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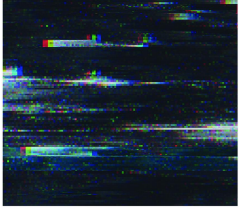
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The Routledge Companion to
Media and Class



Edited by Erika Polson, Lynn Schofield Clark, and Radhika Gajjala

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3

CLASS HYBRIDITY AND THE *HABITUS CLIVÉ* ON AMERICAN REALITY TELEVISION

June Deery

The woman who calls herself “countess” and wrote a book on etiquette is one of the tackiest, ill-mannered, ungracious women I’ve ever seen.... There are no manners here. They seem to feel that money is the only prerequisite for being a lady. Far from it.... How much of a role model can any of them be? Poor breeding. Good grief!¹

Class Migration and Reality TV

In a society whose cultural geography indicates entrenched class segregation—expressed, for example, in separate neighborhoods, schools, and colleges—the media transmits representations of class identities that we might never encounter, and certainly never get to know, otherwise.² Despite narrowcasting and audience fragmentation, mutual cultural surveillance is still a key media function. But the question arises: does media entertainment recognize this burden of representation?³ Do its producers marshal their resources to present a fair and representative sample of any given class? The answer is no, they do not. Nevertheless, the programming I will be examining does offer interesting glimpses into class performances *as performance* and prompts viewers to recognize, acknowledge, and publicly evaluate class identities. This is the largely inadvertent effect of some strains of reality television whose producers, for reasons we shall explore, are motivated to apply pressure right on the fault lines of class. Although this does not produce rounded and systematic studies such as would contribute to sociology, the popular thematizing of class identity does underline some of the problems of class identification and class transition. Viewer and participant reactions to on-screen behavior also suggest that Americans do notice, do monitor, and do care about class. The frustration of the viewer quoted in the epigraph above suggests that the inept performances of the newly rich, specifically the disconnect between money and class, is a particularly heated and therefore lucrative point of contention.

In contrast to the generally muted treatment of class demarcations in most American media, reality TV producers have for some time been exploiting class categorization—along with its uncertainties, anxieties, and ambiguities—for sub-tragic or comic effect.⁴ Indeed, one could argue that observing classed behavior goes back to origins of reality TV in the 1970s,⁵ which is not surprising since the extension of documentary into non-fictional entertainment incentivized producers to locate pre-existing social scripts. Class performance is one such script: by structuring and constraining social behavior, its rules and parameters offer producers predictable sources of tension and drama. In this essay, I focus on portraits of the newly rich and the accompanying class perceptions which energize

prominent docusoaps—these being female-headed series about interpersonal relationships unfolding over multiple seasons in soap-like, interwoven narratives.⁶ In particular, I will draw on Bravo TV, a channel whose marketing boasts it delivers the “affluencer” (i.e., affluent and influential), one who is “engaged, upscale and educated.”⁷ Several of Bravo’s hit shows look closely and sometimes longitudinally at how class is subjectively enacted and understood, in some series for over a decade. Given that it is less visually marked than race or gender, class identification often proves difficult.

Even professional class categorization has always combined fact and judgement. While scholars can invoke quantitative factors such as income and wealth, judgement immediately comes into play in determining how these affect rank. Other criteria are even less objective or metricized. Many sociologists agree that occupation is a significant factor but its weighting becomes a matter of judgement with some historical and cultural variability: i.e., *which* occupations have *what* social prestige *when*. Then there are disagreements within and between cultures about temporal factors: the relative importance of upbringing and early socialization or how long before recently acquired wealth alters class rank. When individuals are in class transit many of these subjectivities and inconsistencies are particularly stark and it becomes clear the degree to which class attribution is a perception—not always universally shared but not arbitrary or individualistic either. This is where the morass of class confusion and class accusation among TV’s nouveau riche proves interesting. Their postures and slippages allow us to see the fragility of some individual class identities and even of systematic attempts to adjudicate ranks.

