A Little Sex Appeal Goes a Long Way: Feminist Political Economy, Commodification, and TLC's *What Not to Wear*

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For some females it is a new set of trousers to emphasize her curves, a pair of peep-toe heels to pump up an ensemble, or the perfect shade of lipstick to make men swoon. With great gains to be had from advertising revenue, reality television today not only comprises a significant portion of the programming lineup, but makeover shows service advertiser demands particularly well, as they create flaws and then provide solutions for female audiences nationwide. Thus examining how capitalism and patriarchy intersect through reality makeover programming, I apply feminist political economy to 21 episodes of The Learning Channel's "What Not to Wear." Research findings suggest that due to the commercialized structure of American media, economic motives overwhelmingly influence TLC's female-oriented programming, and female commodification occurs in support of capitalist goals and patriarchal relations.

Every day, viewers are bombarded with an array of reality programs, largely because of their lower risk and cheaper production costs (Magder, 2009; Raphael, 2009). As a hot topic of debate, multiple scholars have examined makeover programs from a variety of perspectives (e.g., Heller, 2006; Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Ouellette & Murray, 2009; Weber, 2009; Wegenstein, 2007), with notable scholars also examining them from a feminist stance (e.g., McRobbie, 2004; Roberts, 2007). In an effort to add to the existing literature, I explore The Learning Channel's (TLC) hit program, *What Not to Wear* (*WNTW*), calling attention to the economic motives guiding production and how such motives influence programming content. While capitalizing on the female target audience and commodifying females, makeover reality television (RTV) "sells" us on the idea that while some females "require" a new set of trousers, a polka-dot blouse, or pink peep-toe heels, any perceived flaw can be significantly improved—if not corrected—through makeovers that require exorbitant amounts of goods and services.

With this in mind, I interrogate *WNTW* from a critical perspective, exploring how market structure both necessitates and supports female commodification on the small screen. Because females play an integral role in media practices that produce and reproduce gender "norms," critical

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interrogation is necessary to better understand not only how audiences are invited to *watch* female commodification, but also how identifying with participants simultaneously invites females to actively *participate* in their own objectification. Thus, tying feminist concerns to larger structural issues, I argue that *WNTW* is guided by capitalist interests and patriarchal values. To contribute to the scholarly discussion, I illustrate how commercialized media strategically produce normative notions of "females" and femininity, which then become commodities bartered for in the market. Examining *WNTW* from a critical perspective is significant because "if communication scholars fail to elucidate the connections between the day-to-day lived experiences of people and their structures of capitalism and patriarchy, then *we will continue to participate uncritically in their reproduction* [italics added]" (Riordan, 2002, p. 4). Such reproduction, I argue, is precisely the problem.

Thus, I begin with a brief summary of *WNTW*, followed by an outline of feminist political economy as my theoretical frame. I then discuss textual analysis as a methodological approach to examining *WNTW*, followed by a background of TLC's corporate pursuits. From there, I explore *WNTW* for the ways in which commodification occurs, and conclude with possible alternatives for makeover programming.

WNTW: The Show

Like many makeover programs, *WNTW* begins with an unsuspecting person nominated by family and friends for their fashion faux pas. As women comprise the majority of makeover recipients, *WNTW* opens with a surprise visit to an unsuspecting woman from hosts Clinton Kelly and Stacy London—alongside family and friends—where she learns of her impending wardrobe re-work. During the surprise visit, Clinton and Stacy explain why the participant was nominated and their intent to "fix" her, while the woman often stands shell-shocked and humiliated. After the initial embarrassment subsides, participants usually accept the hosts' help and the accompanying wardrobe budget of $5,000. Clinton and Stacy ceremoniously request that the participant "hand over [her] mind, body, and entire wardrobe," as she agrees to the deconstruction of her appearance, and, ultimately, identity.

Next, the participant travels to New York where she watches "secret footage" of herself and braves the 360-degree mirrors (wearing her "favorite" clothing), deconstructing her own body and wardrobe alongside the experts. Her "old" clothes are thrown away, she is shown mannequins in "better" clothing, and is equipped with a camcorder to record her journey. Armed with the new rules and Polaroid pictures of ideal clothes, the participant spends two days shopping for better fashion and a better life. To complete the transformation, hair stylist Nick Arrojo and make-up artist Carmindy Bowyer primp, preen, and polish the participant's rough exterior. Finally, her new wardrobe is modeled for expert approval, followed by the "big reveal" to family and friends.

