briana Oakley (age 17) was portrayed as overly controlled. During her rehearsal, Briana was asked what she felt she needed to work on, and she replied, "Sometimes my need for perfection gets in the way." Randy Jackson, who was acting as a coach for the contestants, agreed: "Sometimes it comes off as too professional" (Episode 11). As she rehearsed, the coaches noted the problems associated with trying to be too in control: her hyper focus was preventing her from connecting with the audience. After her performance, the judges told her that she needed to settle down (Keith Urban) and relax (Jennifer Lopez). Briana's struggle to perfect her singing illustrates a fundamental paradox in neoliberalism: to succeed in neoliberalism, one must always strive to perfect themselves, which is impossible since perfection is elusive. In neoliberalism, there is always a new task to master, a new challenge to overcome. Bria, Marielle, and Briana all exemplified the failure of Black women to be flexible enough. The show represented these women as unable to adequately adapt to coaching, to achieve the correct level of control to meet the needs of the singing competition.

Malaya, who was the most successful Black woman on the season of *American Idol* I studied, was constantly subjected to the discourse of control. Malaya's flexibility is tested on the show via her need to control her enthusiasm. Although the judges said they loved Malaya's self-assurance and singing, the need to control her energy began to emerge at the beginning of the Top 13 finalists' performance episode. Malaya is shown running around the stage, giving members of the audience low-fives. Later, when Ryan asks her about the song she has decided to perform, she replies, "It's really up, like me!" After her performance, the judges noted the need to control her energy. Jennifer Lopez told her, "I love your energy. Performance, you're an A+. It wasn't your best vocal performance. We know that you can blow, so that was like 'eh,' and at the end it went a little off the rails." Harry Connick said that she needed to find the "discipline to sing in tune" and Keith Urban suggested that she needed to learn to keep the energy in her performance while still singing in control rather than "floating around" the song. Randy summarized the challenge for Malaya at the beginning of the next night's results show: "When Malaya first came to me in rehearsal, she was so excited to do this song. I wanted her to be able to control that enthusiasm so that she could give a great complete performance. On the show [last night], she didn't calm down enough, and the song got the best of her." Based on the voting over the previous 24 hours, Malaya was in the bottom three. Although she was not eliminated from the competition, Jennifer Lopez told her, "You have to get control on that stage so you can really show people the pipes you have. That didn't happen last night." The next week, with the Top 12 finalists performing, the judges were unanimous in praise of Malaya's singing and control. Jennifer Lopez said her "singing was crazy" and Harry Connick Jr. noted her control: "This felt very focused to me. I'm really proud of you because you didn't go off the rails."

During the rest of her tenure on the show, the emphasis shifted to Malaya's natural singing ability, and the transformation she underwent on the show to learn self-control. At this point in the season, Malaya is represented as the ideal neoliberal subject because of her ability to be flexible in the effort to

change herself. On the Top 12 performance show, Jennifer Lopez noted her natural talent, “That was killer. You have an amazing voice. You are so blessed!” and Keith Urban alluded to her ability to improve on her talent: “What you’ve got inside, that’s gonna blossom. It’s just magnificent.” After her Top 10 performance, Harry Connick Jr. and Keith Urban praised her control. Connick said, “You were present in every single word,” and Urban commented, “I’m hearing more control in your voice. It really pulled me in.” After her Top 9 performance, Jennifer Lopez told Malaya, “When you come out here with that type of control, because we know you can be kinda off the rails in the best way, I love it. You’re voice really stands out. It’s so beautiful. You’re so blessed.”

Malaya’s representation as having transformed herself into a controlled singer peaked on the Top 8 performance episode. Before she performed, the judges and host discussed Malaya’s time on the show. Harry Connick Jr. established the combination of natural talent and transformation before her performance. When asked by Ryan what he remembered about Malaya when she first walked into the audition, Connick replied, “Two words: gold mine. She’s a gold mine of talent. She really is. It’s been great to watch. I’m so excited to see the difference from the audition city to today. It’s been a great progression for Malaya.” After this comment, a pre-recorded package was shown in which Malaya and her father discuss her journey on the show. Her dad said that he played guitar to her when she was still in the womb, asserting, “that’s where she picked up her pitch.” Her father commented that he was happy to see her growth: “For her to evolve to where she is now, it means the world to me.” The package then shifts to Malaya commenting on her tenure on the show. While old footage of her being energetic is shown, she says with poise, “Back in Detroit [her audition city and location of the footage on the screen] that was like 5-year-old me. So I think you will see a drastic change.” The shot changes to a split screen. On the left is Malaya that night, looking calm and in control. On the right is the old Malaya, acting silly and animated. The package then cuts to footage from Malaya’s audition, where Jennifer Lopez says, “I can’t wait to see how you go through the transformation you will go through,” and Harry Connick Jr. re-

plies, "That's gonna be fun!" The judges, apparently, were correct in their prediction of Malaya's potential to self-transform.

After Malaya performed, Keith Urban noted her development into a controlled singer: "The great thing about this show is watching the growth from week to week. You had this voice right from day one. You just needed to be with it. And that was so with it tonight. You were in such good control. You didn't try too hard." Jennifer Lopez agreed: "It's like you are blossoming into this star right before our very eyes, the way you sing. You're still the same girl, you're still that same little crazy girl that walked in, but you have so much more control. You're gaining this poise and you're realizing your position. It's a beautiful thing to see." Harry Connick Jr. outlined the results of singing with control: "You're doing everything right. That was a really strong performance. You're singing lyrics. You're presenting. You're entertaining. You're performing. You're doing all of those things right."

While Malaya seemed to be doing everything right in making it to the Top 7, she struggled in her last performance episode because she appeared to be trying too hard to control her performance. Until this point, Malaya had been represented as finding the right level of self-control, but in this case, Malaya is represented as having erred on the side of being too in control of her performance. In rehearsal for her Top 7 performance, Malaya is shown working with a vocal coach who encourages her to focus more. Afterwards, Malaya tells the camera, "Being able to have him mentor us is just a great opportunity...to get mentored by him is amazing." After her performance, the judges all mentioned that she was trying too hard. Keith Urban commented that she seemed to be anticipating the climax of her performance of the song, and advised her that, "You have nothing to worry about. Just chill out and coast through it." Jennifer Lopez agreed with Urban, adding, "You just need to relax up there, especially with someone who has the vocal ability you have. You don't even have to try. Its gonna be there for you every time." Connick agreed with the other judges, asking Malaya, "were you feeling that at all?" in reference to thinking about the big note she hit at the end of the song. Malaya, in her last comments on the show,

revealed that she still had a ways to go: “Actually, no. I was just thinking of making sure, because I have a tendency to just feel it, but at the same time I was thinking, ‘I gotta focus.’ I don’t want to get too over-exaggerated, and I just messed the whole song up. So I was just trying to keep myself calm and just stay in the groove.” With the next night’s result show running late, Malaya is told she has been voted off. The judges do not say anything nor does Malaya.

On *American Idol*, Malaya exemplifies the neoliberal subject who must gain the required control through self-transformation, in order to adapt to the needs of the competition. Like some of the other African American women contestants, Malaya was instructed to display more self-control, and unlike the other contestants, she successfully adapted to this imperative. In the end, Malaya was judged to have swung too far in the direction of being overly controlling. In other words, in the end, Malaya failed to find just the right level of self-control demanded by the ever-changing singing competition.

Sissaundra, the most successful African American woman on *The Voice*, was portrayed as an exemplar of control because of her ability to adapt to the flexible demands of the singing competition. In every phase of the show, the issue of controlling her powerful voice emerged, and each time she was judged to have met that challenge. In these situations, Sissaundra was challenged to be flexible enough to sing as well as her talent and capabilities allowed, but to not overshadow her fellow performers or to over sing the song just because she had the ability to do so. In her first Battle Round, Sissaundra was paired with 24-year-old Latina Paula DeAnda. The Battle Round episodes consist of two teammates performing together. At the end of each battle, one of the teammates is eliminated from the competition. Each battle is preceded by footage from the rehearsals for the show. In this situation, the imperative placed on Sissaundra was to control her powerful voice so as to not overshadow Paula. During the rehearsals, Blake Shelton noted that Sissaundra’s vocal ability is her greatest asset. One of the members of The Band Perry, a country music group that was helping Shelton coach his team, suggested that “We’re gonna have to really pick and choose the right moments accordingly so that they don’t weaken each

other. Because you've got to make sure that nobody overpowers one or the other." After the battle performance, the coaches concluded that Sissaundra did in fact exercise control, which allowed her to have a good performance. Blake explained Sissaundra's ability to control her voice: "We are hearing a lot about the big note [that Sissaundra hit] and one of my favorite things that I've heard along the way was that you picked the moment and then you did it, and it was amazing!"

The challenge to prove her vocal control continued in The Playoffs. In the studio rehearsal with Sissaundra, Blake said, "This song allows her to go all over the place, and she really doesn't need to do that." Later, he told the camera, "She just needs to concentrate on a solid performance and not over-sing it." After her performance, the coaches all praised her singing. Shakira began: "You have that kind of voice that makes us all go 'woah!' You have a certain glam to your sound that is different from anyone else who is in this competition now." Usher cut in, expanding the realm within which Sissaundra's voice stood out: "In the world, Shakira. I mean, like the elegance that she possess is like Celine Dion." Shakira responded, "Yeah, you're elegant. That's the word—bingo." Adam Levine hinted at the control Sissaundra displayed in her performance: "You can sing and you get lost in it. But at the same time, how incredible your voice is and your technical skill combined with the soulfulness with which you perform. That's what everybody strives for."

As Sissaundra advanced through the season's competition, her vocal control is portrayed as exemplary. The coaches proclaim that she is already at the highest level a singer can achieve. After her second Battle performance, with Biff, Usher said, "My god! That high note! Where did you find that?" Shakira chimed in, "Sissaundra, your register is sick! Sick, sick sick!" and Adam said, "Sissaundra, I am 80% sure you aren't from planet Earth. I say that so lovingly." Blake agreed with Adam: "Sissaundra, Adam is right. What planet do you come from where they can sing like that? That within itself is entertainment and lights up the room." Shelton explained why he decided to keep Sissaundra and cut Biff, saying, "I can't miss out on the opportunity to work with a one in a trillion vocalist like Sissaundra." Backstage,

after the decision was made, Sissaundra thanked Blake, to which he replied, “Are you kidding? You’re changing this show. You’re that good! You’re that good!” These kinds of compliments continued into the last Live Show, where Sissaundra was finally cut. Shakira said, “There is no doubt that your vocal ability is astonishing, and technically speaking you’re so consistent every time. You’re a pro. If you ever opened the ‘School of Sissaundra Lewis’ I’m sure that the four of us [gesturing to the other coaches] would enroll just so you could show us how it’s done because you are a professional singer. You are amazing.”

5.3.2.2 Confidence

On *American Idol*, the judges instructed the African American women on the show to find the proper level of confidence, suggesting that a lack of self-confidence detracted from a singer’s performance and made her less competitive on the show. For Majesty, the imperative, according to the coaches and judges, was to be flexible and adaptable by being more confident. Initially, she was portrayed as quiet, calm, confident and happy. At one point during rehearsal, Majesty was challenged as to her intent to play the guitar and move around the stage. The coach asked her if she wanted to do one or the other, to which she replied, “Both!” The coach asked her how she planned to do that and in response she made a funny face and shimmied, which caused both coaches to laugh. After her performance on the Top 15 girls show, the judges noted how the performance showcased Majesty’s calm personality and her confidence. Jennifer Lopez highlighted the confidence of her performance: “That’s how you’re supposed to come out here and be ready for show time! That’s the confidence you’re going to need!” Keith Urban emphasized the previously noted personality traits: “You’ve got this real breezy thing about you that we saw in Atlanta. It’s easy, it’s breezy.”

The lack of confidence became an issue for Majesty starting on the Top 13 finalist performance night. In a pre-recorded bit played before she performed, Majesty said, “There’s a balance to everything in life, and for me I’ve always felt like I’m trying to find the balance between humility and confidence. So we will just see if I pull that off tonight.” After the performance, Keith Urban noted that, while she is an

excellent singer, “now it’s just a case of being more confident in what you do.” Despite the praise from the judges, Majesty fell into the bottom three contestants on both the Top 11 and Top 10 shows, and this seemed to make her doubt herself. Before her turn to perform on the Top 10 show, Majesty reflected on being in the bottom three the previous week: “Being in the bottom three was scary and sad...it was really hard and it felt like it was a total humbling experience,” to which Randy responded, “The only thing that stops you is you get a little fearful and a little insecure when you are singing on stage.” The judges generally praised her performance, but Jennifer Lopez commented, “Tonight, I saw something in you that I’ve never seen before, which was a little bit of fear in you. We rehearse to build confidence. You cannot let it affect you.” For Majesty, this is the challenge: to not let fear win out over her confidence in her ability and her preparation. Majesty’s last performance was in the Top 9 week. On the performance night, she commented, “I’ve grown a lot and really it’s been my confidence that has been the biggest thing I have had to overcome.”

In contrast to Majesty Rose, who never successfully adapted her self-confidence to fit the needs of the singing competition, Malaya was portrayed as confident, energetic, and talented, and ultimately, the judges framed her confidence as a positive attribute and a key determinant of her success on the show. Jennifer Lopez introduced Malaya’s segment of the show by saying Malaya “has a huge personality, only to be surpassed by her huge voice.” Most of the representations of Malaya in this episode were self-portrayals. During rehearsals, Randy Jackson asked her, “You love being a little different?” to which she replied, “I love difference. I don’t like being like everybody else!” When Chris Daughtry, an *Idol* winner and vocal coach for the episode, told her “You’re voice is stupid,” she replied, smiling, “A good stupid, right?” Malaya did not appear to be intimidated by the *Idol* stage or the judges. Quite the opposite, she appeared completely confident. After performing, but before Jennifer Lopez could start to speak, Malaya interjected, “By the way, all of this [referring to Lopez’s dress], I’m feeling it, I’m feeling it!” When Harry Connick Jr. mentioned how stressful performing on the *Idol* stage can be, saying he just

wanted to eat a donut, Malaya responded, "I want some fried chicken!" Keith Urban noted her confidence: "You make glasses and braces look so cool! But you know what it is? It's the confidence. You got confidence, and you can make it work."

Deja, one of the two African American women competing on *The Voice*, was portrayed as the ideal neoliberal subject in terms of her willingness to try to adapt to coaching and improve her confidence over the course of her time on the show. Throughout the first episode on which she appeared, Deja is represented as confident. In an interview clip, her father explains, "Deja is a very determined young lady. When she was born, they had to remove her kidney. Doctors told Deja to not involve herself in contact sports, but she's very good at track and basketball. Deja hasn't let anything set her back." Deja picked up on this theme, saying, "I bring the same competitiveness I have with sports to singing. People underestimate me, and I like to prove them wrong." Throughout her introduction and her Blind Audition performance, Deja appeared confident, smiling and looking self-assured and composed. Usher, Shakira and Blake Shelton all turned their chairs for Deja, and Deja decided to join Shakira's team. However, Deja's confidence quickly faded as she moved to the first Battle Round.

For Deja's first Battle, Shakira paired her with Music Box (Ayesha Brooks), a 28-year-old African American woman (Episode 11). Shakira and her celebrity advisor, country music star Miranda Lambert, coached Deja and Music Box in the rehearsal segment, where Deja was seen as too passive and Music Box as too forceful. When Music Box finished her first solo run through, Deja turned to her, looking impressed and overwhelmed, and said, "That was amazing." When Deja and Music Box rehearsed together, Deja appeared unsure and intimidated as she listened to Music Box sing her parts. As Shakira was giving her advice about how to hit a difficult note, Miranda asks Deja, "Do you think you can do it?" Deja responds with a very unsure "yes" and then looks doubtfully at Music Box. As the final rehearsal nears an end, Deja is shown looking more comfortable and confident, and this nonverbal state carries into and through the Battle performance. At the end of the song, both contestants hit the difficult note and then

hug. As soon as Deja and Music Box turn to face the judges, Deja's unsure look returned. The coaches begin by highlighting Deja's powerful voice and her age. Adam told Deja, "You're so young! To have that much power so early is a gift." Blake commented, "You have an amazing voice. It's got to be like Superman when he was first figuring out his powers." Usher distinguished between Deja, whom he says has lots of potential, and Music Box, whom he says already has a fully formed vocal style and voice. Shakira explained how she evaluated the battle, noting Music Box's beautiful voice, but lamenting her failure to be "vulnerable and fragile," before turning to Deja. "Youth has advantages and disadvantages. When you are that young if you show people you possess raw talent [that is an advantage], but the disadvantage is that you lack experience. However, I feel your voice is so angelic, and it accompanies your persona. Today, you showed us that you have a powerful voice." Shakira ultimately cut Music Box and kept Deja for her team. In this first battle episode, Deja is represented as a young, powerful singer who lacks experience and is somewhat lacking in confidence. In the next Battle round (Episode 15), Deja is paired with Ddendyl, a 25-year-old African American woman. Deja is represented, again, as lacking experience and confidence, but Shakira keeps her on the show based on her talent and potential for growth.

Going into The Playoffs, Deja is portrayed as more confident and is represented by the coaches as having made progress but still having room to grow. The Playoffs played out over three episodes, with each coach's team members performing back-to-back. In the end, each coach eliminated two contestants from her or his team. This format shifts the emphasis away from the head-to-head competition and comparison inherent in a battle. In the pre-package introduction to her Playoff performance, Deja talked about the growth she experienced on the show: "I chose Shakira because I felt a special connection from her. She's helped me gain more confidence in myself, and I know that everything she tells me I can benefit from." As she walked into rehearsal with Shakira, looking confident, Deja explained her song choice: "I've been singing a lot of ballads, but this song is very upbeat and shows the aggressive side of my voice." Shakira tells the camera that Deja "just has to believe in herself." The scene shifts to the rehears-

al, where Shakira tells Deja, “I want you to feel strong and look strong when the song requires it.” Cutting back to interview footage with Shakira, she says of Deja, “She is a brave little girl and I want her to stand tall and think that she is a star.”

As in the other performances, Deja looks and sings with confidence in The Playoffs. At the end of her performance, all of the coaches noted her growth on the show. Blake talked about Deja’s transformation: “She went from an adorable teenager all this time to a young woman. You definitely came out of your shell a little bit.” He continued, “There is something endearing about being an adorable teenager, but that can only go so far. Where we’re at now in the competition, it’s time for you to approach a song like this with some attitude, and you did it.” Usher talked about the challenge that her growth presented—it required her to learn control: “You completely morphed into a young adult. You’ve constantly grown through The Battles. At times, you almost oversang the track because your voice is so strong. It is finding that balance between what the song’s emotion is and the way you interpret it. But these are all things that you work out with time, and you’re so young you’re going to continue to thrive and learn.” Adam commented that the growth Deja exhibited on the show means “the sky is the limit moving forward.” Shakira noted her growth, too: “You’ve grown so much. You’re flourishing and blooming. You have so much talent. Today you’ve shown us you’re not just that sweet angelic voice. You can also be stronger and more aggressive.” Shakira concluded, “Pitch, pocket, staging; you embraced all those challenges and did all of that so great. You’re finally believing in yourself. You were confident—and you know that has been our struggle all this time.” As Shakira talked about the difficulty of deciding which two members of her team to cut, Deja looks confident. When the first finalist was named, Deja smiled and hugged her. Deja kept the same composure as the other finalist was named. Before the last finalist was announced, Carson asked Deja what she wanted to say to her coach, Shakira. Deja responded, “Thank you. You helped me come out of my shell, and I’m just so excited to see what the future holds.” This was the last time the audience saw Deja: she was not shown again after Shakira announced that

Deja was not continuing on in the competition. In the end, Deja is represented as the ideal neoliberal subject, in that she was willing accept the imperative to be flexible in order to fashion herself in such a way as to attain success. The fact that Deja did not win the competition suggests that she had not mastered the techniques of self-entrepreneurship, but her willingness to try, plus her limited improvement towards the goal of being more confident, allowed her portrayal to function to support neoliberal ideology.

Sissaundra was represented on *The Voice* as an exemplar of adapting her confidence level in the context of the competition. When it was appropriate to be confident, she was (but not overly so). When the situation dictated that she be open to criticism, she was. She never looked upset or stressed about what was happening in the competition. Her poise was most apparent in the Results Show for the Top 10 (Episode 21), where she was eliminated based on viewer voting. When it came down to the last contestant to be saved and continue to the next episode, Sissaundra stood on stage with the other contestants who were still in danger of being cut. She looked composed. When Blake was asked to make his last comments to his two remaining team members in the group not yet saved, she maintained eye contact with him and smiled. This was in marked contrast to her teammate, whose nonverbal communication shifted nervously from composure to stress and worry as Blake talked about them both. As Carson said, "Alright ladies and gentlemen, the time has come," Sissaundra looked at her family sitting in the studio audience and mouthed, "I love you" to them. The last image of Sissaundra viewers saw was when she learned that she was not saved. She stepped back graciously and applauded as Adam hugged his team member who had been saved by the viewer voting. This is another lesson in neoliberal logic: no matter how hard you work and/or how much you improve, like in the case of Deja, and no matter how talented you are, like in the case of Sissaundra, neither hard work, improvement, nor talent can guarantee success in the end.

5.3.3 *Natural Singers*

Successful (i.e. their audition earned them a ticket to Hollywood) African American women on *American Idol* were overwhelmingly portrayed as naturally talented singers, whereas both white men and white women were evaluated—good or bad—based on the technical qualities of their singing, including tone, pitch, and breathing. Judges on the show consistently attributed African American women’s singing talent to natural ability rather than skill developed through education, study, practice, and hard work. A similar attribution phenomenon was found in studies of televised sports, where sports commentators would refer to white players as hard working and Black players as natural athletes (Eastman and Billings, 2001; Murrell and Curtis, 1994; Rainville and McCormick, 1977). The implication of this form of discourse on the singing talent shows is that Black women are naturally talented, whereas whites became good singers through hard work. This logic connects to the general stereotype that Blacks are natural-born entertainers, and the more specific representation of some Black women, particularly those who are stereotyped as “welfare queens,” as lazy.

Not a single white contestant was told that they had natural singing talent over the first 10 episodes of the show. The judges communicated the portrayal of Black women as naturally gifted singers in various ways. African American women contestants were told, for example; “You’re a natural singer” (Keith Urban, Episode 3), “You sing so naturally...you have so much talent” (Jennifer Lopez, Episode 6), “You just know what to do, you don’t think about it” (Keith Urban, Episode 6), and “You got a lot of great stuff going on that’s raw” (Keith Urban, Episode 6). Malaya Watson, who advanced to the Top 8, was told after her audition, “You’re blessed. God gave you something so pure” (Harry Connick Jr., Episode 3). There were two examples where Black women contestants asserted that, in addition to natural talent, they had also worked hard to learn to sing well. Marielle, who reached the Top 30, explained in a clip before she auditioned, “My dad taught me everything I know, like notes and key changes...I had to sit down and learn it” (Episode 3). At the end of Majesty Rose’s audition, Jennifer Lopez commented, “It

was really beautiful. It was really effortless, which I love, I guess because I have to work so hard at everything that I do...by the way, I try to achieve that quality [of making her singing seem effortless]" (Episode 4). Harry Connick Jr. asked Majesty, "Is it effortless?" Her response was mixed: "I've crafted something in me that just comes out when I sing."

Overall, the judges' reference to the natural signing ability of Black women contestant's was the most consistent theme on the shows. This is a form of unconscious racism. In sports commentary, according to Rada (1996), announcers are under pressure to interpret live events as they happen in real time on the sporting field or court and to say something entertaining and informative. In the live telecast setting, announcers rarely have time to choose their words carefully, which "causes announcers to dredge up comments that reflect subconscious beliefs, images, attitudes, and values" (p. 232). The judges on *American Idol* are in a similar position: they have to say something interesting and entertaining in real time, and this allows for unconscious racial and gender biases to come out in their comments.

5.3.4 The Black Lady

The singing talent contest reality television shows studied in this chapter almost never talk about race, gender, or class, but the show's production, the judges commentary, and the contestants self-portrayals do in fact address gendered and raced representations of African American women. The representations of Black women on *American Idol* and *The Voice* do not align with the traditional stereotypes of the Mammy, the Matriarch, the welfare mother or the Jezebel (Collins, 2000/2009). Nor do they directly invoke the modern stereotypes of lower class Black women like the Black bitch or the bad Black mother (Collins, 2005). The African American women who were most successful on the two shows did not fall into categories of representation found by other studies, either. There were no Sapphires, angry Black women, or hoochies on either program (Campbell et al, 2008; Tyree, 2011). In all but one case (Sissaundra), the Black women contestants studied here were not directly portrayed in terms of qualities

usually ascribed to stereotypes of working-class Black women. But on *The Voice*, Sissandra was represented as a middle-class Black lady.

The Black lady is a controlling image that defines middle-class success for African American women. Collins (2005) defines the Black lady in terms of her appearance, demeanor, and actions. In terms of appearance, the Black lady is beautiful, but not sexy: she does not wear short skirts, nor does she show cleavage (p. 140). She does not wear her hair in dreadlocks, cornrows, or braids, which are “indications of nappy hair” and therefore connected to working-class authentic Blackness (Collins, 1998, p. 39; Collins, 2005, p. 139). She is always put together, “never appearing with a hair out of place” (Collins, 1998, p. 40). She wears “minimal makeup, and a few well-chosen, tasteful accessories” (Thompson, 2009, p.7). In terms of her demeanor, the Black lady appears “calm and poised” (Collins, 1998, p. 40), is “highly professional,” and “projects dignity and breeding” (Thompson, 2009, p.7). In terms of her actions, the black Lady does not use Black English (Collins, 1998, p. 39). She puts her family ahead of herself and her career in particular (Jewell, 1993, p. 49; Collins, 1998, p. 40), and she is warm and loving (Jewell, 1993, p. 49). And since she is a member of the middle-class, she is, by definition, successful.

On *The Voice*, Sissandra is represented as a Black lady in all of these ways. In The Playoffs, Usher and Shakira agreed that Sissandra was “elegant,” and that word epitomized her self-presentation on the show. This quality of elegance and grace in self-presentation is primarily nonverbal. Sissandra looked classy. Her personal appearance was fresh and stylish. Her hair was cut short and dyed blonde. Her teeth were straight and white. Her jewelry was understated and complimented her outfits, which were always flattering, form fitting, and beautiful. She looked like a star and a classy Black lady all at once. Also, Sissandra was always in control of her demeanor. When she interacted with others on the show, she made eye contact and her smile never left her face. Whenever she was shown with her family and friends, she was warm and loving towards them, holding their hands and hugging and kissing them.

One challenge presented by controlling images of middle-class Black women is explaining their career achievements without recourse to the accounts of white middle-class success. According to Collins (2005), responding to this challenge “requires a delicate balance between being appropriately subordinate to White and/or male authority yet maintaining a level of ambition and aggressiveness needed for achievement in middle-class occupations. Aggression is acceptable, just as long as it is appropriately expressed for the benefit of others. Aggression and ambition for oneself is anathema” (p. 140). Collins continues, explaining that African American women:

Must be aggressive, especially if they expect to achieve within the male-defined ethos of corporations, government, industry, and academia. To get ahead, they must in some fashion be “bitchy,” often with a capital “B.” Yet because these same qualities simultaneously defeminize Black middle-class women and mark them with the trappings of working-class, authentic Blackness that is anathema in desegregated settings, middle-class Black female aggression must be carefully channeled. (p. 140)

Historically, one way to deal with this challenge was to ignore it (Collins, 2005). This technique was used on *The Cosby Show*, by almost never showing paradigmatic Black lady Claire Huxtable, a lawyer, at work (Collins, 2005, p. 139). This eliminated the need to explain how a Black woman could be a successful lawyer without being too ambitious, aggressive, and rude. Collins (2005) suggests that another way to deal with this challenge can be seen in the way that the modern mammy image was used to attempt to provide a roadmap for solving the challenge. Modern mammies were almost always shown at work (Collins, 2005, p. 140). “These women are tough, independent, smart, and asexual. But they are also devoted to their organizations, their jobs, and, upon occasion, their White male bosses” (p. 141). Modern mammies always put their work ahead of their family (p. 141).