Sociologists have recently begun to stress the need for personal narratives to better understand the subjective experience of class, as a supplement to traditional quantitative (and largely celebratory) analyses of large-scale data, such as the macro mobility studies conducted by John H. Goldthorpe and his colleagues at Nuffield College, Oxford.⁸ Some have proposed a micro, qualitative-based research agenda which focuses on how class is lived and how individuals make sense of their class trajectories.⁹ One perceived weakness in both academic and political discourse is an assumption that upward class mobility is a pure benefit, whereas individual narratives suggest more mixed blessings.¹⁰ The filming of classed identities on reality TV—including newly acquired identities—gives millions of viewers some inner view of class experience not as scripted by writers but as lived by individuals, albeit in an exaggerated form for entertainment purposes and not with a great deal of introspection. Ordinarily, such portraits are written from the perspective of predominantly middle- or upper-middle-class media professionals,¹¹ whereas on reality TV this professional management is less complete and different classes are invited to represent themselves. Their combination of real-ness and *mediated distance* (as figures on a screen) means viewers feel licensed, even entitled, to publicly criticize or advise these individuals since they have signed on to expose themselves on a TV show (whereas advice for fictional social climbers such as Madame Bovary or Becky Sharp would fall on deaf ears). When the performances are regarded as flawed or risible, producers are able to evade charges of classism because while behavior may be managed to some extent it is not technically scripted.

The selling point of several popular series is offering access to an elite—or at least those who may appear to some viewers to be in this category. From its inception, the very successful *Real Housewives* franchise (2006–) was pitched as a glimpse into a higher social sphere (with hints at the imperfection that is another attraction). The original series is described thus:

Welcome to one of the most exclusive neighborhoods in Southern California. Go behind the gates and meet the women who hold the keys. The Real Housewives of Orange County. Bravo introduces you to five women who are living lives of privilege and indulgence, replete with gorgeous homes, privileged offspring and fabulous bling. See how the other half really lives as The Real Housewives discover their Garden of Eden may not be so perfect....

Similarly, another Californian spin-off is marketed in this way:

The series follows six of the most affluent women in the country as they enjoy the lavish lifestyle that only Beverly Hills can provide. Theirs is a world of luxurious wealth and pampered privilege, where being seen and who you know is everything. These women are in the center of it all and they have the mansions, the cars, and the diamonds to prove it. From heiresses to entrepreneurs to a family of child actresses—The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills deliver the star power and the drama.¹²

In addition, over many years the cast members' self-identifying taglines refer to the relative importance of money, class, and privilege. For example: "I was poor, I was rich, I was poor again and you know what? Having money is easier" (Lauri Waring Peterson, RH: OC); "I never feel guilty about being privileged" (LuAnn de Lesseps, RH: NYC); "I love the bling, I love the jewelry, I love it all" (Gretchen Rossi, RH: OC); "Money doesn't give you class, it just gives you money" (Brandi Glanville, RH: BH); "In Atlanta, money and class do give you power" and "People call me a gold digger, but they just want what I have" (Kim Zolciak-Biermann, RH: ATL); "I have a taste for luxury, and luxury has a taste for me" (Sonja Morgan RH: NYC); "If it doesn't make me money, I don't do it" (Lise Wu Hartwell, RH: ATL); "Beauty fades, class is forever" (Cynthia Bailey, RH: ATL); and so on.

A curiosity about how "the other half" (or 1 percent) lives is to some extent perennial but is also in tune with significant trends in American society today, which are the increase in the public naming and acknowledgement of class distinctions and a burgeoning awareness that the wealthy are pulling ahead, without a consensus about how fair or deserved this wealth distribution may be. American popular culture has periodically examined the ethics of naked capitalism through rapacious icons such as Gatsby or Gekko ("Greed ... is good").¹³ These contemporary docusoaps feature those with more ordinary ambitions but their leveraged lifestyles nevertheless raise questions about greed and narcissism, about class and culture and, what most concerns us here, about the relation between money and class. As a subset of the wealthy, the nouveau riche are generally good fodder for reality television because their being rich encourages voyeurism and their being new introduces vulnerability and dispute. When the topic is classed behavior, both viewer and participant engagement is often intense, in part because class categorization involves taboo and trauma, as when class labels are hurled about in the heat of battle. Even when the labeling is not explicit, the nouveaux riches' confusion and hypocrisy, as well as their enthusiastic display of new wealth, provoke a range of audience responses from a variety of class locations: some admire, others disdain, still others profess elements of both. It is the ambiguity of a nouveau riche status as a transitional category that encourages multiple viewer positions, and since class assessment requires judgement and opinion, viewers can become passionate, contentious, and, above all, engaged—to the delight and profit of producers and broadcasters and, to a lesser extent, of cast members.

