



**HIGH DRAMA**  
Some of reality TV's most notorious ladies are, clockwise from left, Shaunie O'Neal, Evelyn Lozada, NeNe Leakes, Tami Roman, Joseline Hernandez and Tiffany Pollard.

# REAL WORLD

Reality TV is turning countless Black women with a flair for high drama into instant stars with their own spin-offs, cosmetics lines, book deals and millions of loyal fans. But when the women who get the most attention are those most willing to brawl, is success worth it?

BY JEANNINE AMBER | ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOSUE EVILLA

BASKETBALL: ANDREW DERNIE/GETTY IMAGES; CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: LEON BENNETT/WIREIMAGE; SLAVEN VLASIC/GETTY IMAGES; FILMAGIC; VH1; PRINCE WILLIAMS/FILMAGIC; JESSE GRANT/WIREIMAGE.

The fight caught everyone's attention. Dressed in a prim lace blouse with a bow at the collar, Jennifer Williams, the ex-wife of basketball player Eric Williams, was lunching with friends in the presidential suite of South Florida's Gulfstream Park racetrack. Across the table sat Nia Crooks, 32, who was complaining that Williams, 37, was putting on airs. To drive home her point, Crooks, wearing a floral maxi and carefully coiffed bob, marched around the table and administered an open-palm slap to the side of Williams's face. They began to tussle. Evelyn Lozada, Williams's former BFF, watched from across the room. Lozada had her own beef with Williams, whom she described as "whack on so many levels." Suddenly Lozada kicked off her shoes, leaped onto the dining table and took flight, hurling herself directly at Williams. Such was the mayhem that played out over two episodes of the chaotic fourth season of VH1's reality hit *Basketball Wives*.

From the all-out brawls on *Basketball Wives* to the grimy love triangles on *Love and Hip Hop: Atlanta*, reality TV has become a significant force in disseminating images of Black women to the viewing public. But to the chagrin of many, these shows seem to feature one type of woman most prominently: She's irrational, unreasonable, oversexed and violent, and more often than not she's so lacking in self-regard she's willing to be humiliated publicly by the man she claims to love. In short, the women on these shows often represent the worst stereotypes ever hurled at us. *Tacky. Violent. Ho.*

Yet millions of us tune in. Reality programs starring Black women consistently rank as the highest rated on their respective cable networks. And when these programs feature casts who name-call, curse, belittle and physically and verbally attack one another, the ratings go through the roof. *Basketball Wives* is only one case in point: Season four debuted last February with almost 4 million viewers and became the number one trending topic on Twitter—worldwide. The series was followed in June by the premiere of *Love & Hip Hop: Atlanta*, with plotlines involving cheating men and the women who love them, a couple-on-couple street fight and various acts of questionable sexual conduct. The show became a ratings gold mine, with more than 6 million viewers tuning in to last fall's two-episode reunion, many of them tweeting commentary as they watched.

Such ratings can pay off big: The most popular reality stars have managed to parlay their celebrity into a chance to sell everything from memoirs and children's books to makeup, shoes, liquor and weaves. And reality stardom can only help aspiring actresses. Tami Roman, despite criticism of her bullying behavior on *Basketball Wives*, recently signed on for TV One's scripted comedy *Belle's*, while NeNe Leakes, the breakout star of Bravo's *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, landed a recurring spot in the Fox hit *Glee* and a starring role in NBC's prime-time sitcom *The New Normal*. In an industry notorious for its lack

of opportunities for women of color, reality TV, with its reported payday of anywhere from \$10,000 per episode to \$1 million per season, has become the surest route to fame and fortune. But what does that mean for the rest of us?

## DRAMA QUEENS

On a rainy day in late February, Shaunie O'Neal, executive producer of *Basketball Wives*, and Lozada are enjoying lunch on the outdoor patio of Delores, But You Can Call Me Lolita, a popular eatery in Miami's financial district. The women discuss Lozada's ailing relative and her disappointment over the collapse of her friendship with Williams. Lozada sheds a tear and O'Neal gently consoles her. It's the kind of tempered girl talk women have all the time. Not surprisingly, the scene, which takes almost a dozen mostly male and mostly White crew from the production house Shed Media to film, never makes it on the air. To the endless frustration of O'Neal, the network insists that measured conversation is not what the viewers want.