Because the premise of *The Voice* is essentially centered on singers working on their talent in order to become a star, the show was unable to ignore the challenge of balancing ambition and aggres-

sion with the Black lady image in its portrayal of Sissaundra. Instead, the challenge was addressed in at least three ways. First, Sissaundra was represented as already attaining middle-class success, since she had been a background singer for Celine Dion. The means used by Sissaundra to achieve this past success were never explained on the show. Also, during the competition, Sissaundra was represented as properly in control of her ambition. She was always compliant when being coached, and she was shown working well with others. She was always complimentary of the other contestants and was gracious when receiving compliments. Although she consistently received effusive praise, she was humble and appreciative when accepting compliments. Sissaundra's clearly stated ambition to become a star never translated on the show into aggression or bitchiness.

Sissaundra was not portrayed as having to place her career or competitive success ahead of her family. Instead, she was represented as a good mother committed to her children. Sissaundra consistently portrayed herself as committed to being a good mother. In her introduction before the Blind Auditions, Sissaundra revealed that she was Celine Dion's vocal director, but after five tours with the pop star, she decided to quit her job to spend more time being a mother to her kids. "I have three children at home. They're my responsibility, and I love them very much. So I wanted to be able to give my children more of me." She explained that her children told her that she had devoted herself to them and that they wanted her to re-start her career. "So after many years," she concluded, "I am ready to step forward and take center stage." In the introduction to her first Battle round (Episode 8), Sissaundra expressed her desire to be an example of equal opportunity: "I really want to prove to my children that it doesn't matter where you are in life. You can always make your dreams come true." In the introduction to her second Battle (Episode 15), she emphasized her choice to sacrifice her career to be a mom and stated, "I'm here because my kids told me 'go do it.'" Before her performance in The Playoffs (Episode 17), Sissaundra talked about the sacrifice she made to give up her career and the sacrifice that her kids had made for her to tour with Celine Dion. During the Live Top 10 show (Episode 22), the focus was on

how she parents from long-distance and how she handles the work/mom balance: “I do have three children and being away from them is really difficult. Whenever I have the opportunity I grab my phone and I tell them ‘I love you,’ ‘call me,’ ‘text me,’ ‘I’m never too busy for you.’ I may be a singer, but I’m a mom first.”

5.4 Conclusion

The requirement to become an entrepreneur of the self in order to learn to thrive in a society defined more and more by market logic, and the imperative to be flexible, is part and parcel of neoliberal logic. This is particularly true for African American women because of political and structural intersectionality: Black women have been victimized by the discourses of post-racism, post-sexism, and post-intersectionality. And, in the context of myriad forms of oppression and structural inequality, African American women were the most disadvantaged group in terms of attempting to recover from the Great Recession: they suffer multiple material barriers to recovery and they are the target of multiple discourses that blame them for their suffering and that conspire against their success.

American Idol and *The Voice* viewed Black women against the neoliberal backdrop of flexibility and adaptability, in which the necessity to be controlled and confident was a consistent imperative identified as a means to success. The women were implored to be more confident in some cases and to tone it down in other cases. They were instructed to control the power of their voice in some instances and were criticized for being too in control in other situations. This discourse gestured to, but did not specifically reference, the key feature of the negative foundational and modern stereotypes of Black women discussed in Chapter Three. Most of those stereotypes are defined negatively because of the supposed lack of self-control. The Matriarch and the welfare mother lacked the self-control to be good mothers, good mates, and good employees. As a result, they were blamed for raising bad children, they lost their men, and couldn’t keep a job. The Jezebel and the hoochie lack sexual self-control. The Black “bitch” and the bad Black mother lack self-control too: they are loud, rude, aggressive and pushy. This discourse of

self-control also draws on modern stereotypes of middle class Black women like the modern mammy, who is required to negotiate “a delicate balance between being appropriately subordinate to white and/or male authority, yet maintaining a level of ambition and aggressiveness needed for achievement in middle-class occupations” (Collins, 2005, p. 140).

This balancing act is part of the “politics of respectability” that has been foisted on Black women in the era of post-racism and post-sexism (Collins, 2005, pp. 143-148). As Collins explains, the way that respectability is framed in these stereotypes of Black women justifies colorblind racism by establishing presumably non-racist and non-sexist standards that Black women could follow in order to enter the ranks of the middle class, and these standards are validated by model Black women characters circulated and commercialized in popular culture (p. 147). In terms of the reality television programs studied in this chapter, we see examples of Black teenage girls (Malaya and Deja) and Black women (Majesty Rose) still learning the necessary self-control that will allow them to succeed. They are willing neoliberal subjects with the potential for growth, but they aren’t quite there yet. And we also see an example of the ideal neoliberal subject, Sissaundra, who has all of the attributes necessary for middle class success and more. She is a professional singer on par with the coaches of *The Voice* and she represents herself flawlessly. Sissaundra handles the ultimate bad situation—being voted off the show by the audience despite the coaches having described her as one of the best singers on the planet—with refinement and grace.

Neoliberal flexibility requires people to “behave nimbly, to be open to change on short notice, to take risks continually,” and to “adapt and retool to meet the continually changing demands placed on them” (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 107). In other words, flexibility demands a high tolerance for instability and uncertainty (Freeman, 2007, p. 253) from Black women who may already be up to their eyeballs in precarity. And in the context of competing in the market to gain success, where the sheer number of competitors can be daunting and failure is always a possibility, the reign of flexibility creates “conditions of insecurity, suffering, and stress” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 3). The current conditions of neoliberalism are

extremely stressful, especially for people who have yet to reach a livable level of success. But because the tropes circulating on *American Idol* and *The Voice*—flexibility, control, and confidence—are contextual and subjective, they hide racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, even if those or other forms of oppression are not consciously being employed or relied upon for the purposes of judging and/or coaching the contestants. People who enjoy a certain level of privilege, whether it be class privilege (Freeman, 2007, p. 253), whiteness, or maleness, for example, also have a greater capacity to be flexible, to take risks, and to retool. A rich, white man, for example, has a greater ability to sell his business and attempt to start a new career as, say, a writer, than does a poor white man. Compulsory flexibility creates more vulnerability for Black women, not less. In the case of both *American Idol* and *The Voice*, only African American women were subjected to the imperative to be flexible in their self-control and confidence. For the white and Black male contestants, the judges focused on other issues, such as notes and technical advice about the vocal performance (in terms of pitch and tone, for example), appearance (generally positive compliments), and how the audience reacted to the performance.

In addition to the discourses of flexibility and control, African American women were also subject to two representations. On *American Idol*, Black women's singing talent was consistently attributed to natural ability, which implies that their ability to sing well is not the result of hard work, training, and practice. None of the white contestants were portrayed as natural singers. The unconscious racism voiced by the judges demonstrates how everyday racism has shifted from overt and conscious to covert and unconscious. Race is never mentioned in the representation of Black women as natural singers: only through close and careful study of the show does this kind of unconscious racism become clear. On *The Voice*, Sissandra was portrayed as an exemplary Black neoliberal woman. Not only was she portrayed as the epitome of flexible control and confidence; she was also portrayed as a Black lady. This positive representation of Black femininity functions as proof that Black women can in fact balance career success with being a successful single parent, all without being aggressive, rude, or bitchy. This representa-

tion serves to delegitimize claims of racism, sexism, and intersectional oppression and to shift the blame for failure to individual Black women: if Sissaundra can be a successful professional singer and a Black lady, why can't other Black women do the same thing? In this case, the positive representation of one Black woman on reality television may contribute to negative discursive consequences for African American women in society.

The success and failure of Black women on singing talent competition shows serves as examples and justifications of the social positions of individuals and groups who have been marginalized historically. Some people, including Black women, fail because they are not good enough (at being flexible in this case) to compete on an equal playing field. Other people, including Black women, are very close to success; they just need to keep working to master the techniques of the self they have learned on the show. Ultimately, Sissaundra served as a test case of the claims of neoliberalism, post-racism, and post sexism. Despite the alleged fairness of the competition, and in spite of the fact that the judges consistently indicated that she had all of the skill and talent needed to win the contest, Sissaundra did not win. The neoliberal claim that anyone with the requisite skills and personal initiative could succeed in a fair competition was not borne out in the Sissaundra's results on *The Voice*. All of the expert judges, pop music stars themselves, considered Sissaundra an equal in singing and performing ability. It is beyond the purpose of my study to understand or explain why the audience did not vote for Sissaundra, but the claims to fairness and blindness must ring hollow for many Black women, as it did for Sissaundra when she was prematurely and unceremoniously eliminated from *The Voice*.

6 Gamedoc Reality TV Shows

Gamedocs are reality television programs on which contestants play a contrived game that is not based on a specific talent like singing or dancing. The contestants are subject to documentary style filming not only of the game play but also what would otherwise be "behind the scenes." Gamedocs

have their roots in the genre of televised game shows like *The Wheel of Fortune* (NBC), *The Price is Right* (NBC/ABC), and *Family Feud* (ABC/CBS). There are several differences between game shows and gamedocs. Most game shows are episodic (the contestants change every episode) but most gamedocs are serials (the contestants do not change unless they are eliminated). Most game shows are played in studios but most gamedocs are played outside studios or in settings much more expansive than a typical television studio. Most game shows are played in front of a live audience and do not involve physical exertion. Perhaps the first modern reality gamedoc was *Road Rules* (MTV, 1995-2007), which involved cast members competing to solve clues and reach travel destinations. This show morphed into other gamedocs featuring former cast members of MTV's *Road Rules*, as well as various all-star and reunion versions. Other gamedocs include *Big Brother* (CBS, 2000-), *Fear Factor* (NBC, 2001-2006, 2011-2012), and *The Apprentice* and *Celebrity Apprentice* (NBC, 2004-), *The Amazing Race* (CBS, 2001-), and *Survivor* (CBS, 2000-). This chapter investigates the representations of African American women on the most watched post-recessionary gamedocs in 2012⁹: *Survivor Philippines* and *Survivor Caramoan*.¹⁰

6.1 The Show

Survivor is a reality television show where contestants are stranded in a deserted location in places like Africa (Season 3), the Amazon (Season 6), Panama (Season 12), and Fiji (Season 14). Contestants are divided into "Tribes" (teams). The Tribes work together to survive from day to day, erecting shelter, finding food and water, and building a fire. The Tribes also work together in Immunity Challenges, where they compete against the other tribes. Tribes that win the challenges get immunity—they do not have to eliminate anyone from their tribe—and they get rewards such as food, tarps, blankets, and fishing supplies. The Tribe that loses the challenge goes to the Tribal Council, where they are forced to vote to eliminate one member of their group. The motto of the game is "Outwit, Outlast, Outplay," and

⁹ Both 2012 seasons of *The Amazing Race* (CBS) enjoyed higher ratings than *Survivor*, but neither season of *The Amazing Race* included any African American women.

¹⁰ Caramoan is a municipality of the Philippines.

Survivor is a complicated game where contestants are constantly simultaneously competing and cooperating, trying to build alliances and, oftentimes, stabbing each other in the back in order to survive on the game. Once about half of the contestants have been eliminated, the two Tribes are collapsed into one, and the contestants compete as individuals. At the end of the game, a jury of their peers (who are recently eliminated contestants) judges the finalists and decides who will be the “Sole Survivor.” This means that finalists are forced to try to persuade people they might have betrayed, just a week or two earlier in the show, that they deserve to be the winner of the game. Jeff Probst hosts the show.

In the first 5 years (11 seasons) that it aired, *Survivor* was in the top 10 in Nielsen ratings, including earning a #2 ranking in Season 1 (Armstrong, 2000), earning the #1 ranking in Season 2 (Armstrong, 2001), and earning the #3 ranking in Season 8 (“A New Tribe,” 2004). The show’s television ratings have declined from an average of approximately 20 million viewers for each of the first 10 seasons, and have leveled out at 10-12 million viewers per season since 2009. *Survivor: Philippines* was #18 in 2012-2013 with over 11 million viewers, and was the #3 ranked RTV program, trailing only *The Voice* and *American Idol* in reality television ratings (Patten, 2013). *Survivor: Caramoan* was #29 in 2012-2013 with over 10 million viewers, and was the #7 ranked RTV program.

6.2 The Literature

Much of the scholarly work focusing on *Survivor* does not attend to issues of race, gender, class or other identity categories, and none of it was conducted in the post-recessionary context. Cavender (2004) argued that while the show attempts to create “a sense of community by depicting contestants as teams with common goals; they must bond by necessity,” ultimately the 2002 season of *Survivor* promoted competition and lying as keys to success in groups (pp. 168-169). Teven (2004) analyzed the persuasive techniques used by the final four contestants on the 2002 season of the show. He found that the finalists employed a variety of persuasive approaches. Of the three white male finalists, one used his likeability to persuade the jury, one used his utility and helpfulness to others, and the third used schem-

ing and manipulation (pp. 55-58). The eventual champion, a white female, used her physical attractiveness and intelligent game playing to persuade the jury to pick her as the final cast member to survive and win (pp. 58-59). Wilson, Robinson, and Callister's (2012) content analysis of the 2000-2007 seasons of *Survivor* found that the show was dominated by "indirect aggression," which is "verbal and physical aggression that takes place behind the victim's back, as well as direct forms of aggression that are meant to destroy relationships (e.g., spreading rumors, backbiting, sabotage, and intentional body language)" (p. 269). One study focused on finding out what gratifications audience members felt they received from watching "competition-based reality programming," specifically, the 2003-2004 seasons of *Survivor*, *The Apprentice*, and *The Bachelor* (Barton, 2009). Barton (2009) discovered that viewers gained satisfaction from the personal utility they felt the reality television programs they watched provided to them. Personal utility composed a number of reasons that people said they viewed *Survivor*, *The Apprentice*, and *The Bachelor*: "they make me feel less lonely," "they are different than anything else on TV," "they help me forget about my problems," and "they help me relax" (p. 466).

The available literature looking at gamedocs and race did not take into account the intersection of gender or class or other vectors of oppression. Bell-Jordan (2008) studied the 2006 season of *Survivor*, in which the Tribes were divided based on race/ethnicity: African American, Asian, Caucasian, and Hispanic. She found that although the format of that particular season attempted to force a discussion of race/ethnicity, it essentially failed to do so (pp. 361-362). Drew (2011), who studied the same season as Bell-Jordan, argued that, despite the producers' suggestion that the show would prove that race no longer mattered in the U.S., it ended up revealing that historical racism was used to justify success and failure on the show. Pardo (2013) analyzed two scenes from the first episode of the early-2009 season of the show. In the first scene, a white male and a Black female get into an argument, and the man makes comments that can be construed as racist (pp. 70-71). In the second scene, which occurs at the first Tribal Council, a Black male confronts the white male who made the comments, arguing that the com-

ments were in fact racist (pp. 71-73). In all three of these studies, the texts selected for study were deliberately formatted to spark discussions about difference in terms of race/ethnicity. In the case of Bell-Jordan's study, she intentionally looked at RTV programs that "purposely, critically, and unapologetically confront race in the U.S." (p. 368). And in the episode that Pardo explored, the contestants were explicitly directed by the host of the show to form opinions and judgments about, and to make decisions based on, assumptions they made before they had spoken to each other (pp. 70-71). Denham and Jones's (2008) study found that Black people rarely appear as contestants on *Survivor* (p. 94), and this could explain why studies about race on the show have been so narrowly targeted.

Like the singing talent literature discussed in the previous chapter, none of the studies of gamedoc RTV programs focus on representations of African American women, none of them study post-recession reality television, and none of them take the recession into account as formative of the context in which reality television circulates. The cast of *Survivor: Philippines* included two African American women, and the cast of *Survivor: Caramoan* included one African American woman.

6.3 Findings/Discussion

In the gamedocs I studied, African American women were underrepresented in the casts of the shows. I initially planned to study *The Amazing Race* (ABC). In my early work on the study, I mistakenly thought two of the contestants on Season 21 of that show were African American women. Once I discovered that the women were actually Sri Lanken, I turned to Season 22 of *The Amazing Race*, which had slightly lower ratings than the previous season. I learned that no African American women were included in that show's cast either. Ultimately, I decided to study two seasons of *Survivor*. In the process of revising the texts I would study for this chapter, I discovered that out of the 84 cast members included in the two seasons of *Survivor* and two seasons of *The Amazing Race*, only three were African American women. The Black women that were included in the casts of gamedocs were eliminated early in the show: Roxy was eliminated second, Dawson was eliminated fifth, and Francesca was eliminated first.

Given the relatively minor role African American women played on these shows, their portrayals were minimally developed. It is well beyond the design of my study to calculate the frequency of exposure per cast member of the show, but over the two seasons of *Survivor* studied here, there were a total of 30 episodes. The three Black women cast members appeared for a total of seven of those episodes, but they were only given significant air time on the show in which they were eliminated. This exclusion by omission on *Survivor* is characteristic of the exclusion of Black women in society described by Giroux (2008).

Despite their relative exclusion on gamedocs, the three African American women who did appear on *Survivor* were portrayed as bitches, which is a common controlling image of working-class Black women found in popular culture (Collins, 2005). In each case, these representations were bound up in neoliberal logic. Because they are represented on *Survivor* using this familiar controlling image already historically instantiated in popular culture, Black women's failure in the competition seems natural. *Survivor* uses controlling images to represent the Black women on the show as ineffective competitors who deserve to fail, and this logic becomes a part of everyday life. The remainder of this chapter examines how *Survivor* employed various permutations of the Black bitch controlling image to represent the Black women contestants as deserving of failure and marginalization.

The African American women on *Survivor*, who were all eliminated in the first few weeks of the show, were represented in the controlling image of the Black bitch discussed in Chapter Three. Collins (2005) writes that the controlling image of the bitch portrays Black women as "loud, rude, and pushy," as well as "confrontational and actively aggressive" (p. 123), but bitches can also be quiet, polite, and/or passive aggressive. What makes the controlling image of the bitch theoretically productive is not the self-presentational style of the person being portrayed as a bitch, or the way the person might be portrayed as bitchy, which can be quite varied. Instead, the usefulness of the concept is in the complications that bitchiness presents to the status quo. Collins (2005) captures this perspective:

Aggressive African American women create problems in the imperfectly desegregated post-civil rights era, because they are less likely to accept the terms of their subordination. In this context, Black “bitches” of all kinds must be censured, especially those who complain about bad housing, poor schools, abusive partners, sexual harassment, as well as their own depiction in popular culture. They and their children must be depicted as unsuitable for racial integration. (p. 138)

Each of the Black women on *Survivor* are portrayed as bitches in terms of the problems they create for their tribe mates, their tribe, and the order of the game. They do not accept the terms of their subordination in the game, and the way that they are treated, including their ultimate expulsion from the island, is a form of censure in response to their complaints. They are voted off the island because they are judged to be unsuitable tribe mates, and this can ultimately be read as a commentary on the place of “unruly” Black women in the neoliberal order. In the following sections, I explain each Black woman’s style of bitchiness (angry or passive aggressive, for example) as it is represented on the show, and I also spell out the ways each woman’s bitchiness creates problems and is represented as unsuitable for the game. On *Survivor*, African American women become subject to a neoliberal intersectional gaze; their representation on the show signals their status as undeserving of success and deserving of marginalization from the game, and by extension, society.

6.3.1 *Survivor: Philippines—Roxy*

Roxanne “Roxy” Morris, a 28-year-old African American woman, was assigned to the Matsing tribe. Roxy was voted off in Episode 2. Most of Roxy’s screen time was devoted to her attempt to respond to what she thought was the disconcerting conduct of two white teammates, Angie and Malcolm. Roxy attempted to argue that Angie and Malcolm’s cuddling would hurt the morale of the tribe and was a dangerous relationship for her and her tribe mates. Roxy contrasted herself to Angie, who was assumed to be using her good looks to trap Malcolm, and to Malcolm, who fell for the trap. In attempting

to make her case, Roxy is depicted as reasonable and calm at first, but her portrayal quickly morphs to the angry Black bitch representation.

The first time we see Matsing in the second episode, it is nighttime and the tribe is trying to sleep. Prior to this, Roxy was given minimal camera time on the show. Angie and Malcolm are shown cuddling as they lay next to Roxy. As Roxy reacts to this, the shot alternates from nighttime footage of Roxy watching what is going on next to her, and Roxy speaking to the camera about the situation. The next day, looking and sounding confident, Roxy says, "I wake up in the middle of the night, and Malcolm and Angie, they're cuddling, like full on cuddling. That's the same trap that's set every time and with Angie, it's literally a booby trap." As she smiles knowingly, she continues, "And Malcolm's falling for it. I was not born yesterday. As a tribe, we need to be aware that this is going on because those two are dangerous together. One has got to go. Period." Roxy is suggesting that Angie, a young white female who was Miss Teen Utah USA in 2010 and is the stereotypical blond with large breasts, is attempting to manipulate Malcolm, and/or that their romantic relationship could be problematic for the rest of the members of the tribe. As Roxie mentions, this is a common ploy for survival on the show: an attractive white woman tries to manipulate a white man, oftentimes romantically, in order to have him help her outlast other contestants in their tribe.

This is the point where Roxy begins to form a persuasive appeal she hopes to use to stay in the game. If Roxy can convince her tribe mates that the relationship between Angie and Malcolm is trouble, they might vote Angie off the island instead of Roxy. When the show comes back to the cuddling storyline, Roxy tells the camera, "So I wake up on Day 5 and Malcolm and Angie are cuddling again. And I'm like, 'I want one of you out.' Malcolm is clearly more useful. So in order to get Angie out, I knew I had to get Russell on my side." After Roxy alerts Russell, the only Black man on the tribe, to what is going on, Russell tells the camera that he agrees with her, concluding, "Survivor couples? [Shaking head from side to side] Unnn unn. You wana whack that thing down real quick." Roxy also talks to the fifth tribe mem-

ber, Denise, about the situation with Angie and Malcolm. The scene ends with Malcolm saying that he thinks he and Angie are being targeted. At this point, Roxy is attempting to use the argument that people who are romantically linked are not trustworthy tribe mates in order to subvert a white man and white woman. To this point, she is represented as calm, confident, and rational. Her argument about the danger of Angie and Malcolm's relationship makes sense in the context of that season, as well as in terms of the history of game play on the show over the last fifteen years.

As the episode unfolds, Roxy's demeanor is portrayed as shifting from self-confident and capable to bitchy and angry. As she appeared to lose confidence in her place on the tribe, she was shown attacking tribe mates, being rude, and using nonverbal communication consistent with the bitch stereotype, such as eye rolling, neck bobbing, and clapping for effect. After the scene described previously, in which Russell agrees with her that Malcolm and Angie's relationship is trouble, the episode then turns to the tribes' dealing with inclement weather. This is when Roxy's representation begins to shift.

In this scene, clouds roll in, waves rip through the ocean water, and it is raining hard. After showing the other two tribes in the rain, the focus shifts to Matsing. Roxy is portrayed as too weak to be helpful in the camp, and she is also represented as not being self-reliant. At the beginning of the scene, Roxy is shown standing under the tribe's shelter, looking miserable, as other tribe members appear to be busy working. After commenting to the camera about how miserable the rain is, Malcolm explains, "Russell is on fire duty, me and Denise are trying to keep the shelter in one piece. And Roxy is just out of it. She's not working. Her mind's not in it and everyone is noticing." The scene shifts to Roxy, with tears in her eyes, looking crestfallen. As she talks, video alternates between showing Roxy talking and her tribe mates working. There is no mention of what it is that Angie is doing.

In the Challenge that followed this scene, Roxy is portrayed as weak. Matsing is shown strategizing about who will do what part of the challenge. Angie doesn't want to run twice to get puzzle pieces. When asked if she can run twice, Roxy says no because she hadn't enough water earlier in the day. Rus-

sell looks surprised and the rest of the tribe looks unhappy with the answer. Angie ends up running twice, and appears to be exerting maximum effort as she does so. She has a determined look on her face and she grimaces as she tries to help pull the sled. Once her second turn is over, Angie is shown looking exhausted and lying on the ground while the other tribe members' work on solving the puzzle. As Angie lies on the ground, huffing and puffing from her effort, Roxy is shown standing passively, looking apathetic. Eventually, Matsing loses the challenge. Back at their camp, Russell weighs the relative merits of Angie and Roxy: "So we go to the Challenge today and once again we lost. Twenty-year-old Angie, beauty queen, she's like 'I don't think I can do this.'" He continued, "And then here's Roxy, saying 'Not me. I have not had enough water to drink today.' And I just lost it." He concludes, explaining, "Roxy has been extremely successful at making herself a target for getting her head chopped off."

Right before the Tribal Council meeting, as her marginalization from her tribe worsens, the scene shifts to Roxy and Russell talking in private about Angie. This is where Roxy's portrayal changes from confident and assertive to rude and bitchy. Roxy tells Russell, "It's a public embarrassment! Girlfriend's on the floor passed out! She was on the floor!" Russell responds, "You're preaching to the choir on that sista'." Roxy tells the camera, "This is why companies don't like fraternization. It spoils a group." At this point, she starts gesturing and bobbing her neck as she continues to speak to the camera: "But they're not listening to me. Malcolm and Angie are too busy being up each other's butt. And it's frustrating because she doesn't bring anything to the team. She's just playing a cheap game!" Roxy is then shown gesturing and making faces, telling Russell, "That one over there who ain't got no skills at all? Just show the boobs! Somebody will fall for it!" She concludes, telling the camera, "It's like Miss America. All. Day. Long. [Clapping her hands for emphasis and bugging her eyes out] Angie needs to go. Not just because she's the weakest link, but her relationship with Malcolm is just not good."

Throughout the Tribal Council, Roxy is shown being antagonistic and disrespectful towards her tribe mates. The Tribal Council starts with Jeff asking Roxy to finish this sentence, "If there is one thing

that I could change about this tribe, it would be?” Roxy replied, with a mocking tone and a facial expression that looked like she knew she was right, “That they won’t invest 75% of their energy being work-horses around the camp.” Malcolm looked like he couldn’t believe what he was hearing and didn’t think she was right. Jeff responded by asking, “So you’re saying that they put too much energy at camp?” Roxy replied, “Absolutely! I feel like we come back from a second challenge that we lost and then it’s just [in a mocking tone] ‘Back to work.’” Jeff asked Denise if she agreed, to which she responded, “No! If we want to be strong for challenges, we need to get wood. We need that fire going. We have to work. That’s really what’s going on.” Roxy is shown rolling her eyes as Denise talks.

Jeff then pivots the discussion to Angie and Malcolm’s relationship, asking Roxy, “Do you see friendships starting to form in this little cluster of people?” Roxy, neck bobbing, responded, “Absolutely! Other things are as well. I don’t really know what’s going on between Angie and Malcolm but it’s way beyond just an alliance.” Jeff asks her if she is implying that the relationship is romantic and Roxy says, “Probably.” Jeff gives Malcolm a chance to respond to Roxy’s allegations, and he says that there is nothing going on and that Angie is like a little sister to him. Roxy blurts out, “Creepy!” When Jeff asks her why it bothers her, Roxy responds by saying Angie set a “booby trap” for Malcolm. Turning to Angie, she says, “Sorry, but like literally.” She clearly isn’t sorry; she is upset and has lost control of her emotions. In the end, Roxy is voted off the island.