A potentially far-reaching impact of these class portraits is that the self-consciousness of the behavior, and the disconnect between new and original class identities, allow many viewers to understand class as a *performance*. An often pronounced lag between the acquisition of financial and of cultural capital is often framed ironically to underline delusion, hypocrisy, and lack of self-awareness; especially when edited with "the Bravo wink" that implicitly suggests inconsistencies to savvy viewers.¹⁴ In a kind of class misrecognition, the contrast between how well casts think they are performing and how they are assessed by editors and viewers opens up seams of dramatic irony. Adding to the comedy and condemnation is that, like much else on reality TV, these portraits are extrovert and exaggerated; for example, if the nouveau riche are to be characterized as avaricious, egotistic, and ostentatious then reality TV showcases pronounced examples of these traits. This is typical of reality TV's *extra*-ordinariness, its display of the recognizable but excessive. Judging by online commentary, not all viewers are critical however; not all notice the mockery and some

accept the idea that they are gaining access to the lives of an elite. Those who identify these figures as “upper class” indicate that the real powerbrokers and wealth holders are unrecognized or under their radar: which in a system of universal suffrage is often to the elite’s advantage. What is demonstrably true is that the lives of those in power—e.g., the networks of prep school–Ivies–finance/law/politics—are not being accessed or exposed here or, for that matter, elsewhere on TV. Set in a wider context, these ersatz versions of the upper class could be seen as a political distraction, concealing not only the existence of the real elite but also the effective suppression of the middle class who are *not* experiencing the upward mobility advertised on TV.

Thematising Class

Class is brought to the public’s attention in the first instance through market framing. Broadcasters are quick to promote the display of social status as a primary attraction or even *raison d’être* of these shows. Especially during a series launch, they routinely exaggerate the prestige of their nouveau riche cast, loosely employing words like “elite” and “socialite” to imply established upper-class status. Prior to this, casting plays a key role and in some instances class positioning is doubly marked when producers inject racial or cultural differences. For example, the *Ladies of London* (2014–2017) series points up contrasts between what some Americans think qualifies as upper class (predominately money) and the English version, which relies more on background and breeding. This series managed to cast some British upper-class characters (interested in media/appearance careers) and even a few aristocrats. It opens at a polo match where the restrained and sanguine British upper class is juxtaposed with loud and overly excited nouveau riche Americans. Class perceptions and the failure of Americans to understand or qualify as upper class thereafter remain strong themes. One British cast member (the upper-class Caroline Stanbury) spells out the difference:

In America I think that if you become rich, you *are* society. Money and fame opens the door to society in the States. In England it’s about the family name and breeding. Most of the old aristocratic families don’t have money anymore.¹⁵

Given that the show’s central dynamic is an almost Henry Jamesian narrative of boorish new money trying to assimilate into the British upper crust, producers foreground any societal rituals and conventions they can find: Ascot, afternoon tea, dinner at country manor, etc. Class and manners come up in regular discussions among participants regarding what is rude or inappropriate and here, as in other docusoaps, an offence such as being late to dinner or not RSVPing an invite can fester and drive the narrative for months.

The Real Housewives of Atlanta (2008–), *The Real Housewives of Potomac* (2016–) and *Married to Medicine* (2013–) center on African American women who claim to be in the upper echelon of the new South. Some of these are educated and professional but most are not, and, as with other casts, their claim to elite status is insecure: for example, even those who are touted as having earned professional degrees did so in institutions that are ranked from modest to low, or even unranked. Perhaps particularly tenuous is the claim to being a Southern Belle, which Phaedra Parks (*RH: ATL*) in particular has made a career out of, penning a book entitled *Secrets of the Southern Belle*.¹⁶ Co-opting this historical designation elides the fact that the Southern Belle was valued for being the palest of the pale in a plantation culture where these women’s African ancestors would have had a very different status. Even those who don’t think of this as ironic will likely notice the gap between claim and practice: for Parks maintains that the demure Belle is quiet, restrained, always polite, self-controlled, non-confrontational, and pleasant. Yet, this model is subverted by her own behavior and that of other cast mates. One of these, NeNe Leakes, sweepingly co-opts the East Coast version of old white culture with the tagline: “I don’t keep up with the Jones, I *am* the Jones,” this being one of the best examples of pushing to the limits the idea of assigning one’s own rank.

Upper-class whites enjoying the remnants of an elite Southern culture is the premise of *Southern Charm* (2014–), set in Charleston, South Carolina. Historically, this region was the closest America came to an aristocratic and feudal culture, but while there are occasional references to living in contemporary plantation houses, none of the cast acknowledges that some or most of their current wealth derives from a slavery economy. Most are quite conscious of wanting to behave in a “gentlemanly” or “ladylike” fashion but, while some do appear to be from old or oldish money, none are particularly illustrious members of the upper class (indeed, one is a felon). While some are self-conscious about their lineage and make great efforts to establish it with talk about ancestors, trust funds, and selective preschools, pride in their established lineages does not prevent bad behavior on camera and it turns out that some heritage and some rituals are fake or nouveau: for instance, the centrally featured and antebellum-sounding “Founders’ Ball” was premiered in 2015 by a friend of some cast members.

