America’s Doll House: Casting Nora Helmer and other Transgressive Monster-women in Reality Television’s *The Real Housewives Series*

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**Abstract:** Capitalizing on the frivolous activities of affluent housewives who occupy the million dollar dollhouses of America’s landscape, *The Real Housewives* reality television series provides a compelling case to chronicle a fabricated world of sexualized excess, where housewives perform within the consumer imperative of media’s libidinal economy. Within these discursive media spaces, female communities are superficially constructed casting personalities similar to Henrik Ibsen’s Nora Helmer—housewives driven by shades of female hysteria. In this essay, I explore the myriad ways *The Real Housewives*’ media franchise fashions notions of “housewife” and how women subvert and resist this construction for yet another patriarchal construction of sexualized post-feminist consumers. I argue that these artificial performances of sexual desirability and liberatory feminism act as a substitute for gendered justice and political and social transformation.

**Keywords:** Henrik Ibsen, Feminism, Post feminism, Gender Studies, Gender Performativity, American Television, Reality Television.

**Introduction**

Earning over 95 million US viewers in the desirable advertising demographics of 18-49 females consumers, *Bravo Television* has capitalized on the seductive emergence of the neoliberal post-feminist American housewife who balances on Jimmy Choo stiletto heels to trample the submissive silences of domesticity that had previously enclosed her (Time Warner, 2008). Similar to Ibsen’s Nora Helmer—the monstrous mother who slammed the door on her “sacred duties” to husband and children to set forth on her “most sacred duties” to herself—the housewives from Beverly Hills, Orange County, and New York embark on their own hyper-individualized consumer journeys, which puzzlingly dislodges Enlightenment tropes of motherhood and *housewifism* and embraces postfeminist sensibilities (Ibsen, 1992). Bravo’s supernatural cosmology constructs a consumer orthodoxy in which self-actualization and “liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms” can be realized though the sport of shopping sprees where the sky is the limit with a swipe of a *Discover Card* (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). In this article, I explore the myriad ways *The Real Housewives*’ media franchise casts transgressive monster-women who rage against and ultimately submit to the repackaging of hyperbolic constructions of the pre-1970’s virgin/whore, angel/monster, good/bad mother *binarism* to which they have been *contractually* obligated. I argue that the housewives are “ideal neoliberal subjects,” who willingly “cooperate with their subjectification within these markets” (Tyler, 2011, p. 22). Seduced by late-capitalist attitudes of hedonistic desire and mass consumption, I demonstrate how the housewives openly market themselves as active sexual objects of male desire and consumption (Brown 2005; Dubrofsky 2009; Gil, 2007; Lee and Moscowitz, 2012; Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008; Skeggs; 2005). I further examine how these “emancipated feminine subjectivities” are entangled with bodily desires, “choices,” self-fulfillment, and gratification in what Gil and Sharff (2011) refer to as a “radical reconstruction” of femininities (p.5) and the “making and remaking of subjectivities” (p.8).

**Methodology**

My methodology for this analysis involves a qualitative discourse analysis using *Atlas.ti* software in order to explore and analyze specific relationships and gendered performances in the
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The Real Housewives of Orange County (RHWOC), The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills (RHOBH), and The Real Housewives of New York (RHONY) (Fairclough, 1995). In these series, I coded and datafied visual and audio film segments of feminist performances. Yet, it is important to acknowledge my own Second Wave feminist biases and the influence of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s (1979) seminal text, The Madwoman in the Attic, when examining housewife performativity. Codes emerged in the processes of signification in which the monster, scorned, and neurotic developed into feminist framing codes to explore performances and conceptual links between series and characters. In addition, postfeminist codes were also developed to include sexual entrepreneurship, aesthetic projects of self, consumerism, and individualism. While I initially tried to find other coding and tagging choices for the representations of the housewives scorned, or monstrous behaviors, I discovered that the Real Housewives Series was indeed recasting and reinventing pre-1970s stereotypes against the backdrop of a postfeminist, neoliberal landscape. Now, the monster/scorned/neurotic housewife was a sexual entrepreneur with more consumer choices for reinvention. I then spent countless hours coding and datafying Tamra’s “character arc” in RHWOC from Season Three, Episode One to Season Ten, Episode 22; Brandi’s character in RHOBH arc from Season Two, Episode Five to Season Five, Episode 23; Ramona’s character arc in RHONY from Season One to Season Seven, Episode 23; and Sonja’s character arc in RHONY from Season Three, Episode to Season Seven, Episode 23, respectively.