6.3.2 Survivor Philippines—Dawson

The other African American woman on this season of *Survivor* was 28-year-old Sarah Dawson (referred to as Dawson on the show). Dawson was a member of the Kalabaw tribe. She was voted off on the fifth episode. For most of her time on the show, Dawson is portrayed as a nice, fun, caring teammate. But because she toyed with a fellow tribe member for no apparent reason, and admitted that she enjoyed it, Dawson was represented as a passive aggressive bitch.

Dawson is connected to the bitch image by the way that she attempts to manipulate a white male tribe mate, Jeff Kent. She thinks Kent is taking advantage of the fact that no one knows that he was a professional athlete who is rich and doesn't need the \$1 million prize. In the first episode, these facts about Kent are not revealed to the cast members. Kent talks to the camera about wanting to keep the information a secret for fear that it might cause him to be targeted for banishment from the island. As members of the Kalabaw tribe are shown in camp, talking about how they came to be on the show, Kent says that a friend suggested he audition, and that he sent in a video of him doing motor-cross. As he was talking, Dawson looked like she knew something. With a self-satisfied look on her face, Dawson told the camera, "I used to spend time with a guy who was really into baseball. I know who Jeff Kent is [she looks proud of herself]. But there's been no mention of him being a former professional athlete. He's made probably \$30 million in his career!" Kent is shown telling his tribe mates that he is not a professional motor-cross racer and that he makes his money selling motorcycles, not racing them. Dawson, still smiling, tells the camera, "I don't think that the other tribe members know, and I think Jeff [Kent] likes it that way! But I will tell him that I know [smiling more] as soon as it becomes valuable to me!" Ultimately, she says that she enjoys toying with Kent by dropping hints suggesting she knows who he is.

After her tribe loses a Challenge, Dawson is shown passive aggressively teasing Jeff Kent. Initially, she seemed to relish having information about Kent because it could help her advance in the game, but in this scene she seems to value the information simply because she can use it to antagonize him. Kalabaw is shown sitting together in their shelter when Dawson, seemingly out of the blue, says, "Maybe I should date an athlete." Jeff Kent asks her, "What do you consider an athlete?" She lists football and basketball and mentions baseball last. She tells the camera, "I know Jeff Kent is a professional athlete and as far as I know I am the only person who knows [Dawson is shown laughing with tribe mates]. I enjoy getting into his mind [smiling] and making him uncomfortable." As she talks about why baseball is a weak sport, and as Kent is shown shaking his head, she tells the camera, "It's a lot of fun to make him

squirm, and it's a lot of fun, I don't know, I feel like I've kinda got a little mouse that doesn't know that it's in a corner [smiling]. And I'm like playing with it. And I'm gonna stomp on it!"

Dawson was never portrayed as overtly bitchy, hateful, or rude, and she was never openly aggressive towards another cast member. Even when she is shown trying to aggravate Kent, it seems fairly harmless. For most of the first four episodes, Dawson is seldom seen and rarely heard. Although her screen time was limited, Dawson was portrayed as having a crush on the host, Jeff Probst. In the opening scene of the season, when the contestants were gathered on a boat waiting to start the game, Dawson is seated in the middle of her tribe. As Jeff climbs onto the boat, Dawson looked excited and smiled broadly. She said, "I'm such a huge fan of the show. I'm thinking to myself, 'Are you dreaming?'" During her last Tribal Council, Dawson told Probst, "We love to see you [smiling] but it sucks to vote someone out." When he told her she was banished from the island, Dawson looking into Jeff's eyes, kissed him on the cheek, and hugged him. Finally, near the end of the Live Reunion Show, Jeff started to address a question to Dawson. Before he could finish the question, Dawson ran over and kissed him on the lips. The studio audience and her cast mates applauded and cheered as Dawson took her seat, a huge smile on her face. Her crush on the host of the show could be seen as cute or odd, but in no way was it treacherous or evil.

In addition to having a crush on the host, Dawson is also shown being positive and supportive to her tribe mates. In the first episode, for example, Dawson is shown working well with a tribe mate on the puzzle during the elimination challenge. As she placed the final piece on the puzzle and Jeff announced that they won, Dawson pumped her fist in the air and was mobbed by her tribe in celebration. Although she does not participate in several challenges, she is shown cheering her tribe on. In the second episode, Dawson's tribe is shown sitting in their shelter to get out of the rain. Dawson suggests that they play a game to make the time pass faster. During Episode 5, Dana, one of Dawson's tribe mates, became severely ill. Dawson takes the lead in comforting Dana and caring for her. Dawson appears

to be genuinely worried about Dana's worsening condition. In her last episode, when it seems that Katie caused her tribe to lose the challenge, Dawson is shown consoling and reassuring her that she would be safe from elimination. Even though Dawson is portrayed as taunting Kent, in the end, she is fairly harmless.

Dawson's target, Jeff Kent, doesn't think her games are harmless. Kent tells the camera that if his tribe mates find out that he was a professional athlete, he might be in danger of being targeted for elimination. He concludes, "The best scenario might be just to vote her [Dawson] out." At Tribal Council, the issue of Kent being a professional athlete does not come out, and Dawson's alleged weakness in the Challenges is not discussed either. When Jeff Probst, the host of the show, asks Dawson why the tribe should keep her, Dawson responded, "I try to keep the spirit of the camp up," to which Kent raised his eyebrows and then rolled his eyes. Dawson continued, "I try to be optimistic and empowering. Being positive in this weather, in thirteen days of rain, that goes pretty far!" There is no discussion of why Dawson is voted off as the show ends, but in the beginning of the next episode, when Jeff Probst recaps what happened the week before, he says, "Katie struggled...costing Kalabaw the victory," concluding that "Katie was an easy target, but when Dawson messed with the bull [Jeff Kent] she got the horns," suggesting that it was Dawson irritating Kent was what got her voted off, and not her poor game play or general weakness.

The only person who really suffers because of her teasing Kent is Dawson, since this is ultimately the reason given for why she was voted off the island. Her actions could have created empathy for Kent in the eyes of someone who thought that Dawson was being rude or that Kent's past as a professional athlete was irrelevant to the game. However, rather than using his secret against him in the game, as she initially suggested, Dawson keeps the secret to herself, in effect protecting Kent. After she is voted off the island, Dawson tells the camera that Kent owes her (she says she wants a motorcycle, sidecar, helmet, and other motorcycle gear) for her silence about his secret. Dawson attempted to parlay her

silence into material gain. This is symptomatic of neoliberalism's drive to expose every human transaction to the model of the market and to commodify anything and everything.

6.3.3 *Survivor: Caramoan--Francesca*

Survivor: Caramoan was the second fan versus favorites season on the show. One team was composed of avid fans of the show; the other was composed of fan favorite cast members from previous seasons. The Bikal tribe, composed of the favorites, included four white men, two white women, one Latina, one Black man, and one Black woman. The white tribe members and the Latina were introduced one by one, followed by Phillip, a Black man who originally competed on *Survivor Redemption Island* (Season 22). The host of the show, Jeff Probst, tells the viewers that Phillip "was labeled crazy by his tribe mates," but that he eventually went on to finish second in the earlier season. Following Phillip, the final member of the tribe is introduced: Francesca, an African American woman who also competed on *Redemption Island*. As she stepped off the helicopter that delivered the favorites to the island, Jeff immediately portrayed Francesca as Phillip's old nemesis from the *Redemption Island* season. To transition from Phillip's introduction to Francesca's, Probst said, "Now he'll [Phillip] have to contend with an old rival – Francesca." The reason for the rivalry is not explained, but the host says that Phillip prevailed when Francesca was the first to be voted off the island by the tribe she shared with Phillip.

Francesca was represented on *Survivor* as a two-faced bitch because she was nice to Phillip to his face, but targeted him behind his back. While she did target Phillip, Francesca appeared to be incompetent at game play and ultimately failed in her effort to get Phillip voted off the island. Francesca was faced with two possible strategies for success in the game. On the one hand, she could try to avoid being targeted by laying low, which might allow her to advance in the game as the other tribe members competed with each other. On the other hand, she could try to actively play the game, exposing herself by getting involved in the scheming game play. Francesca's portrayal on the show demonstrates the du-

al imperatives that African American women face (lay low or try to play the game), and her failure is a cautionary tale about what not to do.

With the rivalry between Francesca and Phillip introduced, both tribes go to set up their campsite. Francesca is shown trying to “play the game” rather than “laying low.” She attempts to build alliances with tribe mates Andrea and Dawn (both white females who eventually vote against her), and she also strains to resolve the negative relationship with Phillip. Phillip is squatting, working on the shelter, as Francesca says, “I guess I want to start by saying that, even though we didn’t get along so well the first time that we played together, I was never gunning for you.” As she squats to help him, she continues, telling Phillip, “And I know that you thought that I was, but I hope you know now that when I told you I wasn’t, I was telling you the truth.” At this point, she pauses to look for a reaction, but Phillip just keeps working, not looking at her. Phillip says, “We’re playing a new game.” Francesca agrees. Phillip says, “Be smart about it,” and Francesca replies, “That’s what I am trying to do.” Phillip says, “Today we are on the same team.” At the end of the scene, Francesca tells the camera, “I resigned myself to just playing really nice with Phillip, but I don’t know if he’s going to be gunning for me. I’m not gunning for him. So if I get voted off first a second time, I will eat [laughing] this rock. It’s not gonna happen.” As the episode proceeds, we do not see Bikal again until they are shown losing the Immunity Challenge.

Once they get back to camp, most of the rest of the episode is devoted to Francesca trying to build an alliance against Phillip. Despite her previous claims that she is not “gunning” for him, Francesca is portrayed as immediately targeting Phillip. First, she is shown trying to persuade Cochran. As they talk about whom to vote off, Andrea and Brandon approach, and Francesca tells them that the four of them should vote for Phillip. No reason is ever given as to why Francesca is targeting Phillip, but when Andrea warns Phillip of Francesca’s plans, he makes it clear that he still holds a grudge for what he perceived that she did in the *Redemption Island* season. Right before they leave for Tribal Council, Brandon and

Erik, who are aligned with Francesca, convince Francesca to change the plan and vote off Andrea, whom they don't trust.

At the Tribal Council, Jeff asks Phillip, "How was it for you to see Francesca?" and Phillip responds, "Somewhat apprehensive. I was concerned about some of the same things that I felt that'd occurred in our season." In the end, with no further discussion of the rivalry between Francesca and Phillip, Francesca is voted off the island, making her the first person in *Survivor* history to be voted off first in two different seasons. This storyline emphasized Francesca targeting Phillip for no stated reason, while it almost completely ignored what had to be a coordinated effort among six tribe mates to vote Francesca off the island.

Francesca might have lost, at least in part, because she couldn't settle on the right strategy. In one scene, she outlined two somewhat contradictory approaches to surviving on the island. First, she said that, because she was voted off first last time, she hoped that she would not be perceived as a threat: "I'm hoping the fact that I was the first person out in my first season is going to work to my advantage because there are much bigger threats in the game. So when they're looking around and wondering, who do they need to be worried about, hopefully they won't be thinking about me." This approach would seem to dictate that she work to get along with her tribe mates to the greatest extent possible. It definitely would lead her to not aggressively try to scheme against another tribe mate, since scheming against someone would make the schemer a threat. And she does appear to get along well with her tribe mates. She cheers for her tribe at the Challenges. Throughout the episode, she is shown smiling at, interacting with, and helping her tribe mates, all of which would seem to make her less of a target.

But less than 30 seconds after saying that she hoped to not seem to be a threat, Francesca is shown telling the camera that she feels that she needs to demonstrate that she can play the game well. As a clip of her laughing with Dawn and Andrea is shown, Francesca tells the camera, "I think a lot of

people think that, in my first season, I got kind of a raw deal and got stuck in an impossible situation, which I totally agree with.” She smiles and laughs, continuing, “So I’ve got to prove that that’s the case [she is shown lounging in the water with Brandon]. That I can actually play this game and be smart about it [she is shown balancing on Erik’s arm as they walk together] and be competitive and make the right relationships [she is shown talking and laughing with Brenda] and get along with people and be a serious threat in this game.” The footage in this clip, like most of the rest of the footage of her interacting with everyone except Phillip, shows that she can and does get along well with her tribe mates, and this should help her in terms of not appearing to be a threat. But her efforts to build an alliance against Phillip looks to have caused her to be perceived as a threat, and in this process she seemed to be not very good at scheming. She is shown trying to convince Dawn and Cochran to align with her, but they end up being the swing votes that lead to her elimination from the game. And ultimately it appears that her failure to identify Andrea as a possible threat is her undoing.

Francesca is shown several times telling Andrea about her plans, and Andrea ends up betraying Francesca by sharing this information with Phillip. When she is told that Phillip thinks he has a majority alliance within the tribe, Francesca confidently brushes the idea aside and does not appear to consider that Andrea might not really be on her side. Next, she is shown telling the camera, “There’s still conversations going on but it seems pretty clear that Phillip is going to be the one to go.” She seems to think that her early departure from the island last time will keep her safe, and this thought seems to inhibit her strategy-wise: “Of course, I could be blindsided. I could be voted out first twice, which would be the worst thing ever, really the worst thing ever. I can’t even talk about that possibility right now [laughing].”

As the pre-Tribal Council part of the show unfolds, Francesca begins to get paranoid, and this seems to work against her ability to be good at game play. First, she suggests targeting Corinne, explaining to the camera, “One of the things we’re considering is splitting the votes because it is possible that

Phillip has an idol (which gives the player immunity). And I hate to go down this paranoid road but something does not feel right about the way they're behaving." Then, when she is told that others in her alliance want to vote for Andrea because they do not trust her, she agrees, dropping all the planning she had done to that point. As they leave for Tribal Council, Francesca, looking worried, tells the camera, "At this point we're leaving for Tribal Council. I have no time to try to get to the bottom of this. The only reason I came up with that plan [splitting the vote] is because I didn't want us to get totally screwed. And now that is exactly what might happen." Francesca ultimately gets voted off the island, and three people she trusted voted against her. This suggests that attempting to prove she could play the game had backfired, and that she might have been better laying low. Phillip, referring to what he didn't like about Francesca from the last time they played on *Survivor*, points to the ultimate problem that might have caused Francesca to be voted off first for a second time: "She was very strategic early on in the game when she didn't necessarily need to be." This suggests that she might have made herself a target when she wasn't otherwise considered a threat.

After being voted out, Francesca is sent off the island and previews for the next episode are shown. At the very end of the episode, Francesca summarizes her experience on *Survivor*: "I cannot believe I got voted out first again, and I'm not going to cry about it." She goes on to explain that the good thing about being voted off first twice is "I know how to deal with being voted out first." She concludes, "I guess I am not cut out for *Survivor*."

6.4 Conclusion

Since all of the existing literature about race on *Survivor* focuses on seasons and/or episodes of the show where the format of the show artificially prompts discussion of difference, my study is the first to attempt to understand how African American women are represented on versions of the show that are not designed to prompt discussions of race, gender, or class, for example. I found that Black women were underrepresented on gamedocs in general, and on *Survivor* specifically. The few Black women that

were included on *Survivor* were portrayed as bitches, which justified their failure to succeed on the show's competition.

Despite their relevance overall, several explanations of the bitch image outlined by Collins (2005) do not apply in the case of the African American women competing on the seasons of *Survivor* I studied. Calling Black women bitches, according to Collins, "is designed to defeminize and demonize them," (p. 123), but on *Survivor*, none of the Black women are ever called bitches. Moreover, in no way is the use of the bitch representation an attempt to contest the term, nor is it defined positively via the representations on the show. Instead, the representation of the Black female contestants as bitches is uniformly negative, and it results in quick elimination from the game. Also, unlike some instances of the bitch representation in popular culture, the Black women on *Survivor* do not attempt to use their sexuality as a tool to succeed in the game, nor do they use their sexuality against the other contestants. Finally, none of the Black women on the seasons of *Survivor* that I studied are represented as "educated bitches" (p. 138).

On *Survivor*, the controlling image of the Black bitch served a narrative function. In all three cases studied here, there was no explanation by tribe members as to why they voted to eliminate Roxy, Dawson, or Francesca from the tribe. Each Black woman's last episode on the show, then, needed to rationalize her elimination in order to make narrative sense for the audience. The controlling image of the bitch was used to justify and narratively explain the votes. The controlling image of the bitch in popular culture has been used to justify marginalization of Black women who are too unruly to be admitted to middle-class society, and that logic is drawn upon by the producers of the show to explain the elimination of the Black female contestants. The three African American female contestants on the seasons of *Survivor* I studied all represented different versions of the stereotype of the bitch, and this representation was the primary justification used to explain their elimination from the show. The producers crafted the narrative that each Black woman's bitchiness justified their ejection from the show in the

way that they pieced together the thousands of hours of footage to create the final product—the episode shown each week on the air. Roxy turned to the negative actions of the controlling image of the Black bitch when she felt marginalized and in danger. She was represented as resorting to typical negative features of the bitch: clapping her hands for emphasis, bobbing her neck, bugging her eyes out, being loud and rude, and switching her speech to Black English. Dawson was represented as a passive aggressive bitch. She was never overtly mean or rude. She never got loud or angry. But she did use information that only she and Jeff Kent knew to taunt Kent. Like Dawson, Francesca was never loud, rude, or mean to anyone. Instead, she was portrayed as a two-faced bitch because she was nice to Phillip to his face, telling him that she was not targeting him, and all the while she was in fact targeting him behind his back.

While all three of the women were portrayed as different versions of the controlling image of the Black bitch, they all presented essentially the same problem to their tribe mates: Each woman, who was clearly one of the weaker members of the tribe, created a problem for one of the men, each of whom were one of the strongest members of the tribe. Tribe mates had to ultimately choose between Roxy and Malcolm, Dawson and Jeff, and Francesca and Russell. Given the relative strength of each contestant, and the fact that Roxy, Dawson, and Francesca were portrayed as giving their tribe mates a reason to vote them off (being bitchy), the early elimination of the Black female contestants makes narrative sense.

Ultimately, several lessons can be gleaned from the portrayal of the African American women contestants on the show. First, seemingly nice and smart people can try to play the game and fail. Roxy is depicted as a pleasant person for most of her time on the show, and she was essentially right to criticize Angie and Malcolm. Dawson and Francesca were both portrayed as being nice to their tribe mates, and Dawson did not target Kent for elimination from the game. Another lesson is that being targeted is not personal; it is just how the game works. This sentiment was repeated constantly as contestants

talked about voting off different tribe mates. For example, in the scene where Francesca told Brandon and Andrea that her plan was to vote Phillip off the island, Andrea agreed with her, but then privately told the camera, “Francesca is tricky for me because I really like her. She’s funny. I think we have a really good bond. It’s just hard because right away [Day 1], her, me and Donna talked. And then a long time went by and I didn’t hear anything from her. So she has her own agenda, but I think I have more loyal people with Phillip. So instead of Francesca I think it’s better to go that way [with Phillip].” These sentiments are symptomatic of neoliberal racism and sexism. Nothing is personal; it is all just a game that everyone has agreed to play. Participation equals tacit acceptance of the rules. Failure is the fair outcome of the game since the game is fair.

Another lesson emerging from Francesca’s portrayal on the show is that some people are meant to succeed and some are not. Recall the conclusion that Francesca reached with respect to being voted off the island first, twice: “I guess I am not cut out for *Survivor*.” If, as Collins (2005) argues, these kinds of representations of African American women serve as examples of what to do and not do, all three of the Black women on *Survivor* are represented as examples of what to not do. Francesca’s experience highlighted the dual challenge for Black women in neoliberal society: try to compete or try to lay low and hope to stay under the radar. All three women are examples where attempting to play the game turned out to be less efficacious than laying low. In the end, all three women fail in the show’s game play. These failures add to an accumulation of Black women failing in mediated popular culture, which further ensconces the controlling image in society and also justifies the failure of Black women to succeed in society in general and in the aftermath of the Great Recession, over the last eight years.

7 Lifestyle Reality TV Shows

The lifestyle subgenre of reality television includes shows that focus on cast members solving personal problems by learning to make changes in their daily lives. Cast members change their lifestyle

in terms of appearance and style (*What Not to Wear, Extreme Makeover*), nutrition and exercise (*The Biggest Loser, Heavy, I Used to be Fat*), parenting (*Honey We're Killing the Kids, Supernanny, Nanny 911*), overcoming addiction (*Intervention, Rehab with Dr. Drew*), and marriage/family relationships (*Wife Swap, Shalom for the Home*).

Lifestyle reality television show formats vary. On almost every lifestyle program, experts help cast members learn to make life changes by teaching and motivating/punishing them. On *What Not to Wear*, for example, style experts teach people how to shop for clothes that are fashionable and fit their body type correctly. Cast members on the show also learn to properly style and care for their hair as well as how to choose and correctly apply makeup. Lifestyle games, like *Supernanny* and *Honey We're Killing the Kids*, “fuse the conventions of gaming with expert guidance in parenting, nutrition, domesticity, and other everyday activities” (Murray & Ouellette, 2009, p. 5). Unlike lifestyle games, lifestyle competition shows combine expert coaching with a competitive contest format. For example, *The Biggest Loser* is a weight loss lifestyle show on which the contestants are given coaching in nutrition and exercise. They receive assistance from doctors and other health specialists, and they are trying to change their lives by losing weight and learning a new way to eat and be active. Contestants also compete with each other to win challenges and to lose the most weight. At least one contestant is eliminated from the show every week, and ultimately one person wins the title of “The Biggest Loser” by losing the highest percentage of weight on the show. Lifestyle experiments do not involve competition or an expert to help the cast members. On *Wife Swap*, for example, the show simply documents what happens when families switch moms/wives. No expert is involved. The point of the experiment (the swap is not permanent) is for the cast members to learn from being exposed to different approaches to family lifestyles, partnering and parenting. In this chapter, I focus on *The Biggest Loser*, which was the highest-rated lifestyle program that aired in 2012-2013.

7.1 The Show

The Biggest Loser is a competitive weight loss reality television show that premiered in the U.S. on NBC in October 2004. The person who has the highest percentage of weight loss at the end of the season is crowned The Biggest Loser. The contestants are divided into teams and live on a “ranch,” which includes a gym and dormitory style housing that features shared bedrooms, common living spaces, and a kitchen. Each team is assigned to a trainer and wears the same color t-shirts. The trainers perform several roles as they help contestants try to lose weight. The trainers teach the contestants healthy eating and exercising habits that will help the contestants lose weight and that the contestants will presumably embrace as new lifestyle choices. Another way that the trainers help contestants is by playing the role of therapist, helping the contestants understand why they have become obese. Aside from helping contestants learn to be physically and mentally healthy, the trainers on the show also act as competitive coaches, trying to help the contestants lose extreme amounts of weight in order to win the game. The goal of healthy weight loss and the goal of winning *The Biggest Loser* competition are markedly different. According to the Center for Disease Control, healthy, sustainable weight loss typically involves losing 1 to 2 pounds per week by cutting calories and exercising for 60 to 90 minutes per day on most days (“Losing weight,” 2011). Successful contestants on *The Biggest Loser* typically lose 1 to 2 pounds per day by eating 1500 calories and working out for at least six hours per day (Cooper & Denhart, 2005; Pappas, 2010).

The Biggest Loser has a documentary style in that contestants are shown going about their day-to-day lives on the ranch: being coached and motivated as they work out, competing in challenges, cooking, eating, and relaxing. In addition to documenting the contestant’s lives on the ranch, the show also involves format features to increase the drama of the show. The workout segments often focus on contestants being pushed beyond their limit, which results in a great deal of arguing, crying, throwing up, and quitting. The Weigh In occurs at the end of each show, when the contestants step on the scale

to find out how much weight they lost since the last weigh-in. Each contestant stands on the scale where her or his previous week's weight is displayed. After being weighed, the scale shows the previous week's weight with the new weight, and a scoreboard shows each contestant's percentage of weight lost since the last time she or he was weighed. Sometimes contestants with the lowest percentage of weight loss are automatically eliminated, and other times contestants are forced to vote off one of the contestants who had the lowest percentage of weight loss. Reward Challenges involve some kind of physical or mental challenge, with the winner getting prizes such as letters from home, gym memberships, cash, and competition advantages like deductions in weight (a "1 pound pass," for example, means that 1 pound will be subtracted from the actual weight of a contestant at the Weigh In), and immunity for individuals or entire teams. Temptation Challenges involve the contestants being tempted to eat unhealthy foods with the promise of a reward for doing so. Sometimes the reward for eating the unhealthy food is stated at the beginning of the challenge, but other times the reward is a secret. There are Last Chance Workouts, which occur right before the end of the show. These usually involve maximum exertion on the part of the contestants as they try to shed every last ounce before their weigh in. Also, at some point in the season, usually when about half of the contestants have been eliminated, the game changes from teams to individuals. In the team phase, all team members work out with their team trainer, they compete in Challenges together, and weigh ins calculate each team's total percentage of weight lost. The team with the lowest percentage of weight loss has a player eliminated (automatically or by vote). In the individual phase, each remaining contestant works out with any of the trainers, they compete in individual challenges, and Weigh Ins are decided by each individual's percentage of weight loss. Finally, there are two winners on every season finale: the At Home prize is awarded to the person with the highest percentage of weight loss of all contestants who were eliminated from the competition, and the Grand Prize is awarded to the finalist who has lost the highest percentage of weight.

The Biggest Loser has had consistently good television ratings, pulling in 7 to 10 million viewers per season. In 2008, *The Biggest Loser 5* was viewed by almost 9 million people, making it the 57th most watched show and the 14th most watched reality television show (Van de Kamp, 2008). In spring of 2009, over 10 million people viewed Season 7, and it ranked 10th among reality television shows (“ABC press release,” 2009). Season 8, aired in the fall of 2009, was the show’s most successful in terms of ratings: it was the 30th most viewed network television show overall and 9th reality television show, with over 10.4 million viewers (Andreeva, 2010). Ratings for *The Biggest Loser* declined from 2010 to 2012, ranging from 7 to over 8.4 million viewers, but during this period the show was ranked no worse than the 15th most watched reality television program (Andreeva, 2011; Andreeva, 2012). *The Biggest Loser 14*, the season I studied, which aired in 2012, was viewed by over 7 million people, making it the 54th ranked network television show and the 10th most watched reality television program for the year (Patten, 2013).

These ratings have translated into a highly profitable multi-media franchise. The show is estimated to bring in over \$96 million per year in advertising revenue (Arndt, 2012). For the season studied here, the sponsors included General Mills, Brita Water Filters, Planet Fitness, Subway, Jennie-O, and Walgreens (Lafayette, 2013). *The Biggest Loser* has also parlayed ratings success into a range of weight loss products that include a website, DVDs, books, video games, resorts, and other items (Stewart, 2013). As of 2006, these spinoff products and services made the show a \$120 million business (Ives, 2006). The branded items alone bring in over \$50 million a year (Young, 2009). According to The Biggest Loser Club website, the Club provides members with a 6-week quick weight loss program, meal plans, workout instruction videos, food and exercise trackers, and a way for members of the website to communicate with each other via members-only blogs and Q&A pages. *Biggest Loser* exercise DVDs feature the trainers and the host of the show and feature different kinds of exercises and exercise goals, and all of the major video game platforms (XBOX, Nintendo Wii, and Sony PlayStation) have *The Biggest Loser*

weight loss videos games (Stewart, 2013). There are a variety of *Biggest Loser* weight loss program books and cookbooks, as well as books written by contestants (Stewart, 2013). There are even *Biggest Loser* resorts in Illinois, Utah, California, New York, where people can go for vacations that focus on fitness, nutrition, education, and relaxation (“The mission”).