Others who align themselves with old money are those who married it. This is the case in the East Coast *Real Housewives of New York City* (2008–) where some cast members secured husbands from old New York families such as the Morgans and Mortimers and others married into minor European aristocracy (Countess Luanne de Lesseps and Princess Carole Radziwill); reluctance to give up these illustrious names after divorce illustrates their social cachet. In such instances, viewers and participants have to consider whether an upper-class status can be transferred to a spouse and for how long. Or, more generally, whether it is acceptable to marry in order to boost one’s status. Those who were *born* into the upper class rarely appear on TV presumably because, unless they are broke or desirous of celebrity, they simply have no incentive to appear. If a privilege of the elite is the ability to protect privacy and control personal information then they would be reluctant to sign a media contract (indeed, it seems Tinsley Mortimer’s desire for publicity alienated her old-money husband and led to their divorce). Reality TV therefore faces class limits that fictional programming does not: a fate they share with sociologists who also find it difficult to access the elite.

Every one of these docusoaps reinforces the idea that the nouveau riche like to spend conspicuously: on caterers, florists, makeup squads, hairdressers, jewelry, formal gowns, cosmetic surgery, luxury cars, luxury vacations, private jets, spas, horse riding, gambling, etc. This consumerist address offers advantages to producers and cast through what we might call *affective commercial interactivity*, whereby producers build viewer engagement and loyalty in order to sell not just the broadcast series but also associated goods and services pitched by advertisers or cast members. Some of this promotion involves the massification of luxury, what I elsewhere refer to as the Godiva effect (referring to the mass distribution of a formerly exclusive chocolatier’s brand).¹⁷ In this case, ordinary viewers are offered a metonymic sampling of a greater whole: i.e., you may not be able to buy their houses or cars but you can buy the wine you saw them drink at the party you weren’t invited to. And because these are real people in real situations, their use of products offers the advantage of what seems to be a personal testimony.

Financial competition among participants who are still in transit, who are still striving and jostling for position, is the main narrative in series such as *The Real Housewives*, *Married to Medicine*, and *Ladies of London*, where self-conscious social climbers openly discuss their strategies to advance in rank—at least in confessional interviews. Mutual status appraisal is ongoing and weaponized so that, in more explicit class terms than is usual in fictional drama, participants name-call and criticize each other, employing epithets such as “white trash,” “ghetto,” or “bougie.” Using these distinctions as ways to injure and judge underlines the moral and emotional dimensions of class attribution. We see how quickly class difference becomes pathologized and class judgement becomes character judgement (as when we think of others as having “bad” taste rather than different or even lower taste). Ignoring more nuanced hierarchies, participants and viewers often judge others to be either “classy” or not classy, or to have or not have class, a simple binarism itself marked as *déclassé*.¹⁸ In this usage, speakers will describe as “classy” an action they approve of as selfless or morally upright. Their class appraisal also includes assessment of each other’s aesthetic taste, dress code, diction,

mannerisms, and manners. Some participants undergo formal or informal etiquette lessons and others have written whole books on the subject. For example, former Countess LuAnn de Lesseps has made class and etiquette a major theme: after repeatedly instructing cast members, she produced the etiquette book *Class with the Countess*¹⁹ and an auto-tuned song entitled “Money Can’t Buy You Class.” As many point out, it is ironic how often she fails to live up to her professed class rank.²⁰ The cast members who most often discuss the importance of manners and scold others for not complying are typically the older, dominant, and richest females, some of whom assume the role of the grande dame.²¹ As part of their social monitoring they have more than once given a cast member the gift of an etiquette book as a putdown and condemnation of bad behavior.

The Drama of Dislocation: Class Hybridity and the *Habitus Clivé*

Docusoap portrayals of the rewards and vexations of the newly rich stand in contrast to a larger imperative mode in popular entertainment that counsels people on how to assimilate or to improve their situation. For example, numerous reality makeover or philanthropic formats intervene to help the subordinate to advance. Some formats offer unexpected help for the deserving poor who have been overlooked (*Undercover Boss*, 2010–), others school the lower classes in upper-class manners but actually encourage viewers to laugh at their lack of progress (*Ladette to Lady*, 2005–2010 or *Charm School*, 2007–2009). Many shows aid and applaud those who largely make their own way in the world, from competitive talent shows to business makeovers to financial partnerships (e.g., *Shark Tank*, 2009–). Indeed, as is often remarked, the world of reality TV is crowded with determined, neoliberal self-entrepreneurs.²² But while they may model some forms of advancement, subjects in the nouveau rich dramas examined here are unaided, untrained, and largely left to their own devices. Some manage the difference between their original and current class identities through a deliberate and proud amalgam, but more commonly the shift in rank causes apprehension and doubt.

