

Bravo's Exploitation of Black Women in Reality TV

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Reality television thrives on spectacle, and no franchise embodies this more than *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (RHOA). As Bravo's first all-Black Housewives series, RHOA has been one of the network's most successful franchises, praised for bringing Black women's stories to mainstream reality TV. However, this visibility comes at a cost: Bravo deliberately manufactures and capitalizes on conflict among its Black cast members, profiting from the very behavior it later condemns. Each season culminates in a highly orchestrated reunion episode, where cast members reconvene to reflect on the most dramatic events of the season. These reunions are not organic conversations but are deliberately structured by producers to maximize conflict and ensure high engagement. Production can last up to twelve hours (or as many as sixteen when including hair, makeup, and preparation), spanning multiple episodes. In an interview with *The Breakfast Club*, Nene Leakes, widely regarded as the driving force behind RHOA's success, likened the reunion to a "lion's den." She explained, "All the producers and executives are there, and so the girls are trying to prove themselves, you know, trying to step up. 'I want my peach next year,' trying to make sure they have a position."¹

This pressure to entertain creates a high-stakes environment where conflict is expected and often encouraged by production. One of the clearest examples of Bravo's exploitative tactics occurred during the RHOA Season 6 reunion. Kenya Moore and Porsha Williams were placed in a situation where escalating tensions led to a physical altercation. Rather than intervening, Bravo producers allowed, and arguably encouraged, the conflict, knowing it would generate higher ratings. This paper argues that Bravo's reality TV model thrives on spectacle, intentionally fostering and amplifying conflict among Black women to boost viewership, while simultaneously portraying them as aggressive for entertainment value. By analyzing Bravo's

production strategies and the network's broader history of leveraging conflict for profit, this paper will examine how Bravo constructs these narratives, strategically manipulates tension, and benefits from the commodification of Black women's pain.

Bravo's Audience and the Rise of RHOA

Bravo is an American television network and a subsidiary of NBCUniversal, reaching over 94 million subscribers in the United States alone.² The *Real Housewives* franchise is the network's highest-rated series, offering a dramatized portrayal of affluent women's personal and professional lives, often showcasing their marriages, families, and friendships through a heightened lens of conflict and extravagance. Mark Orbe, a professor of media and communications at Ohio University, highlights that commercial media success is not solely dependent on audience size but also on the demographic composition of that audience.³ For years, Bravo's primary viewership consisted of affluent White women. However, the introduction of RHOA in 2008 dramatically expanded the network's reach, drawing in a new demographic (Black female viewers) whom former NBCUniversal executive vice president Lauren Zalaznick acknowledged were "completely underserved at the time."⁴ As Bravo's audience expanded, so did its programming strategy. Instead of embracing more nuanced storytelling, the network leaned into spectacle, particularly among Black women, to sustain engagement. This shift reveals Bravo's reliance on conflict as a tool for profitability.

Conflict as a Ratings Strategy

Calvin Monroe, a graduate student at Georgia State University, examines this dynamic in his master's thesis, arguing that "the more successful and profitable the RTV [reality TV] show, the more derogatory and controversial its representations of women are."⁵ One of the most infamous examples of Bravo's conflict-driven production strategy occurred during the *Real Housewives of Atlanta* Season 6 reunion. A heated verbal exchange between Porsha Williams and Kenya Moore escalated into a physical confrontation. Kenya, wielding a scepter and waving

it in Porsha's face, deliberately provoked her, while producers reportedly found the spectacle amusing and continued to fuel the conflict.

The first clear indication that the situation was escalating came when Porsha snatched the scepter from Kenya's hand. Despite this visible sign of distress, production did not intervene, allowing the tension to build further. Later in the episode, Kenya escalated matters by using a megaphone to insult Porsha, calling her "a dumb hoe."⁶ This final provocation led Porsha to stand up and physically drag Kenya by her hair. Carlos King, a key producer, later admitted that he recognized the imminent escalation but deliberately chose not to intervene.⁷ His inaction underscores Bravo's prioritization of spectacle over ethical responsibility; rather than de-escalating the conflict, production allowed it to unfold, fully aware of the ratings boost such moments generate. The altercation between Porsha Williams and Kenya Moore exemplifies this claim, drawing in 3.1 million viewers.⁸ Despite publicly condemning their behavior, Bravo still chose to air the footage. The network had the editorial power to omit or edit the material. Instead, it deliberately broadcasted it, fully aware of the engagement and profit it would generate. This contradiction (condemning while capitalizing) is central to Bravo's exploitative approach.