7.2 The Literature

Given its popularity and longevity, relatively little scholarly work has been published about *The Biggest Loser*. Most of the available studies document the connection between the show and neoliberalism. Ouellette and Hay (2008a) argue that reality programs like *TBL* “insert television into circuits of resources for caring for oneself and improving one’s own lifestyle” (p. 476) in the context of the reinvention of government—the shift away from government welfare programs and towards personal responsibility—that they describe in their book, *Better living through reality TV*. Silk, Francombe, and Bachelor (2009) outline an argument similar to Ouellette and Hay’s, concluding that the show “classifies the obese, overweight and physically unfit as personal moral failures, immoral and irresponsible citizens, socially, morally, and economically pathological outsiders” (p. 369). Shugart (2010) also looks at how the show supports neoliberalism, finding that *TBL* frames the obese contestants and obesity in such a way that the act of consumption “is squarely aligned with citizenship; conditional consumption, even overconsumption, is restored as vital to self-fulfillment, which is further vital to civic virtue and the benefit of broader society” (p. 122).

Other studies take an audience studies approach to the show. Noting that most of the previous research about reality television engaged in textual analyses of programs to show how RTV promoted neoliberal ideology, Sender and Sullivan (2008) used online surveys, phone interviews, and small group interviews to understand if the findings of the textual critiques were born out in audience members opinions (pp. 574-576). The study found that, while they were cognizant of the negative stereotypes of obesity, audience members agreed with the overall premise of the show, that obesity is a personal prob-

lem caused by a lack of will power and self-esteem (p. 573). Building explicitly on Sender and Sullivan's findings, Readdy and Ebbeck (2012) attempted to discover how audience members understood and acted on the neoliberal ideology in lifestyle programs. None of the literature attempts to understand the representations of African American women on *The Biggest Loser*, and none of it accounts for the post-recessionary context.

I studied *The Biggest Loser: Challenge America* (Season 14). The cast of the show included five white men, six white women, one Latino, one Latina, one African American man, and one African American woman, Alex. Allison Sweeny, a well-known actress on the daytime soap opera *The Days of Our Lives*, hosted the show. The trainers on the show were Bob Harper, Jillian Michaels, and Dolvett Quince. The challenge alluded to in the title of the season is to help the viewing audience, and presumably America writ large, lose weight along with the contestants.

7.3 Findings and Discussion

The Biggest Loser failed to address the ways that racism, sexism, and socioeconomic status (SES) contribute to physical health problems like obesity. Rather than considering how these societal influences factored into each contestants struggle to be healthy and lose weight, the trainers on *TBL* placed the blame for being obese, and the responsibility for solving obesity, on the individual's personal psychological dysfunction. Only by resolving these deeply personal psychological issues, according to the trainers' logic, will the contestants be able to lose weight and live happy, healthy lives.

Alex, the lone African American woman on the show, was initially marginalized, as the extreme physical-emotional struggles of the white contestants were made central in the first three episodes. Once Alex was given a place in the storyline of the program, she was represented in the image of the Strong Black Woman as she struggled with the individual psychological discourse she was subjected to. This portrayal of strength was alternately positive and negative. Alex's hard work and silent strength made her look like a positive version of the Strong Black Woman. Negative strength was manifested in

Alex's portrayal as not wanting or needing the help of the trainers: Strong Black Women are independent and do not need anyone's help, even when they are struggling, as Alex did at times on the show. Alex was also portrayed as an Angry Black Woman at times as she tried to defend her Strong Black Woman persona against the efforts of the trainers to force her to admit personal weakness. In the end, Alex is portrayed as benefiting from opening up to the psychological approach dictated by the trainers. By admitting that she does need help and accepting help, Alex is represented as embracing the individual psychological challenges to weight loss and physical health, and by the end of her time on the show, this attitude appears to be successful; she has lost weight, she looks great, and she seems happy.

7.3.1 Self-reliance and individualism as the loci of obesity

According to previous studies, *The Biggest Loser* framed obesity in terms of neoliberal ideology. More specifically, several studies demonstrated that the show treated obesity and weight loss as individual problems disconnected from larger social issues. On *The Biggest Loser*, obesity is configured as completely within the control of the individual and is explained as a sign of the failure of individual will power (Silk, Francombe & Bachelor, 2009). Likewise, on the show, the responsibility for losing weight falls solely on the individual (Ouellette & Hay, 2008a). The findings of my study show that this neoliberal approach to obesity and weight loss persists on the post-recessionary season of *The Biggest Loser*.

Trainers on *The Biggest Loser* failed to talk about the important role that race, gender, and class might play in each contestant's physical health, and the relationship of these societal factors to obesity. Focusing exclusively on the individual level of obesity is extremely problematic. This approach ignores the social, political and economic context in which individuals live, it results in a poor understanding of the causes of obesity, and it can often devolve into victim blaming (Lofters & O'Campo, 2012, pp. 98-99).

Research conclusively shows that Black women have higher rates of obesity than any other group in the nation. Data from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), a part of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, shows that African American women have higher rates of obesity than

do African American men, whites, and Hispanics (Ogden, Lamb, Carroll & Flegal, 2010, p. 1). When the NCHS data was further stratified by income level, the poorest African American women had the highest prevalence of obesity, and even Black women in the highest income bracket accounted for by the data (+ \$77,000 for a family of four) had a higher rate of obesity than any other group (p. 1). This means that a one size fits all approach to understanding and solving obesity is doomed to fail because poor Black women face decidedly different environmental factors than do, for example, poor white women.

One approach to understanding obesity focuses on class but ignores race. For example, the Food Research Action Center (2013) lists several reasons why poor people are uniquely exposed to factors that cause obesity. But income level, as well as other indicators of SES, is not equal across race, which means that class alone cannot explain disparities in health. Williams and Sternthal (2010) explain:

For example, compared to whites, blacks and some other racial minorities have lower income at every level of education, less wealth (assets) at every level of income, higher rates of unemployment at all levels of education, higher exposure to occupational hazards even having adjusted for job experience and education, and less purchasing power because of higher costs of good and services in their residential contexts. (p. 6)

This has led researchers to begin to try to understand how SES and race interact in terms of health outcomes.

An abundance of research points to the influence of racial residential segregation¹¹ on SES, and race and SES independently contribute to racial disparities in health (Williams & Collins, 2001, p. 404). Williams and Collins (2001) argue that, “Segregation is a fundamental cause of difference in health status between African Americans and whites because it shapes socioeconomic conditions for blacks not only at the individual and household levels but also at the neighborhood and community levels” (p.

¹¹ Segregation based on race was designed and maintained by governments and the judicial system at the federal and state level with the purpose of blocking integration of white neighborhoods as early as the 1930s, and this continues today (Seitles, 1998).

409).¹² In terms of class, low SES people generally live in neighborhoods and communities that do not have access to healthy foods and places to exercise, and do have an overabundance of unhealthy foods, and overexposure to alcohol and tobacco advertising (Williams & Sternthal, 2010, p. 6). Since Black people tend to disproportionately live in these poor neighborhoods, Corral et al (2011) conclude, racial residential segregation produces and sustains racial health disparities, including racial disparities in the prevalence of obesity (p. 372). Studies show that racial residential segregation increases the risk of obesity for African Americans even after accounting for SES (Chang, 2006; Corral et al, 2012).

Gender and class intersect with race to produce health inequalities for African American women. Black women are subjected to uniquely worse socioeconomic conditions than any other group in the U.S. (hooks, 1984; Crenshaw, 1991; Henrici et al, 2010). Racial disparities in SES are particularly pronounced for women (Williams & Sternthal, 2010, p. 409). According to Williams (2008), “At every level of education, Black and Hispanic women earn considerably less than whites of similar education. Blacks earn less than Hispanics, and the differences between Blacks and Whites are especially large” (p. S42). As a result, poor African American women face unique intersectional health risks and challenges (Schulz & Mullins, 2006). Hershaw (2013) found that African American women who lived in more highly segregated areas had higher rates of obesity (p. 304). Coogan et al (2010) found that, “In the United States, the prevalence of overweight and obesity is considerably higher among black women than white women and the racial disparity exists at all levels of individual education and income” (p. 2064).

Although Alex’s presence on *The Biggest Loser* gives the experts on the show the perfect opportunity to address the devastating ways that race, gender, and class uniquely put Black women at risk for obesity, and how those factors make healthy living and weight loss significantly more difficult for Black women, these issues are never discussed. Robert and Reither (2004) found that Black women were at

¹² Although segregation has decreased slightly over the past 40 years, it is still a significant problem in the U.S. Corral et al (2011) reported, “Nationwide, 60-70 percent of African Americans reside in mostly African American neighborhoods” (p. 372). The 2010 Census shows that the majority of African Americans still live in highly segregated areas (Logan & Stults, 2011).

risk of being obese independent of individual and community SES (p. 2431). Living in poverty exposes Black women to a high level of financial stress (Williams & Sternthal, 2010, p. 6). And, “because of structural factors, including poor quality education, residential segregation, high unemployment rates, and poverty, blacks simply have more varied sources of stressors, fewer opportunities to engage in healthy coping behaviors, and greater opportunities to engage in unhealthy ones” (Mozuk et al, 2011, p. 1). Also, research shows that exposure to discrimination causes stress, which “adversely affects patterns of health care utilization and adherence to behaviors and is predictive of increased risk of using multiple substances to cope with stress, including tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drugs” (p. 7). Rather than considering the ways that race, sex, and class might factor into the reasons why each contestant was obese, the trainers focus exclusively on the individual psychological problems of cast members, and their need to solve these issues, in order to be able to lose weight.

The idea that the individual is solely responsible for becoming obese and for losing weight is the most common theme articulated on the show. This theme is crystallized on Episodes 6 and 7. The title of Episode 6 is “Lead by Example.” The twist for this episode is that only one person’s weight loss from each team will count at the Weigh In, and no one will know who the person is until right before the Weigh In. As a result, every contestant has to act as if they will be the one who will be weighed for their team. Several contestants articulated the importance of individual accountability in this context. Jackson said, “One person is going to decide the fate for everyone on our team. I could be in trouble because they didn’t perform the way they should have. And that is scary.” Jeff explained that this rule “means that I have to perform. There’s no ifs, ands, or buts about it.” As Allison wrapped up the announcement of the Weigh In rules, she concluded, “So it is up to each and every one of you to be ready.”

The trainers also touted individual responsibility. When the trainers were informed of the twist, Dolvett explained to the camera, “Just one person is going to represent this team. That means that the weight of the world is on all of them to perform at their very best.” Bob tells his team that not only do

they all have the individual responsibility to train as if they will be the one chosen to represent their team, but also that they should embrace the challenge and want to be the one chosen. He says they should all be thinking, "Let it be me." As they all ride stationary bikes, Bob asks each contestant how they feel, and they all reply with "Let it be me." As the episode continues, the challenge to lead by example is translated by the cast members into the idea that they can only rely on themselves. While a video montage of the contestants vigorously working out is shown, several of them explain this imperative to translate individual responsibility into hard work. Jackson expounds that contestants can no longer rely solely on the trainers to motivate them, saying, "Leading by example means when the trainers aren't here, you're still in the gym getting in a good sweat." Michael explains that, unlike previous episodes, he "can't afford to hide behind his team." Joe says, "There are no excuses. This hurts, that hurts. We're going to fight through it." Because everyone is relying on each other, Fran explains, "In those moments when we all want to give up, we can't." Alex explains that she "had to take that fear [of not losing enough weight] and turn it into hard work and dedication for the rest of the week."

Individual responsibility becomes even more important starting with Episode 7, when the teams are disbanded and the game shifts to singles. Alex explained the impact of the change to individual competition: "I am really at a disadvantage in singles because there were several times that my team kept me here. I don't have anyone to fall back on now. If I have a bad week, no one is there to save me." Allison Sweeney, the host of the show, emphasized this point: "From here on out, it is up to you. You will weigh in as individuals. And for the first time in this season you will face the yellow line. It's no longer about the red team, the white, or the blue. The only thing that matters now is the yellow line. It's all on you." The yellow line refers to the way that contestants are compared as they weigh in. Once the last person is weighed in, they are listed top to bottom on a scoreboard, from highest to lowest percentage of weight lost, with the bottom two contestants on the list under a yellow line. The two contestants below the yellow line are subject to being voted off the ranch by the cast members above the yellow line.

This means that results alone do not determine who is eliminated from the show. There are generally three reasons that contestants cite for why they vote for someone. One reason commonly stated for voting is that the person is a threat. This means that the person voted for is considered a threat to lose more weight and win the show if they are allowed to stay. In other words, someone may not receive votes because they are perceived to not be a threat to win the game in later weeks. Another explanation for a vote is that the person voted for is believed to be able to be successful continuing to lose weight at home. The idea is that one person needs to be on the ranch (to continue to receive help and support to lose weight) more than the other person. Finally, sometimes the reason stated to explain voting for someone is that they lost the least amount of weight. This explanation is based purely on results: whoever is not losing the most weight should go home. This is the purest form of competition, where the strong (those who have lost the most weight) deserve to survive. The idea here is that it is only fair for the least successful person, in terms of weight loss, to be eliminated.

7.3.2 Representations of white contestants/marginalization of Alex

In the early part of the season (Episodes 1-3), Alex is functionally marginalized. The majority of the first few episodes were devoted to the white contestants struggling greatly with the stress of being thrown into the extreme weight loss regimen that characterizes the first few episodes of every season of *The Biggest Loser*. As the white contestant's emotional struggles are given the spotlight, in the rare instances Alex is shown exercising, she is not portrayed as having any trouble coping with the stress of the new and intense exercise routine.

In Episode 1, after being assigned to a team and trainer, the contestants went into the gym for the first workout session. As they begin by walking on treadmills, Jillian yells at Nikki, who has already given up. TC can be heard rasping loudly as he struggles to breathe. Nate's legs give out and he falls off of the moving treadmill. Jillian, seeing everyone struggle, says, "Really? It's been three minutes and thirty seconds, and you're already unraveling. It hasn't been five minutes!" The scene shifts to Jackson, un-

steady on a treadmill, with his eyes closed, looking like he might pass out. Jeff throws up into his hand as he walks away from a treadmill. Jackson is shown again, eyes closed, as he struggles to breath. He receives treatment from an EMT. TC whines and wheezes as he struggles to keep up the pace. Jackson is told to open his eyes right before he passes out and falls down. Two machines away, Nate falls off his treadmill again. Jackson is out cold on the floor as the scene ends. After the commercial, Jackson is still on the floor. Gina is shown giving poor effort on a rowing machine. The first time Alex is shown in the gym, she is on a rowing machine when Bob asks her what her shirt says. "Biggest Loser," she replies. He asks her how bad she wants to be on the ranch, and she replies, "Bad!" Nate falls off the treadmill again, groaning, and Jillian kicks him out of the gym, yelling, "Take your sorry ass out of my gym!" Jackson is still on the floor, muttering incoherently as the EMT continues to attend to him. Dani is shown struggling; leaning on the frame of a treadmill. Jillian asks her if she wants to join Nate. The white contestants appear to be at their limit, crying, vomiting, wheezing, gasping for breath, and generally looking miserable.

Rarely is Alex shown, but in the little time she does appear, she looks strong. As Bob helps a struggling team member, he yells to Alex for support, and she yells back, "Come on, Jeff! I'm right there with you!" Bob summarized the scene in the gym: "The first workout is nuts! Everyone was dropping like flies. It wasn't just a couple of people, it was the majority of the athletes in the gym." But it isn't everyone that is dropping like flies: the white contestants are, not Alex. As Pam vomits into a bucket, Dolvett walks into the gym. Talking to the camera, he says, "What in the...? What is going on in here? Jackson is on the floor. He has an oxygen mask on. People are throwing up." TC is sitting on the floor in front of Jillian, crying. Jillian berates him for the drama he is bringing to the gym. He gets back on the stair climber, only to fall off again. Jillian kicks him out of the gym, screaming, "You are wasting my time!" As he rolls around on the floor, wincing in pain, she tells him, "Get out. Bye bye." The sequences described here are illustrative of the majority of the workout scenes in the first three episodes. The focus is on the

suffering of the white contestants. When Alex is shown, which is rare, she is seen quietly working hard. In the second episode, Alex remains in the margins until the Weigh In, where she is initially nervous. After being told that she lost six pounds, Alex says that she is happy with her progress. In the third episode, Alex is mostly in the background again until the Weigh In.

7.3.3 Representations of Alex

As she gets more air time on the show, starting with Episode 4, Alex is portrayed as dealing with two stressors: being singled out by the trainers for not working hard enough, and relatively poor weight loss results in comparison with other contestants on the show. Alex was portrayed as shifting back and forth between two approaches to the stress of being a contestant on *The Biggest Loser*. At times, as in the first few episodes described above, Alex was shown dealing with the stress of the show in a manner consistent with the Strong Black Woman stereotype: she appeared to be working hard, she was not shown complaining, and she voiced a commitment to doing whatever work was necessary to lose weight and be healthy. At other times, Alex was shown responding in a defensive manner also consistent with the Strong Black Woman image: she acted as if she did not need help from the trainers or her team members. She also acted in a self-destructive manner consistent with the Angry Black Woman stereotype.

The Strong Black Woman (SBW) image dictates that Black women internalize their needs, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities in order to project an outward appearance of strength. The Strong Black Woman stereotype, which portrays Black women as innately hard working, tough, and self-reliant, is “the most pervasive and widely accepted” image of black women in the U.S. (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 184). Because of its widespread acceptance in society, the SBW stereotype generates and sustains distinct assumptions for how Black women are perceived and judged (p. 21). Harris-Perry (2011) argues that the SBW image is “misrecognition” of Black women. On one hand, the SBW image can convey power when Black women embrace the image in its idealized form: “The strong black woman serves as a constructive

role model because black women draw encouragement and self-assurance from an icon able to overcome great obstacles” (p. 184). On the other hand, it is a stereotype generated in part to justify the intersectional oppression that Black women suffer (p. 21).

The Strong Black Woman stereotype functions as an important tool for African American women in the U.S. Strength is imperative for survival in a society that oppresses Black women in multiple intersecting ways (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 179). Beyond survival, the SBW image is also a “shame management strategy” (p. 22), through which “black women have demonstrated their agency” (p. 184). In the face of racism, sexism, and the intersection of those forms of domination, and in the context of the negative historical representations of African American women, “the image of black women as unassailable, tough, and independent is nurtured within the black community” (p. 184). Harris-Perry (2011) explains the logic of nurturing the SBW stereotype for Black women: “African American women do not define themselves as Jezebels, Mammies, or Sapphires; instead, they call themselves strong and proudly drape the mantle of self-denying independence across their shoulders” (p. 184).

Despite the potential benefits that the ideal of the Strong Black Woman might provide, the unrealistic expectations that it carries for African American women sets them up for debilitating failure. Harris-Perry (2011) explains the danger of accepting the idealized form of the SBW stereotype:

The standard set by the ideal of the strong black woman is impossible to maintain. It’s insistence that black women can always make a way out of no way sets the stage for failure. Sometimes there really is no way, and not even capable, dedicated, smart black women can carve space out of nothing. Of course, this is true for all individuals, but when black women expect themselves to be capable of super human tasks, normal humanity is considered a failure. (p. 189)

The inevitable failure that all humans experience can become a unique source of shame for African American women who have internalized the SBW ideal: “While all individuals are publically judged by their actions, the strong black woman imperative is unusual in that it requires tremendous personal for-

titude from a group with few structural resources. It thus exposes black women to more opportunities for shaming” (p. 185). The shame felt by Black women when they fail to fulfill the idealized notion of the Strong Black Woman can result in stress, which in turn is a cause of obesity (West, 1995; Cachelin, Veisel, Barzegarnazari, & Striegel-Moore, 2000; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Puhl & Heuer, 2010). Black women are uniquely positioned in society in such a way that they suffer disproportionately in terms of mental and physical health, and the only positive image they have at their disposal to understand how to cope with these problems is one that puts the burden on them as individuals.

Looking more closely at Alex’s portrayal on *The Biggest Loser* illuminates the way that the Strong Black Woman image can be both beneficial and harmful for Black women in general, and specifically in terms of personal physical health. Alex was portrayed as strong and silent on early episodes of her season of *The Biggest Loser*. As Harris-Perry (2011) argues, the SBW image is a resource used by Black women to display their agency in the face of adversity. Alex shifted back and forth between positive and negative approaches to losing weight on *The Biggest Loser* by embodying contemporary controlling images of the Strong Black Woman and the Angry Black Woman. Early in the season, Alex shifted between variations of the Strong Black Woman. On the one hand, she was represented as strong and self-assured, and other times she was represented as standoffish and not wanting or needing help. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) categorizes this kind of public display of strength by Black women as “accommodation.” When Black women accommodate the Strong Black Woman image by enacting strength in public, their “behaviors and thinking are consciously and even willingly altered to the particular expectations impressed upon” them (p. 15). Alex uses accommodation in the moments when she works hard, does not complain, and does not quit. In these moments, the trainers praise Alex because she is complying with the attitude that they expect of contestants on *The Biggest Loser*. In later episodes, Alex was portrayed as enacting the Angry Black woman stereotype. By the end of the show, Alex was portrayed as embracing the Strong Black Woman ideal.

At the start of Episode 4, the contestants are told that the trainers will be leaving the ranch for the week, and the teams meet to talk with their trainers before they have to leave the ranch. Because the teams typically rely on their trainers so heavily, this twist in the game puts the contestants in a stressful situation. Bob's Blue team, which includes Alex, begins to discuss how to organize the workouts in Bob's absence. Alex suggests that each team member can take the lead for one day, and Bob responds, "That's exactly what I was going to say!" In addition to contributing positively to her teams' strategy for the week, Alex is also shown not letting adversity get her down. The contestants are faced with running a 5K race for this episode's Challenge. As the race begins, Alex starts out at the front of the pack but quickly falls back. She explains what happened, saying, "We're into the race and all of a sudden I feel a blister on the ball of my foot. I got down on myself because I saw everyone passing me, but I didn't want to give up, and I wanted to prove to myself that I could get through it even with an injury." Even though she finished last, Alex continued to display a positive attitude, explaining, "As I came up to the finish line, I'm kinda pissed because everyone is done before me and I'm the last leg, but I see other teammates coming out there to support me and pull me through the finish line. It was a great moment." These are examples of Alex successfully enacting the Strong Black Woman image, by making something positive out of a difficult situation that might cause weaker people to quit.

Alex continues to be portrayed as strong when the trainers return to the ranch at the end of the week. The teams begin their Last Chance Workouts, and Bob and Jillian's teams are working out together. As Bob yells motivation at the contestants, Alex puts a positive spin on Bob pushing her. "Bob and Jill have been gone for a week and it seems as if they're coming back with a vengeance. I miss Bob so much. He is somebody who definitely pushes you to that limit." While Gina bends over, moaning, Alex leans back on the seat of her stationary bike, calmly waiting for the next round of exercise, which she attacks with intensity. Jillian lists the people who are struggling, and Alex is not mentioned. Throughout this epi-

sode, Alex is portrayed as successful and strong, as having a good attitude and working hard to lose weight, and she meets the stringent demands of the trainers.

When the show shifts to the Weigh In, Alex loses four pounds and looks disappointed. This is where her portrayal begins to vacillate. Alex's frustration with her weight loss and her trainers translates into an attitude of giving up, a kind of dissemblance. Sounding annoyed, she says, in a whiney voice, "I'm trying to do everything I'm told. I eat the way I'm supposed to eat. I work out when I'm supposed to work out." Episode 5 begins where the last episode left off, at least for Alex's portrayal. As she is working out with Dani, she starts complaining about not losing enough weight: "I'm working my ass off for nothing. I don't know what's going on with my body." Jillian tells her to be happy with any weight loss, but Alex continues to explain her exasperation: "It's really frustrating to know that you are giving your best and that your best doesn't feel like it is good enough. It's something I have dealt with here on the ranch and something I've always dealt with at home." As she talks about her struggles, she is shown at home: in her car eating, in her house talking to the camera, and in a park eating. She explains, "I want to know that it can be done [losing more weight]." The scene shifts back to the gym, where Alex tells Jillian, "I really am giving up here, honestly." With Jillian trying to encourage her, Alex says she has to use the bathroom and walks out of the gym. This is the first glimpse we see of the difficulty of living up to the Strong Black Woman image.

When Bob finds out about Alex's negative attitude, he is not sympathetic: "That's what I'm sick of! I'm sick of it! She has given me half-ass. She's given me fifty percent." After a commercial break, Bob confronts Alex about her attitude, asking her, "What's up? You're dragging your feet. You've got that look on your face and I know that look, so what's up?" Alex brushes him off, saying, "Nothing. I've already cried. I'm over it." Bob looks confused and annoyed, asking, "Am I hearing you? Are you kidding me?" As Alex cries and shakes her head in disagreement, Bob tells her that her teammates are relying on her, implying that she has not pulled her weight for the team's total weight loss at previous weigh

ins. She replies, angrily, "That is such bullshit! This is my all, Bob. I wake up early by myself and I'm out here running. And I lose four pounds and I don't know what's going on with my body. It's pissing me off!" When Bob asks her to try her best, she replies that she thought that she was working hard already. As they finish the conversation, Bob sends her back to the gym with a hug and then explains to the camera the problem with Alex's attitude: "This is the moment of truth for Alex. In the past, she has tried and tried and tried and given up when things don't go her way. If she doesn't commit right here and right now and trust the process, she's gonna go back to her self-destructive ways that got her here in the first place." The Angry Black Woman stereotype, closely related to "the bad black woman" and "the black 'bitch," is typically portrayed as insufferable and unreasonably mad (Harris-Perry, 2011, pp.88-89). Non-verbal signs accompany their anger: eye rolling, neck bobbing, and excessive hand gestures (p. 95), all of which Alex used in the previously described scene. Bob's "moment of truth" comment encourages Alex to be a strong (Black) woman no matter what. Attempting to embody the Strong Black Woman image is stressful for African American women because it puts them in a position where negative results are always attributed to their personal failure.

At this point in the episode, Alex begins to rally as she tries to embrace the idea that she should keep trying and not give up. She explains that, in the past, her lack of results upset her, but now she is "really just trying to let that go and not let that affect me." Finally back in the gym, Alex is shown working with intensity, and she explains to the camera, "Bob has been telling me from the beginning that he wants to see me get ugly. So I'm gonna do what I have to do but just at a higher intensity." During a break in the workout, Bob is trying to motivate his team and he turns to Alex, close to her face, and says, "You use all this anger you've got and you fuel yourself. You fuel every single day with anger." He says this with dynamism, looking her in the eye, and she responds nonverbally by shaking her head in agreement and making strong eye contact. The next day, as the Blue team is working out, Bob is exhorting his team to "Go!" He then yells, "Alex, go!" Sounding annoyed, she responded, "Bob! I'm going!" and Bob

yells back, “No, you’re not!” Alex frames this interaction positively, saying, “I’m scared of Bob, but I need Bob to yell. I need Bob to scream. I need Bob to get this out of me [maximum effort].” As Alex is shown exerting more energy, Bob tells her, “That’s what I want to see out of you, Alex!” He continues to praise her effort, saying, “Damn, you look like a champion when you do it like that!” In this scene, we see Alex begin to try to open up to being pushed and supported by Bob. Later, during the Last Chance Workout, Bob asks Alex to try harder, and she continues to think positively about Bob pushing her, saying, “I think Bob really, truly believes in me. He’s been telling me from the beginning that he wants to see me get ugly. I’m just trying to give it my best and hopefully my work will reflect on the scale.”

At the Weigh In, the Blue team enjoys success as each member of the team loses a good percentage of weight, but when Alex is the last to weigh in, Bob looks nervous. Allison notices this and asks Bob what he is thinking. He responds, “I’m just thinking about Alex. Alex deserves to get up there and not have to have a proud [brave] smile [because she didn’t get the weight loss she hoped for], you know what I mean?” Bob is describing a feature of the Strong Black Woman persona, in which the woman embodies strength even in the context of getting bad results in spite of all her hard work. As Alex gets on the scale, she says, “I need to know finally that my best is good enough. That my all means something.” The scale shows that she lost ten pounds, her biggest loss to date, and Alex smiles, claps, and begins to cry happily. She notes that this is the first time she has lost more than nine pounds, and Bob tells her, “And you deserve it. You deserve to have the same feelings that everyone else in this room has had. This is what happens. You find yourself in this house when you just let your walls come down.” As Alex nods in agreement, she says, “My best was finally good enough.”