"SOMETIMES THE SHOW'S PRODUCERS WILL ASK, 'ARE YOU FIGHTING WITH ANYONE RIGHT NOW?'"

"The people at VH1 do a lot of polls," says O'Neal, 38, ex-wife of basketball star Shaquille O'Neal. "They'll survey fans on Facebook and Twitter and then tell me research shows that normal conversations are boring." She notes that during the premiere episode of season four, producers introduced two new cast members in scenes that were heavy on dialogue, low on conflict. "And every time it was non-dramatic," she says, "people were on Twitter saying, 'I'm falling asleep,' 'Kill me already.' So it just seems that the audience expects drama."

Of course, this type of "drama" is nothing new. Almost two decades ago, Jerry Springer introduced the spectacle of girl-on-girl slaps as entertainment on his talk show. But Springer's parade of misfits engaged in bizarre love triangles—

"My dad is sleeping with my ex, who's actually a man!"—was comically "trashy" and easy to dismiss. In contrast, *Basketball Wives* offered to take us inside the monied world of grown-up women who were more like us. These were professional women who wore designer clothes and expensive jewelry and lived in well-appointed homes. Perhaps that's why the image of them behaving, as many complained, "like wild animals," was so disturbing.

Shed Media's executive producer Sean Rankine insists that those behind the scenes aren't trying to promote violence on *Basketball Wives*. They are simply following the most compelling story lines. "Women having altercations with one another is only one facet of this show," insists Rankine. "There is also a lot of positivity. Evelyn did a cancer charity run. Tami has filmed sessions with her therapist talking about sexual assault. These >



**FIRED UP** “I didn’t see anything other than me f---ing trying to rip her head off,” Lozada (right) later said of her fight with Williams.

husband, Gregg, she offered, “Well, not long ago.” The audience erupted in cheers.

Now she’s second-guessing herself, wondering if maybe she went too far. She’s sitting in a conference room on the sixth floor of Bravo TV Studio in lower Manhattan with her glam squad and PR person. One of the women tells Leakes that after she made her crack about sleeping with Gregg, Leakes’s date, who had attended the taping, left the building. Leakes rolls her eyes and says to no one in particular: “Chill out, dude. Just roll with it. Damn.” She turns to Steven Weinstock, the executive producer of *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, who’s just entered the room.

“Was it bad what I said?” she asks.

Weinstock replies, “No, not at all.”

“Was it horrible?”

“No.”

“What should I have said?”

“The truth.”

And on it goes, the star asking for approval and the producer telling her that despite the apparently hurt feelings of her companion, she did the right thing. Herein lies one of the truths of reality TV: What compels us to watch these shows is that the stars behave in ways many of us have been taught not to. A good woman doesn’t embarrass her man, bad-mouth her friends or fly off the handle at the slightest provocation. And she certainly doesn’t do it in public. But on reality TV, acting out is not only encouraged, it’s rewarded with more fame. This is exactly what has some critics so concerned.

In her 13 years at Spelman College, associate professor Tarshia Stanley, Ph.D., says she’s witnessed a disturbing change in the behavior of incoming students, a change she attributes directly to their consumption of reality TV. “The students are more confrontational, even physical,” says Stanley, who designed the college’s film and media program. “And it’s not just *our* students. All over the country you can see the trend: Students are watching programs that show character assassination and gossip masquerading as intelligent conversation, where there are no consequences for loud, aggressive behavior. This message can be particularly detrimental for young women of color who will be entering the workforce already fighting the stereotype that they’re angry Black women about to go off.”

