1. Queering “Housewives”

RAGAN FOX

*The Real Housewives* is a broken promise, a paradox. The casts’ surgery-sculpted faces and busts stand in ironic juxtaposition to the “reality” upon which the programs’ titles are premised. Women featured in Bravo’s *The Real Housewives* empire hardly fit the popularized notion of a housewife. A housewife traditionally had “no reason to think of herself as vitally linked with the world outside the home” (Matthews, 1987, p. 4). Bravo’s rendition of the homemaker gains much of its appeal by casuistically stretching conceptualizations of housewives. Many of Bravo’s *Housewives* have thriving businesses and multiple sexual partners. They also drink a staggering amount of alcohol, discuss their sexual exploits, manage successful careers, and engage in public acts of physical and emotional brutalization. The franchise helps demonstrate that *housewife* is a performative construct constrained and enabled by an era’s popular dramatizations, literature, and journalism.

I began watching *The Real Housewives of Orange County* when it debuted in March of 2006. I was drawn to the program’s mix of comedy and drama and thrilled to see a rare televisual sight: multiple women over the age of 30 on an hour-long, primetime show. *The Real Housewives of Orange County* filled the absence that *Sex and the City’s* 2004 departure left in my overly mediated life. The *Housewives* lets me imagine what might have happened to Carrie Bradshaw a few years after the treacherous *Sex and the City* sequel. Since *Orange County’s* premiere, I have not missed a single episode of *The Real Housewives of Orange County, New York, Atlanta, Miami, New Jersey, DC,* and *Beverly Hills.* I often joke to my friends that the series are catnip for gay men and others with queer sensibilities. *The Real Housewives* has become my favorite drag show, complete with wigs, weaves, lip-synced performances, men in high heels, booze, and snappy one-liners. In this
chapter, I consider the queer aspects and paradoxes of Bravo’s *Housewives* phenomenon.

**A Queer Reading of (Mostly) Straight Housewives**

While some may conceptualize queer as a noun (e.g., a queer) or as an adjective (e.g., a queer activist), many queer theorists see the term as a verb. Queer resists identitarian logics that have come to define social movements in the United States. Queer theory is partially premised on Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Butler (1999) argued that humans are exposed to repetitive, interlocking discourses that teach us the “proper” way to perform masculinity, femininity, and sexuality. The word “queer” does not define a person but rather describes his or her mode of textual production, enactment, and reception. Queer, in other words, is a *doing*, not a being. Queering characterizes a form of cultural spectatorship that critiques heteronormativity and celebrates non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality. The practice also challenges hetero-textual essentialism, or the belief that people, places, and objects are straight unless otherwise explicitly marked as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and/or queer, or LGBTQ (Doty, 2000). A fan-penned critique of TV programs like *The Real Housewives* underscores how textual “reception is also an act of [queer cultural] production” (Fox, 2013b, p. 205).

Televised portrayals of gay and lesbian people have been a focal point of sexual minorities since the 1970s, when gay and lesbian activists protested negative characterizations of homosexuals on TV shows like *Marcus Welby* and *Police Woman* (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). Queer media critics engage in critiques of heterosexist bias in television shows, films, music, news media, and other forms of cultural representation. When teaching queer theory in relation to mediated communication, I rely on irony—a mainstay of queer aesthetics—to illustrate the complexities of a queer critical impulse. I discuss Battles and Hilton-Morrow’s (2002) brilliant critique of *Will and Grace* while lecturing on heteronormativity. The scholars’ choice of artifact is compelling, in part, because they took a show frequently lauded for its pro-gay sentimentality and note the multiple ways in which the program bolsters compulsory heterosexuality. They, for example, pointed out that the sitcom’s lead characters are in heterosocial dyads that mimic those found in heterosexual romantic comedy. Will is partnered with Grace and Jack with Karen. Moreover, viewers never get to see the two gay characters, Will and Jack, engage in sexual consummation with their respective same-sex love interests (Shugart, 2003). TV producers, writers, and actors render sexual minority characters “symbolically impotent” (Fox, 2013b, p. 193) or unable to participate in on-screen same-sex intimacy.
Queer critics also challenge mediated heteronormativity by queerly appropriating TV characters and themes. Fejes and Petrich (1993) noted that gays and lesbians have combatted heterosexism on TV via “appropriation of mainstream media content to give it a gay/lesbian affirmative meaning” (p. 410). Queering a film or television show involves exploring “the presentation of alternate worldviews that run alongside, rather than replace, [heterosexual] master narratives” (Fox, 2013a, p. 62). Alexander Doty (2000) devoted an entire book to queering the film canon. In one chapter, he queered *The Wizard of Oz*. “If anything,” Doty (2000) wrote, a heterosexual reading of *The Wizard of Oz* is appropriate, and could be considered subordinate to lesbian readings” (p. 52). The author compared the Wicked Witch to a “dyke on a bike” who craved Dorothy’s ruby slippers, or budding lesbian sexuality. Queering celebrates multiple meanings of an artifact and highlights homo-friendly interpretations of material that might otherwise be read as straight.