A Doll House of Distorted Mirrors
In Western media culture, the camera replaces the pen as the progenitor of the narrative and captures the producer’s artistic direction (Debord, 2009, p. 548). An enunciator of its own generative consumer power, in this series, Bravo’s camera is scopophilic by nature and narrates from its own phallocentric position manufacturing the housewives as sexualized objects of fantasy (Mulvey, 1989). According to Laura Mulvey (1989) the camera subjects women to a monitoring and “curious” gaze that is always male. The Real Housewives embody this mysterious socio-political and gender power construction, which shapes and frames their imagined reality for its intended purposes—advertising dollars and franchise commitments. “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact…” (Mulvey, 1989, p. 19) Like Ibsen, Bravo fathers its texts “project(ing) its fantasy(ies) onto its female figure(s)” and neoliberal housewives are its properties and commodities, owning and controlling them within each “whooping it up” media frame (Mulvey, 1989, p. 19). Actively engaging in erotic exhibitionism in what Brian McNair (2002) refers to as a “striptease culture,” the housewives take on their prescribed sexual performances to quench desires and fantasies—and there are many.

In this pornified cornucopia, viewers can titillate to NY’s sexual predators Sonja and Ramona hunting Manhattan hot spots for pretty boys under the age of 23 or scintillate to OC’s Tamra’s lusty body shot offerings at a high end pool bar in Cabo San Lucas. Shoshini Chauduri (2006) observes, “what distinguishes cinema from other forms of female sexual display is that it incorporates permutations of the look into its very structure, predetermining how the woman is to be looked at, and thus placing all spectators in the ‘masculinized’ position of looking at her” (p. 35). The close up shots of Tamra’s bulging cleavage while lying on the pool bar and erotically kiss-passing lime juice to another sexy girl highlights the fetishized spectacle (“Body Shots,” 2011). The camera fetishizes every body part, fragmentizing her breasts, her six pack, her legs in Playboy pin-up fashion—seducing the viewer to wet dreams of erotic contemplation and shattering the “illusion of depth” and “verisimilitude” (Mulvey, 1989, p. 20). Having willingly entered a bargain with the devil for fame and televisial notoriety, Tamra like the other housewives have surrendered their maternal subjectivities to become dolled-up “sexual entreprenuers” to paternal media’s portrayal of them (Gil and Scharff (2011),...
Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008). These exhibitionist performances, need, however, to be grounded in the grander narrative of late capitalism or “liquid society” in which the “desacralization” of family life coincides with hyper-individualized consumerism resulting in an ontological crisis of “uncertainty” and a “reflective concern with identity and the body” (Gil and Scharff, 2011, p. 8).

Through extensive engagement with self-improvement projects, the housewives religiously challenge virtues of “modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability, politeness” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 23). Although these behavioral attributes are on life support for many of the housewives before their fall from grace, Bravo attempts to contrast the angel in the house with her demonic opposite who, like Nora, slams the door on her maternal subjectivities. Angelic affections are slaughtered by exposing what Betty Friedan (1991) refers to as the feminine mystique—the strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform” (p. 149.) Instead of mass media images of women vacuuming the parlor in high heels and baking Betty Crocker Bundt cakes for their loving families of four, new hyper-individualized “leisure and consumption” images prevail (Rose and Wood, 2005, p. 296). Bravo’s sexualized pernicious rebels spend most of their screen time as dolled-up commodities at high-end restaurants, social events, and confinement luxury resorts sans children in a “highly mediated culture, in which youth, glamour, and fame have come to dominate the public image of female subjectivity” (Cobb, 2011, p. 130). All along the way, the camera captures the dialectical struggles in which, women perform narrative signifiers of good/bad maternal subjectivities that form and inform each other according to social-media marketing trends (Cobb, 2011, p. 135). Subversive performativity lies in the ways in which the housewives “occupy” and or “over-occupy” their prescriptive roles (Iball, p. 133). Housewife performativity becomes the location where submission and resistance can be interrogated (Butler, 1990). Here, we witness complicit performativity and theatrical demonstrations that waver between resistance, critique and submission (Iball, p. 134).

From the opening scenes of the Real Housewives series, the housewives are framed into sexualized displays of “image based femininity” in what Laura Mulvey (1989) describes as “to-be-looked-at-ness” (p.19). According to Roland Barthes, the theatrical montage, freezes the body as “ultra-incarnation, in which the body is double, at once a living body {…}and an emphatic, formal body, frozen by its function as an artificial object” (Sontag, p. 77). Housewives from the OC to New York pose in tight skin bearing fit and flare cut-out dresses proclaiming the joys of housewivism. In the RHWOC opening montage, Heather beams, “Noone’s life is perfect but mine is pretty close,” while sabraging a bottle of champagne. One after the other, these affluent housewives of the East and West Coast, “flirt with the camera in two sexy “stylized” wardrobe changes to produce a hyperbolic femininity bordering on drag queens at a West Hollywood cabaret. With each exaggerated seductive stance, the women produce provocative images of seductress Eves who have snatched the fruit “of that forbidden tree” and “Brought death into the world, and all our woe” for public condemnation and consumption (Milton, 1674, II).

