Sabotaging Reality: Exploring Canadian Women’s Participation on Neoliberal Reality TV

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ABSTRACT It has been argued that reality TV competition shows mirror the contemporary neoliberal workplace by devaluing and exploiting the labour performed by contestants, especially work that is tied to the feminine, such as managing emotions. This study expands on these recent debates about gender, neoliberalism, and reality TV through the lens of the experiences of former show contestants. The author conducted semi-structured interviews with a small group of Canadian women who appeared on talent-based competition shows and found that while there is much to lament with respect to women’s treatment, their stories also reflect strong themes of resistance, and attempts to undermine the production process as a way to assert their agency individually but also collectively.

KEYWORDS Feminism; Gender; Television; Reality TV contestants; Neoliberalism

RÉSUMÉ Certains critiques ont soutenu que les émissions de téléréalité de compétition reproduisent un lieu de travail néolibéral en dévaluant et en exploitant les tâches effectuées par les participants, surtout celles associées au féminin telles que la maîtrise de ses émotions. Cette étude poursuit ces débats récents sur le genre, le néolibéralisme et la téléréalité en enquêtant sur les expériences d’anciennes participantes à ces émissions. À ce titre, l’auteure a mené des entretiens semi-directifs avec un petit groupe de femmes canadiennes ayant figuré dans des émissions de compétition et a trouvé que, bien qu’il y ait beaucoup à regretter par rapport au traitement des femmes, leurs histoires comportent des éléments de résistance ainsi que des efforts de contourner le processus de production de manière à affirmer leur autonomie individuelle et collective.

MOTS CLÉS Féminisme; Genre; Télévision; Participants à la téléréalité; Néolibéralisme; Travail

Introduction
Reality TV has become a staple of North American television programming schedules, in part, because it is viewed as an inexpensive alternative to domestic programming (such as primetime dramas) (Andrejevic, 2004; Baltruschat, 2009; Magder, 2004; Raphael, 2004; Waisbord, 2004). The proliferation of reality TV specifically within Canada is also the result of changes to government policies that emphasize neoliberal values—deregulation, entrepreneurialism, market-based solutions, and consumer choice, which in turn has resulted in ongoing funding cuts to the media arts and especially the CBC,
Canada’s national public broadcaster (Beaty & Sullivan, 2006). Despite the popular and critical backlash towards the growth of domestically produced reality TV shows, there is nothing to indicate that it will disappear any time in the foreseeable future.¹

Academic writing on Canadian reality TV reflects these concerns, most often addressing how the various formats grapple with and negotiate the themes of nationhood, citizenship and gender (see, for example, Baltruschat, 2009; Boyd, 2012; Byers, 2008; de B'béri & Middlebrook, 2009; Matheson, 2010; Rak, 2008). Yet, much of this work, like most of the academic literature on reality TV more generally, tends to focus on analyzing specific shows or their audiences rather than approaching the topic from the perspective of the contestants. This article seeks to address this gap in the literature by sharing results of a larger qualitative study of women who appeared on talent-based competition programmes. While I went into the study wanting to gain a deeper understanding of the growth of audience participation via reality TV, and why women in particular opted to become reality show contestants, I found over the course of the study that there were parallels between how the women described what it was like being competitors and the ongoing feminist debates about gender, work, creativity and neoliberalism (see Gill, 2007; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Gray, 2003; McRobbie, 2002, 2007, 2010; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). Media scholars have also been attentive to the ways in which reality TV competition shows reflect neoliberal values of competition, hyper-individualism, and personal responsibility (Andrejevic, 2004; Coudry, 2008; Grazian, 2010; Hasinoff, 2008; Hearn, 2008; Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Wissinger, 2010). Despite the similarities, however, the interviews also offer new insights and ways of thinking about neoliberal reality TV and show contestants. Thus, the primary goal of this article is to shed light on those aspects that are not well understood or have received very little attention to date in the literature. Of particular interest is what the interviews with former show contestants can tell us about what it means to labour on reality TV, and how the women navigated the industrial constraints imposed upon them. Indeed, as will become clear, while there is much to lament with respect to women’s treatment, their stories also reflect strong themes of resistance, and attempts to undermine the production process as a way to assert their agency individually but also collectively.