Each version of *The Real Housewives*, perhaps unwittingly, revels in queer theory’s ironic terms. I conduct a queer reading of *The Real Housewives* because the web of programs displays ironic/queer revisions of the happy housewife. I concentrate on two ways in which the series might be viewed as queer. First, I code many of the housewives as drag queens. Their big hair, curvy figures, over-the-top style of dress, bright makeup, and witty banter are reminiscent of performances one would view at a drag show. Butler (1999) contended that excessive performances of femininity, like drag, potentially expose more mundane gender performances. “In imitating gender,” Butler (1999) theorized, “drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” (p. 175). One of *The Real Housewives* greatest paradoxes is that, by way of dramatizing hyper-femininity, the programs expose gender, and the housewife role in particular, as a carefully crafted performance, rather than an essential characteristic of female subjectivity.

Next, I examine some of the housewives’ queer life choices. A *queer point of identification* characterizes moments when unexpected similarities emerge between queers and their heterosexual counterparts. Queer points of identification in *The Real Housewives* prove especially ironic given that popular discourse casts the housewife as protector of tradition, home, and family. Conversely, televised narratives have long depicted queers and feminists as primary threats to family values (Cloud, 1998). Bravo’s housewives not only challenge the myth that sexual minorities and “guardians” of domestic space are at odds, but the wives and mothers sometimes enact their own form of queer subjectivity. Many of the housewives have turned away from tradition and adopted a queer mindset, which is exemplified in their choices to have sex
out of wedlock, engage in public acts of desire, divorce men who do not make them happy, and have sexual relationships with other women.

**Housewives Can Be a Drag**

Drag is a performance aesthetic commonly associated with gay and lesbian culture. Like Judith Butler, Taylor and Rupp (2005) argued that drag queens “play with and deconstruct gender and sexual categories in their performances” (p. 2133). Previous examinations of drag culture have focused on gay men as drag queens (Newton, 1979; Taylor and Rupp, 2005) and lesbians as drag kings (Halberstam, 1997), but scholars have paid little attention to women “dragging” femininity. One might wonder whether or not a housewife’s excessive femininity qualifies as drag if the performance lacks the sort of campy intention characteristic of the art form. A queer, poststructural study of gender eschews intentional fallacies that suggest audiences should know or even care about author or performer intent. Framing some of Bravo’s housewives as drag queens exemplifies one way in which I queerly read the programs.

I am hardly the first person to propose women on The Real Housewives look and sound like drag queens. One need look no further than fan-produced art to appreciate connections between drag culture and different women in each Housewives cast. Fans create “secondary texts” (Fiske, 1987) that “function intertextually to favor selected readings of [a] primary text” (Brookey & Westerfelhaus, 2002, p. 22), like The Real Housewives. Take,

*From left to right: Figure 1a: Orange County’s Alexis, Figure 1b: Atlanta’s Sheree, and Figure 1c: Orange County’s Vicki Housewives. Gilmore (2012, Nov. 5; 2012, April 22; 2013), PrettyOnTheOutside.com*
for example, *Housewives* artwork created by a viewer named David Gilmore. Gilmore’s popular website Pretty on the Outside includes numerous drawings that highlight the characters’ queer and often drag-like qualities. Figure 1 includes three of Gilmore’s sketches, including exaggerated images of *The Real Housewives of Orange County’s* Alexis Bellino, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta’s* Sheree Whitfield, and *The Real Housewives of Orange County’s* Vicki Gunvalson. Gilmore produces similar pictures for the reality show *Ru-Paul’s Drag Race*, a televised competition where drag queens battle one another in an effort to become drag’s next superstar. Juxtaposing *Housewives* and *Drag Race* caricatures highlights drag qualities emergent in both programs. The comparison is made all the more hilarious when one realizes that Gilmore’s *Drag Race* images look significantly more feminine and less queer than his *Housewives* drawings. The above images visually exemplify many of drag’s defining characteristics, including flamboyant dress, wigs and other forms of fake hair, exaggerated feminine facial features, gay iconography (e.g., Vicki’s rainbow-colored popsicle), artificial breasts, funny invective (e.g., “Fix your face!”), and amplified feminine sexuality.