As the bearers of guilt and temptation, the “cinematic codes” in the opening spectacle foreshadow plot lines of women struggling to maintain their valuation, “to-be-looked-at-ness, and desirability” (Mulvey, 1989, p. 26). Meekly hidden in the shadows of the postfeminist consumer display, stand the families who, while reaping the financial rewards of their newfound reality fame, have certainly suffered the emotional costs. Tamra Judge puts it quite succinctly: “Boldness comes at a cost and I’m willing to pay.” Beneath the edifices of fluttering lashes, collagen plumped lips and projectile cleavage, exist raging post-feminist voices vying to do undo previous silences within the spectacle of “unlearning not to speak” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 83).

This is also visible in the RHWOC where both figuratively and literally, the housewives are lodged into media discourses in which captivity.
imagery of closing iron gates and static sexualized montage poses freeze the housewives into prescribed socio-economic and gender roles of confinement—roles which throughout the episodes the housewives, resist, rage, and subvert by sexually exploding commando style into a culture of emancipatory orgasm outside the architecture of the home.

**Bravo Witch Hunts**

Bravo captures the cacophonous gap between reality and idealism in a world where nothing is at it seems and women are coaxed into outrageous challenges of the eternal feminine so that almost every real housewife from the OC to NY has taken on arch-villainous characteristics only to be publically ridiculed and shamed for her behavior. The public shaming and humiliation of disruptive and destabilizing behavior when housewives cut free from their apron strings is at the heart of Bravo’s cosmology. Women who leave their homesteads are dangerously swept away on boozy weekend trips to The Hamptons, Paris, Amsterdam and beyond where the voyeuristic apparatus nudges and pokes its characters into provocative filmic excursions of flirtatious *sexcapades* and cocktail induced barbaric yawps. In so doing, the camera exploits the ironic gap between the eternal feminine and her outrageously transgressive evil counterpart (Lee and Moscowitz, 2012, p. 5).

Bravo constructs a familiar world where we come to intimately know the housewives as individuals and not as representative archetypes; the televisual illusions are brought about by media production skill (Cohen 2009). The result is a two-fold irony in which the presented visual information springs from the dialect between fabricated scenarios and the housewives’ “real” conversations and activities within this conjured teleplay. A pointed satirical frame and shame technique captures the unabashed laudatory remarks about housewife self-satisfaction and their virtuous place in the moral order and then immediately frames the antithetical behavior (Dominus, 2008; Dubrofsky, 2009; Lee and Moscowitz; 2012).

The shame and frame technique is an “excessive and punitive” indictment of transgressive behavior highlighting how far the housewives have stumbled from their self-constructions (Gil, 2007, p. 255). In this “sadistic” venue of indulging voyeurism, “pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt” and “subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness” (Mulvey, 1989, pg. 22). Bravo suggests we laugh at the ruptures between the ideal, and real and for the *Real Housewives* it means those trashy deluded housewife perceptions that crassly overvalue their socio-economic status, mental acuity and moral compass. The ironic “real” meets the absurd when the housewives look into the camera and claim moral pretensions of superiority over other housewives on the show. This is especially noted in Vicki Gunvalson’s (2015) hyperbolized value statement in Season Ten’s opening montage segment when she claims: “I’m the OG of the OC…everyone else is just a copy.” In this topsy-turvy world of conflicting values, declarations of control, boldness, happiness, wealth, and consumer housewife beatitudes are satirized with sketched scenarios of the opposite. In this case, it is the combination of verbal, dramatic, and situational irony when Vicki’s inability to discern true human character with now ex-boyfriend Brooks Avery who faked a terminal cancer diagnosis in Season Ten.

Oppositional framing and shaming is at the heart of Bravo cosmology. According to ruler of this inverted world, Host and Senior Vice President of original programming, Andy Cohen, “We do something with the editing that is called the Bravo Wink. We wink at the audience when someone says ‘I’m the healthiest person in the world’ and then you see them ashing their cigarette. We’re kind of letting the audience in on the fun” (Lee and Moscowitz, 2012, p. 5). In this way, viewers and producers alike become part of the “sadistic” juridical processes of public shaming and condemnation, which only serves to “subjugate” and silence woman’s voices in a neoliberal post-feminist chokehold (Mulvey, 1989). What these “Bravo-Winks” reveal is a patriarchal media culture in which feminine behaviors that usurp biblical ideals and
Enlightenment assumptions are punished as daemonic. These transgressive behaviors are later condemned in witch-hunt proceedings of public ridicule and condemnation—also known as the Real Housewives Reunion. The housewives are further condemned by a jury of their peers as they participate in mean girl bouts of boasting, bullying, and back-stabbing to buffer their own privileged social status, and of course to gain more air time.