Feminist Political Economy

In recent years, tension between political economic theory and feminist theory has often led scholars to examine media from one approach or the other (McLaughlin, 2002; Meehan, 2002). On one side, political economists examine issues of social class and power that "mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources" (Mosco, 2009, p. 24). Political economists studying communication industries are concerned with the institutions (i.e., capitalism) that affect the structure of media, how power is used to exercise control over media, and the economics of media industries (Mosco, 2009; Riordan, 2002). Conversely, feminist theories have focused on women's representation in mediated texts and audience reception while simultaneously ignoring institutional constraints (McLaughlin, 2002; Meehan, 2002; Riordan, 2002).

Despite these points of contention, feminist political economy has culminated in the work of Meehan and Riordan (2002) and is a growing field of critical research. As a theoretical lens, feminist political economy deviates from political economy's focus on "only looking at labor or class relations," to examining how media structures produce and reproduce gendered capitalism that is detrimental to, and reproduced by, females (Riordan, 2002, p. 7). Feminist political economy examines how political economic concerns intersect with gender, contending that gender acts a variable worthy of analysis in its own right (Meehan & Riordan, 2002).

Focusing on media, feminist political economy has two concerns: "how gender enters into commercial arrangements and functions as a commodity within the marketplace, and how social structures impact the construction of media texts" (Wyatt, 2002, p. 161). Feminist political economists are concerned with how gender—and notions of normative gender—are commodified and "sold" in the marketplace, the corporate interests that are masked through capitalist processes, and the underlying power relations perpetuated and disguised through female participation (Meehan, 2002; Riordan, 2002). Ultimately, feminist political economy interrogates the gendered structure of capitalism, how capitalism intersects with patriarchy, and how the female gender operates within such systems (Riordan, 2002). This approach ultimately challenges the ways in which social and power relations constrain women through and within mediated texts (Meehan, 2002; Riordan, 2002).

Methodology

While integrating concerns for gender with commercialized media necessitates feminist political economy, critical questions surrounding gender, commodification, and representation necessitate an exploration into media texts. As such, I use textual analysis as a methodological approach to better understand how political economy and gender intersect on *WNTW*.

Informed by the critical traditions, ideological textual analysis suggests that television "produces and perpetuates a *distorted* perception of the world; it prescribes and constructs reality in such a way that it maintains the structural inequalities of a capitalist society" (Creeber, 2006a, p. 32). Such analysis suggests that media project a view of the world that benefits those who control the media industries (e.g., Creeber, 2006b), while White (1992) suggests that ideological textual analysis "aims to understand how a cultural text specifically embodies and enacts particular ranges of values, beliefs, and ideas" (p. 163). This interpretive approach examines both the explicit and implicit meanings housed in media texts (Bettig & Hall, 2003), providing a cogent means for exploring textual properties such as narration, dialogue, and visuals found in *WNTW*.

As such, I examine 21 episodes of *WNTW*, 17 of which came from televised reruns aired during a two-week period on TLC, and four that I randomly selected from the *Mom Makeovers* DVD (a little less than half of the makeovers on the DVD)[1]. Although the episodes are nowhere near exhaustive, they conform to *WNTW*'s standard procedures and formulaic plot, thus providing valid representation of what *WNTW* programming entails. However, because feminist political economy examines how capitalism and patriarchy intersect, I must first situate *WNTW* within the corporate incentives that influence its output.

"Life Unscripted"

Discovery Communications, Inc. (Discovery), parent company of TLC, is a multinational entertainment corporation that reaches over 170 countries and owns more than 100 television networks. Discovery provides a wide range of television programming as well as Web, mobile, and video-on-demand services (Discovery, 2009). With considerable reach and profit, three of Discovery's channels in 2008—Discovery Channel, TLC, and Animal Planet—reached more than 90 million viewers each, totaling 717 million when combined with its seven other channels in the United States alone. Internationally, Discovery reached an estimated 892 million viewers (Discovery, 2009).

In the United States, TLC is one of Discovery's crown jewels. Although it began in 1974 as a satellite experiment to deliver educational information (Douds, 1982, p. 15), by 1991 Discovery acquired the station and introduced it as "The Learning Channel" (Stephens, 2004, p. 192). Contrasting its initial focus on education, Discovery established the present-day TLC, offering RTV's "life unscripted" to audiences nationwide. By 2003, Discovery acquired *WNTW* from the British Broadcasting Company and launched it in the United States (Huff, 2006; Wildman, 2003), where it soon became one of Discovery's "series highlights" (Discovery, 2009, p. 7).