Alex isn’t featured much in Episode 6, but when she does get airtime she is portrayed as having a good attitude. When Bob suggests that they should all want to represent the team at the Weigh In, she joins in, stating confidently the team’s mantra: “Let it be me.” When she expresses worry that she might not be able to have another good week of weight loss, she turns this thought into motivation, say-

ing that she needs to work hard and be dedicated. At the Weigh In, she only loses three pounds but she stays positive, explaining, "It's a process. One week is good; the next week will be bad. Hopefully, the next week will be good for me."

Alex slips back to having negative thoughts and self-doubt in Episode 7, when the game goes to singles. The contestants are faced with a Temptation Challenge, in which the person who eats the most calories in five minutes will be given a two-pound pass at the next Weigh In. Worried that she doesn't have her team to save her if she has a bad week, Alex decides to eat the junk food. Although she does not win the challenge, she still gets a weight advantage because, as Fran, the winner explained, Alex took the risk to eat, so she deserved the reward. The pressure of burning off the 1200 calories of junk food she ate in the Challenge seems to have shaken Alex's resolve to believe in the system, and in herself. In the Last Chance Workout, she falls back into the self-sabotage Bob worried about earlier in the season. The team is doing a drill that involves running to a station, stopping to jump rope, running to another station and stopping to jump rope again. Alex appears to be going through the motions, not paying attention, when Bob reminds them to remember to bring the rope with them: she finishes jumping rope and drops the rope to run to the next station. When Bob tells her to go back, she gets mad at him, explaining to the camera, "I was stressed. I was pissed. And I felt like that took all my momentum away." As she stands in front of Bob with her hand on her hip, rolling her eyes, she tells him, "I'm pissed!" Bob responds, telling her, "You rolling your eyes and having that attitude with me disrespects me here and I will not take that for one second." Alex smirks and shakes her head, saying in a dismissive tone, "Leave me alone." Bob explains his frustration with Alex, saying, "Alex pisses me off. Like what are you doing? Now is the time to deliver. Show everyone what you're made out of. Because what you're showing now is not made out of much." This scene provides another example of Alex's portrayal as the Angry Black Woman, which appears counterproductive and makes a bad situation worse, effectively

self-sabotaging herself. Despite all of the drama, Alex loses eight pounds at the Weigh In, and moves on to the next week of the show.

Although Alex lost eight pounds in the previous weigh in and appears to be happy about this, in the next episode she again devolves into negative defensiveness. This is the point in the show where Alex is eventually portrayed as having made a breakthrough in her self-sabotaging habits and her approach to weight loss. The premise of this episode is that if the contestants lose 71 pounds collectively, they will all be safe and move on to the next week. This means that everyone has to do their part and lose about three percent of their body weight, which puts the pressure on each individual to work hard for the good of the group. The contestants go to the gym to work out, and soon Jillian focuses on Alex, asking her to run for five minutes on the treadmill at six miles per hour. Jillian explains to the camera that she has to push all of the contestants to the limit so that they can lose enough weight for everyone to be safe. As Alex runs, Jillian tells her, "There's no reason you can't do this." The scene then shifts to Jillian talking about Alex to the camera, "I have seen her phoning it in throughout the entire season and doing less than her best by a long shot." Alex continues to run. But when Jillian tells her that she has already been running for one minute, Alex hops off the treadmill track and onto its frame, quitting. Jillian asks her what the problem is, and Alex responds, "It's killing me!" Jillian tells her that quitting is unacceptable, and Alex insists that she is trying as hard as she can. Jillian tells the camera, "I say to run for five minutes, and yet Alex won't do more than one minute. We're eight weeks into this, and it's time that it stops!" As Alex begins to run again, Jillian talks to her, trying to motivate her to strive for a goal. As Jillian finishes the sentence, Alex quits again. Jillian tells Alex that she needs to think about why she is on the ranch, and Alex responds, "Jill, I really am trying my best." As Jillian tries to get through to her, Alex refuses to admit that she is not giving full effort. Jillian tells the camera, "Alex works out for two-hour segments, three times a day. There is absolutely no way this girl cannot jog at six miles per hour for five minutes on a one incline."

Immediately after the workout, Alex and Jillian talk about what happened in the gym. Jillian asks her why she quits, and Alex responds, "I was really trying!" Jillian tells her, "You need to understand why you are doing this. It's the thing that brought you here." Alex nods her head, indicating that she agrees. Jillian tells the camera, "The thing is, if Alex cannot acknowledge, 'I'm selling myself short,' 'I'm phoning it in,' 'I'm giving 20% when I could be giving 100%,' then I have nothing to work with. If we can't get to the bottom of why she is doing this, we're never going to be able to solve this problem." With tears in her eyes, Alex tells Jillian that she gets frustrated when she thinks she is doing her best "and then someone comes in there and shows you all the negative that you're doing. That drives me insane because it has always been, 'Alex, your best is not good enough.' Always! Always!" Jillian softens her tone, telling Alex, "That's the answer. You feel like it's never good enough, so why even try?" Jillian tells the camera, "Finally I've got the answer. Alex phones it in, the trainers get disappointed, she says, 'I don't care what you think, it's good enough for me.' She knows it isn't good enough." Jillian concludes, "Until she can realize that this defense mechanism is now her responsibility and is harmful, things aren't going to get better." Jillian tells Alex that she needs to quit resisting the trainer's efforts to push her to try harder: "You need to stop rebelling because you are hurting yourself in the process." Jillian asks Alex if she understands the problem and Alex answers affirmatively. Alex explains to the camera that what started out as a negative experience has turned into a beneficial one: "This moment in the house really made an impact with me and Jill's relationship. She finally understands where I'm coming from."

Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) describes this process of Black women realizing the need to open themselves up to reveal their weaknesses as "recognized vulnerability," which is a moment when "Black women see and express themselves as multidimensional and developing persons with a variety of human needs and interests" (p. 15). When Black women recognize their vulnerability, the imperative to be strong does not completely control their self-presentation or evaluation of their self-worth (p. 15). "In the place of being strong, such women commit to the flexibility and vulnerability of being human" (p.

16). Bob's constant demands of unwavering strength are not what ultimately help Alex. When Jillian gives Alex the chance to open up, this is what helps. Throughout the rest of the show, Alex is portrayed as having embraced the value of opening up and admitting her humanness.

In the minimal glimpses of her throughout the rest of the episode, it appears that Alex's positive attitude remains intact. She stands smiling as Allison explains the challenge, and she works actively with the rest of the contestants to accomplish the challenge task. During the segment where Jared, the spokesperson for the fast food chain Subway, visited the ranch, Alex tells the camera that if he can keep the weight off, so can the contestants. Later, the contestants and trainers do a trust-building exercise, and Jillian and Alex are paired together. Alex is upbeat about being put with Jillian, explaining that it was a good idea after the disagreement they had in the gym. When they complete the exercise, Alex says, "This was the perfect activity for us to fully, 100% put our trust in each other." Jillian points out that they had surpassed the goal they set for themselves in the activity, and Alex tells the camera, "Jillian 100% has my trust now." While the other pairs do the activity, Alex laughs while she watches them. When two contestants who have a romantic connection on the show do the activity, Alex smiles as she watches them work together. When Jillian suggests that two contestants who dislike each other should go next, Alex smiles and claps with the rest of the group. It appears that Alex has responded positively to Jillian's understanding her struggles to lose weight.

Things appear to be going well for Alex as the contestants walk into the Weigh In. But as the trainers talk about their frustration with another contestant (Gina), Alex looks nervous. When she is called to the scale, Alex has a blank look on her face. She loses three pounds, less than she had hoped for, and tells the camera that she is disappointed for herself and the other contestants. As she continues to stand on the scale, Allison asks her what she thinks, and Alex responds, "It's not what I wanted, but it's what I expected. I've been disappointed this entire process, so it doesn't surprise me. It is what it is, and I have to deal with it." Bob says that he is frustrated with her attitude and that her low expectations

are a self-fulfilling prophecy. As other contestants are shown nodding yes in response to Bob, he continues, saying, "Why not expect something great?" Alex responds that, given her past failures, this failure does not surprise her. Bob responds, "Look. Your whole demeanor, the way you are standing up there, it's like you're already defeated. And Alex, you shouldn't be a defeated woman." Alex nods in response, looking blank. Jillian stands with her hands on her head in frustration. As Alex walks past Jillian on her way back to her spot among the other contestants, Jillian tells her to think about what Bob said because what he said is what Jillian has been telling Alex. Although Alex has had a rough week and did not lose the weight that she wanted to, she does not fall below the yellow line and therefore moves on to the next week.

In her last episode in the competition, Alex displays the resilience that Strong Black Women are supposed to possess. Even though she temporarily lapsed back into the negative attitude the trainers say she needs to conquer to succeed, for the rest of her time on the show, Alex rebounds back to the positive attitude she and Jillian talked about. Alex does not get much screen time until the Weigh In, but she is consistently represented positively throughout the show. The contestants are told that someone is leaving the ranch that night, and they assume this means that someone is being eliminated from the show. Alex says that she is not ready to leave the ranch yet because she has more to learn and more progress to make. Allison explains that this is a Save Your Neighbor Challenge, which means that the contestants will play a game where they cannot save themselves, but they can save someone else by stacking bricks in front of the other contestant's pictures. The person not saved will leave the ranch for the week to lose weight on his or her own and then come back for the Weigh In. Jackson says, "As soon as I hear that this was a Save Your Neighbor Challenge, I think of Alex. I know how hard she's working, and I know how rough week eight was on her." Alex is the second contestant saved.

At the Weigh In, the other contestants are all having good weight loss results, and as Alex steps on the scale, Allison tells her that she needs to lose more than nine pounds to be safe. Alex ends up los-

ing eight pounds, not nine, and is in danger of being voted off the ranch. At first, she looks upset. Jillian tells her, "That's such a great number Alex!" Alex responds, "But it's still not good enough!" Bob and Jillian are effusive in their praise for her work that week and her results. Bob says that Alex had a great week even though it wasn't good enough within the context of the game, and Alex looks to Allison and says, "I'm proud of myself, I really am." She then tells the camera, "I am ok with the eight that I had because I know that for me it was a major accomplishment." Alex's resilience seems to have improved. Her first impulse was to think negatively, but in this example she quickly shifts to thinking positively about a very good result, rather than negatively about the possible consequences on her competitive success in the game.

Alex's attitude is portrayed as uniformly positive for the rest of her time on the show. As the final contestant is weighed in and loses enough weight to beat Alex, Alex smiles and congratulates her. When Jackson, the other contestant below the yellow line, reaches for her, Alex smiles at him and takes his hand. When the trainers leave the room, Alex smiles as she hugs Dolvett. And as Allison explains that if the vote is a tie, Alex will go home because she has the lowest percentage of weight loss, Alex smiles and nods in understanding. As the contestants explain the thinking behind how they voted, they all speak positively about Alex. When Dani apologizes for casting the final vote sending Alex home, Alex smiles at Dani and tells her it is O.K. Allison announces the decision and Alex has a positive attitude about leaving the game and the ranch, saying, "I'm taking a lot home with me. And that emotional stress and drama that I had is what caused me to gain weight to begin with, and now I've overcome that here on the ranch. I can go home a confident person. I'm going home proud of myself."

The show follows up with Alex during the next episode. She is shown doing a photo shoot. As she poses for the camera, Alex is completely positive about her time on the show and her weight loss. She explains, "I've lost 75 pounds and it's the greatest feeling ever." She tells the camera, "The Biggest Loser has changed my life completely. I really don't remember the last time that I felt this good." She

tells the photographer, "A few months ago, I would have never been able to put on a dress like that." Throughout the brief follow-up segment, Alex looks happy. She has a new hairstyle, her makeup is done, she looks fabulous in the dress she is wearing, and the photographer is telling her how beautiful she looks. In the end, it appears that not only was all the drama worth it, but that she has learned to let the negativity go and to be positive about her health and her life. The scene ends with a before and after shot. The before picture is of Alex at the start of the contest. She is standing, looking at the camera with a straight face and her body fat overflowing her workout clothes. In the after picture, Alex is flexing her arms and smiling. She is wearing a form fitting red dress and she looks like a completely different person.

Alex's appearance on the season's final episode is also extremely positive. She comes on stage, looking great in a tight black dress. As her before picture is shown on one side of the screen, Alex stands in the frame on the other side, posing, smiling, and flipping her hair. The whole time, the crowd is cheering wildly for her. As she takes her place on the stage, she waves to the crowd and the other contestants appear to be surprised at how great she looks. Allison said, "Alex, I know you started off rough [the crowd cheers]. I think you proved [pauses for crowd cheers] that it doesn't matter, that you can overcome it. What do you say to everyone who is like, 'Oh yea that happens to me and I can never get going?'" Alex responded emphatically, "It's all about confidence, 100% having confidence in yourself. That's what I lacked in the beginning but I have it now." Allison agreed, concluding, "I think that says it all!" Before weighing in Alex for the final time, Allison explained, "She had a rough beginning on the ranch. But she proved that it's not how you start, it's how you finish." The segment moves to a montage that starts with scenes from past episodes where Alex struggled, and finishes with scenes where she succeeded. She gets on the scale and it shows that she has lost 84 pounds, which was over thirty-five percent of her total weight. She smiles and gestures excitedly as she walks off the scale as Allison tells her

she is currently winning the competition for those who were sent home. When Fran weighs in and beats her, Alex smiles and walks to her seat, and this is the last time Alex is featured on the program.

7.4 Conclusion

My study is the first to examine the ways that the massively popular reality television program, *The Biggest Loser*, represents African American women. *TBL* places the cause of obesity on the individual and ignores societal factors play a major role in the physical health of Americans in general, and Black women specifically. Ignoring the effects of social location on health issues like obesity often results in victim blaming, which is counterproductive to physical well being, and is particularly disadvantageous to Black women, who have the highest incidents of obesity and who are less likely to have the resources and support necessary to be healthy.

On the season of *The Biggest Loser* studied in this chapter, Alex's representation drew on the stereotype of the Strong Black Woman. Sometimes, this representation functioned positively in that when Alex embraced being strong, she appeared to be working hard and making good progress towards losing weight. But Alex also used the Strong Black Woman image to shield herself from criticism in the weeks when she failed to lose enough weight or was accused of not working hard enough. When accused of not working hard enough, Alex would assert that she was in fact working as hard as she could.

Alex employed the Angry Black Woman (ABW) stereotype as another way to shield herself from criticism. By responding angrily to being confronted about her commitment and work ethic, she essentially shuts down the criticism. Alex was instructed to use the anger she articulated to push herself to exercise more intensely. This treatment of Alex's enactment of the Angry Black Woman stereotype is problematic. It reinforces the stereotypical response on the part of Alex, which, on a societal level, is viewed as a negative sign of a poor or working-class Black woman who is not ready to be member of the middle-class. Black female anger is attributed to an authentic Blackness that is to be avoided (Collins, 2005). Also, on *The Biggest Loser*, the trainers emphasize psychological work as a key part of weight loss,

but instructing Alex to use her anger ignores the causes of the anger and does nothing to treat or resolve those issues. Also, this response suggests that Alex internalize her anger, in effect demanding that she be strong, reinforcing the Strong Black Woman stereotype. Ultimately, the imperative to be unflinchingly strong functions to defend and sustain intersectional oppression and inequalities by constantly rearticulating the idea that “personal actions and agency trump all manner of social abuses” (Beau-boeuf-Lafontant, 2009, p. 3). In other words, the Strong Black Woman image supports the neoliberal ideals of individualism and self-reliance. Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) writes:

Taking race, class, and gender domination as givens, the discourse asserts that the intertwined problems that Black women know well—the compromised opportunities occasioned by poverty, male privilege, and the association of Blackness with expendability—are not grounds for social outrage but acceptable tests of individual mettle. The question then turns to whether such women are ‘strong enough’ to endure these hardships, not whether inherent problems exist in the organization of society. (p. 42)

In other words, the Strong Black Woman image supports the neoliberal ideals of individualism and self-reliance via the way it teaches Black women to act in public. This makes the strength imperative that African American women are subjected to particularly dangerous in terms of health issues.

In neoliberalism, abuse is part and parcel of competition and self-improvement. All manner of abuses are characterized as nothing more than hurdles on the track to success. In the context of the taken-for-granted common sense that racism and sexism are no longer societal problems, these and other forms of oppression morph into reasonable, indispensable, barriers that flexible neoliberal subjects are expected to tolerate and even embrace in their efforts to fit into the system and succeed. In neoliberal ideology, being confronted with intersectional oppression is a good thing if it can be characterized as helping people get better.

Throughout the show, Jillian (and Bob) attempt to break through Alex's wall of strength, to get her to admit what was holding her back. Alex's breakthrough occurs when she finally opens up to Jillian and expresses the stress that never being "good enough" creates for her, and the support Alex receives from Jillian is portrayed on the show as translating into lasting positive change for Alex. By the end of her time on *The Biggest Loser*, Jillian and Alex understand Alex's anger as a self-sabotaging move that causes Alex to remain obese. As Alex explained after she was voted off the ranch, "I'm taking a lot home with me. And that emotional stress and drama that I had is what caused me to gain weight to begin with, and now I've overcome that here on the ranch. I can go home a confident person. I'm going home proud of myself." By the end of the show, Alex is represented as having overcome the negative aspect of the Black woman's imperative to be strong—the inability to admit struggles and ask for help—and this is portrayed as being the reason why she has been able to lose weight and learn to be happy with herself.

The logic that obesity is ultimately an individual issue supersedes, and therefore displaces to the margins, important structural issues of racism, sexism, and socioeconomic status as key factors that need to be solved in order for Black women to be healthy. In the end, Alex's problem, the reason that she has struggled to lose weight in the past, is diagnosed as a personal failure to cope with the negativity in her life: the negative feedback from others—"your best is never good enough"—and the negative results—not losing weight even though she feels she is trying her best. Jillian's solution—"this defense mechanism is now her responsibility"—ignores the broader social reality in which Alex lives. Of course, all people have to choose how to respond to negativity in healthy ways, but asking someone who is subjected to significant oppression based on her race, gender, and body size to solve all this on her own is a failure to see the bigger picture, and this shortsighted approach is damaging to African American women. The larger ideological lesson of the show is that obesity is an individual problem that is caused by personal, psychological issues that need to be solved independent of the societal factors that may contribute to them. The more African American women's failure to lose weight and be physically healthy is,

at the societal level, disconnected from their identities as Black women, the more unlikely it is for individual Black women to be supported in their efforts to be healthy and lose weight. Sociologists, medical professionals, and media scholars can continue to write about the health effects of race, gender, and class, but television programs have a strong effect on the values, beliefs, and attitudes of viewers. If shows like *The Biggest Loser* thoughtfully talked about how racism, classism, and sexism influence health issues like obesity, perhaps eventually overweight Black women would face less negativity about their size and their difficulties in losing weight.

8 Docusoap RTV

Docusoaps are reality television programs, in which a person, or a group of people, is followed, relatively unobtrusively, in their day-to-day lives. The docusoap genre combines the techniques of observational documentary filming with the narrative style of soap operas. Observational documentary uses lightweight recording equipment to achieve a “fly-on-the-wall feel” for the program (Hill, 2005, p. 20), and docusoaps use this technique to follow cast members “in somewhat natural settings without a game setup” (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 67). Soap opera features mimicked by docusoaps include the use of “short narrative sequences, intercuts of plotlines, mini cliff-hangers,” and a “focus on character personality” (Murray, 2009, p. 67). Docusoaps usually include humor, but they center on “melodramatic stories” (Hill, 2005, p. 28). Original contemporary American docusoaps include *Cops* (FOX, 1989-2013, SPIKE, 2013-) and *The Real World* (MTV, 1992-). Many current docusoaps revolve around following men who do jobs that require manual labor: *Gold Rush*, a show about gold miners; *Ax Men*, a show about loggers; *Deadliest Catch*, a show about commercial fishermen; and *Ice Road Truckers*, a show about truck drivers who specialize in driving in dangerous, icy conditions. There are also docusoaps about upper-class concerns. *Million Dollar Listing* follows real estate agents in Los Angeles and New York City who sell houses for one million dollars or more, and *Millionaire Matchmaker* follows rich single people as

they use a dating service specifically geared towards wealthy individuals. This chapter focuses on the 2012 season of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, the most watched reality television program that features African American women.

8.1 The Show

The Real Housewives of Atlanta is a version of *Real Housewives* (Bravo), a popular reality television franchise. *The Real Housewives of Orange County* aired in 2006, followed by versions located in New York City and Atlanta in 2008. A Bravo TV press release described *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* as:

An up-close and personal look at life in Hotlanta, "The Real Housewives of Atlanta" follows five glamorous southern belles as they balance motherhood, demanding careers and a fast-paced social calendar, and shows what life is like in the most exclusive areas of Atlanta. These driven and ambitious women prove that they're not just "housewives," but entrepreneurs, doting mothers and classy southern women. These ladies show the world what it takes to live large in some of the hottest zip codes in the south. (The Futon Critic, 2008)

The show's original cast was composed of DeShawn Snow, Kim Zolciak, Lisa Wu Hartwell, Nene Leaks, and Sheree Whitfield (Showatch, 2014). In Season 5, the African American women cast includes returning members Cynthia Bailey, Kandi Burruss, NeNe Leaks, and Phaedra Parks; new members Kenya Moore and Porsha Williams; and Kim Zolciak, a white woman, who returned from last season, is occasionally featured.

In its first season, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (RHOA) averaged almost 1.5 million viewers a week, with the final episode bringing in over 2 million viewers (Denhart, 2008a). The following year, the premier of Season 2 drew over 4 million viewers (The Futon Critic, 2009). The third season of the show averaged 3.6 million viewers per week (Gorman, 2011a). The Season 3 and 4 premiers both opened as the most-watched reality television shows on cable television (Seldman, 2011; The Futon Critic, 2012).

For the season I studied, 2012, Season 5, *RHOA* averaged over 3.1 million viewers per week, which at the time was the highest-rated season of any of the *Real Housewives* franchise (van Kempen, 2012). Although these rating numbers are not impressive in comparison to the ratings of the shows in other chapters, *RHOA* is an important show to study because it was the first, and is the most watched, reality television show that featured African American women.

The Real Housewives of Atlanta attracts a great deal of attention from the popular press and television critics for its negative stereotypes of African American women (e.g. Nelson, 2012; Penrice, 2010; Samuels, 2011/2012; Sisson, 2012; West-Savali, 2012). According to Smith (2013), “loud, ghetto, and trashy are just a few of many words used to describe” *RHOA*. Tinuoye (2012) writes that *RHOA* is characterized by “regular bouts of catfights, bickering, and nasty confrontations between grown women of color.” Shropshire (2012) asserted that, on the show, “the small screen is overflowing with black women who roll their eyes, bob their heads, snap their fingers, spit verbal poison in each other’s faces, and otherwise reinforce the ugly stereotype of the ‘angry, uncouth, uncivilized black woman.’” Maestra (2009) opines that the early seasons of *RHOA* did not portray the women as having middle-class values.

8.2 The Literature

Like the other shows I studied, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* has received little scholarly attention. Moody (2014) studied African American audience member’s opinions about *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. African American viewers said that they thought that producers used negative stereotypes to portray the Black women on the show in a way that would be acceptable to mainstream audiences (p. 276): “Despite it’s fly-on-the-wall potential, it seems black viewers still perceived reality television programming as confined to dominant scripts of blackness used for fictional shows” (p. 284). Moody conclude that the possibility “of reality television to expose a broader audience to diverse aspects of African American culture” might be limited by the control that white producers have over the

end-product, as well as the ways that white viewers might interpret the show using deeply held stereotypes about race and class (p. 284).

Scholars have studied other versions of *The Real Housewives*. Cox and Proffitt (2012) found that *The Real Housewives of Orange County* attempts to sell viewers on the virtues of economic consumption (pp. 299-302). They also found that, while cast members also sold consumption on their official blogs, fan's comments on those blogs both embrace and reject the consumerism the show is trying to sell (pp. 303-308). Lee and Moscovitz (2013) studied *The Real Housewives of New York City*, finding that the all-white cast was represented as rich bitches: "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" (p. 65).

8.3 Findings/Discussion

One critic asserted that the cast of *RHOA* is no different than the all-white casts of other *Real Housewives* shows (Maestra, 2009) — "There's a colorblindness to this kind of television. No one stands for anything admirable" — but she is wrong, at least for Season 5. The season of the show I studied was not dominated by catfights and bitchiness. While it does contain some negative portrayals of African American women, the fifth season of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* also consistently and meaningfully represents the Black women cast members positively: the women of *RHOA* demonstrate interpersonal strength and assertiveness in response to bitchiness, they enjoy equality in their romantic relationships, and they express progressive attitudes about family, sexuality, and LGBT persons. In many cases, the negative aspects of the show lead to positive representations of the Black women, as they cooperatively work on their friendships and work to see other points of view. Even when no positive resolution can be found, the women are often represented as mature, smart, and appropriately assertive. Most of the Black women on *RHOA* are portrayed in stark contrast to the rich bitch persona of the white cast members of *The Real Housewives of New York City* (Lee & Moscovitz, 2013).

8.3.1 Representations of Black Women & Class

One of the primary functions of representations of Black women in contemporary popular culture is to attribute certain “bad” qualities to poor Black women, and to attribute “good” qualities to middle-class Black women. Poor and working-class Black women are portrayed in popular culture as “authentically Black” through the controlling images of the Black bitch and the bad Black mother (Collins, 2005), which I have discussed in previous chapters. This Black authenticity, which is built on negative stereotypes, is attributed to culture, not biology (Collins, 2005, p. 178). Collins (2005) explains that, “In essence, the controlling images associated with poor and working-class women become texts of what *not* to be” (p. 138). Middle-class Black women are portrayed in popular culture through the controlling images of the modern mammy and the Black lady (Collins, 2005), also previously discussed. These representations create a politics of respectability that simultaneously embraces and embodies white middle-class values and rejects the “authentic Blackness” of the popular representations of poor Black women (Collins, 2005, p. 139). These portrayals of “authentic” poor and working-class Black women and “respectable” middle-class Black women are constructed as class opposites, “and their different cultures help explain why poor people are at the bottom of the economic hierarchy and middle-class Black people are not” (Collins, 2005, p. 177). According to the logic embedded in these controlling images, poor Black women are poor because they are unwilling or unable to “shed their Blackness,” and middle-class Black women are successful because they are willing to assimilate into hegemonic white culture (p. 178).

The feature that unifies controlling images of Black women, in terms of class position, is their portrayal as inappropriately strong. Collins (2005) explains, “Whether working-class ‘bitches’ who are not appropriately submissive, bad mothers who raise children without men, or ‘educated bitches,’ who act like men, this Black female strength is depicted and then stigmatized” (p. 179). Black women who are represented in middle-class controlling images are not able to “escape this frame of too-strong Black

women. Such women may receive recognition for their strength on the job, but it is a strength that is placed in the service to white power and authority” (p. 179).

The depiction of the cast members of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* complicates the representational binary outlined by Collins (2005). Although all of the women have moments where they are portrayed as “authentically Black” through their use of Black English and other characteristics considered culturally Black (poor and working-class), all of the cast members who are carry overs from the previous seasons are consistently depicted as Black ladies—assertive and appropriately strong—when confronted with the “Black bitch” performance of one of the other housewives. Contrary to the ways that controlling images typically define women as class opposites, Cynthia, Nene, Kandi, and Phaedra are all represented overall as women who are Black ladies but who are also authentically Black. Authentic Blackness is redefined as a quality that upper class Black women can possess, while still being appropriately feminine. Because they are new to the show this season, Kenya and Porsha appear to be attempting to prove that they are “real,” in the way that women on past seasons of the show are real—fighting, arguing, and attacking each other, enacting the image of the bitch.