Gilbert and Gubar (1979) are correct in the influence of Chaucerian dynamics in which “five centuries later, the threat of the hag, the monster, the witch, the madwoman, still lurks behind the compliant paragon of women’s stories” (pgs. 78-79). This is certainly the case in Bravo’s world in which housewives dramatize their anxiety, their fragmentation, and their rage against – “their own keen sense of the discrepancies between what they are and what they are supposed to be” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 78). For behind every angelic attribute of the Virgin Eve and Virgin Mary, there are the negative characteristics of impropriety, awkwardness, disgrace, impurity, evil, outlandishishness, contentiousness, assertiveness, promiscuity, unfriendliness and rudeness. While The Real Housewives from Orange County, New York, and Beverly Hills attempt to subvert the angel/monster dichotomy, more often than not they end up working out the patriarchal consciousness of monster-devil-whore-hysterical-witch in order to write themselves into Bravo’s Book of Wicked Wives. Shamed and framed within the discourse, women are cast into prescribed roles of performativity to expose the fictitious dichotomies of culturally scripted “eternal types” of submissive playthings (See Butler 1990. Iball, 2005). Deliberately refusing to kill the angelic opposite—the monster fiend, what we are left with are housewives in the shape of neoliberal monsters defined by their voracious material appetites consuming the air waves—which makes for good ratings (Gubar and Gilman, 1979, p. 35).

The Real Housewives franchised planetarium of manipulative, bullying housewives serves to represent man’s persistent uncertainty about his own socio-economic and political position. In this bewildering global market, his female entrepreneurial counterpart threatens masculinist privilege, which once preordained man ruler of all earthly and supernatural realms. It is exactly this “horror of his (man’s) own carnal contingence,” de Beauvoir (1953) notes, “which [man] projects upon [woman]” and which Bravo captures in housewife performativity (p. 76).

The housewives have willing escaped the architecture of the home to strike a selfie at celebrity galas and five star brunches—and in most cases leaving their husband and kids to fend for themselves with the help of their kitchen staff. Seduced by capital’s excesses, the housewives have swapped their maternal subjectivities for entrepreneurial subjectivities to become what Andrew Ross (2008) refers to as “paradigms of entrepreneurial selfhood” as they deftly market their products, their lifestyles and their bodies (p. 32). Concealed behind the bourgeois individualized project of reflexive story telling are both women performing gendered notions of “personhood” (Skuggs and Wood 219).

The remainder of this chapter will explore the myriad conflicting ways that Tamra from the OC, Brandi from Beverly Hills, and Ramona and Sonja from NYC reinvent monstrous, villainous, promiscuous, and hysterical roles though sexual entrepreneurial subjectivities. While these cultural productions directly challenge notions of the eternal feminine, their regulating performances reinforce “persistent gendered coercion and inequality” (Madhok, 2010).