1 For a complete list of episodes analyzed, see the Appendix located at the end of this article.

By the numbers, Discovery currently provides extensive audience access for TLC, both nationally and globally. TLC alone "reached approximately 99 million subscribers in the U.S." in 2009, with another 8 million in Canada (Discovery, 2010b, p. 5). Its global launch made TLC "the most widely distributed female lifestyle channel brand in pay-TV" (Discovery, 2010a, ¶ 1), a channel that now reaches 29 markets across Europe, Asia, and Latin America (Discovery, 2010c). *WNTW*, essentially, has gone global.

TLC has also been immensely successful in reaching its female commodity audience. TLC serves as "one of the highest rated female targeted channels in the United States" (Discovery, 2010c, ¶ 2) and ranks as "one of the top 10 networks" for all female demographics (Discovery, 2010c, ¶ 4). This illustrates not only TLC's female skew when it comes to programming, but also its enormous success: "TLC in the United States [has] delivered its highest ratings in five years, with an increase of 13% in the key female demographic," and "currently ranks as the number eight network in the United States for Women 25-54" (Discovery, 2010a, ¶ 6). TLC was recently named "a top 10 ad-supported cable network" on Friday nights for all key female demographics (Discovery, 2011, ¶ 3), bringing in roughly 1.65 million viewers (Calabrese, 2011). More specifically, *WNTW* celebrated its 250th episode in 2010 (National, 2010), with its 8th season slated for 2010-2011 programming (TLC, 2010). In fact, it was not until the 2010 premiere of *Sarah Palin's Alaska* that *WNTW*'s 2003 debut was surpassed in terms of audience numbers on TLC (Krakauer, 2010).

More than just reach, the television industry and market logic require that shows draw in audiences favored by advertisers in order to maximize profit (Bagdikian, 2004; Meehan, 2005). The combination of cheaper production costs and higher returns on investment (Deery, 2004a; Raphael, 2009) make RTV particularly appealing, with great financial gains up for grabs if outlets can attract the right audience. Following such logic, feminist political economy begs the question: Why do *female* viewers see what they see on *WNTW*?

To media corporations, advertising revenue is big business and thus weighs heavily on program content. In this regard, RTV is profitable not only because it adheres to advertiser demand by attracting audiences, but also because its format is favorable to advertiser interests (Deery, 2004b). Because media corporations adhere to such commercial dictates, financial interests often determine what audiences are—or are not—exposed to, and *WNTW* is no exception (Bagdikian, 2004). Attracting the right, affluent audience shapes media content, as the audiences targeted are often those with both the financial means and willingness to spend (Bagdikian, 2004; Deery, 2004a; Meehan, 2002). Audiences who are both able and willing to spend on advertised products are television's targets, as they provide the profit. As Discovery (2009) states, "content is designed to target key audience demographics and the popularity of our programming offers a compelling

reason for advertisers to purchase time on our channels" (p. 4). TLC targets audiences who are "attractive to advertisers…[and] viewed as having significant spending power" (p. 18). The primary clients are advertisers, and as such the audiences are valued for their profit potential. Ergo, because women are lauded for "their spending power as consumers" (Roberts, 2007, p. 229), such an attribute explains TLC's female focus.

With this in mind, the commodity audience that is sold to advertisers is the audience that will spend (Meehan, 2005). On *WNTW*, that target audience is female gendered and favored for their consumption habits. As a show that is predicated on consumerism as a means of female empowerment and improvement, females are thus integral to furthering the revenue goals of both TLC and advertisers. From a feminist political economic perspective, *WNTW* is motivated by economics, which in turn is dependent on attracting female audiences. Following such logic, Discovery (2010b) states, "TLC targets female viewers, providing a demographic balance in our portfolio for distribution and advertising clients" (p. 13).

Those advertising clients represent significant revenue, as Discovery Channel, TLC, and Animal Planet collectively generated 77 percent of U.S. Networks' (a segment of Discovery) total revenue in 2009 (Discovery, 2010b). As advertisers play a vital role in media operations, they often target women specifically for their status as household "spenders" (Meehan, 2002, p. 218). It is here that gender plays a crucial—albeit sexist—role in defining and obtaining "the commodity audience" (Meehan, 2002). Females are not targeted as social or political individuals with agency, but instead are targeted solely for their propensity to shop, and shop *more*.

