Self-Projects

Makeover Shows and the Reflexive Imperative

*The Biggest Loser’s “wow”* factor is mesmerizing—over a period of maybe twelve weeks to see someone completely change what they look like by their own hard work. I think that element could appeal to any people of any size. But what draws you in initially, for a thin person, might not be the same as a fat person. Where a fat person is drawn into the show with a “what if” concept, like “What if that was me?” or is approaching it as “Maybe I’ll learn something from it.” And I think that maybe that’s the side of the show that is lacking in my opinion, is that there aren’t many—it’s very fleeting. It comes on, I watch it, I’m enthralled, I love the concept of it. When it’s done, I don’t really think about it until it’s on again. It doesn’t teach me anything; it doesn’t give me life lessons; it’s not an instruction book for how you at home could do it. It’s portrayed as a contest to win money, and that’s the primary objective. And so that’s my one criticism is that I’m not learning anything. I’m just watching someone like me have the motivation and desire to do what I can’t do, and then they achieve it and I wish I was them, and then the show’s over, and then I just continue my life as a person who doesn’t do that.

—Seth, *The Biggest Loser* interviewee

Midway through interviewing people who watch makeover television shows, I had a conversation with Seth, a white, single, heterosexual man in his thirties. He was a fan of the United States version of the popular competitive weight loss show *The Biggest Loser* who wanted to lose about eighty pounds in weight. In the course of the interview, Seth articulated his complex and contradictory perceptions of this show that help to frame some of the central themes in this study. Above he notes the “wow” factor of seeing contestants going through dramatic physical transformation and the possibility of identifying with the contestants. He expresses his disappointment that the show is not more explicitly pedagogical, as well as his regret that he cannot convert these fleeting images of transformation into changes in his own life. He went on to note how body size and appearance are...
structured through gendered norms and modes of looking on *The Biggest Loser*:

I think that it’s a by-product of our society that success in life is tied to body image in some sense for both genders. As a guy who struggles with weight, I’m interested in that dynamic of a show, to see other guys. But it’s fascinating to me to see how much, even though I am like that, that I also prescribe to the way we are as a culture, in that I see these women go on there and I’m like, “Oh, shit! Look at the size of her!” And the complete and utter disaster. My initial reaction is, “How could they do that to themselves?” It’s kind of a selfish thing, kind of an arrogant thing, to be a guy who struggles with that and feels that [way] personally, to be able to look at someone else and be like, “You fat whale.”

He was frankly aware of the double standards of appearance applied to women and men, and struggled between this awareness and his own contempt for the women contestants on the show. Makeover shows represent the transformation of ordinary people, most often women, through appropriate consumption, and in doing so reproduce norms of attractiveness and legitimize the audiences’ scrutinizing gaze. But shows such as *The Biggest Loser* also bring men into these traditionally gendered modes of representation and inspection. The male turn in the makeover forces Seth to consider his own contradictory position in which he critically assesses the overweight women on the show at the same time as he must deal with his own heavy body within similar regimes of representation.

Seth considered how *The Biggest Loser* exposed the candidates as overweight and underdressed. As did many interviewees, he believed that however harsh, these routines of representation promoted shame that was functional for contestants on *The Biggest Loser*:

I think that people that are as big as the people on that show are, it’s like they have bottomed out, to want to be involved in a show on a major network, that’s viewed by millions of people that are going to see them in awful shape in ill-fitting clothes, and a lot of skin. It’s a pretty embarrassing thing, and I think that those people are at their breaking point for the most part.
Seth assumed that “bottoming out”—reaching a nadir of self-esteem—explained why candidates would expose themselves on broadcast television in a range of unflattering and revealing outfits. Bottoming out invokes a 12-step program ethos where the recognition and confession of shame is the first step toward personal transformation. As did other participants in this study, Seth saw such public shaming on *The Biggest Loser* as helpful in forcing candidates to change.

Seth went on to assume that a willingness to be represented this way was a guarantee of the candidates’ authenticity. He said, “I really think that the people involved are genuine. I wouldn’t have watched it a second season if I got the impression the first season that all the people there were motivated by the monetary aspect.” He and other interviewees put a high premium on the authenticity of candidates, evidenced by having good reasons to go on a reality television show: to really work to change rather than to simply be in it for money, fame, or career reasons.

Seth was also aware that the show was constructed, despite all the claims to reality that the genre assumes. In his discussion of the genuineness of the candidates he continued, “[The producers] could be manufacturing or eliciting that response from me, but I really buy into it. I think [the candidates] are people who really want to improve their life and think that this show is going to do that.” Even with his awareness that the production routines of the show could shape his responses, he nevertheless remained highly invested in the emotional realism of the show. This was not only predicated on contestants taking part for the right reasons—“really want[ing] to improve their life”—but also evidenced by contestants’ emotional expressivity.