Constructing Monster Narratives: The Crucifixion and Resurrection

Tamra Judge appears from “Behind the Orange Curtain” in Season Three to take on the role of seductress monster/sexual entrepreneur in the house positioning her family drama front and center between Simon’s demands of what is acceptable domestic behavior and foreshadowing a contentious ugly divorce in season Five’s Finale episode. Bravo casts the luscious Tamra to perfectly construct the concept of a mother/working realtor/ housewife caught between the turmoil of expressing her maternal subjectivities with the constricting paradigm of a controlling husband who believes she must act in
accordance with his construction of her. Tama is
cought between Gubar and Gilman’s fallen
angel/monster woman and a postfeminist Barbie
whose script of “personal empowerment,
entrepreneurship, sexual agency, entitlement to
pleasure and emancipation,” reads straight from a
postfeminist manual on “women’s right to be
beautiful” (Lazar, 2011, p. 38). The tension
between these conflicting ideologies can be seen
in the marriage scenes with Simon, where Tama
is torn between aspects of passivity and assertion,
while still performing the sexualized subject of
desire. While raising four children, she works
equally as hard to maintain her to-be-looked-at-
ess by botoxing, working out, and obsessing over
the size of her breasts and vagina. As the seasons
progress, we witness Tama trying to be the model
housewife to the often verbally abusive Simon.
Tama binges on diamonds, yachts, and even more
Botox to fill her despair. Sadly, nothing can keep
the former car and tequila salesman Simon happy
as he wants Tama at home with the children
reinforcing the idea that beautiful working
mothers must be punished even when their
earnings help to support the outrageous lifestyle of
their husbands. Reprimanded for not filling the
role of self-sacrificing mother, Tama rebels
against the postfeminist “new momism” that
condemns women for not prioritizing family over
other aspects of their life (Douglas & Michaels,
2004; Feldstein, 2000). Bravo goes to sexy filmic
grape-stomping and diacritic lengths to fashion the
image of intimate togetherness, but as the camera
pulls back the illusion of the happy couple is
revealed and the “real housewife” image anchored
in domestic bliss is proven a façade. When the
house of Simon starts to crumble, he asserts the
last bastion of control over Tama’s friendships
and begins to regulate who her friends can and
cannot be. In a last ditch hyperbolized
performance of housewife loyalty, Tama goes so
far as to tattoo Simon’s name on her ring finger—
the emperor Simon proclaiming, “That’s the first
unselfish thing you’ve done in a long time”
(“Nothing Is at It Seems”). The insinuation
of course is Tama is the selfish monster/bitch,
whose self-absorption is a visible trace of “fallen
angel, bad motherhood, and transgressive
femininity” (Cobb, 2011, p. 128). Tamra and
Simon’s story highlights the complex social issues
faced by woman balancing career, motherhood,
and marriage. Tama’s journey entails negotiating
the persistent morality that places unrealistic
burdens on mothers who find themselves more
often than not squashed and dismembered in the
self-indulgent/self-sacrificing binary of Western
patриarchal culture. In the climactic scene
reminiscent of Nora Helmer’s demolition of
Torvald’s dollhouse, Tamra announces to Simon,
“I want a divorce,” smashing the limo door on her
masquerade of the submissive housewife (“Is This
All There Is?

This is the turning point in Tamra’s character.
No longer the tormented housewife, she takes
the role of sexual predator—using her body to
write herself into Bravo “his” story. Her “sexy
body” becomes a “key (if not sole) source of
identity” and performativity (Gil, 2007, 140).
Tamra’s moments of extreme behavior, of the
primitive, raw sense of her sexuality are most
visually expressed in Season Six’s “Body Shots”
in which Tamra’s body becomes a metaphorical
site of sacrificial taboo and transgression offering
itself for sexual consecration. “Woo hoo! I’m
done being a trophy wife!” Tamra proclaims.
Tamra’s sacrificial performativity atop a Cabo
bartop testifies to her inner needs that have been
repressed; her sexual sacrifice is the closest she
comes to an experience of erotic liberation.
Examining Tamra’s sexual patterns, it becomes
clear that Bravo’s female bodies are the first place
that defines political struggles in which to observe
how the socio-sexual patterns expose the
relationship between boundaries and power. In a
post-feminist media culture that preoccupies itself
with the sexualization of the body, agency and
submission walk hand in hand. “The body is
presented simultaneously as women’s source of
power and as always already unruly and requiring
constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and
remodeling (and consumer spending) in order to
conform to ever narrower judgments of female
attractiveness” (Gil, 2007, p. 149). In this respect,
the female body is a metaphor for marginalization
and abuse. In both, we see how women have been
banned from the master narrative, and how this

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marginalization has led women to use their sexual bodies to contest the patriarchal narrative as a way of writing themselves into being. Tamra, specifically, employs the fetishization of her breasts as a way of talking back—ultimately leading to more bodily anxiety over her physical appearance. Her internalization of the male breast obsession results in five boob jobs, three that became part of her story line in which she went from Amazonian size to moderate reduction, to complete removal and back again. Tamra’s metamorphosis suggests an allegorical narrative for the imprisonment of her soul that will foreshadow her ultimate spiritual release in Season Ten’s finale—“Baptism by Fire.”

When Tamra falls immediately for bodybuilder-Eddie to escape to Sin City, we witness Tamra falling deeper and deeper into a despairing need of masculinist approval. With new younger, perkier housewives competing for screen time, Tamra realizes she must up her anty and compete in order to pay her bills and her fantasies of opening a gym with Eddie. Debold (2009) reminds us how “Each individual commodity fights for itself. It avoids acknowledging the others and strives to impose itself everywhere as if it were the only one in existence” (p. 914). Tamra cannot go happy into that good night, she has too many bills to pay and must get airtime. She must become evil, contentious and vicious and strike out against Gretchen, Alexis, Vicki. She must become the concentric center of good and evil in order to be perceived more than solely an object of visual consumption and objectification. Though Tamra’s triumphs and travails, we witness the production of “a consumer based emancipated feminine identity” (Lazar, 2011, p. 49). On her bittersweet journey to self-actualization, she marries boyfriend Eddie, opens C.U.T Fitness, in Rancho Santa Margarita and loses physical custody of her 16-year-old daughter to ex-husband Simon. Tamra falls so far from the eternal feminine that according to court documents, she will have only sporadic visitation rights with her daughter “every other weekend, and one day midweek from 4:00 to 7:00 pm every week” (Barney v. Judge 2015).