Hybridity

What I call hybrid class identities belong to those who acquire a new economic status but who deliberately, not inadvertently, maintain some social attributes of a different rank. This type is best illustrated by the popular *Duck Dynasty* (2012–2017) series whose originally lower-class Robertson family built a profitable business—before, and also because of, their media exposure. Their TV performance—and it *is* a performance—fully embraces and exploits the dual status of “redneck” and “rich”: they are the wealthy who choose to maintain still the manners and rituals of a lower-class background. The germ of their on-screen license comes from a libertarian and self-conscious “redneck” culture, but their ability to live how they please is secured by their new wealth. A similar formula is found in Southern *Bayou Billionaires* (2012) where another rural family strikes it rich, this time due to natural gas being found on their land (à la *Beverly Hillbillies*); they, too, resist assimilation into a higher class.

When writing elsewhere about regionalism and class I have suggested that in the United States a Southern flavor softens class judgements through non-threatening exoticism.²³ On *Duck Dynasty*, the Robertsons’ wry humor and self-mockery, as well as their “Southern charm,” is sufficiently disarming that even the most sophisticated viewer can laugh *with* them as much as *at* them. This family is not trying to imitate the more privileged or pass as upper class and their upholding the values and rituals of a lower rank is framed as having a quirky integrity—although, as evidence of a lack of authenticity and playing to stereotypes, some viewers object that the Robertsons did not always sport their now iconic redneck beards. However, the degree to which their hybridity is genuine is not the point; the point is that a hybrid identity is what they are performing and capitalizing upon. Thanks to their TV income and a massive self-branding and merchandising effort the

family was able to outplay the broadcaster who threatened to ban the patriarch for homophobic remarks: when all threatened to leave the show in solidarity, the executives backed down from losing so profitable an asset. The family went on to extend their influence into politics and specifically the Trump campaign. Speaking as right-wing populists, they appeared to echo Trump's wealthy-businessman-with-a-common-touch persona. The series' patriarch also starred in an apocalyptic, right-wing film by Trump's former chief strategist Steve Bannon. In fact, the Robertsons probably *were* effective spokespeople for Trump since pollsters discovered a strong correlation between Trump supporters and viewers of this series, stronger than those who voted for a previous Republican president.²⁴

Habitus Clivé and the *Feminine Docusoap*

Other reality TV stars don't embrace but run from humble roots, yet these roots keep tripping them up. The regular faux pas and humiliations of the nouveau riche can be attributed to what Bourdieu²⁵ identified as a *habitus clivé*, a cleft or divided habitus where original class dispositions and current social position don't quite align. He used the term *hysteresis* (or lag) to describe the experience of those who, because their extant habitus has not yet adjusted to their new situation,²⁶ suffer the "double isolation" of not fitting in either within their original or new class group.²⁷ While mobility is an under-theorized area of Bourdieu's analysis—his focus being on a fairly stable and durable habitus formed during the primary socialization of childhood—he did at times acknowledge that one's habitus can and must adapt to new circumstances such as an upward class trajectory: indeed, his own life evinced such a transformation, although he was sparing in revelations about this personal experience.²⁸

Subsequent accounts, such as that by sociologist Bernard Lahire,²⁹ have disputed the notion of a fixed or homogeneous habitus, especially when individuals are socialized in highly differentiated societies and draw on a plurality of dispositions in a variety of contexts. The specific effects of class mobility on individual subjects has, to a limited degree, been studied by other sociologists, some of whom suggest that any kind of social mobility (upward and downward) will have a "dissociative" effect on the individual³⁰ and produce an unease that may not be discernible from quantitative data sets.³¹ Sennett and Cobb,³² who famously explored the "hidden injuries" of class, found that the upwardly mobile can experience problems of isolation, vulnerability, and psychological distress that may disrupt the coherency of the self.

While there are some indications of trauma—erupting in breakdowns, addictions, divorces, family alienation, even suicide—generally speaking, Bravo's docusoap casts attempt to keep their deeper social insecurities under control and their pasts well-hidden. TV producers have a different agenda, however, and are more predisposed to exacerbate any misalignments in the habitus of their hapless casts. In addition, reality TV favors an extrovert and extreme modality that works against core ideas of higher-class behavior such as restraint and privacy: it is, in this regard, inherently vulgar. Producers therefore have to prop up the idea that they are offering access to an elite of some sort and offer viewers the pleasures of wealth voyeurism, but they are also motivated to cash in on the performance gaps and the social missteps that undermine their cast's material accomplishments.