Situating reality TV contestants
The scholarship on reality TV tends to focus on textual criticism of specific shows and on audiences of reality TV but very little has been written about show contestants, “the constituency most underrepresented in current scholarship on reality programming” (Grindstaff, 2009, p. 46). The existing literature is mostly concerned with understanding the growth of “ordinary” people on television (i.e., reality shows, talk shows) and the power relations that underpin their participation (Andrejevic, 2004; Broadcasting Standards Commission, 2000; Coudry, 2000; Gamson, 1998; Grindstaff, 2002; Turner, 2010). This work has been important in understanding how television, as an ideological and economic institution, structures the participation of “ordinary” folks in the television process. This work does not, however, deal specifically with women’s participation in reality TV, except for Laura Grindstaff’s (2009) research on women who appeared on the American reality series Sorority Life.
Reality show contestants are no longer just ordinary people exploited on television for entertainment; rather, they have become celebrities in their own right. Newspaper articles and entertainment reports show that many former contestants (especially in the US) have parlayed their exposure into further work in the entertainment industry. Sue Collins (2008) contends that reality show participants have become integral to the celebrity eco-system as a kind of surplus labour or “disposable celebrity” (p. 104) that the industry can exploit, which ultimately helps to prop up the traditional star system. Similarly, Grindstaff (2009) contends that ordinary celebrity is a result of “self-service television” (p. 45), where contestants are given the materials and prompts by producers and crew to create successful celebrity personas. Their celebrity designation, however, is a precarious one: they face much controversy and backlash, they are constantly reminded of their “D-list” status (Palmer, 2005), and their participation in the media often gets reframed as narcissistic and pathological (Couldry, 2000). The backlash tends to be more vitriolic and venomous when it comes to female reality show participants—think Snooki from MTV’s The Jersey Shore or Kim Kardashian from E!’s Keeping up with the Kardashians—who are often judged and ridiculed for lacking any perceived “real” talent (see Williamson, 2010).

Women’s participation in “self-service television” (Grindstaff, 2009, p. 45) is also symptomatic of the turn towards neoliberalism and its rebranding of the self as a commodity to be constantly worked over and improved upon (Hearn, 2008). Media scholars have shown this extensively in analyzing how reality TV shows embody neoliberal values of competition, flexibility, personal responsibility, hyper-individualism and commodification of the self (see Boyd, 2012; Byers, 2008; Grazian, 2010; Hasinoff, 2008; Hearn, 2008; Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Ringrose & Walkderine, 2008; Wissinger, 2010). For instance, Laurie Ouellette and James Hay (2008) have argued that reality TV places the onus on individuals to take personal responsibility for all “choices” and also redefines personal success, not “through ‘society’ or collectively, but through their choices in the privatized spheres of lifestyles, domesticity and consumption” (p. 12). Women have been a particular focus of such programming, as neoliberalism intersects with the self-help and expert advice offered by reality TV, encouraging women to take personal responsibility for their lives rather than look to the state to accommodate them (Ouellette, 2004). In turn, this ideological paradigm ignores systemic inequalities that constrain or partially determine our access to certain resources, forms of capital, and entitlements or privileges. Indeed, reality TV has been particularly adept at exploiting the labour of those most affected by economic insecurity: women, the poor, and racial and sexual minorities (Hearn, 2008). The competition format common in reality TV especially embodies the free-market, individualistic spirit and morals of neoliberalism and the myth of meritocracy—the belief that any woman can make it if she just works hard enough and makes the right life choices regardless of race, class, ability, or sexuality—which is reflected in the format’s cut-throat competitive environment where contestants are faced with impossible tasks and deadlines and are encouraged to view their co-competitors as an obstacle on the path to success (Grazian, 2010; Ouellette & Hay 2008; Redden, 2010; Wissinger, 2010). Moreover, reality game shows set the stage for the neoliberal workplace by demanding “compulsory self-staging, required team-
work, and regulation by unquestionable external authority mediated by equally unquestionable norms or ‘values’” (Couldry, 2008, p. 14).