Gilmore’s images are, of course, caricatures of caricatures. Bravo’s *Housewives* hardly need comic renderings to be viewed as drag queens. Photos of *Atlanta’s* Kim Zolciak that appeared in *People* magazine reveal that Gilmore’s comic images are grounded in a performative arena where one can no longer distinguish between “real” housewives and drag performers. The *People* spread includes the *Atlanta* Housewife posing for the NOH8 campaign, an organization that promotes marriage equality for gays and lesbians. In one image, Kim’s enormous, implant-filled breasts are largely exposed. Four pieces of shiny duct tape in a “X” formation cover her nipples. The Housewife’s pro-marriage-equality face paint, flowing wig, and overt sexuality riff more on drag culture than representations of a housewife.

Although Zolciak is arguably the cast member most easily read as a drag queen, many ladies in the *Housewives* family drag femininity by way of cosmetic procedures, wigs and weaves, and lip-synced musical performances. First, the women’s reliance on plastic surgery and injectables reveals gender as an embodied and highly performative construct. Many drag queens sculpt feminine figures out of padding and amplify feminine facial features via makeup. Unlike a magician who conceals his or her sleight of hand, drag performers often reveal the tricks of their trade (so to speak). It is not uncommon to see a female impersonator rip off her wig in the midst of a performance or remove breast padding and then use it to wipe off a sweaty forehead. Similarly, several of the Housewives have theatricalized and deconstructed their production of feminine beauty. Viewers have witnessed an Orange County and New Jersey
Botox party, electro-shock facials in Beverly Hills, New Jersey’s Teresa Giudice’s breast augmentation, Beverly Hills’ Kim Richards nose job, New Jersey’s Jacqueline Laurita’s tummy tuck and facelift, and New York’s Sonja Morgan’s liposuction. In the second season of The Real Housewives of Miami, Lisa Hochstein best sums up the ladies’ penchant for surgically induced beauty when she claimed in her season two opening tag line that her husband is the “best plastic surgeon in town” and she is his “best creation.” Bravo’s cameras caught and aired all of the above-mentioned operations and beauty interventions. Many of these filmed procedures included graphic images, such as Beverly Hills’ Taylor Armstrong with Botox-filled bubbles on her face and a fold of Laurita’s tattooed skin lying on a surgical platter. Like a drag queen pointing out that her breasts are made of foam, the women’s willingness to discuss their elective procedures and include them on a national television show exposes beauty and femininity as carefully crafted performances, or a doing rather than a being.

Next, many of Bravo’s housewives utilize artificial hairpieces that resemble those worn by drag queens. The ladies’ wigs and extensions tend to be large and over-the-top, indicating that the women are not interested in passing the hair off as real. Kim Zolciak of Atlanta fame is perhaps best known for her long, peculiar hairpieces. Kim’s enemies often poke fun at her wig when trying to get a rise out of her. Kim’s arch rival NeNe has perhaps gotten the most comedic mileage out of Kim’s fake hair. NeNe’s drag-like digs include, “Is your wig squeezing your head too tight, heifer?” In true drag fashion, NeNe once wore Zolciak’s hairpiece at a wig party—yes, a wig party—and impersonated Kim. Other housewives have followed Zolciak’s lead and made artificial hair a significant component of their theatricalized femininity. Atlanta’s NeNe, Cynthia, and Kenya and Orange County’s Alexis, Quinn, and Gretchen have all sported wacky wigs and other hairpieces. In the first season of The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills, Adrienne Maloof even started a fashion trend after she donned a blonde hair weave complete with gold tinsel.

Faux hair is sometimes central to the shows’ drama. New Jersey’s Danielle Staub sued a castmate’s daughter after the teen ripped weave out of her head at a party. Bravo used footage of Staub holding up a ball of fake hair in an advertisement titled “Haircut, by Bravo.” A similar event occurred in The Real Housewives of Atlanta when, in the midst of a heated argument, Sheree yanked on Kim’s wig. “I felt the need to tug on her wig,” Sheree narrated. “I did not try to pull it off. I did not want to pull it off. I just wanted to shift it a little bit.” Cases of hair pulling metonymically represent staged femininity and its deconstruction. Sheree pulling Kim’s wig and a young woman clawing
weave out of Danielle’s head dramatize a mythologized hysteria that doctors have historically linked to “natural” femininity (Foucault, 1980).