Ultimately, because media corporations produce programs to deliver consumers to advertisers (Meehan, 2005), and because *WNTW* has favorable ratings with favorable audiences, advertisers are more than willing to pay for access to TLC's coveted audience. Further, Discovery—like other media corporations—is devoted to making *WNTW* a success through multiple ventures, including DVDs, books, spin-off programs, and websites with show schedules, fashion tips, shopping quizzes, and more (TLC, n.d.), making *WNTW* a financially rewarding endeavor. In many ways, TLC fulfills its commercial demands by delivering advertisers the heterogeneous group most often (and problematically) associated with consumption: women. While it is a capitalistic logic that "shape[s] corporate decisions," it is *patriarchal* ideology that characterizes women as spenders (Meehan, 2002, p. 220). To further illustrate how market incentives are projected through programming, the following section explores the ideological messages that are ostensibly "sold" on *WNTW*.

"It's You, Enhanced"

While cultural scholars have studied media's representation of women for decades (Riordan, 2002; McLaughlin, 2002), feminist political economy

takes these concerns one step further by calling for interrogation into the ways such representations increasingly turn female "self-identity into a commodity and a lucrative, media event" (Deery, 2006, p. 160). On *WNTW*, commodified femininity begins with none other than the female wardrobe. Through commodification, clothes become inordinately influential, as the "right clothes"—if chosen and worn correctly—serve as a window to one's *true* personality (e.g., Velázquez Vargas, 2008). For example, in Season 7, Episode 3,[2] Stacy tells Amanda that "your clothing is all about who you become when you put it on… an extension of you," while Mala learns in S7-E4 that "there's a lot you can express through clothes and all of that is kind of lost on you." In S3-E1, Stacy tells KerryEllen that her personality is hidden under bad clothing, while Clinton suggests that the "right" clothes will portray the "fun, feisty female" she is. Finally, in S5-E33, Stacy informs Valerie that her colleagues are worried she isn't "dressing to [her] full potential," while in S2-E46 Clinton tells 16-year-old Erinn that the right clothes will "work wonders" and "help people remember [her]" (Klein, 2003, n.p.).

In this way, *WNTW* encourages "freedom and expressive individualism linked to consumption," while normalizing a female identity that is "inseparable from consumption" (Roberts, 2007, p. 232). Through feminist political economy, this "inseparable" relationship makes perfect sense: because females are valued by advertisers and media corporations for their consumption habits, these entities have a vested interest in reinforcing both shopping and appearance as characteristics that are *central* to female identity. Mala's identity remains lost in the heap of clothes that will soon be thrown away, KerryEllen's exuberant personality is muted by her frumpy clothes, Valerie curtails her appearance possibilities, and Erinn needs the right wardrobe to be a "somebody" in her high school (Klein, 2003, n.p.). This high premium on clothing transforms aspects of female identity into objects that are determined by what one wears. On *WNTW*, purchasing new and presumably better clothes is not only the key to true self-expression, but also the key to revealing the *real* woman within.

As identity is morphed into something that can be bought and sold, RTV benefits from "the capitalist credo that one can *buy* [italics added] happiness, that through consumption you or your life experience can be fixed or improved" (Deery, 2006, p. 160). This is the modus operandi of makeover programming: while RTV creates the "problem," the show's experts and advertisers provide the "solution" via new and "improved" goods and services. In the case of *WNTW*, improving oneself is a matter of not only having enough cash and/or credit, but also of spending it *correctly* (i.e., on advertised products).

2 In future references, *WNTW* Season and Episode number will be identified as "S#-E#." For example, Season three, Episode seven is articulated as S3-E7.

From this, makeover programming perpetuates two key ideologies: that problems inherently exist but can be corrected, and that only through consumption can happiness be achieved (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006; Deery, 2006; Velázquez Vargas, 2008). As makeover programs encourage viewers to spend whatever is necessary to improve their lot in life (Deery, 2006), personality becomes subsumed by a capitalist logic in which consumerism—in and of itself—provides the path to "the good life" (e.g., Deery, 2006; Velázquez Vargas, 2008). Through *WNTW*'s discarding of old clothes and purchasing of the new, there is the inherent promise "that no one has to stay stuck in his or her place…we can change it all tomorrow" (Wildman, 2003, p. 46). That "change," however, only occurs through adherence to the rules of consumerist culture. In this way, *WNTW* perverts feminist concerns such as liberation and empowerment by binding them to acts of consumerism. Such contortions effectively undercut the "empowerment" message that *WNTW* hosts lay claim to, and instead suggests that the power of the purse is key to female fulfillment.