In one of the most bizarre twists of Real Housewives’ history, Tamra surrenders her life to Jesus. “I’m going to see a pastor about being baptized,” she declares (“Baptism by Fire”). Tamra has fallen so far deep into the hedonistic crevices of reality television, that her complete transformation from considerations of vaginal rejuvenation after her divorce from Simon to Medieval notions of contemplative purity was Season Ten’s episodic climax. “I’m saved and if you don’t like it, you can suck it,” Tamra beams.

Tamra’s baptism implies her acknowledged wrongdoing in the house of patriarchy, suggesting that her original laboratory “emancipation from (second-wave) feminism” was misguided and in need of reconsideration of her “true feminine” self (Lazar, 2011, p. 49). In order to regain entrance, she must wash away her original sin—her disobedience to God and man and purge her postfeminist sensibilities.

In an over the tacky top baptism ritual in which her housewife friends are all dressed in white cocktail attire and the Gospel choir sings, “What can wash away my sins?” Tamra reflects: “If I hadn’t gone through that hard time last year, I would not be standing here right now accepting Jesus into my life” (“Baptism by Fire”). Wearing self-tanner and a white slinky (baptism?) dress from Forever21, she now courts the camera in Jesus’s name—the Holiday Inn swimming pool sparkling in the background. Tamra controls all theatrical aspects of her baptism performance in which viewers subject themselves to Tamra’s spectacular images of transformation (Mayne, 1984). Tamra reflects: “My relationships going to change and my friends are going to change and they’re going to know a side of me that they’ve never known. A side that I never knew was there” (“Baptism by Fire”).

Whether or not tabloid gossip is true and Tamra proposed her born-again episode to the producers, what is true is that this resurrected angel woman “reveals that she can manipulate; she can scheme; she can plot—stories as well as strategies” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 26). In an immediate cut to Tamra wearing a devilish red dress, she recounts her torturous figurative and literal trials with Simon: “Last year my ex put me
though living hell just to hurt me.” Like the forgiving Jesus Judge, she tells the crowd she even forgives Simon and knows she’ll never be perfect. “I know I will continue to mess up from time to time, but I’m happy to say that what was once my mess is now my message,” she says (“Baptism by Fire”).

In Tamra’s ultimate televisual transformation, Pastor Mike walks Tamra to the pool telling her, “You look like a beautiful angel, Tamra.” And in one quick dunk, Tamra sees her life flash before her eyes: “By the time I was 21, I was divorced and I had my first attempt at suicide. I feel like I lived most of my life just lost.” As she rises from the water to the lyrics “I once was lost, but now I’m found,” the fallen angel is resurrected, her sexy bathing suit shift clinging to her ass in the ultimate power of ritual and performativity. Tamra’s sleek glistening body becomes the site of what Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) calls a “bare scaffolding on which discourse and performance build a completely acculturated being” (p. 6). “Live your truth and live in the truth,” says Tamra. Only time will tell whether the sexualized angel of the house who fled the House of Simon to take up triple residence in the House of Jesus, Eddie, and Bravo will be more empowered.

The Scorned and Defiant

Representing the scorned woman of cheating husband Eddie Cibrian, former runway model Brandi Glanville catapults into Season Two’s RHOBH. Cast as a cross between Medea and the Wife of Bath, she signifies “old stereotype(s) wrapped in a new, glossy, postfeminist guise”—a loathly-lady internally conflicted by the external circumstances of her husband’s betrayal (Harvey and Gil, 2011, p. 52). Brandi’s scorned persona immediately infuses rage and vengeance into housewife doldrums. Her bawdy, passionate strike is uncontainable as she vies for the center of bravado, slapping Lisa Vanderpump off her high-heeled horse, dosing star Eileen Davidson with wine, and physically assaulting her archenemy Kyle Richards. Brandi’s excessive behavior transgresses the propriety and customs of Beverly Hills and has some cast members alleging she is responsible for the domestic demise of Adrienne Maloof and Paul Nassif’s relationship. Denounced as a despised daemon, Faye Resnick says to Brandi: “You put them through hell,” she sneered, “like you put everyone else through hell” (“A Shot Through the Heart”). Indeed, Brandi’s “performativity materializes in concentrated form,” as she rages against her cast mates’ character assignation, by verbally and physical fighting back (Diamond, 1997, p. 47). Brandi’s performativity of the scorned, neurotic, unpredictable creates the chaotic unexpected moments that fuel the ideology of the spectacle and feed viewer intrigue.