Hair-tugging violence validates the “reality” of reality TV, even as it exposes cast members’ femininity as a fabrication. Feminist media scholars Laura Grindstaff (2002) and Rachel Dubrofsky (2009) likened excessively emotional women on reality programming to the “money shot” in pornographic films. “An important aspect of this shot,” argued Dubrofsky (2009), “is that the rest of the action builds up to this moment, and the shot is an anticipated spectacular display of uncontrolled bodily comportment” (p. 355). A woman’s hair may become disheveled, eyes red, and cheeks flushed. Likewise, tearing out another Housewife’s hair confirms reality TV is grounded in “real” experiences that matter to reality television participants. Ripping hair from a woman’s head “verifies the authenticity of the moment: it is proof that [reality show participants] have felt real emotion” (Dubrofsky, 2009, p. 356).

Finally, several of the Housewives riff on drag culture by staging elaborate theatrical productions that involve lip syncing. Story editors for the programs have created complex storylines about the development of particular Housewives’ music. Viewers witness song writing, time spent at the studio, music video production, promotion of a brutally funny single, and staged performances that sometimes take place at gay bars. Schacht (2005) contended that drag queens lip sync and dance to “emphasize contemporary notions of what it means to be a woman in our society” (p. 167). He went on to argue that their dress reflects feminine themes present in the music. “Typical attire worn is suggestive and includes tight-fitting dresses, immaculately coiffed hair (almost always wigs) and applied makeup, high heel shoes and boots (most four inches or taller), and large sparkling earrings, bracelets, and necklaces” (Schacht, 2005, p. 167). The productions Schacht observed in his ethnographic investigation of drag culture resemble what viewers see when a Housewife takes a stage.

Kim Zolciak, for instance, lip synced her single “Tardy for the Party” at the 2010 White Party. The White Party is an annual gay dance celebration held in Palm Springs, California. Gay porn producer and famous West Hollywood drag queen Chi Chi LaRue introduced Zolciak. Flanked by male strippers and gay porn stars, Kim took the White Party stage, jiggled, and pretended to sing her song. Kim’s lack of singing talent was a major focus of Atlanta’s first two seasons. Other Housewives have had lip-syncing performances featured in the series, including New Jersey’s Melissa Gorga and New York’s LuAnn de Lesseps whose deliciously awful single “Chic C’est La Vie” was parodied on Saturday Night Live.
By surgically enhancing their bodies, donning wigs, and performing torch songs (e.g., Zolciak’s “The Ring Didn’t Mean a Thing”), the “real” Housewives present a self-consciously assembled embodiment of femininity that highlights gender as a social construct and looks a lot like drag. Schacht and Underwood (2004) suggested that, throughout history, drag queens “have both reflected and sustained men’s images of what a woman is, or should be, and other important cultural values of the given society, and in this sense, are very much symbols of the politics of the times” (p. 6). Similarly, Bravo’s matriarchs call attention to the painful mechanics of femininity. They are often forthcoming about how they shape their flesh to appease men’s images of what a woman is, or should be (e.g., Lisa Hochstein “I am my husband’s best creation” from season two of The Real Housewives of Miami).

**Queer Life Choices**

In the context of The Real Housewives, queer points of identification describe scenes in which the ladies make queer life choices that social conservatives typically frame as disrupting traditional family forms. I characterize their decisions as queer for two reasons. First, queer emphasizes a distinct gay and lesbian presence in the women’s on-screen narratives. Second, the term “queer” underscores how many of the Housewives make decisions that might be read as non-normative, or, queerly/ironically at odds with traditional notions of a housewife. Three queer points of identification have emerged as salient in Bravo’s franchise: gays and lesbians play key roles in the women’s lives; some of the series’ most popular Housewives have participated in lesbian relationships; and many of the cast members divorced their husbands while the show aired.

First, gay men are an integral component of nearly all iterations of Bravo’s Housewives. Bravo’s gay executive vice president of development and talent Andy Cohen produces and hosts annual reunions for each of the shows. Additionally, gay and lesbian characters are featured in Orange County, Atlanta, New York, New Jersey, DC, Miami, and Beverly Hills. Gay men included in Atlanta’s broadcast are The Real Housewives’ most notable queers because they enact modes of subjectivity that disrupt the grammars of “homonormativity” (Duggan, 2002). Homonormativity refers to “acceptance of a segment of gays and lesbians who are gender conforming, middle class, upwardly mobile—in other words, those best able to take advantage of the benefits of assimilation and the valorization of a particular type of diversity” (Ghaziani, 2011, p. 104).