Related to the "hidden" personality traits that clothing obfuscates, *WNTW* suggests that beauty is also revealed through consumption. While Nick uncovers beauty often hidden by unruly hair, Carmindy "polishes" natural beauty through makeup. For example, while Carmindy tells Catherine in S6-E26, "this is you babe, we didn't use a lot of makeup…this is you *enhanced*"(Klein, 2003, n.p.), she also tells Shifra in S2-E7, "it sounds to me like you are really sassy on the inside but slacking on the outside… I think it's a sin that you are just hiding from your natural beauty—you are gorgeous. We need to just let that show, let that radiate from you" (Harvey & Cohen, 2008, n.p.). In S2-E47, Nick tells Melissa that his goal "is to bring out the woman in you. Obviously you've kind of subdued it," while Carmindy tells Valerie, "We just took your natural beauty and intensified it…honey, never disappear again" (Klein, 2003, n.p.).

Thus, makeover RTV relies on "the subject's understanding that the 'new' self is preexistently latent within herself," and "must be liberated rather than being imposed from the outside in" (Robert, 2007, p. 237). Important here is the idea that with the right products and "expert" training, individuals are capable of unleashing the beauty queens within. Such messages of latent beauty are integral to closing the "sale." That is, by focusing on pre-existing qualities that only need to be uncovered, *WNTW* suggests that participants already possess within themselves the bulk of what is needed to improve. They simply need to learn the right tricks and buy the right tools to bring those qualities to the forefront. By extension, then, the same message conveyed to audiences is that with the right products (i.e., hair mousse, makeup, etc.), becoming the "more beautiful you" is well within one's reach.

In addition to personality and beauty, professional success is also subject to improvement on *WNTW*. In this regard, feminine-but-not-too-feminine clothing ensures that participants are taken seriously at work, which their

"old" clothing purportedly prevented. For example, in S6-E6, Clinton and Stacy proclaim that Rebecca's style hinders her career advancement (Klein, 2003, n.p.), while in S2-E24 Clinton tells Cynthia, "to be upwardly mobile, you've got to *dress* like you're upwardly mobile" (Harvey & Cohen, 2008, n.p.). Clinton suggests that Mala will "come across as more of an attorney" if she follows the experts' rules. Even Erinn is subjected to the barrage of professional concerns, when the voiceover states that she will finally have "the edge when it comes to those admissions tutors," because of her new look. In the same episode, Stacy tells Erinn that her SAT outfit is "more important than if you studied for them" (Klein, 2003, n.p.). It is not knowledge, training, or skill that is indicative of female success on *WNTW*, but rather outward appearance. Appearance, not aptitude, is all that matters.

In this regard, while professional attire is important in "real life," *WNTW*'s representation of such is problematic because it disregards all other aspects that contribute to one's success. *WNTW* reinforces gendered ideologies, where appearance acts as *the most important factor* influencing female success. Importantly, while Valian (1998) argues that working females must appear professional enough to be considered competent while still feminine enough so as not to be perceived as too masculine, a number of scholars have similarly argued that women today are still judged largely by their appearance (e.g., Andersen, 2002; Hesse-Biber, 2007). In this way, *WNTW* suggests that in order for a woman to succeed in the public sphere, her style must be situated somewhere between the (masculine) professional and the feminine. For example, while Clinton tells Melissa that her new look is "tough but feminine and professional," voiceover narration in the same episode boasts, "Melissa strikes a happy medium of feminine and authoritative." Such statements not only imply that female competence is evaluated largely on physical appearance, but also that it is impossible to be a successful woman without adhering—at least in part—to gendered codes of dress. Only if a woman wears the right heels can she finally get that promotion, and only if she buys a tailored jacket will she be perceived as competent at work. Like so many other aspects on *WNTW*, feminist concerns for workplace equality and career advancement are commodified into objects that can be "purchased" with the right wardrobe. In reality, fashion is largely outweighed by education, experience, and skill; focusing on such non-material factors, however, does not stimulate shopping sprees nearly as well as focusing on appearance. Ultimately, because these aspects do not create inroads to sell advertiser products and instead defy capitalist logic suggesting that *purchasing* leads to success, they are excluded from *WNTW*.