The expansion of the neoliberal paradigm into public policy through funding cuts, erosion of the welfare state, and other austerity measures that target education and social services, combined with a stagnant economy, have made competing for work via reality TV an attractive option for the young and educated trying to find their way into the world of stable paid work (especially in the creative fields, which have always been unstable and subject to “boom and bust” cycles). Unsurprisingly then, many reality TV competition shows often take place within the creative sectors (such as fashion and entertainment), which tend to attract young, artistically inclined men and women seeking a cool and/or glamorous, as well as financially rewarding career. In reality, they are more likely to spend most of their post-graduate years working in low paid, unstable, contract-based positions or unpaid internships (Grazian, 2010). The increase in low (or no) paying precarious work is also tied to gendered notions of work.

As Madeleine Schwartz (2013) observes, “[t]he industries that rely on internships, such as fashion, media and the arts, are feminized ones” (n.p.). Moreover, even the terms used in the industry to describe the type of employee demanded by the “post-work economy” are gendered: “we’re all expected to be demure, enthusiastic, quick learners, and adaptable, the characteristics of a good secretary” (Schwartz, 2013, n.p.). Reality competition shows that take place in the creative fields reproduce such distinctions by devaluing the affective labour of female contestants, even though it is integral to their performances, such as managing their own and others emotions, creating drama for the cameras, or playing up a particular character type such as “the villain,” “bitch” or “the smart girl.” Discourses of authenticity mask the labour involved in being a reality TV competitor, and women are doubly affected because the soft skills that they possess due to gender socialization processes are devalued because of their association with the feminine. Indeed, skills and abilities like caring, being sociable, demonstrating good communication skills, and nurturing others are viewed as an extension of the reproductive work that women have done historically in the home (Gregg, 2009). Often, such work by reality show contestants is rendered invisible or secondary to the “real” work of the competition, such as singing or modelling, even though it is the emotional work by these contestants that produces the audience-drawing dramatic elements. Similarly, in the creative sectors, this kind of “emotion-work” is not typically viewed in monetary terms, even though such “soft skills” have become increasingly desired in job candidates (Gill & Pratt, 2008).

Because women have been more socialized to perfect these emotional skills in order to successfully perform hegemonic femininity, they are in many ways better equipped to adapt to this new work economy. This may help to explain why the women of reality TV have become symbols of the entrepreneurial, internship-based economy, functioning as mentors and role models for young women wishing to make a name for themselves in the creative sectors (for instance, see *Kell on Earth* (Bravo, 2010), *The Hills* (MTV, 2006-2010), and *The Rachel Zoe Project* (Bravo, 2008-present). These successful women are “enterprising subjects” (Gray, 2003) who
unproblematically inhabit both a masculine, rational, productive workers
self, and a (hetero)sexualized feminine, (appropriately) reproductive iden-
tity that both consumes itself into being and is the object of consumption.
(Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 231)

In a similar fashion, women reality show competitors are under pressure to suc-
cessfully perform this neoliberal model of womanhood, to be adaptable, flexible, com-
pliant, self-disciplining, and to take personal responsibility for all life choices. However,
this overlooks the ways in which contestants utilize their skills and knowledge to nav-
igate the shows in complex and compelling ways. Thus, my interviews with former con-
testants contribute to these discussions by bringing attention to the work performed
by the women that is not explicitly tied to their on-camera performances. Rather, this
article helps to shed light on how even within the context of reality TV, women continue
to participate in undervalued forms of labour, reinforcing the notion that there is valued
work (here the official competition work, such as modeling or fashion design) and
work that is considered secondary or less important to the show (such as managing
one’s emotions, or others, as well as just navigating the reality show space).