Together, Seth’s comments exemplify some of the tensions that structure audiences’ discussions of makeover television that are the foundation of this project: tensions that involve learning, identification, gender, shame, authenticity, realism, and feeling. Seth acknowledged being inspired by candidates but unable to apply the show’s techniques to himself. He recognized gendered standards of appearance, where women are judged unfairly according to their looks; at the same time, he saw the shame induced by being on a makeover show as a necessary part of its success. He was aware that the show is constructed, and how the producers and editors shaped his responses. He was nevertheless invested in the authenticity of the candidates, gauged by their motives for taking
part and their emotional expressiveness. In order to hold these tensions in a productive relationship, I draw on contemporary theorizations of reflexivity across a number of fields. I do not mean reflexive as in reflex: an uncontrolled, unthought, instinctive reaction to a stimulus. On the contrary, Seth’s quote reveals a sophisticated appraisal of himself and his engagements with *The Biggest Loser*, a reflexivity shared by many of the people we talked to about makeover shows. Instead, reflexivity describes how makeover shows rework ideas about the self through the particular demands of contemporary television programming. These shows mobilize audiences’ reflexive engagements with the texts, their viewing habits, their social relations, and their ideas about themselves as projects to be worked on. I do not share the view of some of its celebrants that reflexivity is a natural attitude inherent to modernity, nor do I believe that reflexivity necessarily produces the freedom and insight that its most ardent advocates assume. Instead, I explore how audiences talk about the reflexive self as an accomplishment produced in part through their engagement with makeover television.

Makeover television shows offer a rich opportunity to consider contemporary anxieties about “the self,” variously characterized as fragmented, performative, narcissistic, therapeutic, anxious, self-surveilling, and governmental. The genre also fuels a broader anxiety about reality television and its effects on audiences. Specific makeover programs will come and go; indeed, two of the shows I consider here, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Starting Over*, have been cancelled since I started this project. The genre morphs into novel forms and themes, as we have seen with shows that have emerged more recently (*How to Look Good Naked* and *Bridalplasty*, for example). Makeover shows nevertheless articulate a particular set of concerns that mobilize contemporary ideas about the self within a much longer history of selfhood. The makeover genre draws on earlier, Romantic investments in interiority, expression, and authenticity. The reaffirmation of personal authenticity has been seen as especially important at a time when traditional frames of reference have been eroded. As Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn write, “Older forms of authority and security—the law, democratic government, judiciary, medical experts and so forth—have been critiqued and displaced by an increasing public political cynicism and a turn to the self as the only possible marker of integrity.” I consider
analyses of modern, mediated selfhood and offer an intervention into the field of scholarly critiques of reality television that are based largely on textual analysis of television shows. To complement these, I draw on extensive conversations with audiences about their engagements with makeover television. As with earlier studies of media reception, I found that audiences’ responses to these programs were far more nuanced and compelling than textual approaches alone could account for. These conversations with audiences about makeover television require a reconsideration of the meanings these shows have for the people who watch them, and illuminate their significance in the production of a reflexive self.

Makeover Television: Contexts and Characteristics

Makeover television shows can be a source of information, a point of identification, a guilty pleasure. They are also a densely articulated set of texts that encourage audiences to reflect on themselves and allow scholars, in turn, to reflect on the production of the self through contemporary media. Rather than taking for granted a self that is stable and preexisting, I draw from contemporary scholars to consider how media are used by audiences as a resource for constructing a reflexive self. Like other reality television programs, makeover shows have proliferated rapidly as a product of particular economic, industrial, and technological circumstances in the first decade of the new century. These circumstances demand fast, cheap, and popular programming to counter the worst effects of audience fragmentation and the challenges this poses to advertising revenues. Makeover shows draw on already popular genres, including self-help literature, soap operas, and talk shows, that are attentive to intimacy, value emotional expression, and offer narrative frames within which audiences, especially women audiences, interpret their experiences.

The genre of makeover television, broadly defined, has rapidly expanded in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Brenda Weber, for example, studied hundreds of different shows among the 2,500 hours of makeover television she analyzed. This burgeoning of makeover programming, and of reality television in general, has been met with significant scholarly attention. Most of this attention has
been directed toward reality texts, with some notable exceptions from the UK. Suspicious of popular and scholarly critiques that dismiss the genre and disparage the people who enjoy it, I wanted to supplement this textual focus by turning attention to the people who watch makeover programs. A team of researchers at the University of Pennsylvania and I conducted extensive audience research on four US makeover shows. In addition to *The Biggest Loser*, we also looked at *Queer Eye*, where five gay men make over a hapless heterosexual guy; *Starting Over*, which features six women living together to get their lives in order; and *What Not to Wear*, in which mostly women are transformed from frumps and floozies into models of respectable upward mobility. These typify distinct subgenres of makeovers: weight loss, male lifestyles, psychological change, and women’s self-presentation, respectively, although each show contains some elements of the others. Even with these different emphases, all four shows exemplify the subgenre of reality television known as makeover shows. They feature “ordinary” people, even though, as Laura Grindstaff argues, there is little that is ordinary about the people who volunteer and are chosen to participate in reality shows. The action is largely unscripted, with the work of constructing narratives taking place in the editing room. They focus on transformation precipitated by expert intervention and exemplified in the moment of “reveal” at the end of the episode or season. Each of these shows are unapologetically commercial; they are distributed on for-profit network and cable channels, and are thus dependent on revenue from advertising, ratings, product placements and tie-ins, multi-platform distribution, branded products, and so on. Finally, these shows focus on personal transformation—of the body, appearance, and psyche—rather than transformations of candidates’ homes (*Trading Spaces, Hoarders*) or professional lives (*The Apprentice, Project Runway*).

For all the formulaic presentation of problems with their banal resolutions, this genre articulates a collection of attitudes and techniques that take the production of the self as their central, vexed concern. These shows represent a way of thinking about and working on the self that is historically and culturally specific to our contemporary economic, media, and social climate in the United States, although self-transformation is neither a new nor a specifically American phenomenon.
How are narratives of the self articulated through this commercial form in our particular space and time? How do their shifting aesthetic, technological, and economic conditions frame these narratives? How do audiences engage with makeover shows as a resource to consider and express their selves? Among the group of highly invested viewers with whom we talked, makeover shows were part of an active project of self-making. This was not a playful, performative, poststructuralist, post-identity type of self-making, but was a sincere articulation of their inner, essential selves and the fraught problem of manifesting that real self in the world. The shows are a resource for this project, in which participants were reflexive about their selves, their media consumption, and their involvement in the academic project of research. However lowbrow, commercialized, feminized, and exploitative they may be, makeover shows offer a prism through which to consider the question, “How to live?”