More than just this, redefined femininity also emerges as a means of selling gender on *WNTW*. In "mandating femininity for women" (Sherman, 2008, p. 52), *WNTW* suggests that femininity only comes from dressing in overtly "feminine" ways. For example, Carmindy contends that makeup can prevent a woman from being "considered a total tomboy," while Stacy

remarks in S6-E20 that a new wardrobe will bring Kathy "away from the trucker look and more toward the girly look." For Melissa, her updated look makes her realize that "I really am a woman underneath" (Klein, 2003, n.p.). *WNTW* thus perpetuates socially constructed definitions of femininity and advocates a very narrow version of female appearance.

More than just femininity, Amanda finds that fashion is the essence of being a woman and being *perceived* as a woman:

> CLINTON : *"Now do you see how running around town looking like this you might go out for coffee to meet a friend, there might be a guy at the next table—"*
>
> AMANDA: *"Hi guy at the next table—"*
>
> CLINTON: *"She's available and straight!*
>
> STACY: *"—And now you look it, which is really important."*
>
> AMANDA: *"I've spent a lot of my life with people assuming I was a lesbian because of the way that I dressed and because of my hair."*
>
> STACY: *"You were dressing like you didn't even have a gender!"*

Thus, Amanda's new wardrobe is key not only to expressing femininity, but also conveys the "correct" message about her gender and sexuality. When coupled with Clinton's remarks that "there could be a single man" just waiting for Amanda (Klein, 2003, n.p.), *WNTW* further implies that females are heterosexual by default. On the show, females are immediately linked to heteronormative sexual proclivities, unless otherwise stated by the participants themselves. Add heels, lipstick, and a man on the side, and not only is the makeover recipient (thankfully!) more feminine, but more importantly: she's unquestionably straight.

Related to sexuality, sex appeal is also commodified via patriarchal relations. Several scholars have argued that patriarchy still exists and is illustrated throughout contemporary media (Douglas, 2010; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Meehan, 2002; Ross, 2002). Such patriarchal values are evident through the exclusion of male participants and perpetuation of the male gaze on *WNTW*.

In terms of gender representation, *WNTW*'s track record illustrates its predominantly female focus. In fact, by 2011, only 22 of *WNTW*'s 297 total episodes involved men, with six of those episodes featuring heterosexual couples and 16 involving men on their own. Despite these initial attempts to include males, *WNTW* has not featured a male alone since 2005 or a male participant (as part of a couple or family) since 2008 (TV Guide, 2011). Such numbers illustrate TLC's dependence on female insecurities for profit (Hesse-Biber, 2007), because featuring male participants would likely

fail to cultivate aspirations for change among female audiences. Because appearance ideals differ substantially between genders, females may not identify with the changes needed for improvement when male participates are featured, which could negatively influence the profit potential for TLC and advertisers.

More than just representation, *WNTW*'s emphasis on female appearance not only perpetuates a patriarchal mindset, but also invites females to both adhere to—and participate in—the male gaze. For example, in S2-E45, Celita is compared to a Barbie doll as Stacy points out the "ideal body proportion that we want to get" (Klein, 2003, n.p.), while in S5-E26 Clinton notes Bonnie's "hourglass figure" with body parts that should be "shown off" (Harvey & Cohen, 2008, n.p.). Although present in other televised content, Clinton and Stacy repeatedly incorporate the thin ideal into *WNTW* programming as an appearance that all women should strive to achieve. Despite the fact that Clinton claims them to be "strong believers in dressing for the body you have now, not the body you want to have," Stacy follows up by asking Rebecca, "let's say you start wearing pants that automatically take off 10 pounds, wouldn't that make you feel better about yourself?" (Klein, 2003, n.p.). Similarly, while Stacy tells Lisa in S2-E43, "this is a case of you doing your body a big disservice" (Harvey & Cohen, 2008, n.p.), Clinton informs Kim in S5-E34 that she has "great curves, but what we're doing is accentuating them" (Klein, 2003, n.p.). While hosts focus on creating the appearance of an "ideal body," *WNTW* simultaneously reinforces and normalizes an ideal appearance that is both unattainable and created by and for men (e.g., Andersen, 2002; Hesse-Biber, 2007). In this way, *WNTW*'s repeated emphasis on the body and female "assets" encourages the acceptance of "patriarchal values that may make [women] ever more dependent on men for approval and success" (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 22). In this way, *WNTW* suggests that the female ideal can be achieved in one of two ways: through physical transformation (which is where *WNTW*'s advertising inundated with diet foods is helpful), or through wardrobe choices that create the illusion of a thinner, more "attractive" body. Patriarchy and capitalism coalesce in this latter option, creating profitable programming for TLC and advertisers.