Kenya Moore is one of two new additions to the *RHOA* cast. A former Miss USA, Moore is an actor and model, and owns a movie production company. As new member on the show, Kenya is depicted as trying to prove that she fits the “real” part of *The Real Housewives* title, by frequently enacting the Black bitch image that has typified previous seasons of *RHOA*. It looks as if she is trying to prove that she has what it takes to be a cast member on a reality television show that portrays Black women fighting, arguing, name calling, and generally being bitches. In almost every case where Kenya is shown acting like a bitch, the other cast members respond assertively without enacting the bitch image themselves. In this way, a significant portion of this season of *RHOA* represents Black women responding interpersonally to someone acting like a bitch in a way that appears mature, strong, assertive, and definitively not bitchy.

The portrayal of Kenya as a bitch starts halfway through the second episode, when Cynthia Bailey, another cast member and a supermodel, invites Kenya to be a judge at a casting call for *Jet* Beauty of the Week. *Jet* magazine is a weekly targeted to African American readers. Cynthia explains, "It's a big day at the Bailey Agency. It is our open call for *Jet* Beauty of the Week. This is *Jet* magazine, and Beauty of the Week is just one of those things that most Black women kinda wanted to be." As the casting auditions begin, Kenya is shown, along with all of the other judges, being complimentary, supportive, and positive to the models. After a couple women model for the judges, Kenya tells the camera, "I was looking for someone who reminded me of myself. Sexy, strong, and who really represents Black women well." Immediately after this statement, Kenya is shown acting like a stereotypical bitch.

Cynthia tells one woman that she is very pretty but not what they are looking for with this particular casting call. As the woman walks off stage, Kenya says, "That's a man!" As Cynthia gives Kenya a disapproving look, Kenya continues, "No, I'm serious! I was looking for an Adam's apple." As Kenya continues to negatively comment on the women modeling, Cynthia tells the camera, "We're not here to tear anyone down. That's pointless and just mean-spirited. [Since Kenya is] a former Miss USA, I just thought that it was a no-brainer [to have Kenya help judge the casting call]." As the episode returns from a commercial break, Kenya continues to be critical of the women modeling for the judges, and Cynthia acts assertively to respond to and control Kenya, who tells one of the women: "I'm not trying to be mean, girl, but why are you here?" Another judge tells her to behave, and Kenya replies, "I'm just being truthful!" Cynthia interjects, telling Kenya, "In the spirit of *Jet* beauty, all is welcome. We said that." Kenya apologizes, and one of the other judges tells Kenya that she needs to stop being mean. Kenya responds, "No, I don't!" The next model comes on stage, and Kenya comments, "Is this strip club *Jet*, or regular *Jet*?" As the other judges compliment the woman, Kenya grimaces. Cynthia compliments the model on the self-confidence required to model in such a small bikini, and as the model leaves the stage, Kenya escalates her criticism, saying that she is "highly offended" that the woman would come to the

casting call showing “coochie crack and ass crack.” Cynthia tells the camera, “Now the people from *Jet* are uncomfortable. Who does this? What is wrong with you? You are a grown woman!” As Kenya is shown continuing to comment on the last model, Cynthia tells the camera, “I think Kenya is being a bit of a hypocrite,” as photos of Kenya, on the covers of various magazines, wearing tiny bikinis, are shown, Cynthia continues, “because I wouldn’t be caught dead doing some of the work I’ve seen her do.” This is an example of Cynthia being represented as a Black lady overall—her analysis of the situation and Kenya’s poor behavior is spot on—although she also is represented as enacting authentic Blackness (being a bitch), since the last line of her quote could be read as Cynthia being a bitch towards Kenya’s modeling career.

When one of Cynthia’s assistants attempts to explain to Kenya that some of the models are auditioning for the first time, Kenya becomes irate, and they engage in a shouting match. As they argue, Kenya calls for her security guard, who starts to push the assistant out of the room. Cynthia steps in between the bodyguard and the assistant, stopping the bodyguard from pushing her assistant. She tells the camera, “This is out of control. I have to step in.” After resolving the issue with the bodyguard, and establishing her place as the owner of the agency and the person running the casting call, Cynthia tells Kenya, “O.K. Alright.” The camera shifts to Kenya, who is wearing a self-satisfied smile. Cynthia continues, “I think, going forward, we’re going to have to make a few rules.” Kenya interjects, “One rule is no coochie crack.” Cynthia, looking annoyed, responds: “Excuse me. I am speaking. This is not about trying to insult any of these women that are out here. That’s not what the Bailey agency is about, or *Jet* magazine.” At this point, Kenya appears to attempt to try to save face. She tells the camera that she is only being critical as a way to help the models, explaining that, “If someone hadn’t taken me aside and shown me the correct way to dress for auditions, I would never book a job.” This defense of her actions doesn’t quite ring true since she did not take the models she was criticizing aside. She berated them in public rather than helping them privately.

Cynthia announces that the auditions are over, and she calls all the models onto the stage. Before she can start to address the group of models, Kenya stands up, and says, “May I just say [claps and looks proudly at the models], we know it takes a lot to get up here in a bathing suit.” Cynthia looks annoyed with Kenya, as Kenya continues, “Just know, when you leave here, that you are all absolutely stunning.” Cynthia stands up to take control, saying, “And I would like to say something as well, since we are all here at the Bailey Agency School of Fashion [Kenya looks directly at the camera and smiles], and I’m Cynthia, this is my school. You guys did a fabulous, fabulous job. And no matter what the outcome is, [Kenya rolls her eyes and says, “I said that”] you should be very proud of yourselves for coming out and going for it, because that’s what it is all about.” As the models clap and leave the stage, Kenya tells the camera, “It was as though she didn’t have an original thought in her mind. I think that there is a possibility that Cynthia is a little intimidated by me.” The shot cuts to Cynthia, telling the camera, “She’s completely disrespecting the school. She’s disrespecting the fact that I’m kinda the boss.” Before going to commercial, Cynthia tells the camera, “If Kenya comes for me, I’m coming for Kenya. We can do this all day long. It’s like a tennis match. My court, your court—let’s go.”

Throughout this scene at the Bailey Agency, Kenya is portrayed as a bitch, while Cynthia is represented as more mature and responsible. Cynthia gradually increases the assertiveness with which she responds to Kenya, and by the end of the scene, Cynthia not only senses that Kenya might try to cause trouble for her again, she vows to stand up to the challenge. These representations, of Kenya as a bitch and Cynthia as a lady, are re-affirmed in the next episode, when each woman recounts what happened during the casting call.

In this episode, Kandi Burress and Phaedra Parks, two of the returning cast members, invited Kenya to lunch. Phaedra and Kandi ask Kenya about how things went at the casting call with Cynthia, and Kenya states, “she had one of her little minions [her assistant] come around and say, ‘I think you’re being rude to the girls.’” With a self-satisfied smile on her face, she explains, “I had to let him know—

bitch please!” She goes on to explain that she had her security guard throw out Cynthia’s assistant, and Kandi asks Kenya what Cynthia did. Kenya responds, “Nothing! What was she gonna say?!?” Kenya continued, “Everything she said was something that I had already said. I felt like I was in the Wizard of Oz, and she was the scarecrow looking for a brain, because it was like she didn’t have one of her own.” In this scene, as Kenya talks about Cynthia, she flips her hair, rolls her eyes, and gets loud as she talks. By telling lies and half-truths about Cynthia, Kenya again is portrayed as a bitch.

Later in this episode, Cynthia, Phaedra, and Nene meet at a local gym to exercise together. After working out, they take a break, and Nene asks Cynthia how things went when Kenya helped with the casting call. Cynthia answered, “In conversation, she was great over the phone. She comes over and was completely—was a whole ‘nother person. I’m not even sure if she spoke when she got there. It was just really, really disappointing. I know Kenya’s not coming back to the Bailey Agency.” When Phaedra suggests that Cynthia give Kenya the benefit of the doubt, Cynthia responds, “It’s not going to be a situation where you’re going to come disrespect my business and me, and then we’re gonna get together and make up. No. I’m too old and too busy to be going back and forth.” The contrast between how Cynthia is shown recounting what happened at the casting call, versus the way Kenya did, makes clear the difference between the two women. Cynthia did not critique Kenya for disrespecting the models. She qualified the claim that Kenya didn’t speak to her when she first arrived at Cynthia’s agency (“I’m not even sure...”). And she expresses a desire to avoid more drama, rather than engage it.

The representation of Cynthia as a mature but strong Black lady continues throughout the season. One example, not involving Kenya, is when she deals with an apparent disrespect towards her by Phaedra in the third episode. Nene and Cynthia are having lunch, when Nene tells Cynthia that she has a voicemail recoding on which Phaedra speaks negatively about Cynthia being unable to attend Phaedra’s son’s birthday party. After hearing the recording, Cynthia tells Nene, “I feel like I need to let her know that I know. She needs to be more careful about who she butt dialing!” Cynthia continues, telling Nene,

“Phaedra thinks we are stupid, but I am on to her. I’m gonna call her out.” Later in the same episode, Phaedra and Cynthia meet for brunch. Cynthia confronts Phaedra, and Phaedra denies it. Cynthia asks her, “Are you sure you didn’t say it?” Phaedra, not exactly answering the question, responds, “I don’t think you have ever heard me drop the ‘F bomb,’ so whoever told you that is trippin’.” After Phaedra is shown denying that she said anything, Cynthia tells her that she has a voicemail as proof. Looking confused, Phaedra says, “I don’t recall that conversation.” Cynthia says that she can play the recording for Phaedra, and Phaedra changes the subject. Cynthia seemed to be trying to give Phaedra ample opportunity to admit to what she said, but in the end, Cynthia noted, Phaedra “giggled her way out of it.” Later in the season, Phaedra acknowledges that she did, in fact, make the comment that she was accused of, and she apologizes. In these examples, Nene and Cynthia are represented as strong Black ladies in that they want Phaedra to have to be accountable for her apparent disrespect of Cynthia. But they also display qualities of Black bitchiness: Nene could be seen as inserting herself into a situation that has nothing to do with her, just to stir up trouble, and Cynthia could have just dropped the issue without confronting Phaedra. But, overall, in this situation and over the course of the season, these moments of Black bitchiness do not overwhelm the way that Cynthia and Nene are represented as strong Black ladies.

The rift between Kenya and Cynthia is picked up again in the seventh episode, when the cast members and their men all go on vacation to Anguilla. The couples are enjoying dinner, when Kenya blurts out that she has a present for Cynthia. The present is a book: *You have no idea*, written by Vanessa Williams. As Kenya hands the book to Cynthia, Cynthia looks annoyed, and Phaedra comments, “Interesting.” Kenya explains to the camera that it bothered her when, in an earlier episode, Cynthia asked Kenya if she or Williams was the first Black woman to be crowned Miss USA. “I was like, Cynthia, you don’t know that she [Williams] was the first Black Miss America? Are you serious right now?” Kenya continued, “I was clutching my pearls. I was like ‘Ooooooh child!’” The camera returns to the dinner,

where Kenya tells Cynthia, "So I got her to autograph it for you." Cynthia thanks Kenya, then reads the title of the book, and says, "OK, that sounds like a read," and wags her finger. The expression, "a read," implies that a person is being told something about himself or herself. By giving Cynthia a book about Vanessa Williams, entitled, *You have no idea*, Kenya is telling Cynthia that Cynthia knows nothing about Black history in general, or about the history that Kenya and Williams share. As Cynthia starts to try to explain her question about who was the first Black Miss USA, saying, "I'm not from the pageant world," Kenya cuts her off: "You don't have to be from the pageant world to know about history, though. She was, like, history." Cutting Kenya off, Cynthia responds, "No no no no no no no no no! This is not about history. I'm very well-versed in history." Cynthia explained the reason for the question about who was first from the previous episode, shaking her head and wagging her finger. "Whatever it was, in any way, it was a compliment, OK? So do not get it twisted, OK?" Cynthia explains to the camera that Kenya's "gift" was rude, just like how Kenya had acted at the *Jet* magazine casting call: "She has no idea. Once again, mean-spirited, and very inappropriate."

Later in this episode, Cynthia confronts Kenya about the way Kenya has been acting towards her. This is an example where negative incidents between the two women are used to improve their relationship. As they walk together on the beach, Cynthia brings up her feelings about how Kenya acted at the casting call. They argue, both stating their side of the issue. Kenya seems to want to just drop it, but Cynthia pushes on: "I can tell you this, Kenya. If you invite me to your space, I'm a say, 'Hey, what do you need me to do?' When you're supporting friends, you just support them and move on!" "I got that part," replies Kenya, "I got that part." Cynthia continues, and Kenya comments that this incident happened two months ago, implying that Cynthia should be over it. But Cynthia responds, "It doesn't matter. I have to do everything on my time." Kenya tells her to calm down, and Cynthia responds, "Respect, respect, respect!" Kenya finally appears to get it and gives in, yelling, while laughing, "Make it stop!" Cynthia tells Kenya that Kenya has to respect her, and Kenya runs away, again laughing and yelling,

“Make it stop!” They then approach each other, laugh, and hug. Kenya, sounding and looking sincere, tells the camera, “This is actually really good. I think by having a mature conversation, I’m gonna give Cynthia another chance. And I hope she gives me a chance, too.” Unlike the white women cast members of *The Real Housewives of New York City*, who argued but never confronted each other to improve their friendships (Lee & Moscovitz, 2013), *RHOA* represents Black women as being able to not only fight, but to talk out their issues and move past them, and this in the end is a positive representation of Black women on a show thought to be exclusively about Black women being bitches.

This is not the only example of the Black women on the show using moments in which one or both of them might have acted like the stereotypic Black bitch as a starting point to improving their friendship. During the same episode, while the couples were vacationing in Anguilla together, Nene confronts Kandi about something Kandi said to Cynthia. Kandi admitted that she did, in fact say what Cynthia told Nene she said, and they begin to talk about their past difficulties with each other. Kandi tells Nene, “You and I, we do totally different things. We’re both in our own lane, and I feel like we’re both successful. But I feel like, whenever my name comes up, you always give me that, ‘psssst’ [dismissing Kandi’s accomplishments].” Nene denies this, saying, “I always say you’re doing your thing! I can’t believe you would say that!” Kandi asks Nene if she remembers when their friendship waned, and a clip from a previous season of *RHOA* is shown, where they both quickly escalated from talking to arguing like stereotypical “Black bitches.” The scene shifts, and Kandi tells Nene, “Lately, you are that chick that I thought you would be, as far as you’ve been fun. You know, everything has been cool. It doesn’t feel like we’re always in a competition.” Nene says that she never felt like Kandi respected her, and Kandi responded, saying, “Maybe because we never really communicate.” Nene tells Kandi, “We don’t be connecting like that. I really never felt it.” Nene says, to the camera, that she and Kandi do not have a reason to dislike each other, but they never really clicked. “Well, let me tell you today,” Nene says to Kandi, “I’m proud of you.” Kandi interjects, “I’m proud of you too.” Nene continued, “You’re doing your thing,

and I love to see that you're with your man, and you're happy." As the scene ends, they joke with each other, and appear to have genuinely made a positive breakthrough in their friendship.

The representation of Kenya as a bitch is not limited to her interactions with Cynthia. The biggest, most typical, *Real Housewives* catfight occurs between Kenya and the other new cast member, Porsha Stewart, granddaughter of famous civil rights activist Hosea Williams, and wife to ex-NFL star quarterback Kordell Stewart. In their initial interaction, the women meet for lunch, where Porsha invites Kenya to a fundraising event she is planning for the Hosea Williams Foundation. At the event, Kenya is unimpressed with how many people are in attendance, and then gets irate when Porsha refers to her as Miss American, rather than her correct title, Miss USA. Porsha is offended when Kenya appears irritated and starts to leave, and they argue. Porsha tells Kenya that the way she is acting is disrespectful, to which Kenya responds, "Disrespectful is inviting me to your event and getting in front of a group of people and not even knowing my title or who I'm about." Porsha responds, irritated, "From 19-whenever? I don't remember that." Kenya replies, "You have to do your research. You invited me. I feel disrespected." As they argue, Porsha tells Kenya, "You're on the curb, where you should be. At this point, I'm going to ask you to just go ahead and leave." At this point, their argument devolves into a stereotypical *RHOA* catfight: they talk over each other, wag fingers in each other's faces, and name-call. In this sequence, Kenya appears to act like a bitch, but this is the first example in a pattern in which Kenya tries to explain her side of an argument civilly, which Porsha completely ignores only to escalate her side of the argument by acting like a bitch, herself.

Porsha brings this encounter back up in the eighth episode, when all of the couples are on vacation in Anguilla. The women are all having drinks together after a long day on the island. Earlier in the day, Cynthia had renewed her marriage vows with her husband, which seemed to make this a particularly poor time to start a fight. Porsha starts out, seemingly complimenting Kenya for the how nice she had seemed so far on the trip, and Nene asks what happened at Porsha's charity event. Instead of saying

that it wasn't worth going over again, Porsha starts to explain her version of what happened that night. For most of the scene, Kenya tries to avoid a fight. She tells the camera, "I don't even know why we're talking about this bullshit. I'm over you, get over it." Kenya tells the women that Porsha is telling her side of the story, and Porsha challenges Kenya to tell her side. Kenya responds, trying to avoid a fight, "That was a while ago. I'm really over the situation. It really doesn't matter to me." Porsha looks and sounds irritated by this, and she turns her focus to explaining more of her side of the story to the other women, waving her hand towards Kenya.

At this point, it appears that Porsha has pushed Kenya too far. Porsha tells the other women, "She's a non-factor to me," to which Kenya responds, "You're a non-motherfucking-factor bitch." As they snipe back and forth, Kenya is shown explaining to the camera, reasonably, and based on what was shown of the fight, correctly, "I'm clearly not ready to talk to her. I'm being polite, and she's pushing the issue." Porsha tries to argue, and Kenya attempts to de-escalate the conversation, saying, "I'm over it. I'm over it." As Porsha continues to criticize Kenya, Kenya responds in kind, defending herself. Kenya explains to the camera, "I don't like being put in a corner, because I'm a fighter. If you put me in a corner, I'm gonna scratch somebody's eyes out." Kenya implies that Porsha is being immature by asking Porsha, "What, are we in high school?" As Porsha begins to respond, the stereotypical *RHOA* brawl breaks out between the two. Although Kenya is, at times in this scene, disrespectful towards Porsha, she also made many attempts to avoid and deescalate the interaction. She apparently felt like she had been cornered, and she responded. In contrast, Porsha is portrayed as being the instigator and aggressor, and she never attempts to deescalate the fight, which makes her seem to be more at fault for the argument.

Kenya calls Porsha a bitch, and Porsha calls Kenya a hood rat. Kenya stands up and towers over Porsha, who is still sitting at this point. They waive their hands in each other's faces, Kenya calls Porsha a bitch again, and Porsha stands up to face Kenya. As they shout at each other, the other women attempt to step in to separate them. Porsha calls Kenya a tramp, and Kenya calls Porsha, "a bitch and a dumb

little cheerleader.” As they are separated, they continue to scream at each other, Porsha calling Kenya a “curb-ass bitch,” and Kenya responding, “Read a book, bitch!”

Once they are separated, Kenya explains her reason for allowing herself to be pulled into the fight, saying that there is a certain line that should not be crossed. She tells Phaedra, “You take off the gloves when you insult me. Alright? Don’t hit below the belt. You hit below the belt, you gonna get punched in your face.” She then tells the camera, “All I heard was her calling me a tramp. And then I heard her call me ghetto. I am ghetto! I’m also sophisticated, educated, classy. I’m a lot of things. That’s all part of the magic, sweetheart [apparently referring to Porsha, in Porsha’s absence]. You’re just jealous because you don’t have that kind of magic.” In this quote, Kenya defines her complexity: she can be a bitch, but also sophisticated, smart, and sexy.

The scene shifts back to Kenya talking to Phaedra. She explains what got her so mad: “You don’t call a woman a name like that. I don’t sleep around. One thing about me, I don’t sleep around! You don’t call me a tramp! I will get Detroit on you if you call me out my name like that. I have a grandmother who raised me the Christian way. I ain’t nobody’s tramp.” She continues, implicitly critiquing sexist and racist respectability expectations: “I will flirt, I will laugh, I will look beautiful doing it, and I will go with my man and go home.” Nene tries to get Kenya to “sit down and talk about it,” but Kenya decides to go to bed, and this is how the episode ends. As the next episode begins, Porsha talks negatively about Kenya in her absence. Porsha tells the women that she is more mature than is Kenya, and then the scene cuts to Cynthia, telling the camera, “I was a little surprised at how [pauses to think] crunk the fight got. But Kenya and I are a little bit closer in age. And if you call me some of the things that she was calling Kenya, oh, that will make somebody wanna fight.”

Portrayals of bitchiness are not reserved for the Black cast members. Kim Zolciak, a returning cast member, who is white, is represented as a bitch frequently in the season that I studied. Because she was rarely included in the episodes of this season, I focus here on two examples of her representation as

a bitch. Early in the season, Kim is shown, in her home, complaining about having to move. She explains the drama she has had with the landlord, from whom she allegedly was supposed to eventually buy the house. Moving day had finally arrived, in the fifth episode, and her representation as a bitch is juxtaposed with scenes in which Kandi makes seemingly reasonable (based on what is shown to the viewers in each episode) critiques of Kim. This juxtaposition results in Kandi being represented as being a reasonable Black lady, and Kim being portrayed as a white bitch. This depiction is in line with Lee and Moswitz's (2013) finding that white women on other versions of *The Real Housewives* are portrayed as bitches with no redeeming qualities.

This set of scenes begins with Kandi and her mom unpacking boxes in Kandi's new house. Kandi shares with her mom that while she expected to be emotional about moving out of her old house and into the new one, she is not. Once they finish talking about the difficulty of moving, Kandi tells her mom that Kim is moving out of her house today, and her mom comments that she thought that Kim was buying the house she had been living in. Kandi responds, "No. And the crazy thing is, the moving company she called, guess how much she said that they told her it they was gonna charge to move her stuff and store it for three months. A hundred thousand dollars!" When her mom asks Kandi if she is serious, Kandi just smiles knowingly. In this scene, Kandi's under-control move is compared to the drama surrounding Kim's move.

The scene shifts to Kim's house. She yells to her assistant, "Sweetie! Can I ask you where all the fucking movers are?" Sweetie tells her they are in the basement, to which Kim responds, looking annoyed, "Wait a minute. There's movers in the basement just sitting down there twiddling their fucking thumbs at \$35 an hour per mover? Let's go see what the guys are doing downstairs." When they find one of the movers, she calmly asks him, "What are you guys doing?" She notices that the movers are not organizing the items as they pack them in boxes, which annoys her. She tells the camera, waving her hands in exasperation, "I coulda fucking done this myself and just said put it wherever the fuck you want

and I'll figure it out later. I don't want to do that." She then opens one of the packed boxes to see the jumble of stuff inside. As Kim rants, "Is this fucking guy for real? He has no fucking clue what he's doing," Sweetie looks as if she is annoyed with Kim and embarrassed. When Kim says, "I'm gonna have a nervous breakdown. Crazy asshole," the mover she is yelling at shakes his head, as if to say, "What is your problem?" Her rudeness and use of curse words and exaggerated gestures in this scene is a textbook example for the stereotypical image of the bitch.

After another return to Kandi's house, where Kandi tells her mom that Kim had been critical of Kandi's new house in an earlier episode, the scene shifts back to Kim's house, where Kim looks upset. Sweetie, Kim's African American female assistant, is represented as the voice of reason, in contrast to Kim's angry and irrational ranting. Sweetie explains, "In this situation, you don't need to be yelling and screaming, hollering," to which Kim responds, "I'm fucking pissed!" Sweetie calmly says, "I understand where you're coming from, but it's not proper." Kim responds, "So you don't think I can say 'fuck you' to somebody because it's not proper?" Sweetie says that she understands, but that Kim needs to act more like Kroi, Kim's husband, who is generally calm. Kim interrupts her, exclaiming, "When I'm writing a \$10,000 check I say 'fuck you mother fucker!' Kroi doesn't get loud. I do."

Perhaps the best example of the way that Kim is represented as a bitch is in a scene in the fifth episode. The women meet for lunch to discuss their vacation to Anguilla. Kim shows up and tells them that she cannot go with them. Kim, who is seated at the head of the table, first says that she and her husband will go if his work schedule allows. But when Cynthia asks each of the women to confirm that they are, in fact, planning to go on the trip, she and her husband are planning, Kim says that she cannot travel with the group because of her pregnancy. She starts reciting reasons why she cannot go on the trip: "At 28 weeks, you can't travel. So I'm going to have to talk to my O.B." She continues, "My cervix is already shortened, just a little. And I had KJ early. There's a lot of factors. My husband's in camp. I'm breastfeeding. So..." Cynthia explains that they scheduled the dates based on Kim's pregnancy and her

ability to travel: "We were trying to speed it up for you." Kim starts talking about how far along the pregnancy is, but her numbers keep changing and Nene says to the camera, "Kim knows how to tell some tall tales honey, believe me. The bitch might be two weeks pregnant, but will tell you she's two years pregnant." Kim says that she is 8 months pregnant, and Nene tells the camera, "Just last week you were four months pregnant. So, however many months pregnant Kim wanna be, that's how many months she gonna be."

Kim says she definitely cannot go, and Kandi asks her, "So you and Kroi are not gonna do a trip?" Kim says that she and her husband are going on a trip next week. Kandi tells the camera, looking annoyed, "What? How you gonna sit up here and tell me you can't go on a vacation, but you're going on a vacation, the same time we are, somewhere else?!" All of the other women are irritated, in part because they all had engagements that they passed up or rescheduled in order to work around Kim's pregnancy. Phaedra summed up the criticism: "Everybody's got a busy schedule." Kim then says that she thought the trip would be in the U.S, "but out of the country is definitely not an option. You can't fly after a certain period, and that's that." Nene sums up the situation: "You ain't got to travel with us, and you don't have to have a doctor's excuse. If you were the right kinda bitch, you would walk up in here and say, 'You know what, I'm not gonna travel with you guys because I don't want to.'"

Phaedra tells Kim that she wonders if Kim doesn't have time to be friends with her and the other women. Kim replies, "You know what? I really don't." She continues, "I gotta be honest with you. I got married, I had a baby, my priorities have changed. I have a lot going on." Kandi responds, "I mean, clearly, we all got a lot going on." Kim defensively restates reasons she cannot go on the trip. She ignores the two complaints that the other women have: that they planned around the schedule that she gave them, and that it seems that she no longer wants to be friends with them. Nene, clearly irritated, tells Kim that she always has an excuse for why she cannot do things with them, and Kandi joins in, saying, "Every

time, it doesn't matter where we are, you got a good excuse for why you cannot come." Nene starts to get mad, and Kim storms out of the restaurant. Kim: "All these bitches are fucking crazy."

In this scene, all of the Black women, who had a right to be angry—they planned around Kim's schedule, they all sacrificed things to make the dates work for Kim, and she seemed to be making up excuses to get out of the trip—were represented as Black ladies: they were not rude, but they did display strength as they appropriately and assertively questioned Kim's reasons and motives for dropping out of the trip. And Kim, a white woman, was represented negatively: she changed her story, she made up excuses, she seemed to not care to get her story straight, and when she was legitimately questioned about her commitment to her friendship with the other women, Black women, she said she didn't have time for them, that they were not a priority for her, and, in the end, that "these bitches are not my friends."