All audience research must tread a treacherous path between textual determinism, which usually assumes that texts do terrible things to people (especially women and children), and the excesses of active audience theory, which celebrates people’s freedom to make what they like of the texts they consume. In this book I hold in tension the ideological imperatives of the text with the need to do justice to audiences’ investments in and negotiations with the texts. I offer a critique of makeover shows’ didactic instruction toward narrow versions of appropriate gender and race self-presentation, assumptions of upward mobility, and consumer appeals, as well as the demands on the shows to make enjoyable, profitable television. At the same time, I take seriously the ways in which makeover shows are made meaningful and important in the lives of the (mostly) women who watch them. As with other audience research studies, I have struggled to retain a critique of the shows without damning their viewers and fans, and to recognize the commercial, popular conventions of the shows without dismissing them as a hopelessly corrupted genre. By addressing audiences’ engagements with the texts, their selves, and the research context as reflexive, I hope to avoid the impasse of earlier debates about media reception. This book explores how audience research enriches our understanding of reflexivity, and how thinking through reflexivity challenges audience research. Rather than uncritically celebrating reflexivity, I consider how
audience research risks collaborating with an ideologically tempting but ultimately naive view of the modern reflexive self.

Queer Eye, Neoliberalism, and Governmentality

I began this project in 2005 as I was completing an analysis of the Bravo cable channel’s show Queer Eye for the Straight Guy. I was interested in this program because it appeared to be an inevitable outcome of the construction of gay taste and expertise that has become prevalent in mainstream consumer culture. In this show, gay men were openly recognized for their labors in the style industries, and were particularly useful in the ongoing challenge of cultivating heterosexual men’s domestic and intimate consumption. This analysis drew from scholarship that looked at reality television as a vehicle for neoliberal values of disciplined, self-monitoring, responsible citizenship. Scholars such as Laurie Ouellette and James Hay see the reality genre as doing important ideological work for the state that has reduced traditional forms of social support, for a labor economy that requires workers to be mobile and flexible, and for a media industry that needs cheap popular programming. In this critique of reality television, the work of governing subjects moves from state apparatuses to the subjects themselves, in a process Michel Foucault termed “governmentality.” Reality shows propose “technologies of the self”—ways of appraising and caring for the self—that audiences are assumed to adopt. These scholars argue that reality genres model a version of citizenship that demands that subjects take responsibility for the self, tolerate risk, and look to mediated experts for guidance on navigating modern life.

Surveillance is crucial to the production of this normative self. As Ouellette and Hay write, “Part of what reality TV teaches us in the early years of the new millennium is that in order to be good citizens we must allow ourselves to be watched as we watch those around us.” Referring to makeover shows specifically, Weber concludes that obtaining “love and empowerment requires writing normative gender, race, and class congruence on the body in ways that can be visually policed and affirmed by a collective body of like-minded citizens.” From this perspective, by representing examples of bad citizenship, makeover shows both encourage audiences to view candidates with contempt
and to reform themselves in order to avoid such contempt from others. Bad citizenship can also be avoided by taking advice about appropriate consumption: “The makeover is . . . a vehicle through which experts communicate with the public directly as advocates of the power of consumer-based lifestyles to fulfill people’s needs.”

The governmental approach helped me make sense of Queer Eye’s project. Despite the apparent aim of making these straight male candidates better husbands and boyfriends, the show’s parallel project exhorted them to be more mature, flexible, and willing professionals. Yet as I was finishing that research I was left with a sense of unease—I didn’t trust how neatly this critique elided the show’s contradictory elements, and I felt discomfort about what it implied about the audiences who watched the program. How could we make sense of Queer Eye’s camp pleasures, especially insofar as they seemed to disrupt some of the text’s most heteronormative assumptions? Did people who watched these shows willingly adopt the instruction, consumer appeals, and modes of self-monitoring modeled in the texts? And in the governmental emphasis on discipline and responsibility, where was the place for fun, frivolity, and mayhem that many of us enjoyed about this show? In the move to account for reality television as a relatively new media phenomenon, it seemed that scholars had forgotten a venerable history of especially feminist-grounded audience research that paid attention to pleasure and contradiction and that resisted a disparagement of lowbrow media audiences along with the lowbrow media themselves.

Wanting to explore the contradictions within Queer Eye in the context of this tradition of feminist audience research, I undertook a large-scale investigation of audiences’ engagements with this and three other makeover shows.

Turning to Audiences

I situate this study of makeover audiences within a feminist cultural studies approach to media reception. This approach asserts that there is no single preferred meaning in texts which media scholars are privileged to discern. Even while there are textual factors at work (generic conventions, narrative closure, and so on), audiences are also active makers of meaning, and they experience pleasures in doing so. It is
important and valuable to study lowbrow media forms such as romance novels, soap operas, and tabloid magazines from the perspective of their largely female, middle- and working-class audiences, in order to investigate how hierarchies of gender, class, and taste intersect with pleasure. Neither activity nor pleasure, however, guarantees political activity or resistance.20

As audience research has evolved, the idea of “the audience” has become increasingly complex and problematized. Consumers of media fragment across diverse platforms and genres, making the idea of a coherent entity, the audience, less relevant (if it ever was). Moreover, audience research scholars have argued that the very idea of “the audience” is more a product of market research and scholarly study than it actually describes a stable collectivity of viewers joined by a shared participation in media.21 I use the term “audiences” and sometimes “viewers” here for want of better terms: by pluralizing them I hope to convey that there is not a coherent audience of makeover television, or even of each of the four shows. The data demonstrate that there are different meanings made of the shows, both between the shows and among the people who responded to each show. I do not assume that the people who participated in this study mirror “the audience” of makeover shows in general—as with makeover show candidates, the very fact of their participation marks them as distinct.