Interviewing (extra)ordinary women
The interviews undertaken for this project were informed by feminist research prac-
tices (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Contemporary approaches to qualitative interviewing em-
phasize active and cooperative relationships between the researcher and respondent,
and are self-conscious and reflexive about the ways in which the researcher plays a
role in helping to construct meaning in the interview process. As noted by Jaber
Gubrium and James Holstein (2001), this marks a movement away from earlier for-
mulations of the interview process as a one-way process, whereby the respondent was
viewed as a passive repository of information that could be accessed by the researcher
in an objective, neutral setting. Indeed, feminist researchers challenge the strict di-
chotomies between researcher and research participant, making allowances for the
messiness that sometimes comes with interviewing human subjects (see Oakley, 1981).
Understanding that interviews are not always easy or clear-cut helped me to adapt to
the particularities and challenges posed by each interview, allowing some flexibility
in how I communicated and interacted with each woman.

I used a semi-structured interviewing format (an interview guide with broadly
defined questions), and the study was approved by the university’s office of research
ethics. I interviewed 14 former contestants, ranging in age from late teens to mid-
30s, who competed on Canadian competition reality shows: Canadian Idol (CTV,
2003-2008), Canada’s Next Top Model (City TV, 2006-2007; CTV, 2009), Popstars:
Boy Meets Girls (Global, 2002), Project Runway Canada (Slice, 2007; Global, 2009),
and So You Think You Can Dance Canada (CTV, 2008-2011). Two of the interviewees
appeared on the American competition show Rock Star: INXS (CBS, 2005), which
included a global cast of male and female participants. Approximately half of the in-
terviews took place online via Skype and email, and the other half in-person over a
period of six months. Each participant gave informed consent and was given the op-
tion to create a pseudonym.
The women were at different points in their lives, in terms of work and education. All of the women had prior professional experience in their respective fields. The women came from a range of ethnic groups, primarily Caucasian, Asian-Canadian, Afro-Canadian, and Aboriginal. One woman disclosed her sexual orientation as lesbian, and only one woman was a mother. Significantly, all but two of the women went back to living fairly “ordinary” lives, either by going back to work or school post-show, suggesting that within this group of women, definitions of success were not heavily tied to their television appearance, and in fact, only two of the women framed their participation as part of a bigger desire to become a public figure or celebrity. This finding meshes with other literature suggesting that other factors, such as identity politics and wanting to be a part of the process, can play a part in an individual’s desire to appear on television (Broadcasting Standards Commission, 2000; Grindstaff, 2009).

My pool of respondents was drawn from an existing sample frame, as the criteria for participation were quite specific and applicable to a very narrow demographic: a Canadian citizen, 19 years of age or older, who had appeared on a competition or talent-based reality show. Gaining access to the contestants proved to be a formidable challenge, even though I set out with the intention of interviewing 15–20 participants, I still fell short by one. I was surprised by how difficult it was to get women to participate in my study, as I contacted a total of 83 women, yet my response rate was very low at less than 20 percent.

I conducted an intense Web search, compiling information on all former female contestants that appeared on popular Canadian competition talent-based shows. Due to their public status and local celebrity, it was not difficult to find basic information such as full name, age, location and even contact information, as some women had professional websites. I also made use of the social media site Facebook and located many former contestants there. I sent invitations/calls for participants using Facebook’s “message” function. As per the requirements of the ethics review board, I identified myself clearly, in addition to outlining the study details and participant criteria. Relying on Facebook to make “first contact” (Baltar & Brunet, 2012, p. 70) did pose some challenges: irregular access or abandoned accounts, users reading your message as spam, and participants dealing with large volumes of messages. Many of the women I contacted had recently appeared on television, so were still in the public eye and likely wary of answering any unsolicited email.