Additionally, *WNTW* forces participants to "exercise the gaze" as they view themselves as outsiders while watching the "secret footage," and as the 360-degree room invites them to participate in the fragmentation of their own bodies (Sherman, 2008). That is, while the secret footage encourages participants—and audiences—to evaluate participants' fashion blunders, the 360-degree room exercise is notoriously known for breaking the women down piece by piece for the ways that clothes fail to flatter the woman's figure. As Shifra confesses, the secret footage and 360-degree room was devastating. She states, "the best part about today is that it was over—it was a miserable experience." Cynthia echoes similar sentiments: "it was a

complete and horrific exploration into what I really look like; I had never seen myself in that way. It was very tormenting at some points." For Bonnie, the 360-degree room "was like being tortured and having bamboo shoots thrown under my fingernails. Really it gives you a unique aspect of what you look like… I think that the hard part is over, I've been shredded and humiliated in front of two million of my closest friends" (Harvey & Cohen, 2008, n.p.). In this way, makeover participants internalize the male gaze throughout the process, while friends and family employ the gaze as they judge their beloved nominees both before and after the transformation (Deery, 2004b). Such evaluations reiterate the need for women to please others through their looks, and encourage them to adhere to assessments based on appearance. The most important benefactors and intended recipients of the revamped female appearance on *WNTW* are, after all, men.

For example, while Amanda believes that her makeover will "change how men look at me" and her friend hopes it will bring her more dates, Stacy chastises both KerryEllen and Lisa for failing to "hook-a-hottie" with their pre-makeover appearance (Harvey & Cohen, 2008; Klein, 2003). Clinton tells Debbie in S7-E18, "we know your boyfriend likes you for your personality and your mind, let's get him to like you because you're a total hottie," while in S4-E42, Nancy believes that her new look will "turn a few heads and maybe get a little more attention" (Klein, 2003, n.p.). On *WNTW*, male "approval at the end of each show validates the transformation project" on *WNTW* (Roberts, 2007, p. 238), as women are encouraged to look a certain way chiefly *because it appeals to men*.

Similarly, while Clinton tells Ellyn in S3-E3, "a little sex appeal goes a *long* way," Kathy is encouraged to wear a sexier outfit to show her husband "some love" (Klein, 2003, n.p.). Nancy goes from "grandma to hussy in one fowl swoop" (Klein, 2003, n.p.), while Nick proclaims his intentions to "bring the hootchie back" and "ramp up the sexy" with Bonnie (Harvey & Cohen, 2008, n.p.). Women are also repeatedly defined by their long legs or voluptuous chest—rather than by individuality or personality. Their "best" physical assets become the center of their worth and what they ultimately are remembered for. It is through smart use of a woman's best physical assets and her unwavering sex appeal that she is able to fulfill her "natural" role: to please and attract the opposite sex.

Finally, *WNTW* also objectifies women as they are referred to as material objects throughout the show. For example, Aysha's male friend states in S2-E48, "before I'd say that Aysha was a Mercedes, but I think you guys are going to turn her into a Rolls Royce," while Amanda's friend states, "[her wardrobe] is a test… if you get past the candy-coating on the outside you get into the beautiful person on the inside." Debbie is transformed from a "downer into a delicious dish," KerryEllen becomes "streamlined," and Melissa's body provides hosts with "raw material to

work with" (Klein, 2003, n.p.). While likening the female body to food, objects, and male pleasure is nothing new (e.g., Andersen, 2002; Parasecoli, 2007), women on *WNTW* are no longer dressing simply to *please* men, but are made to be *palatable* to men as well. In comparison to makeover shows created for men—which makeover tangible objects (i.e. cars)—females on *WNTW* become the objects themselves.

Conclusion

In many ways, female commodification on *WNTW* is inextricably linked to both capitalism and patriarchy, as it suggests that to be successful in any social relations, females are required to adhere to the guidelines of each and both *at the same time*. To be successful at work, females must participate in consumerism, where they are required to buy a new wardrobe or don a new hairdo to be considered for the job. When combined with patriarchy, women must not only buy the new wardrobe, but also appear feminine (never "unfeminine"), pretty (but never too pretty), and stylish (but never in such a way as to undermine their professional persona). In this case, women must dress to please men, to impress men, and win the prize of being favorably looked upon by men *and* other women. This, however, is the crux of the problem: women remain those within the social stratum who are continually "looked upon" and "looked at." Indicative of the motto, "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em," *WNTW* suggests not only that females *should* be looked at, but also invites them to revel in, celebrate, and engage in countless hours of mental and physical labor all in the hopes of *looking good for someone else*. Through the tangled web that is capitalism and patriarchy, *WNTW* suggests that in order to succeed in either, women must incessantly and endlessly participate in *both*.