This project employs a number of approaches to understanding how makeover shows are meaningful to some of their most ardent viewers: an online survey for each of the four shows; follow-up interviews with volunteers from each of these surveys; interviews with a comparison group who were not regular viewers of the shows and were not recruited online; textual analysis of at least two seasons of each show; and textual analysis of press coverage of the shows and the makeover genre in general. Existing audience studies from Britain have taken reality television as a broad category or have focused on what is known there as “lifestyle television.”22 Yet the range of programs under the reality umbrella (from Trading Spaces to Survivor) and even within lifestyle programming (from Wife Swap to What Not to Wear) seemed so broad as to miss important differences between the shows. Audience research has moved from an initial focus on specific programs to genres and even, more ethnographically, to the use of media in everyday life.23 I
took the rather old-fashioned route of focusing on specific programs because I became interested in this project through my earlier textual analysis of *Queer Eye*. It seemed to me that this show was distinct in significant ways from other kinds of makeover shows—in its focus on heterosexual men, its casting of openly gay men as hosts, and in the gender and sexual contradictions in the show. I drew from this observation that within the makeover genre there would likely be specific elements of shows that addressed distinct aspects of self-transformation, and chose four shows that, I believed, would represent some important differences among them. This approach was borne out by finding that the people we talked to did, indeed, perceive and respond to the four shows with quite different emphases.

Our research team designed four online surveys, each tailored to one of the shows. The surveys were intended to probe such things as whether people who watched these shows learned things from them, followed their consumer advice, identified with candidates, assessed their emotional authenticity, critiqued the realism of the shows, and so on. We also asked about other shows they watched, and whether they avoided particular kinds of makeover shows. (See appendix I for research protocols, including a generic version of this survey.) We posted links to the survey on the official message boards for each show as well as on reality television blogs, all with the agreement of moderators. The response was overwhelming: within a week of posting the links, more than 1,800 people had completed one or more of the surveys (see appendix II for a breakdown of demographics on survey respondents). We considered the responses to the survey as we developed the protocols for the interviews to follow. Unsurprisingly, many respondents shared the view of a woman who wrote about *What Not to Wear*, “I like getting tips from the style experts and hair/makeup people. I, obviously, enjoy seeing the transformation of the ‘guest,’ and I like the personalities of the hosts.” In response to whether she had picked up tips from the show, another wrote, “I can’t think of anything specific, but I definitely have ‘Oh, I learned that on *What Not to Wear*’ moments when I’m shopping (as have my friends).” As critics of the genre have assumed, the shows’ instruction, visible transformation, host–experts, and social sharing were common themes mentioned by respondents across all four shows.
However, the survey responses also complicated these themes. First, even those respondents who generally reported that they liked the shows “very much” criticized the instruction, consumer appeals, and representations of candidates they found in the programs. Another survey respondent said of *What Not to Wear,* “Subjects are encouraged to buy clothing that is often too expensive for the average person, e.g., a $200 pair of black pants or a $400 leather jacket. Although Stacey and Clinton consider this type of clothing ‘classic’ and ‘timeless,’ they don’t account for the fashion industry deliberately changing pant leg widths, jacket styles, etc., every season.” Another writer felt that *The Biggest Loser* “exploits the overweight people by putting them in skimpy outfits and having the men take off their shirts before being weighed.” It was clear from the surveys that the model of the obliging viewer who willingly adopts the shows’ pedagogic projects and participates in their shaming of “deviant” bodies was complicated by audiences’ ambivalent reception of these programs.

The second striking feature of the surveys emerged from respondents’ discussions of the candidates’ transformation through each episode. A *Queer Eye* viewer contributed a widely shared opinion about the genre: “I love the whole total transformation experience that I see the candidates experience both in physical appearance and in psychological changes.” Survey respondents across all four shows repeated that what they liked about the shows was the emphasis not only on changes in appearance but “inner” transformation as well. A woman wrote of *What Not to Wear:*

I like that we get to see the whole transition of a person, starting from their reluctance to get out of their rut and how bad it is for them, to their final highly self-confident day when they feel they look great. I like that the physical transition tends to affect the person on the inside as well as how they look on the outside. Some of these people don’t know how beautiful they are, or how professional they look. Sometimes they cry when they see themselves this way for the first time. It’s very touching.

The investment in interiority was often connected with expressions of feeling, both by the candidates and by the people watching the shows. Interiority and expression, and their importance for authenticity,
became a primary frame as we moved toward the interview phase of the project.

The survey responses were thus instructive as we developed questions for the follow-up interviews. Questions addressing the governmental critique, with its emphasis on self-discipline, rational adoption of advice, and a focus on self-surveillance needed to be complemented by questions that would probe people's emotional and pleasurable experiences with the shows, and with their intense investments in the inner self as a source of authenticity. We undertook 110 follow-up interviews with survey respondents who indicated that they would be willing to talk to us more about makeover shows. This group was roughly divided across the four shows, with some interviews about more than one of the shows.