The snowballing method was also used and resulted in three interviews. Using existing social networks and/or asking for referrals from interviewees made particular sense for my project because “one is now more likely to be someone, or to know someone who has been on television” (Redmond, 2006, p.28). This did not always pan out, however, as having a common connection was not enough to encourage some women to share their stories with me for personal reasons.

The interviews typically lasted from 1–3 hours, were recorded, and took place in public settings, such as coffee shops, as well as private settings, such as interviewees’ homes (as well as mine). I used question prompts as a general guide, but I also left room for the interviews to unfold more organically. Participants were asked questions grouped around several broad themes: the process of participating in the show, the
ways in which participating did or did not help them to meet their professional goals, general comments on reality TV’s portrayal of women, and any changes in their understanding of reality TV post-show. Transcribed interviews were then analyzed for common themes, and a qualitative software program was used to help categorize and organize key passages that could then be returned to for further investigation.

**Labouring on the reality competition show**

Through analyzing the interview data, it became clear that there were connections between the labour that the women performed on the competition shows, and academic scholarship on the changing work economy. Indeed, as already discussed, many scholars have persuasively shown links between the work performed on reality TV and the work performed in the new economy, yet the emotion-work so integral to on-screen performances and managing teams of people in the workplace, are still undervalued because of their association with the feminine. The findings discussed here substantiate the idea that the work performed on competition shows is a reflection of the turn towards neoliberalism, and that contestants also participate in propping up this logic.

The findings shared in this article, however, also expand upon this area of inquiry to show how women’s reality TV labour is informed by other desires that exist outside the commercial logic of the show. Therefore, rather than focus on how their on-screen performances do or do not conform to this new ideal, my discussion of the research reveals how the women engaged in other forms of labour that remain hidden from the official show narrative—the emotion-work that disrupts the flow of the production.

**Bodily limitations**

All of the women, at some point during the interview, commented on the toll that competing on the show took on them, both mentally and physically. The hyper-intense competition environment and a hectic and unpredictable filming schedule forced the women to push their bodies to the limit, as the competition was not only based on skill or talent but also on endurance. The producers of the shows were clearly aware of what they were asking the contestants to do because they equipped the production space with products to help the contestants manage the inevitable effects on their bodies. As Shelly recalled during her interview,

> It was definitely draining. They had those emergency packets. They had cases of them free ... because you will get sick from being so drained and stuff (emphasis added). They had Cold-FX. All that kind of stuff. If you felt anything coming on you're like pumping all this stuff into yourself.

Another participant, Carla, told a similar story. She recognized how the show’s competition structure is set up to make most people fail because they are pushed beyond their physical and mental limits, even as she ended up reframing this result as a personal failure on the part of the participants. Indeed, she indicated that her body ultimately let her down, as happened to other contestants.

> I understood why [I got voted off]. It was because I lost my mind and I’d had no sleep, like basically my creative juices were gone. I was sucked dry like I didn’t have anything else in my brain. I had a design, I was gonna do it and it didn’t work out. I understand now watching the American
ones why it gets so bad near the end … the designs are just not that great and I understand why. Because you just get so exhausted emotionally and physically and all your design powers are going [sic]. Your brain’s dead basically.

Franke echoed these sentiments in her interview, noting that it is in the producer’s interest to push contestants to their limits, in order to manipulate the contestants into creating dramatic content for the show.

[T]he whole thing is based on wearing you down … exhaustion … that’s how you get fighting because [you’re] tired, [you] go home, and there’s bottles of wine, there’s every liquor you can possibly think of, and then the next day they would fill it right back up once you drank it. You know when people are inebriated, tired, frustrated, that’s where the fighting and the bitching comes in.