Her performance of the grotesque, unnatural, threatening woman, which imperils domestic solidarity suggests a woman in search of herself and place in society. The decentering of Brandi’s world comes when other housewives take jabs at her motherhood because one of her toddler boys had the audacity to pee on Adrienne’s manicured turf. Bravo producers seemed to have taken up the latest trend in what Ruth Feldstein refers to as “mother-blaming” for children’s growing pains (Lee and Moscowitz, 2012, p. 11). Brandi will have none of this “new-momism” policing and rails against its prescriptive motherhood “shouldisms.”

Brandi’s etiquette and demeanor flagrantly confronts upper middle class notions of maternal propriety when she shows up as a disheveled low rent hooker at Lipsa’s jewelry fundraiser for cancer. In a further dismantling of societal expectations, Brandi claims to have dressed as a “conservative” mother for her parent-teacher conferences. By performing a role that challenges social norms and expectations, Brandi opens up spaces for a discussion of Jean Baudrillard’s (1993) “viral loss of determinancy,” and why women so readily succumb to media’s idealized notions of femininity and why they so easily turn on each other in times of crises (pgs. 7-9). What Brandi’s narrative ultimately reveals is how she has been “othered” in a desacralized world order in which liberated women like Brandi must still confront their seconded nature and inability to live up to contradictory notions of motherhood and femininity, a world that leads to her demonic rage at being excluded from its social embrace (Faludi,
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1991; Giddens, 1991; Gil and Scharff, 2011). Brandi is one of many women entangled in a “locked embrace, of a ‘war’ between women and the male culture they inhabit” (Faludi, 1991, p. 30).

**MILF Madness**

RHONY employs “Crazy Eyes” Ramona Singer and self-proclaimed “trashy” Sonja Morgan to accentuate complex degrees of nervousness and neurosis—their active performativity of this role suggesting a destructive vulnerability for both themselves and those around them. Ramona in particular is cast as a hyper-obsessed, self-defined MILF (mother I’d like to fuck) who maintains her narcissism from Season One to Season Seven in spite of her daughter Avery’s disapproval. Indeed, Ramona’s hyper-charged sexuality and self-obsessed preoccupations challenge notions of “the perfect mother” figure.

In Season One, Ramona’s bikini attire to be looked-at-ness sexuality disgusts her daughter who responds at her mother’s fiery poolside antics by calling her “an evil woman” (“The Hamptons”). Ramona defends her behavior by claiming, “We’re just a bunch of MILFs” (“The Hamptons”). Desirable MILF figures represent “a conflicting relationship to female empowerment and child-rearing responsibilities that engages with a larger postfeminist trope of women failing to achieve perfect motherhood” (Bradshaw 2013, 173).

In Season Seven when Ramona leaves her husband Mario of 27 years, Avery returns home from college and advises her mother to “do whatever makes you happy” (“Pop of Crazy”). In a declaration of postfeminist rhetoric, Ramona claims, “I make myself happy and my friends make me happy” (“Pop of Crazy”). As she makes these assertions of self-fulfillment, she appropriates her daughter’s wardrobe and sense of style. The young coed has chosen varying degrees of blue in her wardrobe. Rather than allowing her daughter, her own sense of fashion choices, Ramona arrogantly claims them as “Ramona blue,” overshadowing Avery’s growth as a separate individual apart from her neurotic mother’s branding ventures. In yet another declaration of emancipatory rhetoric, the Pino Grigio sloshed Ramona hosts a “New Beginnings” party to refashion herself after her divorce from Mario and it is here at the crossroads from being and becoming that Ramona attempts to write herself back into her own story through sexualized dirty dancing and suggestive gestures to the Conch Bar owner—a scene reminiscent of Nora Helmer’s tarantella of desperately wild expressions (“Conch Blocked”). Evaluating Ramona Singer’s evolution, it appears that Bravo panoptic camera is filtered through the lens of a 17th Century apparatus that believes that hysteria is a hormonal induced female problem in which woman must be reprimanded when their sexual desires do not meet prescribed patriarchal standards (Foucault, 2002).