Leakes, who has close to a million Twitter followers, likes to point out that the cast of *Real Housewives of Atlanta* doesn’t engage in physical violence. “We don’t fistfight on our show, but you have definitely seen us fighting with words,” she says. Indeed Leakes has been involved in countless heated battles, most of which involve her yelling, bullying or insulting her castmates. Despite, or perhaps because of her propensity for confrontation, Leakes was tapped to appear on season four of NBC’s *Celebrity Apprentice*. There she immediately locked horns with Star Jones. In one argument Leakes loomed over Jones, telling her to bring her “street game” and calling her a “punk-ass bitch.” A bemused Trump raised an eyebrow. “Well, that was unusual,” he said.

These days Leakes is reported to be the highest paid star of the *Housewives* franchise. “But there is definitely

a downside to being on reality TV,” says Leakes, whose 12-year marriage viewers watched implode on season three of *Real Housewives of Atlanta*. “You give so much of yourself and sometimes you have to share things that you wouldn’t actually share with everybody. Like my relationship with my husband. I wish I had never put that out there. If Gregg and I weren’t on this show, we probably would have been able to work through some things.”

She turns to Weinstock and cocks her head: “Plus, we work for a White man who wants blood out of you. He makes you say sh-- you don’t want to say, and if you don’t he screams and scratches.” Weinstock laughs uncomfortably. Leakes continues her insults, citing the man’s religion and his bank account and insisting he needs to give her a check so she’ll feel better about herself. It’s not entirely clear how much of this is a joke. Soon a member of her entourage asks that the tape recorder be turned off.

## SEEKING HEAT

Another truth of reality TV: What you’re seeing isn’t always real. Many shows are peppered with amateurish attempts by the cast to act “real”—exaggerated eye rolls, gasps of “surprise,” the clearly preplanned “spontaneous” invitations to social functions. *Basketball Wives*’ Rankine explains these shows follow what is called a “soft script,” whereby story lines are “gently guided by production to move the action along.” Rankine maintains his show is more authentic. “When you cast a show correctly,” he says, “you can just follow the lives of the women and get a story that people will want to tune in to every week.”

But as much as producers claim what we are seeing is “real,” these shows seem designed to ensure strife: Women who may actively dislike one another are thrust together at parties and overnight getaways. Every disagreement is rehashed in one-on-one interviews, and warring women are encouraged to “talk it out,” sometimes in the presence of other women who possess information that only fuels the flame.

“On our show everything is set up,” says Janice, a cast member on a predominantly Black ensemble reality show who has asked that her real name not be used. “Sometimes the producer will ask, ‘Are you fighting with anyone right now?’ and then tell us to re-create the argument with very specific talking points. So one person might be prepped to say something like, ‘I hate you, bitch!’ and then the other person would have a natural response to that. One time we had a reporter on set and production let everyone go freestyle so it didn’t look like it was produced. But the whole thing is actually very inauthentic. It’s like they are intent on creating conflict between Black women. The situations they put us in have the potential to tear people apart.”

The notion that angry Black women drive ratings may have first dawned on TV execs in 2004, when Omarosa Manigault, then a political consultant, was cast as a contestant on NBC’s *The Apprentice*. Audiences were riveted by her confrontational attitude, which included yelling at

Donald Trump in the boardroom. Crowned reality TV’s number one Bad Girl by E!, she became one of the genre’s first bona fide stars.

But when it comes to Black girls behaving badly, nothing compares to VH1’s cringefest *Flavor of Love*, says Jennifer L. Pozner, founder and executive director of Women In Media and News and author of *Reality Bites Back* (Seal Press). “*Flavor of Love* set the template for how people of color would be depicted on reality TV,” she explains. The show starred middle-aged former rap star Flavor Flav as jive-talking ringmaster to a houseful of half-naked, potty-mouthed women who vied for his affection. The program offered unbridled chaos; at the reunion show melee, cast members seated in the audience flung off their heels and charged the women onstage. The televised brawl required no less than six security men to get under control. “The show was designed to minimize dignity and maximize stereotypes,” writes Pozner. A clear-cut ratings bonanza, *Flavor of Love* opened the floodgates for similar fare. Most notable was *I Love New York*, featuring Tiffany Pollard, possibly the most volatile bachelorette on reality TV.