Atlanta’s Derek J., Lawrence, and Dwight represent a type of gay man that remains largely absent from gay-themed TV shows like Modern Family,
The A-List, Will & Grace, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, and Queer as Folk. Derek, Lawrence, and Dwight are African American and perform a hyper-femininity that is normally frowned upon by gay characters on television. Derek J. and Lawrence wear makeup and high heels and carry large purses to major Atlanta events. Dwight’s dress is equally flamboyant. While shooting scenes for the program, he has donned oversized fur pants, a neon pink bandana, larger-than-life hats, high-heel boots, and a spandex dress. Similarly, Miami’s Lea Black’s best friend is a six-foot-two drag queen named Elaine Lancaster. Elaine, an enduring figure in Miami’s social scene, played a central role in the second season. She performed at galas, hosted fundraisers, and verbally sparred with other members of Miami’s cast.

Bravo’s fascination with a particular, in-your-face queer person demonstrates the network’s celebration of sexual minorities who reject rigid performative enactments of gender. Simply including gay men in a television show like The Real Housewives is not enough. Derek, Dwight, Lawrence, and Elaine delightfully disrupt the gender-normative social gatherings they attend. Their popularity among viewers calls into question homonormative structures that tend to keep lipstick and heel-wearing queens off of primetime television. Interestingly, the term “homonormativity” first emerged among transgender activists in the 1990s. They used the concept to contest heterosexist privilege and demonstrate how “homosexuality, as a sexual orientation category based on constructions of gender it shared with the dominant culture, sometimes had more in common with the straight world than it did with [people who challenge the gender binary]” (Stryker, 2008, p. 146).

Next, some of the series’ most popular Housewives have engaged in on-screen same-sex intimacy. Orange County’s Tamra Barney, for example, canoodled with Fernanda Rocha, a fitness trainer who was billed as a “friend of the Housewives” in the show’s sixth season. Fernanda admitted to another Housewife that Tamra followed her into a bathroom and kissed her. “This kiss with Tamra took me by surprise,” Fernanda explained during a talking head confessional, “It was a mutual attraction, a mutual connection.” Later in the season, cameras filmed the two women as they posed back-to-back and topless for a marriage equality photo. The ladies discussed their moment in the bathroom while reviewing prints from the photo shoot. Tamra’s dismissal of Fernanda’s romantic feelings might be framed as a teachable moment for heterosexual women who do not understand the nuances and depth of lesbian desire. “I think that Fernanda thought she could bring me over to the lesbian side. It’s all about the challenge for her,” Tamra suggested. Tamra dismissed Fernanda’s affection by way of the gay predator trope, or the idea that gays and lesbians prey on heterosexual men and women. Had the producers
ended the narrative with Tamra’s reductive and stereotypical characterization of her friend’s feelings, I would not classify the scene as queer. Fernanda fortunately got the last word. She stated, “[Tamra’s] the type of girl who kisses girls for fun. That doesn’t really resonate with me. Straight girls think it doesn’t mean anything but gay girls want to have something more.” Marriage equality photos of the two topless women, covered in industrial chains, highlight the scene’s queer irony and intimate that, in fact, Tamra was the one employing lesbian desire to ensnare another woman.

Kim Zolciak’s relationship with DJ Tracy Young was more sustained than Tamra’s tryst with Fernanda. Zolciak and Young’s love affair was a major storyline in Atlanta’s third season. During a confessional segment, Kim explained that she met Tracy while the two worked on remixes of her song “Tardy for the Party.” “And we had sex,” she announced. Cameras caught the two lovers attending various social events. In one particularly telling moment, viewers see Tracy carrying Kim’s youngest daughter piggyback, indicating that she has become a significant presence in Zolciak’s life. Kim and Tracy incidentally also posed together in a “NOH8” marriage equality photo, although they were markedly more clothed than their Orange County counterparts.