Reports of plying contestants with alcohol has been documented in the press (Wyatt, 2009), and this in combination with irregular sleep, intense and long days competing, and the general stress and anxiety that would come with immersing one’s self in such an environment are a recipe for harm. Within the discourse of reality TV, such manipulations are downplayed or marginalized in order to advance the show’s claims to be real. Instead, the neoliberal logic of the competition show dictates that everyone is responsible for their choices, even if those choices/reactions are justified, given the unusual circumstances as well as the impossible expectations placed on contestants. The women’s reactions, while often critical of their tactics, are ultimately sympathetic towards the producers, showing how they internalize neoliberal values of personal responsibility and were flexible subjects. Similar to the earlier discussion of women working in the new economy, this group of women understands that contending with these undesirable conditions is what they must endure in order to remain in the competition and if they hope to benefit from other tangential rewards, such as public exposure and the possibility of more work opportunities post-show. As Laurie Ouellette (2004) illustrates in her analysis of Judge Judy, the neoliberal logic of reality TV “does not seek to expand women’s choices, it merely guides them in particular directions” (p. 246). Given that those women who reject the neoliberal values of reality TV are often publicly scolded and ridiculed both on and off screen by show judges, hosts, and audiences, it is no wonder that many of the women I interviewed, made the only logical “choice” presented to them, and rationalized away the systemic failures of the competition format.

**Resisting the camera**

As part of their contract, the reality show contestants must agree to be filmed around the clock, with little or no entitlement to privacy. Show contestants have become savvy about their on-camera performances and have learned through watching reality TV prior to becoming a contestant themselves what producers are looking for from contestants and therefore act accordingly, even if sometimes this means going against their sense of self (Grindstaff, 2009). Building on the idea that show competitors know how to manage their affective responses to the camera, I contend that part of this ne-
gotiation also includes developing strategies to avoid the camera altogether. Through reflecting on the filming process, many of the interviewees talked about either sabotaging the footage or escaping to spaces where they were not under the camera's constant watch. By doing so, the women's actions illustrated how they enacted their agency in service of the self in order to reclaim their autonomy and to reject the dictates of the neoliberal workplace as constructed in reality TV game shows (Couldry, 2008).

Many of the women talked about the invasive nature of the cameras, and how they could find little escape from this constant surveillance. Of course, the “fly-on-the-wall” approach is borrowed from documentary filmmaking as a way to capture “reality,” as it is believed that the camera crew’s job is to film the participants without interfering with or influencing their behaviour in any way. These filming practices, however, are also complicated by the fact that most camera workers are men. The women often commented that this aspect of the competition was strange, especially how they were not allowed to talk to the cameramen. As Lindsey noted in her interview, “the camera guys, who were around us twenty-four-seven, like literally twenty-four-seven, we didn't even know their names” (emphasis added by author). This one-sided relationship meant that the women knew very little about the people filming them, while the crew knew intimate details about the women and had access to contestants’ most private moments and activities. This is significant given how women's bodies are under constant scrutiny in media culture and have, through reality TV, become a source of entertainment (Gill, 2007).

As expected, these filming arrangements became a source of frustration for many of the women. On the one hand the women recognized that the camera crew were just doing their job, but, on the other hand, the women had few emotional outlets to express their frustration at being looked at constantly by men behind a camera. Melissa shared her feelings of annoyance at being constantly subjected to the camera's (male) gaze, and spoke of one particular incident where she vented her feelings quite publicly.

I got mad a lot of the time like, if the camera was following me around, I'd just swear at the camera, because then I knew they couldn't use that footage, right? But then I'd apologize to the cameraman like, “I'm not swearing at you, I'm swearing at the cameras. It's not you, I'm sorry!”

<laughs>

Significantly, Melissa ended her story by stating how she was apologetic for publicly expressing her frustration, and thus rationalized the neoliberal logic of the competition show. Ultimately, she let the cameramen and producers off the hook for having to take responsibility for angering the women with an excessive presence of the camera and potentially inflicting gendered violence on the women by making them feel uncomfortable. Although she appeared to accept the cameras as just part of the show, in the same breath Melissa also revealed how she turned her knowledge of the production rules against the producers. Knowing full well that swearing on camera is not allowed, she did so purposely, making it known to them when she did not want to be filmed.