Of course, the spectacle of the Female Hothead isn’t limited to Black women. Cable networks continue to win audiences with a steady stream of women threatening full-scale beatdowns on shows such as *Jersey Shore* and *Mob Wives*. But while Italian-Americans cried foul when Snookie and JWoww hit the scene, no other group has objected to small-screen characterizations of themselves with quite the same vigor as African-American women, who have fought the angry Black woman stereotype for generations. >

**CELEBRITY APPRENTICES** Leakes (left) and Jones brought fire to the boardroom in season four of Donald Trump’s reality hit.



LEFT PAGE: BASKETBALL, ANDREW DENNIE/GETTY IMAGES; FROM LEFT: CINDY ORD/WIREIMAGE FOR LAMONT GOODMAN; HOWARD HUANG/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES; RIGHT PAGE: TV, SIEDE PREIS/GETTY IMAGES; LEAKES AND JONES, NBC.

issues exist within our community and the women are doing a good job bringing them to light.”

Mona Scott-Young, executive producer of *Love and Hip Hop* and *Love and Hip Hop: Atlanta*, also maintains she offers viewers more than negativity. “Human nature dictates that anything explosive gets a huge reaction,” she says. “But I think there is also an aspirational element for viewers interested in the glitz and glamour of this world. They may tune in for that, and then as the cast deals with very relatable issues, such as infidelity or career disappointment, fans tell us they see lessons they can apply to their own lives.”

While that may be true, as the controversy over season four of *Basketball Wives* mounted, O’Neal found herself increasingly displeased with the direction of the show. “*Basketball Wives* was supposed to highlight us as strong, independent women,” she says. “But when I went to VH1 and said, ‘We need to be more positive,’ and showed them viewer e-mails, they said, ‘Wow, why are they dogging you out? You’re not hurting anyone. You’re a businesswoman.’ The problem is that at the end of the day, the network decides what it wants.”

## THE PRICE OF FAME

It’s 1 A.M. on a brisk March night in New York City, and NeNe Leakes thinks maybe she said the wrong thing. Only hours ago, the star of *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, and arguably the most recognizable face of the entire *Housewives* franchise, appeared on Bravo’s late-night talk show *Watch What Happens: Live*. When host Andy Cohen asked Leakes to recall the last time she had sex with her estranged



**FAMILY FARE** The new roster of reality TV shows relies less on brawling wives and more on sister acts. Clockwise from left: Toni and Tamar Braxton, gospel duo Mary Mary, and Tia and Tamera Mowry.

a petition describing the show as “digital crack” and calling for a boycott went up online, garnering more than 3,000 signatures before the third episode aired. Other petitions followed. Many viewers complained about the negative message the programs send to children. While VH1 maintains its core audience for *Basketball Wives* and *Love & Hip Hop* is 25-to-34-year-olds, it’s impossible to know how many teens are tuning in. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, Black youth consume nearly six hours of television daily, nearly twice as much as their White counterparts. Even if parents restrict their children’s TV consumption, most reality fare is available free online. And with promises to offer viewers a peek at the lifestyles of those connected to the glamorous worlds of music and sports, *Love & Hip Hop* and *Basketball Wives* have undeniable appeal for teens.

In 2011 the Girl Scouts Research Institute conducted a study, *Real to Me: Girls and Reality TV*, examining the effects of reality programming on 11-to-17-year-old girls. Of the 1,100 girls surveyed, almost 80 percent of those who watch reality TV regularly agreed that “gossiping is a normal part of a relationship between girls” versus 54 percent of girls who didn’t watch. Reality TV viewers were also more likely to think it’s in girls’ nature to be catty and manipulative, and agree with the statements “Being mean gets you more respect than being nice” and “You have to lie to get what you want.”

“We are really on the cusp of understanding this, because reality TV is so new,” says Kimberlee Salmond, a senior research strategist with the institute. “But we know that many of these girls think what is happening on reality TV is real and unscripted, and that exacerbates the impact because they think it’s an accurate reflection of life.”