If drama—and more specifically comedy—is found where there is maladjustment, dissonance, and disparity, then this basically describes the fate of the nouveau riche. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that producers should want to focus on their casts' class insecurity and their volatile combination of arrogance and insecurity. After selecting those who are ambitious but lack self-awareness, producers typically intensify pressure on their new identities in a variety of ways: with forced sociality and material display; with physical stressors such as alcohol and exhaustion; and by applying the financial pressure of selective contract renewals. While some expenses are covered, several participants have been under considerable pressure to spend beyond their means in order to merit inclusion on the show and in one case at least this may have led to suicide.³³ Even those who have

adequate financial resources know they need to be outrageous to attract the camera and secure opportunities for onscreen branding of themselves and their products. But if their goal is to establish a genuinely elite status, then they are constantly being set up for failure. Many articulate their awareness that restraint in words and behavior is considered higher class, but the economics of reality TV are such that their salaries increase and their contracts are renewed if they are outlandish and vulgar. If (as they claim) being “classy” means thinking of others or putting others first then they fail ethically also, and if being upper class means resisting the temptation to share and to commercialize every aspect of their private lives then that battle is long lost.

Whatever their financial situation, these casts don’t appear to have as yet an established or high cultural capital. Their most august ritual is not the opera but fashion week, and if they attend polo matches or tea parties they and their oversize hats are noticeably uncomfortable. When they attempt charity events such as the upper echelons use to consolidate their status, some of these have deteriorated into hair pulling and fist fights. And if they buy the physical structures or accoutrements of an older heritage, they don’t preserve the original upper-class aesthetics, as in Dorinda Medley’s garish makeover of a fine old home in the Berkshires; in a true rags-to-riches story, her father once worked there as a mason and when she later married a wealthy man his daughter acquired this aspirational object. These women are not Bourdieu’s scholarly *transfuges* who rose through education and meritocratic, institutional selection.³⁴ More often their social elevation is due to a sexualized body: either its leveraging to marry wealth or to sell associated beauty products. Thus, another criterion these shows test is whether marrying money, especially new money, merits or guarantees class elevation. Typically, the husbands are not highly-educated or professional but are in careers such as sports, commerce, or real estate (an exception being *Married to Medicine*). Due to being on the TV show, a good number of the wives or ex-wives are now themselves entrepreneurs: given the possible stigma of marrying for money, many seem anxious to prove they have their own earning capacity. Typically, as entrepreneurs they focus on selling the attractive bodies and accessories they used to attract wealth in the first place, so it is a significant but not major change of direction.

The difficulties and fragility of class transition are particularly apparent when there is a sudden (and photogenic) social pratfall, most commonly when alcohol releases an original class identity and erases a more recent social veneer. For instance, the women will arrange some polite and aspirational event (formal dinner, social outing, pinkies-up tea party). Everyone starts out with good manners: fond greetings, mutual compliments, gratitude for the hostess’s efforts. Language and postures are on guard. Then, after a few drinks, things begin to deteriorate. As perceptions of social slights and ill manners flare up, we witness the flinging of insults and class epithets (also the flinging of wine and tableware), before one or more participants wobble off to the limo in tears. The cleft is once again evident and the sudden code-switch comic because the participants trespass on taboos and puncture pretensions—a release of energy often associated with the comedy of manners, here in a markedly intoxicated version.³⁵

One last means for securing social status worth mentioning is what can only be described as brand idolatry. In an effort to quickly and reliably translate financial into cultural capital, docusoap women are often seen buying or referring to their purchases of prestigious brands. In these circles, reverence is reserved not for Mozart or Rembrandt but for Louis Vuitton and Jimmy Choo; and a Birkin bag is not so much a purchase as an achievement. Global brands act as a prosthetic for what is missing: i.e., the individual’s own elite taste palate and fluency in social signaling. Instead, these arrivistes appear convinced that acquiring these well-known retail talismans will accord automatic status—except for those who might judge this status unearned and crass.

Conclusion and Political Coda

Class incompetence draws attention to class performance. It also creates engagement and affect. Some viewers will miss the inept code switching but if Bravo, for example, claims that it attracts

more sophisticated and affluent viewers, then there is a good chance that it is ultimately class slippage that is being sold. The extent to which cast members and viewers criticize individuals for not meeting class standards, and hurt or offend others in doing so, confirms that these standards do exist and that class recognition and affiliation do matter.³⁶ While some viewers might admire the aspirants' initiative and determination, when they overreach and seem to claim a higher rank than is merited this aggravates and even angers many, again supporting the idea that class calibrations still exist.