Bravo's strategy of leveraging conflict for viewership was apparent from the very first RHOA reunion. During Season 1, a heated verbal exchange erupted between Nene Leakes and the only White cast member, Kim Zolciak-Biermann. As tensions escalated, Leakes moved closer to Zolciak-Biermann, appearing as if she might physically confront her. Andy Cohen, seated between them, later remarked, "Nene low-key was starting to lunge at Kim," while fellow housewife Deshawn Snow noted that Lisa Wu was practically restraining Leakes to prevent an altercation.⁹ Once again, Bravo allowed the situation to unfold and actively captured it on camera, prioritizing spectacle over de-escalation. Their leadership's response reinforced the network's willingness to amplify such conflicts. Following the reunion's high viewership,

then-CEO of NBCUniversal Jeff Zucker personally emailed Cohen, stating, “Wow, nice numbers. Congratulations.”¹⁰ Encouraged by the success, Cohen recalled, “That’s when I started pushing for multipart reunions because it seemed ridiculous to not air more of this great material we were getting.”¹¹ His characterization of near-physical altercations as “great material” underscores Bravo’s commercial strategy—one that thrives on the commodification of Black women’s conflicts while simultaneously claiming to denounce such behavior.

Conclusion

Black women’s bodies, and by extension, their narratives, remain at the mercy of Bravo. The transactional relationship between Bravo and its Black cast members is inherently exploitative, with the network reaping far more financial and cultural benefits than it provides in return. These women deserve not only greater agency over their portrayals but also the freedom to exist beyond the restrictive framework Bravo has constructed for them. Bravo’s exploitation of Black women’s conflicts reflects a larger media trend—one that profits from negative stereotypes while outwardly claiming to denounce them. The network frames physical altercations as scandalous yet depends on them to sustain engagement. By refusing to intervene and even fueling these conflicts, Bravo demonstrates a clear double standard—capitalizing on the very behavior it later condemns.

Without a fundamental restructuring of who holds decision-making power, Bravo’s portrayal of Black women will continue to be dictated by profit rather than authenticity. Michelle Rice, president of TV One, highlights the importance of diversity behind the scenes, stating,

“It’s about having Black people in production and programming roles that have true green-light power to make sure that we’re putting things on the air that are true, authentic, and quality representations of all people of color.”¹²

The issue is not merely on-screen representation but the lack of Black decision-makers behind the camera. Producers hold the ultimate power in reality television, shaping narratives that prioritize profit over authenticity. A more diverse production team could challenge Bravo's formula, where negative depictions of Black women drive higher ratings. They could push for more authentic and empowering representations by actively resisting these exploitative strategies. Until the balance of power shifts, reality television will continue to exploit Black women for entertainment. The industry must move beyond spectacle and invest in narratives that respect the full humanity of its subjects.

Notes

1. Envy, D. J., Yee, A., and Charlamagne Tha God. (4 March 2020). Nene Leakes dishes on RHOA cast members, false narratives, marriage + more.” YouTube, uploaded by Breakfast Club Power 105.1 FM, www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZd3HcEbVFI&feature=youtu.be.
2. Cox, Nicole. (June 2012). The housewives' guide to better living: promoting consumption on bravo's the real housewives. *Communication, Culture, and Critique*, Volume 5, Issue 2, Pages 295–312, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2012.01126>.
3. Orbe, M. (5 September 2008). Representations of race in reality tv: watch and discuss. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 25:4, 345-352, DOI: 10.1080/15295030802327790.
4. Quinn, Dave. (2021). Not all diamonds and ros  : the inside story of the real housewives from the people who lived it. Andy Cohen Books. (PAGE 7; Lauren quote)
5. Monroe, C. (2015). “Black themed reality television & racial identity: gendered perceptions from black college students.” Thesis, Georgia State University, https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/aas_theses/28.
6. “Reunion: Part 1” Real Housewives of Atlanta, created by Scott Dunlop, season 6, episode 23, Truly Original, 2014.
7. Quinn, Not all diamonds and ros  , pg. 7
8. “Reunion: Part 3” Real Housewives of Atlanta, created by Scott Dunlop, season 6, episode 25, Truly Original, 2014.
9. Quinn, Not all diamonds and ros  , pg. 5
10. Ibid, pg. 5
11. Ibid, pg. 5
12. Shorter, S. (2016). Real housewives or real lies? new constructions of ‘housewives’ on the real housewives of Atlanta.” *Black Women’s Portrayals on Reality Television: The New Sapphire*, edited by Allison Donnetrice et al., Lanham, Lexington Books, pp. 213–32.