Finally, many of Bravo’s homemakers theatricalize queer possibility by breaking the cardinal rule of being a housewife: they divorced their husbands. Housewives have been configured as the “primary agents of family nurture” since the Victorian era (Coltrane & Adams, 2003, p. 365), which partially explains why people tend to blame women when there is a breakdown in the family unit. The Real Housewives franchise puts a queer spin on divorce by reimagining women as protagonists in divorce narratives. Fans of the show sometimes talk about the Housewives marriage curse. Show participants have divorced or separated twenty times since the series began. Bravo’s cameras filmed twelve of those breakups, including Orange County’s Vicki and Don, Tamra and Simon, Jeana and Matt, and Lynn and Frank; New York’s Luann and Alex; Beverly Hills’ Camille and Kelsey, Adrienne and Paul, and Taylor and Russell; Atlanta’s NeNe and Gregg, and Porsha and Kordell; and Miami’s Marysol and Philippe, and Ana and Robert. Divorce narratives on the shows are typically told from the wife’s point of view and, as a result, the tales are sympathetic to the divorcees. After one of a Housewives’ marriages comes to an end, female participants tell their side of the story, but former husbands no longer provide on-camera commentary. Men are not surprisingly painted as philanderers (e.g., Alex of New York and Kelsey of Beverly Hills), verbally abusive and controlling (e.g., Simon of Orange County), physically harmful (Russell of Beverly Hills), financial deadbeats (e.g., Frank of Orange County), and incapable of filling a wife’s “love tank” (e.g., Don of Orange County). A compassionate story about women getting divorced defies an age-old
mythos that suggests women shoulder the burden for marriages that come to an end.

Divorce might also be coded as queer failure. Jack Halberstam (2011) mined failure’s queer potential by linking it to breakdowns in heterosexist productivity. Queer life choices represent a breakdown of capitalist and heterosexist logic, because queer sex metonymically symbolizes an unsuccessful connection between production and reproduction (Hocquenghem, 1993). “If success requires so much effort,” argued Halberstam (2011), “maybe failure is easier in the long run and offers different rewards” (p. 3). Rather than reiterate the divorced woman in despair trope, Bravo reframes failed marriages and the “divorce problem” (Coltrane & Adams, 2003) as opportunities for professional success and occasions to experiment with intimate relationships that might prove more consistent with a particular woman’s proclivities. Housewives like NeNe Leakes used divorce as a springboard to reach elevated career opportunities. The season immediately following her divorce from Gregg focused on the popular Housewife’s explosive success in television, ranging from guest spots on local newscasts to a recurring stint on Fox’s Glee and a regular role on NBC’s The New Normal. Glee and The New Normal, incidentally, are popular, gay-themed network sitcoms. Second, many of the divorced Housewives found more personally fulfilling relationships with men after their divorce. Orange County’s Tamra, New York’s LuAnn, and Beverly Hills’ Camille each ended up with younger men who, in the context of the television show, seemed to make the ladies happier. This is not to say that, queerly speaking, depictions of divorce on the series remain unproblematic. Because the programs tell the tales of wealthy housewives, producers never reveal the material consequences many economically disadvantaged women endure after a marriage dissolves. Moreover, some of the divorced women have moved from one marriage to the next, an act that reifies a heteronormative institution that has already failed them.

Conclusion

I spent a few years in the Housewives closet. I was ashamed to admit to friends and strangers that I loved the program. What began as a guilty pleasure has grown into a low theoretical consideration of housewife performativity. In The Queer Art of Failure, Halberstam (2011) explained that low theory celebrates work that comes from silly, eccentric archives, or pop culture artifacts, such as The Real Housewives, that may otherwise be labeled “unserious.” The programs are theoretically provocative in part because they reach audiences that might not pick up a book of high theory, like one of Judith Butler’s treatises.
This is not to say the programs are beyond critical/cultural reproach. Queer and feminist critics may rightfully take issue with how the shows perpetuate beauty myths, commodity fetishism, and the notion that women are hysterical and backbiting. In the spirit of queer critique, I advocate multiple ways of reading Bravo’s texts and have demonstrated how The Real Housewives animates resistance through its brand of irony and queer aesthetics. Like Sex and the City, The Real Housewives’ success is partially predicated on the franchise’s “narrative queerness [that] alters the representation of [the Housewives’] heterosexuality, drawing it out from the shadow of its hegemonic closet” (Gerhard, 2005, p. 43). The programs theatrically contest some of the most rigid binaries that have constrained and enabled conceptualizations of the housewife role. Bravo’s housewives show the performativity of gender (drag), fluidity of sexuality (same-sex affairs), and commensurability of sexual minorities and families.

References