I was concerned, however, that this approach to recruiting interviewees would mostly access people who were fans of the shows with easy access to the Internet. In order to get some sense of how people perceived the shows who were not regular viewers and who did not necessarily have online access, we also carried out interviews with twenty people who were recruited through a temp agency and local advertising and were not very familiar with the shows in this study (five people for each show—see appendix II for details). This comparison group furnished an illuminating range of responses to the shows that complements the data from the surveys and interviews with regular viewers.

As I began working with this material, what struck me most was participants' nuanced engagements with the shows. As did Seth, who opened this chapter, interviewees shared their enjoyment of the genre, sometimes in ways that conflicted with their own most humane principles. Others noted the contradictions between what they felt were the imperatives of the show and their own practices. One woman laughed as she told us that she and her husband watched *The Biggest Loser* together: “Well, this is going to sound really strange, based on what I told you, but [we have] kind of a competition to see who was right about who would win, while eating cake!” Further, there were many examples of interviewees who used the shows to make sense of their experiences, struggles, and social relationships. A fifty-one-year-old woman living with Crohn's disease poignantly discussed her application to be on *Starting Over*, which was rejected because the casting director perceived her to be too unwell:
I really wish I could have gone on [the show] because I think I could have been a positive role model instead of somebody who was all whiny and bitchy over their situation. But I’ve taken a lot of the things that they’ve done and just, whether it be writing down things, or sitting and reflecting on things that I’ve picked up, I do that an awful lot. In many different areas—I’m trying to think what areas I’ve done that. But it just doesn’t seem like a day goes by where I don’t learn something and think about it in correlation of myself. And see if I can’t make that another useful tool in arsenal, because when you’re sick it’s not just all about drugs. It’s about attitude and relaxation techniques and not getting all excited over nothing.

Of the four shows we looked at, Starting Over drew most explicitly on therapeutic and self-help techniques, making it especially available for this kind of relationship with the self. Across all the shows, however, it became increasingly clear that the regular viewers used the shows in an ongoing process of self-reflexivity. These programs offered a language for, a set of metaphors to describe, and a way of seeing the self.

In the production of a reflexive self, audiences did not merely parrot the norms of the shows; they negotiated with—even expressly refused—some of the texts’ explicit themes. Sometimes this opposition was framed in terms of participants’ awareness of the constructedness of media and its economic demands. One woman who watched both The Biggest Loser and Queer Eye considered how candidates on these shows were portrayed:

I’m sure a lot of the true personality comes through—but you’re absolutely seeing what the editors want you to see. It’s manipulated. I watch way too much reality TV, so I understand that it’s almost never as it seems. I can recall when we first started watching—I was just discussing with a girlfriend—when we first started watching Queer Eye, we were sure that it [took] just two days, and that Thom was behind the scenes painting. And I think episodes one, two, and three, they did a ton of work and that maybe a lot of it was what we thought it was. But certainly now, none of it is what it appears. It’s edited for content, just like the disclaimer at the end says in teeny, tiny lettering.
Even as this interviewee affirms that audiences see much of the “true personality” of the shows’ candidates, she is also adept at pointing out the artifices of the show that elide the practical constraints on production. Further, her appraisal is partly worked out in conversation with another audience member; audiences developed often highly sophisticated critiques of the genre within their social relationships, both on- and offline. Audiences frequently observed the ways in which reality television isn’t especially “real,” noting its generic conventions, casting tropes, editing sleights of hand. They considered the economic contexts of the shows’ production and the demand for high audience ratings, the influence of advertisers, and the necessity for product placement, much of which viewers disdained. In making sense of these data, it became clear that the governmental approach to reality television that emphasized audiences’ acquiescence to the text and disciplined self-surveillance could not account for their astute critiques of the genre.

Reflexivity and Its Limits

I began to see that the mode of engagement many audiences took to the show was not obliging but reflexive. Audiences were reflexive about themselves, using the terms in which the shows addressed the self to make sense of their life trajectories. They were reflexive about the programs they watched, considering the effects of the economic, technological, and production contexts on the genre. And some were reflexive about the research process, recognizing that the surveys and interviews offered them a chance to construct a view of the shows and to critique the research process itself. These audiences used makeover television as a resource to articulate the self as a reflexive project, as something that must be critiqued, narrativized, transformed, and expressed within the mediated logics of late capitalism.

Charles Taylor situates the Western, modern self within a long historical trajectory of selfhood, vestiges of which remain in our contemporary version. He describes this modern self as having an interiority that can—indeed must—be excavated, and is the source of the truth of a person. Even though the Greeks had a concept of interiority, it was not until Augustine in the fourth century that the idea of the self became an inner space one could enter to look up toward God. This inner
space was radically revised and somewhat secularized in eighteenth-century Romanticism, which posited the inner self as the essence of moral authority and truth, unencumbered by the alienating demands of industrializing societies. This interior self was the source of the inner voice, variously conceived by the Romantics as the voice of nature, creativity, and feeling. The exploration and articulation of the inner self produces a sense of endless depths of the soul: “The inescapable feeling of depth comes from the realization that whatever we bring up, there is always more down there. Depth lies in there being always, inescapably, something beyond our articulative power.”