Yet confusion does remain, both on and off screen. Indeed, it may be that these TV productions mediate contemporary anxieties about the significance and identification of class, compounded now by a nouveau riche president who successfully exploited a weak understanding of class relations in order to persuade a disaffected underclass to support an oligarch. A stalling of the American Dream of class mobility is generally offered as one explanation for the success of Trumpist populism and the class inversion that secured him the election.³⁷ The real estate developer from Queens who now occupies the most prestigious address in the world, Trump specializes in selling the unsophisticated person's *idea of* wealth. His image as the successful business man was secured by his stint on reality TV where he sold his "high class" assets (even while many of his businesses had actually failed). Although born into some wealth, Donald Trump has always had affinities with the newly rich: flashy and ostentatious, a lover of fast food and easily digested television, he has long projected the narrative of being self-made. But he and his political persona may be most accurately described as a deliberate class hybrid since his performance capitalizes on a mixed identity of (supposedly) *regular* and (supposedly) *billionaire* by one who enjoys being considered authentically "ordinary" by the underclass whose interests he often does not, in fact, share.

Duplicity is too simple a concept to describe what is going on here. Nor does it encompass Trump's relentless media skepticism and destabilizing of fact, a maneuver that also possesses class dimensions. For it seems that pressures within postindustrial capitalism have emboldened this form of epistemological corruption, based on a loose ontological agnosticism that willfully discounts the distinction between "real" and "unreal." One pressure is the desperate desire among the old manufacturing and rural working classes to demolish the professional politics and professional journalism that have presided over a brutal economic divide. Trump has tapped into this frustration and, at the same time, his own iconic nouveau riche status appears to offer hope that the twentieth-century American Dream can still bridge this divide: individually if not collectively. If Trump does not adequately or consistently perform his elevated rank, if his hybrid identity means he is non-conforming and in class terms inconsistent and flawed, then among some groups his political performance is all the stronger. Inevitably, this raises the specter of whether reality TV not only gave Trump the name recognition and status to launch his campaign but also sowed the seeds of skepticism about what is real, a skepticism that threatens to destabilize nothing less than the democratic system.

Notes

- 1 Viewer Sarah Metzgar in a *YouTube* comment regarding RH: NYC. Available at: <https://ru-clip.com/video/5XiW6zs7UC8/rhony-dorinda-to-sonja-shut-your-mouth-season-9-episode-4-bravo.html>.
- 2 For an overview of scholarship on class and media see the Introduction to June Deery and Andrea Press, eds. *Media and Class: TV, Film, and Digital Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2017); for more essays specifically on reality programming see Helen Wood and Beverley Skeggs, eds. *Reality Television and Class* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
- 3 Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (London: Routledge, 1994).
- 4 June Deery, "TV Screening: The Entertainment Value of Poverty and Wealth," in *Media and Class: TV, Film, and Digital Culture*, eds. June Deery and Andrea Press (New York: Routledge, 2017), 53–67.
- 5 Reality TV began with the overtly upper-middle-class *An American Family* (1973) and the working-class *The Family* (1974).
- 6 Other series featuring the nouveaux riches on Bravo Channel alone include: *Shahs of Sunset*, *Million Dollar Listing*, *Below Deck*, *Southern Charm*, *Flipping Out*, *Millionaire Matchmaker*, *Après Ski*, *Princesses Long Island*, *Pregnant in Heels*, *Thicker than Water*.