And it’s not just impressionable teens who are affected. Mary Beth Oliver, Ph.D., codirector of the Media Effects Research Library at Penn State University, says numerous studies show that television can promote racial stereotypes. “If I grow up in an all-White community and the only contact I have with African-Americans is through television, that’s my reality,” she explains.

“When people watch shows that depict Black women as violent and irrational, they think that’s how Black people resolve conflict,” adds Marc Lamont Hill, Ph.D., professor of education and African-American studies at Columbia University. “Girls get the message that this is how they are supposed to deal with stress; this is how they’re supposed to relate to one another.” Hill says there is another message these programs send that is far more disturbing. “When you constantly see Black women being assaulted, even by each other, it normalizes the image of a Black woman being physically violated,” he says. “That makes it more difficult for people to have a sense of outrage when they see violence against Black women, whether it’s domestic violence, partner violence or violence on the street. It’s not shocking to us anymore. The thought is, *You do it to each other. Why should we care?*”

Of course, not all shows featuring mostly Black casts rely on their stars’ volatility to keep viewers engaged. The past

year has seen a rise in more wholesome fare, including WETV’s *Mary Mary*, about the gospel singing sister duo; *Braxton Family Values*, about five R&B singing sisters; and Style Network’s *Tia and Tamera*, about twin actresses juggling careers and family. But while the newer shows garner top ratings on their networks, none has seen the numbers posted by their more conflict-driven competitors. The Braxtons and *Tia and Tamera* both peaked with under a million viewers per episode. By contrast last season’s episode of *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, in which the ladies traveled to South Africa, where they bickered, visited an orphanage and bickered some more, all the while wearing designer heels and full makeup, was watched by almost 4 million people.

Not surprisingly the teaser for season five, which premiered in November, features what appears to be a scuffle between Leakes and new cast member Kenya Moore, a former Miss USA. Moore insists what looks like a fight wasn’t a fight at all. “NeNe was just pulling me away from a situation,” says Moore, who has a natural hair care line in the works and hopes her *Housewives* role will help to grow her brand. But like most reality stars, Moore admits she’s had to balance the potential payoff against the toll of being put in scenarios designed to create heat. “I am not a fly-off-the-handle person,” she says. “But on reality TV sometimes you find yourself in situations with people you wouldn’t normally be friends with and they are speaking to you in an insulting or condescending way. And in a particular instance on the show I used language I wouldn’t normally use.” She pauses. “Honestly, it felt like an out-of-body experience.”

## SPIN CITY

**E**velyn Lozada is crying. She’s sitting on a soundstage in Los Angeles, filming the season four reunion episode of *Basketball Wives* and she’s explaining that she has had an epiphany about the fighting. She’s embarrassed, she says. She’s made mistakes. Only days before, Tami Roman had appeared on *The Wendy Williams Show*, shed a few tears and said the same thing. The women are ready to clean up their acts. It’s a message that Lozada would repeat a few months later on a two-episode run on OWN’s *Iyanla: Fix My Life*.

The first show aired in September, only days before Lozada’s divorce from football player Chad Johnson (formerly Ochocinco) became final. The couple had married on July 4 but broke up five weeks later after an altercation in which Johnson allegedly head-butted Lozada. (Johnson pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor battery charge and in September was sentenced to a year’s probation.) The program was an exercise in redemption, with host Iyanla Vanzant taking Lozada to task for her behavior on *Basketball Wives*, then guiding the tearful star to the epiphany that beneath her anger was a scared little girl who wants to be loved. “You have been rewarded for being out of order and a thug among women,” Vanzant said after replaying

scene after scene of the star’s violent outbursts. “I just want to do good,” a weeping Lozada responded, folding herself into Vanzant’s embrace. “I was put into this position for a reason and I just don’t know what that is.... But I know it wasn’t to act the fool on TV.”