Michel Foucault looks at the modern self in institutional terms, produced through religious confession. He argues that the self is not a preexisting fact that must be expressed but is, instead, brought into being through the very act of articulation. Nikolas Rose draws on Foucault to consider how the idea of the self has been reworked in the twentieth century through the “psy disciplines”: psychiatry, psychology, and psychoanalysis, as well as popularized forms of self-help. Rose writes, “The self’ does not pre-exist the forms of its social recognition; it is a heterogeneous and shifting resultant of the social expectations targeted upon it, the social duties accorded it, the norms according to which it is judged, the pleasures and pains that entice and coerce it, the forms of self-inspection inculcated in it, the languages according to which it is spoken about and about which it learns to account for itself in thought and speech.” Both Foucault and Rose are attentive to the ways that discourses of the self serve institutional demands: for them, church and state. But Rose also mentions how the discourses of the psy disciplines have been reproduced through popular media: “A new genre of publishing has made rapid strides. Bookshops fill with paperbacks, each advocating a different therapeutic system and educating the reader in the procedures by which he or she can be transformed from dissatisfaction to fulfillment by systematically acting upon the psyche.”

Taylor also addresses how the modern self has been produced through mediated forms. He argues that the ideal of ordinariness, fundamental to the reality genre, emerged with the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century. Moving away from archetypal plots and dramas, novels required that general principles be read from the particular and
everyday. Novels also endorsed the values of sentiment and strategies of narrativization that affirmed the Romantic inner self, sentiments and narratives that transformed the ordinary into the uniquely individual. Graeme Turner argues that the contemporary media landscape, characterized in part by unprecedented opportunities for ordinary people to represent themselves, offers new possibilities of self-recognition, even construction: “Where the media might once have operated as a mediator or perhaps a broadcaster of cultural identities, its contemporary function is closer to that of a translator or even an author of identities.” Reality television doesn’t fictionalize ordinariness, as in the novel, it represents ordinary people—or at least unusual groups of ordinary people willing to be represented in their ordinariness to potentially vast numbers of strangers.

Taylor sees the Romantic self as already reflexive, focused on exploring the inner depths, expressing the voice of truth discovered there, and drawing on mediated forms to articulate narratives of the self. Anthony Giddens builds on this to argue that modern identity has become increasingly self-reflexive; in contrast to the premodern self who was constrained by role and structural position, the modern self “has to be reflexively made . . . amid a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities.” Makeover television’s raison d’être is to help people navigate this puzzling diversity of possibilities: What to wear? How to eat? Who to be? Makeover television is paradigmatically self-reflexive in Giddens’s terms: its narratives and modes of representation posit identity, body, affect, and behavior as an intensely involving project of the self. The genre narrates that self as having a (traumatic) past and (idealized) future in a journey of self-discovery that requires constant self-scrutiny and revision. The shows reproduce and rework other narrativized and mediated modes of self-production, borrowing from the psy disciplines as well as women’s magazines, talk shows, and self-help literature. Most seductively, makeover television shares with Romanticism the assumption that only through self reflexivity can subjects find their authentic, inner being: a self capable of being “true to oneself.” As Rachel Dubrofsky argues in her study of the series The Bachelor and The Bachelorette, the function of reality shows is less to effect personal transformation than it is to affirm “the constant (unchanged) self across disparate social spaces, verified by surveillance.”
Giddens and other advocates argue that reflexivity allows agency and choice, thereby affording individuals greater personal freedom. Ulrich Beck, for example, posits that reflexivity promotes autonomy from social structures and hierarchies: “The more societies are modernized, the more agents (subjects) acquire the ability to reflect on the social conditions of their existence and to change them accordingly.” Reflexivity encourages agency and allows for “detraditionalization”: freeing oneself from structural determinations, norms, and expectations. Both Giddens and Beck hold an optimistic view of reflexivity, insofar as this allows subjects to critique the social and economic conditions of modernity. However, as Beverly Skeggs notes, historians and theorists of consumer and popular culture have traced the rise of introspection and self-expression to the formation of the professional classes. In contrast, “the working-class have consistently been represented as incapable of acquiring the psychological depth needed for self-governance; hence their association with the ‘mass.’” Lifestyle television broadcasts beyond traditional class boundaries the expectation that learning to be self-reflexive is both therapeutically good and facilitating of upward class mobility.

Despite the troubling implications of self-introspection as a class project, the possibilities of reflexivity have been compelling for scholars who are interested in resisting some of the more top-down models of media effects. Media literacy aims to train audiences in a reflexive appraisal of the economic, industrial, technological, and aesthetic contexts of media production. This appraisal, it is hoped, protects audiences from an uncritical absorption of texts’ most nefarious messages. Two British scholars, Annette Hill and John Corner, argue that the aesthetics of reality television encourage audiences’ reflexive attitudes toward the genre. As with other reality genres, makeover show routines prompt media reflexivity by showing candidates talking directly to camera and by allowing glimpses of production equipment such as microphones and cameras. In addition, the frictions between fact and fiction and between entertainment and education, which give the reality metagenre its frisson, leave enough contradictions for audiences to appraise its truth claims. The ways in which the genre leaves its seams showing encourage viewers to consider the “reality” of reality television as constructed.
Reflexivity also has a long tradition in social science research and writing. Pierre Bourdieu has advocated “epistemic reflexivity” through which sociology “continually turns back onto itself the scientific weapons it produces.” This is consistent with Bourdieu’s analysis of habitus and field; within the field of intellectual inquiry, the scholar must rigorously investigate her own habitus and the routines of thought that shape this. Wacquant describes this approach: “What has to be constantly scrutinized and neutralized, in the very act of construction of the object, is the collective scientific unconscious embedded in theories, problems, and (especially national) categories of scholarly judgment.” For Bourdieu and Wacquant, this does not only mean that researchers must pay attention to their social position (gender, class, and so on) but also to the investments and limits of their intellectual field. These include the assumptions that underpin the intellectual enterprise itself and that radically separate thinking from the object of thought: “The subject of reflexivity must ultimately be the social scientific field in toto.” Importantly for Bourdieu, reflexivity must be a social commitment, not an individual one, and he derides what he sees as an American fashion in the social sciences for a solipsistic focus on scholars’ personal feelings and biography. As with the other kinds of reflexivity, true epistemic reflexivity represents freedom, “the means of a potentially liberating awakening of consciousness.” Bourdieu’s characteristically pessimistic view of social change is leavened here by an optimism of method.