8.3.2 Representations of Black Women & Gender

In the U.S., the norm upon which all women, including Black women, are judged is "middle-class, heterosexual, white femininity" (Collins, 2005, p. 193). This ideology is operationalized through a set of "benchmarks" that function as "a normative yardstick for all femininities in which Black women are relegated to the bottom of the gender hierarchy" (p. 193). The benchmarks of normative white middle-class femininity that Collins (2005) points to are: Appropriate feminine demeanor—women must look feminine and must not act like men (pp. 193-196); appropriate heterosexuality—women should be married to men, and sexuality should occur only within marriage, and only in private (pp. 197-198); and appropriate balance of work and family— married women should have kids, which inevitably should take priority over career (p. 198). The cruel trick of this arrangement, according to Collins (2005) is that even Black women who meet these benchmarks cannot achieve the ideal femininity because "the fact of Blackness excludes them. Dominant gender ideology provides a social script for Black women whereby everyone else needs Black women to be on the bottom for everything to make sense" (p. 199).

The depiction of African American women on *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* confounds the dualistic gender representations outlined by Collins (2005). Unlike other docusoaps, *RHOA* presents depictions of Black women who are strong and assertive in their romantic relationships, but are not emasculating, as the stereotype would have it. They are appropriately feminine and heterosexual, and they are also represented as equal to their male partners. Kenya's portrayal, in terms of her romantic relationship, is somewhat of an exception in that she pushes the man she is dating to marry her, and this is portrayed negatively.

Cynthia, Kandi, and Nene are all represented as appropriately strong Black women in their romantic relationships. They aren't too overbearing, nor are they deferential to their men. In the second episode, Cynthia, her husband Peter, and her ex-husband Leon are in the kitchen. Leon is in town to see Noelle, the daughter he shares with Cynthia, and he is staying with Cynthia and Peter. Peter is joking around, talking in a Jamaican accent, and Cynthia playfully tells him to stop. Cynthia has dinner ready, but Peter tells her he wants to eat leftovers. Cynthia responds, laughing, "I try to make a nice dinner. I put in an effort. And it's like, 'Oh, you never cook!'" They begin to talk about whether or not to home school Noelle again in the coming school year. Peter and Leon think Noelle should go to school, and Cynthia thinks she should be home schooled. When Leon says it will be difficult for her to convince him that Noelle shouldn't go to school, Cynthia pushes back, explaining her side: "When you see Noelle, it's happy times because you don't see her every day." She tells the camera, "I need for Leon, as Noelle's dad, to support me and back me up because I'm really here the most. I'm really seeing the most." Leon says that Noelle needs to be around other kids, and Cynthia tells the camera, "Alright already, I got this. I'm good at this. Noelle is a great kid. But when it comes to Noelle, there's one boss, and it's me." Cynthia tells Peter and Leon, "I feel like it's very easy for you [Leon]. And you [Peter], you live here but you're not as involved in Noelle's day-to-day with her school stuff. I deal with her emotionally, physically. So when she ain't right, I ain't right. You [Leon] have the luxury of coming in here and saying, 'Well, I think

she should be back in school,' like that's just going to solve all the problems." As they continue to talk, Noelle enters the kitchen. Cynthia asks Noelle what she wants to do for school. Noelle says that she wants to go to school, that she never wanted to be home schooled. The adults agree to do what Noelle wants, and Leon jokes with Cynthia that she can home school Noelle on the weekends. Cynthia jokes, "I'm taking my food away! None of you guys are getting it!" In this scene, Cynthia is portrayed as being strong in her conviction about Noelle's schooling, but she is also represented as being flexible in changing her mind. The men have not overruled her, and she does not appear upset about the disagreement or the resolution.

Kandi and her boyfriend Todd are living together, but they are not married, and Kandi is not in a hurry to get married. Kandi and Todd's relationship is represented as one of equality, in that they love each other and are happy together, but they agree that they do not want to rush into marriage. In Anguilla, Kandi and Todd are having drinks and holding hands, and Todd says that they need to have more "alone time" when they get back home. Kandi, smiling, tells the camera, "Everything about our relationship, it just works." She continues, laughing, "I hope in the future, you know, he'll lock me down." Later, when the women are getting massages on the beach, Phaedra asks Kandi if she thinks Todd will ask her to marry him, and Kandi responds, "I hope so." After Nene comments about how nice it would be if Kandi and Todd got married, Kandi tells the camera, "Right now, Todd and I just kinda like going with the flow and enjoying each other. And it's making me feel kinda pressured, that being the main topic of conversation." The theme of being happy with her and Todd's relationship, and not wanting to rush, continues throughout the season. When the women get back to Atlanta from their vacation in Anguilla, Cynthia tells Kandi that she thought Todd might propose on the trip, and Kandi says that she hopes that Todd will propose marriage to her soon. Kandi then contrasts her approach to Kenya's approach to romantic relationships: "Here's the thing. Her conversation is always, 'I wanna be married and go immediately to having babies. But clearly, they weren't on the same page, because we all know that men tell

you stuff to keep you in the relationship.” In this scene, the fact that Todd and Kandi are on the same page is contrasted with Kenya and Walter’s relationship, which is portrayed as unequal. Later in the same episode, Phaedra has brought her pastor to bless Kandi and Todd’s new house. The conversation turns to marriage, and Kandi tells the camera, “I’m just gonna keep it real. I don’t want to be like Kenya, scaring off Walter! I want my situation to flow like it’s supposed to flow.” As they continue to talk about marriage, Kandi tells them, “OK, y’all are putting pressure [on us to get married].” In another scene, Kandi tells the camera, “Todd, Riley, and I have been in our house for a couple months, and things are going really good. Todd and Riley, they’re bonding. This is the picture perfect life that I’ve always wanted. I hope one day it goes to marriage, but I’m not forcing it.” Kandi is portrayed as strong in two ways. First, she is strong in that she and Todd are portrayed as both wanting to take their time before they get married, and she is not trying to force him into marrying her. Second, Kandi is strong in that she does not buckle under the pressure others put on her to get married. Instead, she steadfastly explains her position without giving in. Although Kandi hoping that Todd will propose to her is very traditional (she could propose to him), she is not in a rush for this to happen because they have agreed to not rush into marriage.

Nene’s portrayal, in terms of her approach to her romantic relationship, is similar to Kandi’s. In the previous season of *RHOA*, Nene divorced Greg, her husband. Over the course of the season, the show features Greg and Nene trying to work on their relationship so that they can stay together. This involves scenes where Greg tries to be charming, supportive, and complimentary to Nene, and he often asks her if they can get back together romantically. Throughout these scenes, Nene holds strongly to the idea that they have to take it slow, and that Greg has to earn her love back over a period of time. She is never shown being rude to Greg, she never tries to use sexuality against him, and she never uses his desire to get back with her to manipulate him. The way Nene is represented, in terms of her romantic relationship with Greg, is as an appropriately strong Black woman.

In the second episode, Greg walks into Nene's kitchen and hands her the mail. He asks her for a kiss for bringing it to her, saying, "C'mon, pay the mail man." Nene laughs at him, saying, "Greg, come on man," and thanks him for delivering her mail. Then she tells the camera, "Of course Greg wants me back. I'm doing a lot of things. We always had a great relationship, and it was very difficult during the time that we weren't together. I'm open to it [her and Greg getting back together romantically], but Greg's gotta prove himself." Nene tells Greg that she feels that she took a lot of the blame for their breakup, and that he has to take some of the blame. Greg says that he takes the blame for what he did to contribute to the breakup, and Nene tells him, "At the end of the day, you know I was a good wife to you." In this scene, Nene stays strong in her position about her relationship with Greg and how it should go, and she also voices her feelings about who is to blame for their breakup, all without being mean, rude, or bitchy.

The next episode starts with Nene and Greg at a spa, getting pedicures. Holding glasses of champagne, Nene says, "Here's to a day out." Greg responds, "I love you," and Nene rolls her eyes, indicating that saying that in public was inappropriate, given the place where their relationship is. Nene tells Greg that she needs him to take care of their son while she is out of town, and Greg tells her he needs a key to her house. "Actually," he continues, "I need two keys. I need a key to the house, and I need a key to your heart." Nene tells the camera, "Greg wooing me reminds me of when we were first dating. All this public affection, it's a little embarrassing. But he's lost a few pounds, and he's not looking so bad, so it's OK," ending with a smile. Greg asks her about her move to Los Angeles—she is shooting a new television show, *The New Normal*, so she will be living part time in L.A.—and then tells her that he is thinking about opening a new office, for his business, in Los Angeles. She looks surprised, and asks him, "Where you gonna live at?" Greg responds, "I would be given a key to something [hinting that he wants to live with her]." Nene tells him, "Get you a key to a hotel room down the street." After some more banter about keys, Greg tells Nene that he is trying to prove himself to her: "I'm trying to prove myself

to you, that I do want to support you. And I want nothing short of the absolute best for you,” to which Nene replies, “Greg, keep it real now.” Greg says he is being honest, and Nene tells him that he lacks patience for her and their son. He asks her if she thinks he needs therapy, and she says, “I’m gonna give you a list of the things you need therapy for.” Greg tells Nene, “Give me a key and I’ll get help,” and Nene responds, emphatically, “No. Change will get you a key.” This scene shows Nene being open to rekindling her relationship with Greg, while she also stands up for her belief that Greg has to earn his way back into the relationship by proving that he has changed.

Later, in episode fourteen, Nene and Greg are shopping for furniture for Nene’s house in Los Angeles. As they look at furniture together, Nene tells the camera, “I never thought, when we were divorcing, that I would be walking around a year later, searching for furniture with Greg in Los Angeles. Honey, things have definitely changed.” Greg makes a joke about wanting a certain kind of furniture. Nene tells him no, and he asks why. Nene, laughing, responds, “Do you live there?” They both laugh, and then Nene tells the camera, “When Greg started to do things that I did not like, I divorced Greg. Now, I might get married again. But you act up again, I’m gonna divorce you again.” In this scene, Nene is giving Greg credit for improving in the way he treats her and proving himself. But it also demonstrates her independence by keeping the possibility of divorce on the table if they do get back together.

The equality that characterizes the representation of Cynthia, Kandi, and Nene’s romantic relationships is contrasted with Kenya’s portrayal. Kenya appears to be in a hurry to get married and start a family. Throughout most of the season, Kenya is shown to be scheming, pushy, and passive aggressive towards Walter as she tries to get him to propose to her. The first time we see Kenya and Walter together, in the third episode, they are having dinner. Their conversation quickly turns to Kenya listing reasons why she wants to get married soon and have kids. She tells Walter that much of the reason she moved to Atlanta has to do with him. He asks her what she means, and she tells him that she moved to Atlanta primarily to build on their relationship, and then mentions that she has recently seen a fertility

doctor to find out about the chances of her getting pregnant. Walter, looking uncomfortable, just says, "Wow." He then asks her if she will have to have an in vitro procedure, and she smiles at him, saying, "I would like to try the natural way." Walter laughs uncomfortably and takes a drink of water. The waitress brings them triple shots of tequila. While Kenya takes a sip, Walter downs the entire drink, as if he needs the liquor to deal with what Kenya is saying to him.

Kenya shifts the conversation, telling him that she would like to know if he has "some skeletons in the closet." Walter asks her what she wants to know about, and Kenya responds, "Anything that could possibly embarrass me. You need to tell me." Walter says he has dated women in Atlanta. When Kenya asks if she knows anyone he has dated, he tells her that he asked Kandi out, but that she said "No." Kenya appears upset with this news and she explains to Walter, "It's something for somebody to have in their little back pocket. 'Yea, her man tried to talk to me before.'" Walter tries to convince her that this is nothing to worry about, but Kenya is visibly distraught. Walter tells Kenya: "I'm just trying to be truthful, and you are jumping the gun. Pump the brakes." Kenya, clearly upset, excuses herself. As she walks away, Walter says, "Wow" again, and when Kenya enters the women's restroom, she utters, "This is some bullshit." When Kenya returns to the table, Walter tries to pacify her, telling her that he likes and respects her, and that he thinks that she is attractive. Kenya's mood visibly changes as she enjoys the flattery. She laughs and, smiling says, "So you're flirting with me now," to which Walter replies, "I don't want you to be mad at me over nothing." Kenya laughs and says, "OK. Cheers!" In this scene, Kenya is represented as being too pushy in her desire to get married and pregnant, and she is also portrayed as being manipulative.

This theme appears in several other episodes, as well. During the fifth episode, Kenya and Walter are having dinner at Kenya's house. She prepares pre-made food that she got at the store, but dirties a pan to make it look like she cooked. They eat outside, and Walter comments, "Oh, wow, you got it nice out here!" She says that this is a preview of how it would be if they were married, and that she is "trying

to get more accustomed to being wifey.” She looks in his eyes and continues, “Being at home, being a mother. So how do you think I’m doing so far?” Walter takes a bite of chicken and avoids the question, saying he likes the food. Kenya continues to pressure Walter, saying, “I just have a laser focus right now. I want a baby like yesterday.” Walter looks like this comment has made it difficult for him to swallow the food in his mouth. Kenya continues, “If I could be nine months pregnant right now [looks Walter in the eye], I would be. I don’t want to wait! I’m ready. I’m not trying to put any pressure on you.” Walter responds, “It sounds like pressure to me!” Kenya tells him that she is not ovulating that day, implying that there is no rush because she couldn’t get pregnant that night. Walter says, “Wow.” He looks uncomfortable. He holds his hands up in front of him, the nonverbal sign for “stop.” Walter tells Kenya that it has been nice having her in town since she moved to Atlanta, and she responds by saying, “So...Five and a half” (referring to her ring size). Walter asks her what she means, and she says, “Not my shoe size!” Walter laughs uncomfortably, and Kenya pushes further: “It damn sure ain’t my bra size, as you can see.” She lifts up her dress to adjust her breasts, and Walter tells her, “I got it. I got you. I got it. I got it.” Kenya smiles and asks, “So...Soon?” Walter replies, “I don’t know. Just keep drinking, boo. Just keep drinking.” In this scene, Kenya is portrayed as too pushy, which makes Walter uncomfortable.

Kenya continues to press Walter about getting married while the couples are vacationing in Anguilla. At the end of the trip, the couples are having lunch, and the topic of Walter proposing comes up. Nene says that Kenya said Walter was going to propose before they left the island, and Walter responds, telling everyone, “Let me correct that. We did talk about it. I just didn’t say when.” Kenya reminds Walter that he said that anything could happen while they are on vacation, and Walter responds, “Yea, anything can happen. It might happen. Just let me go at my own pace.” Kenya smiles, and she seems OK with his reply. As Kenya asks Phaedra how she let Apollo know she was ready for a proposal, Phaedra tells the camera, “I feel sorry for Kenya because she appears to be longing to be loved, but she doesn’t know how to attract the right attention.” Nene tells Kenya, “You can’t force a man into engagement.

The best way to get a ring is with a closed mouth.” Kenya responds, saying that the only way to know that two people are ready to be engaged is to talk about it. “If somebody is like, ‘I don’t ever want to get married,’ then you need to just keep it moving.” Walter says that he didn’t say he never wanted to get married, and Kenya responds, saying, “I know you never said that, ‘cause I would never be here. I don’t like to waste my time.” As Kordell tells the story of how he proposed to Porsha, Kenya becomes upset and leaves the table.

Walter goes to talk to Kenya, who says that she is upset hearing the stories of how the other couples got engaged. Walter defends himself, saying that he didn’t mean he was going to propose to her on the trip. Then Walter tells Kenya that he will not be pressured into marrying her, saying that her pressuring him is annoying. She accuses him of yelling at her, and he tells her that he isn’t yelling, but that he wants her to hear him. Kenya storms off and Walter lets her go. Phaedra and Apollo go to check on her. They both advise her that she shouldn’t pressure Walter, or any man, to marry her. Phaedra tells her, “At the end of the day, if he decides to marry you, he’ll do it.” Apollo tells Kenya, “If you really want it, just be patient and the walls are gonna come down. At the end of the day, if it’s God ordained, then its gonna flow. You just have to sit back and try to cheer up.”

Kenya’s representation on *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* functioned in two ways. First, she was portrayed negatively. By pushing Walter to propose to her, she appears demanding and self-centered. Ultimately, this approach to romantic relationships is portrayed as being unsuccessful, as Walter starts to avoid Kenya and they stop dating. In addition, Kenya’s negative representation serves to make Cynthia, Kandi, and Nene look better. They do not pressure their men, nor do they attempt to manipulate their men by using their sexuality.

8.3.3 Representations of Black women & Redefining Black Gender Ideology

According to Patricia Hill Collins (2005), a progressive Black sexual politics that would improve upon the way Black women have been represented “requires alternative definitions of Black masculinity

and Black femininity that might spark different self-definitions, interpersonal relationships, and social practices within African American community politics” (pp. 199-200). Fundamental to the task of building a progressive Black gender ideology is that the “weak man, strong woman” thesis needs to be countered. As Collins (2005) explains, “*the fundamental premise of any progressive Black gender ideology is that it cannot be based on someone else’s subordination*” (p. 200). As such, Collins concludes that strength needs to be separated from control (p. 201). Collins (2005) identifies several changes in the ways that Black people should be represented, which might push towards a more advanced portrayal of Black life. Non-normative family formations, “gay and lesbian families, families that incorporate grand parents, cousins, and ‘fictive kin’, and heterosexual women or men who teamed up,” that nurture African American children, for example, “would be valued, not maligned because it failed to measure up to some pre-determined gender norms” (p. 205). Also, a progressive Black gender ideology would represent the sexuality of African Americans’ “beyond the narrow confines of the sexually repressive culture of the United States” (p. 209). Collins lists several examples, including: “the open expression of strong feelings and emotions; being more at ease with sensuality and eroticism as aspects of use of the body; openness about the use of the body through appearance and movement; a comfort level with sexual expression both within and outside of marriage” (p. 210). Finally, Collins argues that representations of Black intimate love relationships must change (p. 252). Positive representations of African Americans experiencing “mutual recognition and understanding” instead of “the love and trouble tradition” are needed (p. 252). In addition to positive portrayals of Black love, the heteronormativity of loving relationships needs to be undone: “In essence, ‘out’ LGBT African Americans are inherently rebellious, regardless of their choice of love interest, the sexual practices they prefer, and/or whether they are sexually active at all” (pp. 269-270).

There are several ways that *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* enacts Collins’s version of a progressive Black sexual politics. The cast members value alternative family forms, including one couple

who is divorced but now working to get their relationship back to where they can re-marry, and one couple who considers an ex-mate as a part of the family. In addition, the cast members are not sexually repressed, nor are they represented as hypersexual or amoral. And gay Black men are represented positively on the show.

There are several non-normative family arrangements on *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, and they are all represented positively. At the beginning of the season, Kandi and Todd bought a house and are moving in together with Riley, Kandi's daughter from a previous relationship. Kandi and Todd's relationship is portrayed positively despite the fact that they are not married, which is one of the benchmarks that define femininity in the U.S. (Collins, 2005, pp. 197-198). Kandi's comments about her relationship are always positive. Earlier in this chapter, I described a scene in which Kandi said that she and Todd share the same mindset about getting married. At the end of that scene, Kandi explains, "Todd, Riley, and I have been in our house for a couple months, and things are going really good. Todd and Riley, they're bonding. This is the picture perfect life that I've always wanted. I hope one day it goes to marriage, but I'm not forcing it." In the third episode, Kandi says that her relationship with Todd "feels very natural for us. It just feels right." In addition to Kandi's self-representation, the other cast members voice support for her and Todd's relationship. In the seventh episode, Kandi's mother, who did not like Kandi's last mate, is positive about Kandi and Todd moving in together. In the ninth episode, Nene says, "Everybody needs love, and Kandi has found Todd. And if Kandi is happy, I'm happy for her." Throughout the season, the dominant themes that explain Kandi's relationship with Todd are that love is the most important quality needed in romantic relationships, and that it is better to live together, unmarried, than to rush into marriage.

Another non-normative family relationship that is portrayed positively is the one between Cynthia, her husband Peter, and Cynthia's ex-husband Leon. Earlier in this chapter, I recounted a scene where the three adults were discussing whether or not Noelle, Cynthia and Leon's daughter, should be

home-schooled. Cynthia and Peter were playfully arguing about what food to eat for dinner, and Cynthia's cooking habits, when Leon interjected, saying in a joking tone, that they should act like they have company, referring to himself. Peter replies, "Man, you ain't company no more!" Then, Cynthia explains to the camera, "When Leon comes to town, Peter is good with Leon staying with us, because we're all grown and I've always been very upfront about my relationship with Noelle's dad." In this scene, the emphasis is on what is best for the child in the family, and Leon is treated as if he is part of the family, even though he is divorced from Cynthia. All three adults are working together for the good of the child. This unique family relationship was also portrayed positively in light of the way that the three adults shared their opinions and ultimately agreed on a decision concerning the daughter being home-schooled.

Another version of a non-normative family unit represented positively on *RHOA* is the relationship between Nene and Greg. They had been married for fifteen years before getting divorced during the previous season, and in the season that I studied, Nene and Greg are trying to work things out so that they can get back together.¹³ Nene and Greg are having dinner with Cynthia and Peter in the sixth episode. When Nene and Greg arrive at Cynthia and Peter's house, they all greet each other happily, hugging and kissing in a celebratory manner. Cynthia tells the camera, "It feels good to be hanging out with Nene and Greg. Even though they have their issues and their problems, you just want them to be together. Because it's Nene and Greg!" As they stand in the kitchen, Peter asks Nene what is going on with her and Greg. Nene plays coy at first, saying, "Nothing. What you mean, 'what's going on?'" They all laugh, and then Nene explains, "We are the new normal! What I think happened, when me and Greg got divorced, there was nothing else to fight about." Smiling, Peter responded, "y'all are good!" Laughing, Peter tells Cynthia, "I think we need to break up. Then maybe we will be happy."

¹³ They ultimately re-married after Season 5 aired.

In the next episode, while Cynthia and Peter get ready for dinner during their first night of vacation in Anguilla, Peter asks, “Did you notice Nene and Greg? That’s some crazy stuff! A year ago, they went through a divorce, and it looks like there’s some new stuff jumping off right now!” Cynthia says that she thinks that they will get back together soon, and Peter responds, “I love that!” Cynthia agrees, saying, “I do, too!” In the eleventh episode, Nene, Greg, and Brent, their son, are sitting in the kitchen. Greg says that he is happy that they have worked their way back together as a family, and Nene says, “Somehow, we have made it to the other side, and that is the great thing.” Greg replies, “That’s all that matters.” Then Nene tells the camera that she and Greg are packing up to move to Los Angeles, explaining that it is a “a time of change for me and my family.” At this point, although they don’t explicitly say so, it seems that Greg and Nene are back together. Nene tells Greg that she is going to give him a key, suggesting that he has proven himself to her. Later in the episode, Cynthia throws a going-away party for Nene. Kandi tells the camera, “I am soooo happy to see Nene and Greg back together. It’s great to see him and Nene moving together as a family. It’s great to see she’s got that rock, that person who has been there for her forever.” Overall, Nene and Greg’s relationship, going from married to divorced to back together as a family, is represented positively.

The three family configurations—living together unmarried, including one partner’s ex as a member of the family, and reconciling after a divorce—are all represented in essentially the same progressive perspective, which is that loving and supporting each other and the family is what really matters in a romantic relationship. Another way that *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* breaks traditional gender ideology is the way in which it represents Black sexuality.

On the season of *RHOA* that I studied, sexuality and/or sexual themes come up consistently. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* are not sexually repressed, like the middle-class ideal would suggest (Collins, 2005, pp. 97-98), but they also are not represented as overly sexual or freaky, as poor and working-class Black women are usually represented in popular culture (pp. 126-130). One popular line of discussion is

about “donkey booties,” which are large posteriors typically attributed to African American women. In the third episode, Kandi, Kenya and Phaedra meet for lunch, and when Kenya arrives, Phaedra’s first comment is, “Donkey booty!” As the women laugh while Kenya shows off her large posterior, Kandi says, “Kenya has a donkey booty. We know where Phaedra’s gonna have her eyes on!” Phaedra, looking wide-eyed at Kenya’s backside, says, “That’s a big old shelf!” All the women laugh, and Kandi and Kenya high-five each other. In the eighth episode, all of the women are on the beach in Anguilla, when Nene playfully leads them in an impromptu set of exercises. Nene declares, “We making our booties stand out!” As she lies on her back, Nene says, “Everybody’s legs in the air! Think about that hot, sexy man.” As the women comply with Nene’s directions, they laugh. Once they all have their legs in the air, Nene directs them to “open ‘em! Open ‘em.” The women laugh as they open and close their legs. Nene leads them in another booty shaping exercise in which they get on their hands and knees, and shake their posteriors. Then, they do single leg thrusts. All the while, the women laugh as they appear to have fun together on the beach.

In addition to the emphasis on Black behinds, there are many references to sex. Contrary to white heterosexual norms that dictate keeping sex private, the women and their men talk about having sex. They aren’t repressed, but never does this talk become freaky either. One way that sex comes up on the show is in the form of sexual jokes. During the third episode, as Kandi and Todd unpack in their new house, Kandi tells Todd that she needs his help with a tool set that is still in its box. They joke back and forth about tools. Todd says, “I’m allergic to tools. I’m a city boy, we don’t use tools.” Kandi, smiling, responds, “I think all men should have tools.” Todd says that he has tools in his truck, and Kandi replies, “I thought you was talking about your other tool,” and they both laugh. In the same episode, Phaedra and Apollo talk about the exercise video they plan to make, and Phaedra asks Apollo what role he is going to play in the “Donkey Booty” workout. Apollo jokes, “We can do it two ways. I can hit it from the back...Oh, for the workout!” In another scene, in the fifth episode, Peter and Greg talk about being ro-

mantic with their partners when they all travel to Anguilla for vacation, and Greg tells Peter, “Develop that boxer’s mentality.” Peter asks what he means, and Greg responds, “Stick and move.” They all laugh. In all of these examples, the cast members joke about sex, but sexuality appears within the normative confines of heterosexual, committed relationships.

Another way that sex is depicted on *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* is in discussions about the couples making love. This was a prominent theme on the episodes in which the vacation to Anguilla was discussed. As Cynthia, Peter, Nene and Greg talk about the upcoming trip to Anguilla, in the sixth episode, Cynthia tells Nene and Greg, “Peter’s whole point is, ‘Am I gonna get some while we’re there? That’s all I’m trying to figure out.” Peter responds, “Exactly! I’m not gonna be on no romantic island, and you don’t wanna play, baby.” They all laugh and agree. Later, on the seventh episode, when Phaedra and Apollo first arrive in the room they will stay in during the vacation, Phaedra lays on the bed and says that she is tired. Apollo lays down next to Phaedra, embracing her. Phaedra tells the camera, “It’s always good to have alone time so that you can focus on [raises her eyebrows and smiles] multiplying.” In the scene that follows this, Cynthia and Greg enter their room, where there are rose petals on the bed. Cynthia says, “Who’s getting some tonight?” Peter replies, “Peter better be getting some tonight.” They both laugh, and the conversation shifts to Nene and Greg. Then they talk about their honeymoon, which Cynthia turned into a family vacation. Peter says, “There was nothing sexy.” Cynthia tells Peter, “OK, so I owe you. I’ll make up for that.” Peter, looking lustily at Cynthia, replied, “Oh, you owe me! And right here [points at the bed], you gonna make up for it.” They both laugh, and Peter continues, “Over and over again.” They laugh and look at each other lovingly. They kiss, and Cynthia stands up. As she walks to the bathroom, Peter admires her beauty, smiles and gives an approving, “Wooo!” In this scene, there is an element of traditional heterosexual sex roles—Peter wants sex and Cynthia agrees that she “owes” him—but what makes this scene somewhat more progressive is the fact that they both have positive

attitudes about sex, they are open about it, and their sexual intimacy is not represented as freaky or deviant.