Acknowledging the camera's presence, or what is referred to as “breaking the fourth wall,” could be a very calculated strategy on the part of the contestant. Similar
to Melissa, Kelly used this piece of information strategically in order to sabotage footage that she did want aired on television.

Kelly: No you can't [look into the camera]. They won't use it. I did on purpose but then they'll never use it. I was smoking a bit, and if I didn't want someone to know, I was like, “You can't use that footage.” And I knew they wouldn't because I looked in the camera. They won't use it. So it's a good way of ...

Natasha: The little techniques ...

Kelly: Yeah, you learn your ways of sabotaging the footage. <laughs>

Thus, swearing at or looking directly into the camera was one way for the women to assert some form of control over the filming process. Moreover, this example illustrates that the emotional labour expected of women can also be used to engage in actions that work to undermine the producers’ authority, even if only temporarily.

In asking the women to reflect on the production process, some of the women shared stories of how they avoided the camera's (male) gaze because it made them uncomfortable. For instance, during a discussion about the lack of privacy during filming, Franke told me how she and Carla would make use of hidden or dark spaces in order to avoid the camera as much as possible when they were getting dressed.

... in the beginning we weren't sure if there were cameras in the apartment, hidden, and Carla and I shared a bedroom, so we would change in the closet in the dark just in case there was a camera around ...

Thus, a seemingly routine activity—getting dressed and undressed—became a source of anxiety and something that had to be carefully managed in order to retain some semblance of privacy. The theme of privacy also came up during my interview with Kelly, and she commented similarly,

There were cameras in the rooms, so if you're changing you can be seen which [was] part of the contract that we signed, so you'd just turn around when taking your shirt off.

The interviews illustrate the fraught relationship that the women had with the cameras and the people operating them. The camera is a constant reminder that they must be “on,” ready and willing to do the work required to construct their competitor persona, and yet several of them fought back against this demand for various reasons, in different ways, and to varying degrees. Through these acts of manipulating the filming rules and the limits of the camera, the women showed how they could be active participants in the reality TV process, making decisions along the way that both conform to and challenge the spatial constraints placed upon them by the production process.3

Claiming space
According to some of the women, the producers could not film when only one person was using the bathroom, and the women were permitted to close and lock the door. This rule was waived if more than one person occupied the bathroom; in these instances contestants could not close the door and would be filmed. As one woman pointed out this was a nuisance when multiple contestants were trying to get ready at
the same time: one person might be showering while another was applying her makeup or getting dressed. The tight scheduling often did not leave the women much time to get ready, thus sharing the bathroom space would have been a necessity, and probably another way in which the producers manipulated the production rules to create drama or tension between contestants.

Some of the women, however, provided examples of how they attempted to wrest back control of the bathroom space for their own purposes, in service of the self and others. For instance, Kelly spoke about the role that the bathroom played as a therapeutic space, where contestants went to deal with personal matters or talk about their feelings with one another.

... bathrooms became the safe haven and if you were going through something with someone, you’d go into the bathroom and do this but it became so much so, that they had to take the locks off the bathrooms because we’d lock and not let the camera crew in, and there’d be stuff happening in there, so they took the locks.

In this example, Kelly and her co-competitors transformed the bathroom into a kind of “safe space” away from the camera’s invasive gaze, and where they engaged in emotion-work—the managing of one’s own and others’ feelings—for the sake of helping another contestant on the show, not for public exposure or as part of the game. However, the more the contestants sought to construct some semblance of privacy, the harder the producers fought back, and in Kelly’s case the producers eventually removed the bathroom locks altogether as a way to reprimand the contestants for their act of defiance.