Even with the different foci of these three types of reflexivity—towards the self, media, and method—they share some fundamental features. For Giddens, reflexivity means being able to reflect on one’s life and history and to construct a coherent (if changing) narrative about the self. For Beck, reflexivity means being able to consider and possibly detach from the limits posed by one’s class and gender. For Corner and Hill, reflexivity involves assessing reality television’s generic conventions and aesthetics to critique its truth claims. For Bourdieu and others interested in methodological concerns, reflexivity is a responsibility for researchers to consider our own habitus and investments in shaping the assumptions and techniques of research. These three foci of reflexivity share fundamental features: the ability to see a phenomenon (the self, social structures, a text, a method) in context; to consider the possible influences this context has on the phenomenon; and to be attentive to
processes, not only outcomes, because phenomena are always contingently situated in time and space. Further, these perspectives assume that reflexivity affords freedom from tradition, from the text, and from a partial worldview. Reflexivity is fundamentally illuminating.

Reflexivity proved a very productive concept in making sense of participants’ engagements with the shows. It helped to situate the various ways they distanced from the texts even as they reinvested in them. It illuminated some of the pleasures of media critique, and ways to understand how these critiques were a form of knowing self-production within the research context. As I worked with this concept, however, I became suspicious of it. My critique of reflexivity was initially prompted by the data from interviewees and survey respondents. I noticed that even though people critiqued the advice offered by the shows’ hosts, few people challenged the value placed on expertise in the shows. They hated product placement but didn’t comment on consumption as a taken-for-granted method of self-transformation. They critiqued the realism of the shows’ production processes but reinvested in the emotional realism reproduced through these processes. They reflected on their life trajectories and interior experiences, but not on the processes of narrativization and interiority themselves. If self-reflexivity facilitated a freedom from tradition, why did the outcomes of the makeovers seem so formulaic? If media reflexivity allowed a distance from the shows, why did people continue to watch and invest in them? Rather than presuming that reflexive audiences were freed from the texts, the reflexivity prompted by the shows seemed recursive, rerouting audiences back into the texts even as they felt mastery over them.

My suspicion was also aroused by the assumption that reflexivity is a value that we all, of course, uphold. It has entered the terminology of a wide range of activities—at the very least, documentary filmmaking, scholarly research, ethnographic writing, media literacy, and self-help. As the word becomes broadly adopted, it is both taken for granted and increasingly indistinct, what Gramsci called common sense. We assume reflexivity to be such a natural good that its ideological work is overlooked. Part of this ideological work can be seen in its paradoxical reproduction of gendered and classed norms. Lisa Adkins, for example, argues that:
reflexivity should not be confused with (or understood to concern) a liberal freedom to question and critically deconstruct the rules and norms which previously governed gender. Indeed rather than detraditionalizing, it will be suggested that reflexivity is linked to a reworking or refashioning of gender, indeed that reflexivity is perhaps better conceived as a habit of gender in late modernity.46

I began to look at reflexivity within a discussion of “women’s culture” that spans, for example, Janice Radway’s research on readers of romance novels and Lauren Berlant’s discussion of “cruel optimism” in relation to melodrama.47 As do other forms of traditionally women-targeted media, makeover shows contain the promise of fulfillment, agency, and self-determination. But they are also “juxtapolitical,” where “feminine realist-sentimentality thrives in proximity to the political” but never fully engages with a feminist critique, instead offering emotional succor and a sense of community.48 Many of the women we talked to critiqued some of the shows’ impossible demands to conform to unachievable (for most of us) standards of attractiveness, for example. They nevertheless situated happiness within consumer and domestic economies that are not invested in women’s empowerment. The reflexive opportunities within makeover television did not prompt in audiences a stark appraisal of the workings of social structures, but reproduced these workings through their appeals to emotional authenticity.

I have also become interested in the ideological work reflexivity does in the area of audience research, which has traditionally been very attentive to the epistemological challenges of understanding the processes of reception. In their consideration of their research methods, Skeggs, Thumim, and Wood question the “finding” of reflexive subjects of lifestyle television. They argue that audiences’ critical distance on reality shows did not display freedom from class structures but was a performance of cultural capital: “Self-reflexivity itself depends upon access to resources and concomitant forms of capital that are classed, raced, and gendered.”49 Similarly, my critique of self and media reflexivity as a contemporary common sense is complemented here by critical attention to the research process itself. Respondents were sometimes reflexive about their participation in research, and used the frame of the makeover to describe this experience. One woman, for example, compared the
self-consciousness of being on reality television with her experience of being recorded in our interview. Another affirmed the value of authenticity in the interview setting, commenting that she was “trying to be as honest as I can be” in her conversation with us. Research reflexivity provided participants an opportunity to situate themselves and their media practices within their understanding of popular and scholarly critiques of lowbrow reality television. But as with their reflexive frames regarding the makeover shows themselves, this reflexivity remained recursive, where participants affirmed their position as having awareness and agency within the research context, but did not critique the research enterprise itself (at least to us). Audience studies that rely on self-reporting in surveys and interviews, as this one does, risk reproducing similar norms of reflexivity as do the makeover shows themselves. Both audience studies and makeover shows require that participants see themselves as if from outside, reflect on their contexts, narrate stories about themselves, and are authentic and expressive. Rather than seeing this as a paralyzing epistemological crisis, however, I argue that the processes of self-making inherent to both makeover television and audience research can productively inform a larger critique of reflexivity as contemporary common sense.