Another way that *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* represents a more progressive Black gender ideology is the positive way it represents the two cross-dressing Black male stylists, Lawrence and Derek. The first episode, "Hair Stylist Tell All," features Lawrence and Derek discussing their favorite moments from the previous four seasons of the show. Throughout the episode, Lawrence and Derek alternately laugh at the cast members and joke about their favorite moments. They also explain and make sense of certain scenes, providing previously secret information that only they possessed because of their friendships with the women. In this episode, Lawrence and Derek are portrayed as voices of reason, explaining what is wrong with certain things that happened on the show. For example, they discuss a scene from Cynthia and Peter's wedding day, in which Cynthia's mother and sister hid their marriage certificate, hoping to prevent the two from getting married. The sister asks Cynthia's mother, "Do you think we should give it to her?" Lawrence chimes in, "How you gonna hide somebody's marriage certificate? I think that that momma and that sistah was completely out of line for hiding that girl's marriage certificate." Derek says that he understands that the mother and sister didn't think that Peter was the right person for Cynthia to marry, and Lawrence responds, "But that's not for them to make that decision."

In another scene, in which Nene and Greg were getting pedicures, Lawrence walks over to say hello to them. Greg says to Lawrence, "You wanna see something special?" and kisses Nene's feet. Lawrence tells Greg, "You look like you lost weight. You look good!" Greg explains that he is trying to get back together with Nene. Lawrence then says, "Let me tell you what you do. Be sincere and genuine. And you wait on the universe to respond back. Just chill out." Greg says, "That's good elementary knowledge," and Nene tells the camera, "Lawrence has good advice for how to woo a woman." In the tenth episode, Derek and Lawrence show up at Peter's party. Phaedra compliments Derek's eyes, and Cynthia tells Lawrence that she loves Lawrence's glasses. As the party continues, Derek and Lawrence

hang out with the other women. Throughout the season, Derek and Lawrence were represented positively as smart, funny, friendly, and stylish. At no time are they represented negatively on the show.

8.4 Conclusion

The Real Housewives of Atlanta is the first reality television show that gives viewers a glimpse of the lifestyle of upper middle-class African American women. In its fifth season, the show portrays Kenya and Porsha as stereotypical Black bitches. However, Cynthia, Kandi, and Nene are most likely to reflect the stereotype of the Black lady, except that these women have not shed their “authentic” Blackness. Instead, *RHOA* circulates an image of Black women, who in many ways reflect normative white middle-class values but also use Black vernacular English and stereotypically Black non-verbal communication. The presentation of Kenya and Porsha as bitches, in the fifth season, serves to spotlight the positive qualities of the women who are portrayed as Black ladies. This season of *RHOA* also depicted Black women turning disagreements into stepping-stones to gaining a better friendship.

In addition, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* contained positive representations of Black femininity. Cynthia, Kandi, Nene, and Phaedra were all represented as equals to their romantic partners. They were not portrayed as overbearing, nor were they portrayed as weak. In contrast, Kenya was depicted as too pushy in her pursuit of a marriage with Walter, which ultimately made her unattractive to him.

The Real Housewives of Atlanta, in its fifth season, also circulated progressive representations of Black life. Various alternative family arrangements were shown, in which the Black women were concerned more about having a loving relationship with their mate and about caring for and supporting their children, than they were about looking like a normal family. On the show, sexuality was referenced, not repressed, and Black sexuality was presented as normal and not deviant. The show also depicts the gay men who appear on the show as smart, pleasant, supportive friends to the Black women cast members.

Despite the progressive representations of Black life and Black women on the show, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* supports post-racism, post-sexism, and neoliberal discourses. Collins (2005) suggests that post-racism ideology requires examples of African American success: “A meritocracy requires evidence that racial discrimination has been eliminated. The total absence of Black people would signal the failure of colorblindness” (p. 178). This logic also applies to the success of women (post-feminism requires evidence that discrimination based on gender has been eradicated), and therefore successful Black women are also needed as proof that intersectional discrimination has been eliminated. *RHOA* presents a more progressive representation of Black women and Black life than does most RTV programs, all the while supporting the claims of neoliberalism. The show proves that African American women can, in fact, achieve upper class success (or at least upper middle class success). The women are so successful that they are worthy of a reality television program that features the goings on of their daily lives. This epitomizes one way that capitalism adapts to challenges to its ideology: the elites who own media corporations and television networks not only profit from the negative representations of Black women, they also are now able to capitalize on progressive conceptions of Blackness found on shows like *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*.

9 Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

Reality television has dominated network and cable television ratings in the U.S. for the last ten years. Since television has significant influence on its viewers, it is important to understand the ideological nature of contemporary reality television programs. Quite a bit of existing scholarship explains how white women and Black men are represented on reality television, but there is a significant lack of work available that explains how African American women are portrayed on reality television. Given this gap in the literature, I set out to answer the question: “How are African American women represented on

reality television in the U.S. after the Great Recession?” With neoliberalism, post-racism, post-feminism, and the historical and modern controlling images of Black women as important theoretical guides, my study revealed important insight with regard to race, gender, and class on reality television. Since I explored a fairly broad range of reality television genres, my study provides a more comprehensive look at the representation of Black women on reality television than did previous studies. In the following sections, I integrate the findings of my study, discuss the limitations of the study, and outline potential future research projects.

9.2 Discussion of findings

9.2.1 *The Great Recession*

The Great Recession is a significant conjuncture in U.S. history. Any analysis of popular culture produced and circulated after 2009 should take the recession seriously as an important contextual factor. Studies of pre-2009 popular culture had to consider markedly different socioeconomic factors: the U.S. economy was relatively prosperous until 2007, and this prosperity resulted in more jobs, higher wages, and a plethora of economic positives for society. As a result, working-class and middle-class Americans were more likely to be employed and able to buy homes, build personal wealth, and save for retirement. On a societal level, neoliberalism, post-racism, and post-sexism were firmly ensconced ideologies that enjoyed a certain truth value that was supported by the seeming success of those ideas in the economic attainment that the country enjoyed. This was a starkly different context than that of the Great Recession. The recession was, for however brief a time, a crisis of neoliberalism. Market logic, the hallmark of neoliberalism, had failed miserably, and the economic collapse provided an opening in which the neoliberal ideology might have been challenged. With several years behind us, neoliberalism not only survived the crisis; it used the crisis as an opportunity to push its agenda even further and more vociferously (Mirowski, 2014).

The recession prompted two results that are particularly relevant for my study. First, although millions of people suffered the impacts of the Great Recession, African American women suffered disproportionately. This unequal result, in and of itself, was grounds to challenge the fairness of neoliberalism, post-sexism, and post-racism. Another result was that reality television programming changed in direct response to the recession. This change was particularly clear on real estate reality shows. Since people could no longer afford to buy homes (because of record unemployment and because they could no longer get credit) or sell homes (because they owed more than what the homes were worth after the real estate bubble burst, and because no one could afford to buy a home), new house selling and house flipping programs, such as *Flip That House* and *Flip This House*, were cancelled or put into reruns until the economy improved. And, as I have started to document in other studies, entirely new categories of reality television programs emerged on the heels of the recession.¹⁴

More than ten years of scholarship on reality television demonstrated that reality television programs functioned to support status quo ideology (neoliberalism, post-racism, and post-sexism). Therefore, I wanted to find out if the problems created by the Great Recession were registered and/or reflected on post-recessionary reality television programs.

My study demonstrated that reality television shows rely heavily on modern controlling images to portray African American women (Collins, 2005). Contrary to previous studies published before the Great Recession, which found Black women being represented as Jezebels, Sapphires, or hoochies (Campbell, et al, 2008; Tyree, 2011), post-recessionary reality television represents African American female cast members primarily as either Black ladies or Black bitches. The sexualized controlling images of the hoochie, and the passive images of the mammy, were not drawn upon to portray Black women cast members. Given Collins's (2005) explanation of the way the Black lady and the Black bitch work in society, neither representation is productive for Black women, or for anti-racism or anti-sexism

¹⁴ I discussed two such new kinds of reality television programs—Transaction TV and RTV shows about rich people and CEOs—in Chapter 4.

projects. The snapshot provided by my study indicates that reality television teaches viewers that successful Black women are ones who conform to normative white standards. These women function as proof that success is in fact possible for Black women, and it sanctions victim blaming, since it suggests that anyone can succeed if they approach success properly. My study also shows that reality television teaches viewers that Black women who are rude, pushy, angry, and/or confrontational do not deserve to be successful in society. This conveys an expectation of respectability that severely confines the way that Black women live their daily lives. This expectation makes it more difficult for Black women to be successful in the current neoliberal order.

On one hand, the Great Recession and its effects were not significant factors on the shows I studied. None of the African American women on the programs I studied were represented as being affected by the Great Recession. One reason for this might be the fact that, by 2012, the effects of the recession had been resolved to an extent that reality television producers did not find it necessary or profitable to make the effects of the recession part of the storyline. As others have documented, neoliberalism was vehemently and aggressively re-established in the immediate aftermath of the recession (Crouch, 2010; Mirowski, 2014). By finding that the recession was not a factor on post-recession reality television, my study demonstrates how deeply is neoliberal ideology rooted in U.S. society, and how committed to it are the rich members of society. Also, because the solution to the crisis of neoliberalism was to ignore the effects of the recession and the attendant critiques of the ideology that produced the effects, this response may have filtered down to the producers of the shows, so that they defaulted to the discourses they were familiar using (neoliberalism, post-racism, and post-sexism). I explain this process in more detail in section 9.2.3.

On the other hand, the representations of Black women on the shows I studied can be read as explanatory examples of the place of Black women in society at large, which indirectly implicates neoliberalism. The Black women who were shown to be failures at being flexible on *The Voice* and *American*

Idol, and the Black women who were voted off *Survivor* because they were portrayed negatively, can be read as justifications for the failure of some Black women to gain access to the middle class. These women are represented as failures not because of their race or gender, or because of their position as Black women, but because of their inability to be good neoliberal subjects. They are not good at competing in a fair contest. Marginally successful Black women on *The Voice*, *American Idol*, and *The Biggest Loser* are examples of hope. While they did not win their respective games, these women did well enough to show that African American women who try to adapt to neoliberal, post-racism, and post-sexism logic have a fair chance to succeed. The successful women on *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* are proof that Black women can in fact succeed, and therefore that the system is fair. This supports victim blaming: if these Black women can succeed, then any Black woman who tries hard enough can too, and therefore any Black woman who does not enjoy success is just not trying hard enough.

9.2.2 Representations of African American women

My study revealed several important findings about the inclusion of African American women on reality television. Many shows do not include Black women at all. The limited inclusion and relative lack of success of African American women on *American idol* has been noted by at least one study (Hobson, 2012). My study showed that Black women were functionally ignored on gamedocs, as I discussed in the gamedoc chapter. When they were included, they were ejected from the game early in the competition.

Controlling images of African American women have become a crucial component of neoliberalism. Controlling images are powerful stereotypes, already embedded in U.S. culture, in the hearts and minds of Americans, which isolates individual defects of Black women as the reason for their failure to join the middle class. According to Windsor, Dunlap, and Golub (2011), controlling images “inform policies and behaviors that create and maintain structural barriers such as lack of access to education and meaningful employment and further marginalize oppressed individuals” (p. 290). Controlling images are

used to justify “the disproportionate impact” of these structural forces in the everyday lives of Black women (pp. 291-293). These controlling images are reworked to fit the context in which they circulate and are disseminated via popular culture (p. 303). The Sapphire image, in particular, is used to “minimize and justify the oppression” Black women endure as a normal feature of society (p. 302).

Neoliberalism demands that people compete for success, but when Black women try to compete too hard, they are rejected using the Black bitch image and rationale: they are deemed not adequately socialized to white, middle-class, female standards, to be included. The Black bitch serves as a script of what not to do to be successful, and this is clearly supported by the results of the Black women cast members of reality television shows who are represented as using this stereotype. On the other hand, reality television’s use of the Black lady image teaches people that Black women can, in fact, be successful, but only if they conform to white ideals of femininity. According to Collins (2005), in order to become Black ladies, Black women are denuded of their Blackness. They are physically Black, but they must act like the normative white woman, whom they can never be fully equal to. On reality television, then, the Black bitch justifies the place of poor and working-class Black women; they do not know how to act properly, and so they are rightly relegated to the margins of society. The Black lady image also justifies the marginalization of poor Black women by serving as proof that society is not racist or sexist: if this Black lady can succeed, then any Black woman can succeed if only they try hard enough.

One finding worth noting is the discovery of two new versions of the Black bitch image. In addition to what might be considered the stock bitch image discussed by Collins (2000/2009, 2005), Harris-Perry (2011), and others—a Black woman who is rude, aggressive, loud, and angry—there are two other versions: the passive-aggressive Black bitch and the two-faced Black bitch. They can both appear on the surface to be nice and friendly. That the Black bitch image has gained nuance on reality television is not a good thing. Because both of these variations are covertly bitchy, this calls into question more Black women who might appear to be nice, but who may be a bitch in disguise. This makes more Black women

susceptible to being labeled a bitch, for they cannot be trusted. This placement of Black women under the suspicion that they might be covert bitches severely disadvantages African American women as they strive for success in the context of a society structured around the precepts of neoliberal competition.

The one exception to the way that the Black bitch/lady opposites work might be found on the fifth season of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. There are instances of resistance to hegemonic white norms on this season of *RHOA*, but the show still supports post-racist and post-sexist discourses. Collins (2005) argued, "Blackness must be seen as evidence for the alleged colorblindness that seemingly characterizes contemporary economic opportunity. A meritocracy requires evidence that racial discrimination has been eliminated" (p. 178). While *RHOA* appears to present progressive representations of Black women and Black life, it functions as proof of the claims of neoliberalism. Not only does the show demonstrate that African American women can, in fact, achieve upper middle-class success, it shows that they can be so successful that they are worthy of their own reality television program. This epitomizes part of the way that capitalism adapts to challenges to its ideology: it not only capitalizes on negative stereotypes of Black women, it also is able to capitalize on progressive conceptions of Blackness.

Another finding worth noting is that *American Idol* managed to situate the Black women contestants within discourses that defined them as unworthy of success, without representing them using historical or modern controlling images. The judges portrayed the Black women on *American Idol* as natural singers, which is likely an unintentional form of racism towards Black women that implies that they have not worked hard to achieve their success. The judges also represented the Black women as lacking the necessary control of their voices and their emotions, and this representation connects to the characteristics of controlling images of working class or poor Black women, all of whom are stereotyped as not deserving of middle-class status because of their supposed inability to control their "authentic" Blackness. Although all of the Black women on *American Idol* are portrayed as generally likeable, and

although they are not directly represented using any of the stereotypes associated with poor and working-class women, the show still manages to portray them as unworthy of success.

In addition to examining the modern controlling images of Black women on reality television, my study also contributes new knowledge about the ways that Black women specifically are portrayed in terms of neoliberal logic. Not surprisingly, all of the competitive reality television shows articulated expectations and explanations of success that linked to neoliberal ideology. Three of four chapters focused on reality television programs with a competitive format: *American Idol*, *The Voice*, *Survivor*, and *The Biggest Loser*. All of these programs were characterized by discourses and controlling images that uphold the white, male, heterosexual hegemonic order in the U.S. On *American Idol* and *The Voice*, African American women were implored to be flexible self-entrepreneurs, and any possibility of inequality or discrimination based on race or gender, for example, was functionally ruled out due to the various strands of equal opportunity rhetoric articulated on the shows. On *Survivor*, elimination was explained as a function of a fair game in which a vote for elimination was not personal, i.e. voting for someone to be eliminated was not racist, sexist, or classist, but based on who could best help the tribe survive. On *The Biggest Loser*, the problem (obesity and overweight) was diagnosed as individual and psychological, and societal factors that help contribute to obesity were ignored. Alex was portrayed as a successful example of an African American woman whose resolution of her individual psychological issues is shown to be the key to her continued weight loss. Alex, although she does not win the competition, serves as a positive example of a person who worked hard to solve personal individual issues in order to solve physiological problems.

9.2.3 Methods of representation on reality television

The ways that African American women are represented on reality television is a complex process in which the producers of the show compose an episode and a season of the program from thousands of hours of raw footage. There are many sources of this raw footage. On *American Idol*, for exam-

ple, producers combine family video provided by the contestants, with footage taken behind the scenes, pre-recorded interviews, rehearsals, performances, and judge's commentary. The producers of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* work with footage of the women going about their daily lives, clips of previous episodes or seasons, and they also rely heavily on footage of the women talking directly to the camera.

Reality television shows, like any story, are narratives. Producers use narrative techniques to make sense of the raw footage. For television shows, including reality television, the key technique that producers use in order to tell a story is narrative probability (Fisher, 1985). According to Fisher (1985), narrative probability "refers to formal features of a story conceived as a discrete sequence of thoughts and/or actions" (p. 349). In other words, narrative probability suggests that producers attempt to compose fragments of footage in such a way that the story told in each episode, and over the course of a season, makes sense. When a story has narrative probability, it is coherent and relatively free of unresolved contradictions.

Producers have various methods at their disposal to tell a coherent story. One method used to create a coherent story is the use of a narrator or host. On all but one of the reality television shows I studied, a host helped make sense of the story as each episode progressed, as well as making sense of the story from one episode to another. Hosts use standard connectives to help the story make sense, including previews of what will happen later on the show, reviews of what just happened, and transitions explaining the movement from one scene or action to another. Hosts also ask questions that prompt the cast members to describe their perspective on the events of the show, and these comments help explain the progression of the story. Similar to hosts, some reality television shows use coaches and/or judges to help explain the story. Coaches and judges critique the cast members of reality competition shows, expressing approval and disapproval. Since they are experts on the particular subject of the show, their judgments of the cast members might carry added weight with audience members. Another method used by producers to tell a coherent story is the use of private interviews of the cast members,

who are asked to explain how they feel, what happened, or why something occurred. This functions as narrative material that producers can use to tell a story. And, of course, the producers eventually settle on a story, which determines which of the thousands of hours of footage they will use to create the final product: an episode, as well as a set of episodes, which constitute a season.

In terms of studying representations, closely examining the ways that the producers attempted to make coherent stories is critical. At the most basic level, producers decide what to include and what to exclude, and in most cases viewers never know what has been excluded. Of the thousands of hours of raw footage, a reality television season composed of sixteen 1-hour episodes yields about twelve hours of actual program (the rest of the one hour block is devoted to commercials). An incredible amount of content is excluded from reality television programs. This is important to note in terms of the work of describing, analyzing, and interpreting reality television shows, because the critic is not privy to all of the footage that has been shot, she or he is studying representations created via production, rather than actual qualities of the person being represented. For example, on *Survivor*, I argued that all of the African American women were represented in the modern controlling image of the bitch, but this does not mean that the women acted like bitches consistently during their time on the show. The viewer ultimately sees a version of reality created by the producers; it is not necessarily an accurate depiction of the way each woman acted or what they said, on the whole. This is an important distinction for a critic to make. In this study, I described and analyzed the speech and actions of the women *that were provided to me in the final product*. Almost all of the evidence I used to analyze and explain the representations of the Black women on *Survivor* and *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* were drawn from the actions and words of the women themselves, and, to a lesser extent, their cast mates. But ultimately producers organized fragments of these words and actions into coherent episodes and seasons.

The comments of hosts, judges, and coaches are another form of representation. Producers, for the most part, decide what comments to include and exclude in the final product. The speech of these

commentators is important to the study of representation in that what they say helps make sense of the action on the show. For example, on *American Idol*, the judges give advice to the contestants, and this advice represents the cast members in important ways. On the season of *American Idol* and *The Voice* that I studied, the majority of evidence I used to support the representational interpretations I made came from the comments of the judges. Similarly, on *The Biggest Loser*, most of representations made of the Black woman on the show came from the trainers, who attempted to explain the reasons why Alex was obese, why she had failed in the past to lose weight, and what she needed to do in order to lose weight in the future. But, as with the other examples, these comments were not necessarily representative of what the judges and trainers said; they were what the producers decided to use to make the story make sense. The exception to this ability of the producer to control the content of reality television programs is when the show is broadcast live, such as the live performance episodes of *American Idol* and *The Voice*, the live finale of *The Biggest Loser*, or in-studio recap episodes of *Survivor* and *RHOA*.

The way that all of the participants—producers, hosts, judges, coaches, and cast members—create representations is complex. All of the participants are subject to the influence of societal discourses such as neoliberalism, post-racism, post-sexism, and historical and contemporary controlling images of African American women. Television CEOs and presidents are influenced by their relationship with the owners of mass media corporations for which they work; the decision makers of a network or cable channel are influenced by their relationship with their bosses (CEOs, presidents, vice-presidents, and other executives); and producers are influenced by their relationship with the people who decide whether or not to pick up their programs (Gitlin, 1980, pp. 254-255). These relationships allow for a downward flow of the dominant ideology from the capitalist class to the creative class, and this influence is rarely, if ever, intentional (Gitlin, 1980). Producers want to create programs that make money for the television industry because that is what the television industry is looking for. This desire guides them in their decision-making at every level of production, whether intentional or not. For example, early sea-

sons of *The Biggest Loser* spent more time on the nutritional side of weight gain and loss than do more current seasons. The reason for this shift to an emphasis on the exercise side of weight loss is likely because watching people struggling to exercise is more entertaining than watching people learn about calorie counts. Hosts, judges, and coaches, who function as experts on reality television shows, make sense based on their immersion in a particular profession, and this professional sense often draws on the dominant ideology (Hall, 1980). So, when commentators voice racist viewpoints, as the judges on *American Idol* did when they attributed Black women's excellent singing to natural ability and not hard work, this, like most representation, is not intentional, but it is a reflection of the dominant ideology.

The role of cast members in the representation on reality television shows is also complex. Unlike other forms of television, reality television is not carefully scripted: the cast members of reality television shows are not acting out a script in the same way that fully written television shows do. That said, cast members of reality television shows do enact unwritten scripts. First, like producers and commentators, what cast members do and say is influenced by dominant ideologies. African American women, in particular, are well aware of the controlling images described by Collins (2000/2009, 2005), Harris-Perry (2011), and others. For example, Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) talked to Black women and found that they were painfully aware of the Strong Black Woman image, and how it dictated in what way they should live their lives. But there are other unwritten scripts for cast members. One version of an unwritten script is the kind that is formed over several seasons of a reality television show. In the initial version of a reality television show, the cast members do not have any prior knowledge of the format of the show, or the terminology, for example, since they have never seen the show. But as several seasons of that show air, viewers learn the format and terminology of the show. Eventually, viewers become fluent in the discourses on the show because of their viewership. For example, long-time viewers of *The Biggest Loser* were subject to the show's focus on the individual level of obesity. Each season, the focus is on blaming the individual for his or her physical condition. This explanation for obesity is solidi-

fied as viewers familiar with the show repeat the discourses they have been subject to over time. Another example of this method of creating an unwritten discourse is when a new Black woman joins the cast of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. New cast members, having watched the show, are likely to attempt to prove that they are in fact real enough (i.e. willing to enact the Black bitch image by fighting, arguing, and backstabbing) to be worthy for inclusion on the show, as Kenya and Porsha did on the season I studied.

This is not to say that producers, commentators, and cast members do not have a mind of their own, that they do not have the ability to resist societal scripts. Of course, all of the actors involved in a reality television show, like all people, have agency and control over how they act, what they say, and how they contribute to the creation of the show. But the dominant understandings of how society works, who belongs, and who does not, explains in large part the resulting representations found on reality television programs.

9.3 Limitations of the project

There are several noteworthy limitations of my study. First, my decision to only study programs in 2012 proved problematic. *American Idol* and *The Voice* were not available to view on Hulu, Netflix, Amazon or any other web platform that I could find. This forced me to study the most recent seasons of those shows, and even then I had to track down YouTube video episodes. As a result, my first chapter looks at representations of Black women on shows that aired in 2014, and the other chapters look at shows that aired in 2012. It is unlikely that representations on *American Idol* and *The Voice* were significantly different in 2012 than they were in 2014. However, it is possible that, had I studied the 2014 version of all of the RTV shows, my findings may have been different.

Related to the problem of the availability of past seasons of the reality television shows is the issue of archiving the shows included in the study. Because of copyright limitations, it seems that YouTube videos of episodes of popular television shows are taken down fairly frequently. I viewed *American Idol*

and *The Voice* several times in order to write the first draft of the talent contest RTV chapter, but when I went back months later to view the shows again, some of the episodes were no longer available. For future studies, I will ensure the availability of the shows I plan to analyze and I will use video capture applications like Screencast-O-Matic, Screen Flow, or Eye TV, to record and archive the shows before I do any other work. Also, as I move forward, I will be able to record shows that I might want to study using a DVR and store them on an external hard drive or cloud storage, which will eliminate the need to watch shows on the Internet.

Second, I limited my study to a single year of shows, which restricts my findings and conclusions. They provide a snapshot of the representations of African American women for that year, which is important, but this is only a starting point. Studying each show over several years of its existence would have provided more generalizable findings and conclusions. Third, in order to control the size of the study, I limited each chapter to no more than the two most-viewed RTV programs of the same genre. This meant that I did not study *X-Factor*, *Hells Kitchen*, and *Dancing with the Stars*, all of which were in the top fifty highest rated television shows. It also meant that I did not study reality television shows on cable channels that are widely discussed in popular culture, but do not attain high ratings. For example, there are at least two reality television shows about pawnshops. *Pawn Stars*, set in Las Vegas, features an all white, mostly male, staff of pawnbrokers and experts, and an almost uniformly set of white, mostly male, customers. *Hardcore Pawn*, set in Detroit, features a mostly white staff of pawnbrokers, but most of the customers are African American women and men. The parameters of my text selection—the focus on the highest-rated RTV shows and limitation of a maximum of two shows per chapter/genre—eliminated the possibility of studying these shows.

Fourth, and related again to the way that I constrained my study, all but one of the shows I examined was a competition-based reality television show. Overall, then, the limitations of the project can be summarized by noting that the way I selected my texts resulted in me studying competition reality

television programs that aired almost exclusively on the networks. A significant omission is the fairly popular cable reality television programs that did not receive high enough ratings to be included in my study.

9.4 Future research

There are two obvious lines of future research that this project points to. First, the consistently high ratings of reality television shows that air on network television justify more in-depth study over the life of each show. The current project is a snapshot of the representations of African American women that is limited to one year, and a longitudinal study of each program would allow for more conclusive claims about the nature of representations of Black women on each show. Studying each show over multiple years would be more conclusive, and perhaps yield more complex results. In addition, along this same line of thinking, *X-Factor*, *Hells Kitchen*, and *Dancing with the Stars* merit in-depth study, since they were all in the top ten most-watched reality television programs in the U.S. Because it is the highest rated and longest running program that features African American women, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* should be studied longitudinally. This would allow for more decisive findings and conclusions about this important reality television show. Also, a more ambitious project would be to analyze reality television programs aired before and after the recession, in order to make a more strict comparison of the representations on reality television pre- and post-recession. This project may be difficult, given the lack of availability of the older RTV programs on the Internet.

Second, additional reality television programs that are aired on cable channels need to be studied. Even though they do not acquire the same ratings as network shows, millions of people watch popular reality television programs that are circulated on the cable channels, and these shows are discussed constantly in the popular press, on celebrity-focused television programs, and via social media. In 2012, for example, in terms of total viewers, *Pawn Stars*, *Jersey Shore*, *Storage Wars*, *Gold Rush*, *Swamp People*, and *American Pickers* were in the 20 most watched cable shows for 2012 (Rice, 2012). For adults

25-54, *Kourtney & Kim take New York* and *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* were in the top 20, and for adults 18-29, the list includes *Teen Mom II*, *Teen Mom*, *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, and *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta* (Rice, 2012). In the methods chapter, I noted that some of these shows were excluded from my study because they did not include African American women in the cast, or because they did not have high enough ratings. But to the extent that reality television shows meaningfully include African American women on the casts, they are important to study.

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