- 7 “Affluencer” was coined by Bravo chief Zalaznick to describe Bravo’s “young, chic, stylish, and upward-aspiring demographic.” Susan Dominus, “The Affluencer,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 2008, MM38–48.
- 8 For example, John H. Goldthorpe, John H., with Catriona Llewellyn and Clive Payne, *Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); Robert Erikson and John H. Goldthorpe, *The Constant Flux. A Study of Class Mobility in Industrial Societies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).
- 9 For more on arguments that support this type of research see Steph Lawler and Geoff Payne, eds., *Social Mobility for the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 2018). Also see Andrew Miles, Mike Savage and Felix Buhmann, “Telling a Modest Story: Accounts of Men’s Upward Mobility from the National Child Development Study,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 62, no 4 (2011): 418–441; and Sam Friedman, “The Price of the Ticket: Rethinking the Experience of Social Mobility,” *Sociology* 48, no 2 (2013): 352–368.
- 10 Steph Lawler and Geoff Payne, eds., *Social Mobility for the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 2018). And for a recent personal account of the difficulties of upward mobility see Lynsey Hanley, *Respectable: Crossing the Class Divide* (New York: Penguin, 2017). For how class origin can inform one’s academic research see Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London: Sage, 1997).
- 11 For a recent and groundbreaking analysis of how middle-class and upper-class media producers affect class portrayals see David Hesmondhalgh, “The Media’s Failure to Represent the Working Class,” in *Media and Class*, eds. June Deery and Andrea Press (New York: Routledge, 2017), 21–37.
- 12 Both descriptions are found on the Google Play site: https://play.google.com/store/tv/show/The_Real_Housewives_of_Orange_County?id=MbnRbbBerOU&hl=en.
- 13 Gordon Gekko was the iconic 1980s stockbroker and defender of capitalism in Oliver Stone’s *Wall Street* (1987).
- 14 Andy Cohen, the executive producer of multiple Bravo docusoaps, explains: “We wink at the audience when someone says I’m the healthiest person in the world, and then you see them ashing their cigarette.” Andy Cohen, interview by Melissa Block, *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, August 12, 2009.
- 15 Caroline Stanbury, “Caroline on the Fascinator Faux Pas,” *Ladies of London* (blog), June 2, 2014, www.bravotv.com/ladies-of-london/season-1/blogs/caroline-stanbury/caroline-on-the-fascinator-faux-pas.
- 16 Phaedra Parks, *Secrets of the Southern Belle: How to Be Nice, Work Hard, Look Pretty, Have Fun, and Never Have an Off Moment* (New York: Gallery Books, 2013).
- 17 June Deery, *Consuming Reality: The Commercialization of Factual Entertainment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 142.
- 18 June Deery, *Reality TV* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).
- 19 LuAnn de Lesseps, *Class with the Countess* (New York: Gotham, 2009).
- 20 Michael J. Lee and Leigh Moscovitz, “The ‘Rich Bitch’: Class and Gender on *The Real Housewives of New York City*,” *Feminist Media Studies* 13, no 1 (2013): 64–82.
- 21 Examples of the grandes dames of decorum are LuAnn de Lesseps, Lisa Vanderpump, Phaedra Parks, Heather Dubrow, and Patricia Altschul.
- 22 For example, Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, *Better Living Through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship* (Blackwell: Oxford, 2008).
- 23 Deery, *Reality TV*.
- 24 Josh Katz, “‘Duck Dynasty’ vs. ‘Modern Family’: 50 Maps of the U.S. Cultural Divide.” *New York Times*, December 27, 2016. Available at: www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/26/upshot/duck-dynasty-vs-modern-family-television-maps.html.
- 25 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, translated by Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990 [1980]); Pierre Bourdieu, *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*, translated by Lauretta Clough (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996 [1989]).
- 26 Bourdieu, *The Logic*, 62.
- 27 Bourdieu, *The State*, 107.
- 28 For a good overview of Bourdieu’s personal transition versus his professional research see Sam Friedman, “The Price of the Ticket: Rethinking the Experience of Social Mobility,” *Sociology* 48, no. 2 (2013): 352–368. For how this inconsistency can be leveraged to further critique Bourdieu’s work see Tony Bennett, “Habitus Clivé: Aesthetics and Politics in the Work of Pierre Bourdieu,” *New Literary History* 38 (2007): 201–228.
- 29 Bernard Lahire, *The Plural Actor* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011).
- 30 For example, Earl Hopper, *Social Mobility: A Study of Social Control and Insatiability* (New York: Praeger, 1981).
- 31 See, for example, the early work of Pitrim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Mobility* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1941) and, more recently, Diane Reay, “The Cruelty of Social Mobility,” in *Social Mobility for the 21st Century*, eds. Lawler Steph and Geoff Payne (New York: Routledge, 2018), 146–157.

- 32 Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977 [1972]).
- 33 It is thought that Russell Armstrong, a husband on *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, committed suicide in 2011 due to financial pressures compounded by the show.
- 34 Bourdieu, *The State*.
- 35 There are some distinctions within *The Real Housewives* franchises, with the women of New York and Beverly Hills being more genuinely affluent and sophisticated than those of New Jersey or Atlanta.
- 36 Andrew Sayer, *The Moral Significance of Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- 37 For data on the economic decline of the American middle class see Pew Research Center, “The American Middle Class is Losing Ground,” Washington, DC, December 9, 2015. Retrieved from www.pewsocial-trends.org. Some scholars disagree on the rates of mobility, depending on the main criterion selected; for example, whether income or occupation or lifestyle. For more on this see Will Atkinson, *Class* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 110–114.