The Reveal: Coming Up Next

The chapters that follow take reflexivity and its limits as a primary lens through which to understand these highly invested audiences’ engagement with makeover shows. The following chapter takes a brief detour away from audience data to contextualize makeover shows within a longer history of gendered self-improvement. I consider their highly normative values of femininity, upward mobility, discreet sexuality, and “ethnic anonymity.” Describing the four shows as an articulation of women’s culture allows for a consideration of how this culture becomes democratized as a luxury that not only white, middle-class women must afford.

Chapters 3 through 5 consider the participants’ responses in terms of the three central debates in makeover television scholarship: governmentality, surveillance, and realism. Chapter 3 complicates the critique that reality television produces obliging, rational, self-governing
citizens. In contrast to this view, I found that many of the people we spoke to were highly reflexive about the instruction and consumer advice presented in the shows. Even when viewers discussed adopting guidance from the shows, this was far from a willing absorption and reproduction of the shows’ rationalities. The degree to which audiences discussed adopting the shows’ instructional and consumer imperatives was uneven, and audiences were as likely to critique the training and consumer messages they saw. I also consider how social uses of the shows—among viewers’ intimate circle as well as online—temper our understanding of their didactic impact.

In chapter 4 I address audiences’ perceptions of the makeover shows’ representational routines. I embed viewers’ responses at the intersection of two critiques of the shows’ visual strategies: that makeover television promotes a distancing schadenfreude in audiences, on the one hand, and self-surveillance, on the other. Audiences distinguished what they saw as necessary social shaming from cruel humiliation, sometimes distancing from candidates, at other times identifying with them. Even as they critiqued the ways the shows represented candidates, however, there was some evidence that the audiences imagined how they would look if rendered through the scopic technologies of the shows (hidden cameras, mirrors, the eyes of the hosts). This suggests that the prophylactic assumptions of media reflexivity (being able to see and critique representational strategies) did not necessarily protect audiences from adopting these strategies in a process of self-reflexivity.

Chapter 5 engages with debates about reality shows and their realism. I found that the audiences we talked to were highly reflexive about the media they consume: the artifices of makeover shows, their editing conventions, the need to attract audiences, and so on. At the same time, they were highly invested in the narratives’ emotional realism as a resource for self-reflexivity. As with audiences’ critiques of the shows’ instructional and representational strategies, their skepticism about realism afforded a more invested engagement with the self-reflexive aspects of the shows.

Chapter 6 draws together threads from the preceding chapters to consider how audiences mobilized the shows’ themes to produce a reflexive self. They drew self-reflexive themes from the episodes, employing mediated narratives to articulate selves that have interiority, seek
congruence between an inner and outer self, and need to be expressed. I look at this as a reworking of Romantic ideas of the self within the neoliberal attention to self-production through a mediated, commercial gaze. I return to the suggestion that reflexivity is detraditionalizing to argue that makeover shows’ dependence on rituals borrowed from Christianity, law enforcement, education, and elsewhere in fact reproduce highly institutionalized ideas about the self. This chapter argues that the reflexive self is not an inevitable manifestation of modernity but an accomplishment achieved by these audiences, in part through their engagement with makeover television.

Chapter 7 turns a skeptical gaze on reflexivity in the process of audience research itself. Here I consider the ways in which audiences are aware of their participation in the research process, explicitly shaping their narratives of their viewing pleasures and life stories and critiquing interviewers’ techniques, and using the interview as an opportunity to display expertise. I conclude by considering the extent to which reflexivity may be a classed and gendered performance demanded by the research context, and the implications of this for audience research.

The concluding chapter revisits arguments about makeover television and audience research in light of reflexivity. I argue that by seeing how people work with makeover texts, we can move beyond a current textual emphasis on instruction and self-discipline. I also consider how thinking about reflexivity in makeover television aids a reconsideration of some of the central debates within audience research. These include what we mean by “the audience” and how we understand audiences as self- and institutionally aware participants in the research process itself. I conclude that reflexivity does not simply “free” audiences from the imperatives of makeover texts, or research participants from the academic enterprise. It does, however, require that we rethink reflexive selfhood as a negotiation between institutions and human qualities—longing, possibility, connectedness—that cannot be entirely encompassed by institutions or texts.

*The Makeover: Reality Television and Reflexive Audiences* is shaped by stories: the shows’ stories of transformation, stories that our participants told us about watching the shows, stories that they told about themselves through their engagement with the shows, stories that I tell from the data. There are many paths through these stories; the route
I follow explores audiences’ narratives in which the self has a highly reflexive attitude toward the self and its contexts. I do not see makeover shows as yet another example of how media dupe audiences into being ideologically docile. Far from being duped, audiences are well able to recognize and articulate the shows’ constructions. Reflexivity, however, does not afford audiences unlimited agency or freedom to self-define, but can also be considered a new type of habitus that comes with demands and expectations. Makeover shows mobilize stories of the self that rework older, Romantic ideas about intimacy with the self, that provide a sense of postfeminist agency, and that manage the inevitable disappointments of making do in a world which fails to hold the interests of ordinary people as its central concern.