Back in May, after the taping of the reunion show, the producers of VH1 issued a statement: “We at VH1 agree with and support Shaunie and the show producers’ ‘no excessive physical confrontations policy’ on the series moving forward,” it read. “We are all committed to balancing the candid, bold excitement that the viewers have come to love in the series with story lines and representations they can be proud of.”

O’Neal admits she’s not sure how fans will accept a kinder, gentler *Basketball Wives*. And she has reason to be concerned: During an episode of the second season of the franchise spin-off *Basketball Wives: LA*, castmates Brooke Bailey and Jackie Christie got into a heated argument. In compliance with the new policy to limit violence, VH1 producers edited the scene

so that all viewers saw were two women gesturing angrily and threatening each other, then a smash cut to the women—now with torn clothes and matted hair—being held apart by security men. The fans were not having it. “You would not believe the tweets,” says O’Neal. “Things like ‘How you gonna cut out the fight?’ ‘Why didn’t we see her get her butt whipped?’ and ‘If this is how it’s going to be, you might as well take it off the air.’ It was nuts! Sometimes it just feels like I’m damned if I do and damned if I don’t. At the end of the day, you can’t please everybody.”

Still, she’s making the most of the situation. As she looks ahead to her show’s return to VH1 this spring, O’Neal is doing her best to spin the franchise into a Tyler Perry-esque juggernaut. “When I started *Basketball Wives*, I was a stay-at-home mom,” she says. Now she has a feature film about basketball wives in the works, a

scripted project that she’s teaming up with *Jumping the Broom* producer Tracey Edmonds to deliver. “It’s going to be an empowerment movie, a brand-new fictional story line,” says Edmonds. “This is an interesting world to explore, and Shaunie was smart to build a career and enterprise off it.”

But O’Neal, who’s also producing a basketball-themed play to start touring in February, appears to have no intention of creating further chaos. She says she receives e-mails from scores of women insisting their lives would be perfect for reality TV. “They tell me things like, ‘We’d be great wives—we act the fool!’” she says. One woman contacted her not too long ago offering plenty of made-for-ratings shenanigans. “She wants us to do *Project Wives*,” says O’Neal with a sigh. “But I don’t want to attach myself to something that I know is going to be an automatic train wreck.” □

**Jeannine Amber** is the senior writer for this magazine.

## ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

**T**he raucous five-minute “supertrailer” VH1 produced for season four of *Basketball Wives* has been watched more than half a million times online. It opens with Lozada telling Williams, “I’m gonna punch you in your motherf---ing face,” then swells to a crescendo of insult hurling, bottle flinging and smack throwing only to close with the spectacle of Lozada leaping across the table.

After seeing the trailer last February, Wendy Williams, formerly a devoted follower, announced on her talk show that she would no longer watch the program and took to making chimpanzee noises when she mentioned the show. Former cohost of *The View* Star Jones followed suit, tweeting, “It may be ‘comfortable’ to be quiet when women of color slap the crap out of each other and run across tables barefoot, but #ENOUGHISENOUGH.” Even Nicki Minaj tweeted she was “so disturbed,” after watching Tami Roman, ex-wife of baller Kenny Anderson, intimidate another cast member to the point of tears. In April Alexis M., who identifies herself as a Spelman student, put a petition on change.org, calling for a boycott of *BBW*. On the site she says she was inspired to start the petition after noticing aggressive behavior among teen girls she mentors. “I found out the ring leader was imitating some of the *Basketball Wives*,” she wrote. By May the petition had almost 30,000 signatures, and major companies had pulled their ads from the show. Many who signed the petition added personal comments: “Women of Color DO NOT act like this....” wrote one. Added another: “As a dark-skinned Black woman, I am OFTEN judged on stereotypes that originate from programming like this.”

This was not the only petition calling for an end to these programs. Within days of the *Love & Hip Hop: Atlanta* premiere,

TV: SIEDE FREIS/GETTY IMAGES; CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: PAUL ARCHULETA/FILMAGIC; JASON LAVERIS/FILMAGIC; GARY GERSHOF/WIREIMAGE (2); JOHN N. HELLER/GETTY IMAGES.