This sense of heightened “madness” is further exploited in the sexual trials and travails of Sonja Morgan who takes on the role of the desperate ex-housewife of John Adams Morgan, son of Henry S. Morgan. Sonja claims to be the “wealthiest homeless person in Manhattan,” declaring, “I used to be classy, now I’m trashy” (“The B is Back”). In yet another casualty of the marital battleground, Sonja prostitutes her Everywoman quest for identity and socio-sexual position to become Bravo’s latest “leitmotif of erotic spectacle” and ridicule (Mulvey, 1989, p. 19). Confessing her youth secrets of nightly testosterone and estrogen taking to keep her “young and juicy” for Bravo attention, Sonja captures the latest demographic in reality television (“Lord of the Manor”). After all, reality TV is for “masses, not the classes” (“Lord of the Manor”). Ariel Levy (2005) comments how the rise of “raunch culture” has spread pornography to “mainstream media” in which “sexy” encounters and “sexual objectification” are “repackaged” as rhetoric of empowerment (Harvey and Gil, 2011, p. 54).

Perhaps, Ramona provides the economic incentive for Sonja’s behavior—“Lady Morgan’s house is crumbling down. Don’t repeat this: it went into trusteeship” (“Everybody Thinks We’re Drag Queens”). Even her business advisors’ heads spin when she discusses her erratic business ventures. “I have the lingerie out of Colombia…the yellow and white diamond
collection. I’m speaking with a Saudi team and then a major end football team,” she claims. Their response: “You’re fucking bananas!” (“Mind Your Own Business”). Sonja is going to have to light more than one Bravo abundance candle to keep her lifestyle afloat. Carole’s comment on Sonja’s sexcapades tells it all: “I’m not going to say who but a sex act happened at the house which until recently was considered a felony in 37 states. I’m not going to say buck fuck that is so rude” (“Vacation All I Ever Wanted”). Sonja responds: “The only time I kissed the ground --when he was humping me in the back of his garden” (“Vacation All I Never Wanted”). Imelda Whelehan (2000) suggests that the mass display of sexualized imagery is an aggressive backlash to feminism and a type of “retrosexism.” The explosion of indiscriminate sexual activity appears to be a welcoming signifier for postfeminist fulfillment, which is “linked to promote a new, liberated contemporary sexuality for women” (Attwood, 2006, p. 9). According to Attwood (2006):

A related fashion for ‘fetishistic sexual imagery’ in popular culture has become another form of textual disavowal recasting power relations between the sexes as a series of glossily stylized sexy encounters, thereby diverting attention away from real gender inequalities. (p. 7).

The MILF’s (Ramona, Brandi, and Sonja) behavior reveals women entangled in the binary of feminist/postfeminist discourses. In this writing and rewriting of feminism, acceptance and repudiation of feminist ideals, the MILFS try to find meaning and liberation though commodified performances of sexual desirability as a substitute for gendered justice and political and social transformation (Gil and Scharf 2011, McRobbie 2009).

Conclusion
In this essay, I have taken on Laura Mulvey’s charge to break down the “cinematic codes and their relationships to formative external structures” in order to challenge fetishized constructions of motherhood and housewifism in the Real Housewives Television Series (Mulvey, 1989, p. 26). I have argued that in this fabricated world of sexualized excess, the housewives perform within the consumer imperative of America’s libidinal media economy (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008; Lee and Moscowitz, 2012). From Tamra’s C.U.T. Fitness Center, Brandi’s Unfiltered Blond Chardonnay, Ramona’s Tru Renewal, True Faith Jewelry and Ramona Pino Grigio, Sonja’s Classic collection, and Timeless jewelry and all the other ventures in between, the savvy housewives willing sell their authentic selves to become commodified advertisements for their products. By capitalizing on contradictions and conflicting portrayals of women still caught in the triple bind of Enlightenment ideals, new momism, and Neoliberal Post Feminism, the housewives act to reinforce “anti-feminist tropes” of the angel/monster/sextoy aesthetic to which they construct themselves into fetishized media art (Lee and Moscowitz, 2012, p.2).

This article hopes to contribute an understanding of the evolution of feminist and postfeminist constructions of housewife sensibilities and how women engage, resist, and subvert gendered constructions of housewife performativity. In all these housewife performances, we witness women who willingly perform under the cultural dictatorial authority that imprisons them in masquerades and performances of angel and monster. Caught in this dialect, they visually struggle to hold on to their womanhood and their independence. This is certainly the case fifty years ago, and it has proven to be most definitely the case now—the difference is the not-so-real housewives are generally compensated for their gendered “fuck-puppet of male fantasy” subjectivities and performances (Turner, 2005, p. 2). While we have certainly come along way from Henrik Ibsen’s Doll House, and televisual images of the happy homemaker, the postfeminist masquerade has only distorted the representation of women though continual fetishisation of their bodies, the conflation of personal agency with consumer choices, and glass ceiling questions of equality and gender justice. Certainly more research needs to be conducted to examine the
impact of neoliberalism on cinematic codes and its malignant constructions of housewivism and motherhood.

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