As a highly successful makeover program, however, *WNTW* provides much more than a mediated text for critical analysis; it paints a vivid picture of what is wrong with makeover reality television today. Thus in the spirit of progress, I argue that in order to improve upon the problematic state of females on RTV, scholars must begin discussing how we are to move forward in an epoch where RTV has all but inundated programming schedules. In this regard, I envision two alternatives to enhancing the state of makeover programming, both of which require completely uprooting the "makeover" genre (although the possibilities for change do not end here).

First, instead of focusing on "making over," we need to focus on "making better" from the *participant's* perspective. Rather than emphasizing appearance, RTV could use a dose of shows that foster personal, professional, and/or social enrichment. This can include, for example, furthering education, enhancing banking/credit knowledge, or learning helpful interview techniques. Given the United States' economic recession, the current unemployment rate, the collapse of the housing market, and financial bailouts, these alternatives may prove to be an especially fruitful endeavor for *both* male and female audiences

nationwide. Second, makeover RTV could also benefit from more success stories of individuals who have improved their own lives, without the help of "experts" who are all but inaccessible to the average audience member. Rather than focusing on the *process* of improvement (as in the first alternative), RTV could instead focus on how individuals have become successful in and of themselves. In this regard, audiences may benefit greatly from seeing someone "like them" make it on their own, without an overwhelmingly dependence on consumerist culture. By focusing on "success stories," RTV can provide opportunities to learn from others' experience—experiences that are all too often excluded from television's commercialized entertainment formats. At the end of the day, we need more programs that foster development in ways that last long after the makeup fades.

While lofty in its aspirations, contemporary RTV leaves much room for improvement. Through feminist political economy, I have illustrated that it features problematic portrayals of not only women, but also of women's role and value in American society. On *WNTW*, females are invited to gaze upon, evaluate, and participate in the commodification and objectification of other females (and themselves), while media corporations and advertisers benefit from the insecurities they create and reinforce. While these alternatives are neither a "fix-all" nor immediate solutions, there is great value in critically interrogating not only what is wrong with media, but also how it can be improved. In this vein, it is only when such discussions are sparked that we—as scholars and students alike—can begin demanding more progressive, varied, and egalitarian representations on reality television.

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Appendix: Episode Guide

Note: Episodes are identifiable in text by season and episode number.

Amanda Cohen- Season 7, Episode 3
Original Air Date: 10/17/2008

Aysha Malik- Season 2, Episode 48
Original Air Date: 09/03/2004

Bonnie- Season 5, Episode 26
Original Air Date: 04/27/2007

Catherine K.- Season 6, Episode 26
Original Air Date: 4/25/2008

Celita Shultz- Season 2, Episode 45
Original Air Date: 07/30/2004

Cynthia Venasca- Season 2, Episode 24
Original Air Date: 03/05/2004

Debbie Gleicher- Season 7, Episode 18
Original Air Date: 03/06/2009

Jen and Julie Dreyer- Season 6, Episode 5
Original Air Date: 10/19/2007

Ellyn Sollis- Season 3, Episode 3
Original Air Date: 10/15/2004

Erinn Johnson Long- Season 2, Episode 46
Original Air Date: 08/06/2004

Kathy Garth- Season 6, Episode 20
Original Air Date: 03/14/2008

Kerryellen Kelly- Season 3, Episode 1
Original Air Date: 10/01/2004

Kim- Season 5, Episode 34
Original Air Date: 07/27/2007

Lisa Laford- Season 2, Episode 43
Original Air Date: 07/16/2004

Maria Merchado- Season 3, Episode 23
Original Air Date: 03/11/2005

Mala- Season 7, Episode 4
Original Air Date: 10/24/2008

Melissa Notig- Season 2, Episode 47
Original Air Date: 08/20/2004

Nancy G.- Season 4, Episode 42
Original Air Date: 08/04/2006

Rebecca Chiccpa- Season 6, Episode 6
Original Air Date: 10/26/2007

Shifra Littman- Season 2, Episode 7
Original Air Date:10/10/2003

Valerie- Season 5, Episode 33
Original Air Date: 07/20/2007