Yet, Kelly’s example of bending the rules also reveals something equally important; that reality show contestants can, and do, feel a sense of collectivity with each other. This is surprising given that the competition format is structured in such a way as to reward those contestants who successfully embody reality TV’s neoliberal values, especially women, who are bombarded with contradictory media messages that, on the one hand, blame feminism for creating unrealistic demands on women, and on the other hand, rebrand feminism as passé because women have achieved gender equality (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2007). Here we see how women competitors use their developing bonds with each other as a way to get through the stressful competition, which contradicts television’s portrayal of women reality show competitors as stereotypically vindictive, spiteful, bitchy, catty, and so forth. Despite their efforts to carve out counter-spaces away from the camera’s eye, however, contestants are ultimately constrained by the demands of the production/competition.

Melissa also bent the single-occupancy bathroom rule in order to temporarily escape the demands of filming.

I would oftentimes say, “I’m going to the bathroom” and I’d grab my book and I’d run, and then shut the door and lock it, and sit on the floor and read my book for ten minutes.

Here, Melissa converted the bathroom into a space of leisure and comfort, as a way to do something nice for herself. Her memory also speaks to the contestants’ desire to
continue to do the things that they found relaxing or pleasurable before entering the competition; activities that they were often restricted from participating in on-camera. Thus, even the act of reading or listening to music took on a nefarious element when performed during the competition, which in and of itself became a form of pleasure for the women, as Carla explains below.

[W]e weren't allowed to read the paper. We weren't allowed to listen to music, watch TV obviously, read magazines [or] any kind of outside influence that may potentially influence what we make. We would sneak the radio every once in a while. One of the three rooms had a clock radio underneath the bed and we discovered this <laughs> but later on. It was awesome.

Such media embargos are common practice in reality TV filming, as the programmers believe that the “construction of an isolated environment … can force out ‘true’ selves in the ‘pure’ environment of [a] house … [un]touched by the media world” (Holmes, 2008, p. 19). Yet, this belief fails to acknowledge how everyday mundane activities aid in the construction of the contestants’ sense of self, and it underestimates the lengths they will go in order to retain some semblance of their pre-competition lives.

These diversionary tactics show how a small group of women who competed on reality TV challenged the power structures that frame reality TV space as a neoliberal workplace by consciously withholding their labour and by finding ways to engage in activities for self-pleasure. The women’s actions thus challenge our perception of what counts as “active participation” on reality TV. Indeed, much of the current writing tends to emphasise the powerlessness of show contestants and/or overvalues their participation as part of TV’s democratizing role. Only through speaking with reality show contestants about their participation can we gain a deeper appreciation for and understanding of the work that women do on reality competition shows. Through that process, we are able to learn about what fails to make the final cut because of their interventions. The forms of emotion-work described here are not a part of the official show discourse but are no less important. In some ways, they are more salient because refusing to engage in some aspects of affective labour illustrates the limits of the neoliberal paradigm that tells us that we must all become branded-selves in order to succeed in the new economy. These women have shown, through their actions, how emotion-work is also done for the self, for pleasure and not for production value (because the footage is unusable), whereas the emotion-work performed in front of the camera is ultimately in service of the end product: the program.

Conclusion
This article has explored how reality TV competition shows have become a key site for the cultural production of neoliberal subjectivities, and how women in particular have come to symbolize this economic paradigm. As Elizabeth Johnston (2006) writes,

the appeal of today’s reality TV speaks to a desire to control an economy that has become increasingly out of control; ironically, the fantastic reality offered by these shows works to keep economic control in the hands of the elite. (p. 121)
However, my analysis offers fresh insights into these ongoing debates by drawing on original research with former reality show contestants. As this article has shown, the women’s descriptions of their participation certainly support previously made arguments that neoliberalism is embedded at all levels of reality TV production, from the pressure to perform the self for the camera, to the hyper-intensification of work on-screen via challenges and tasks, and the ensuing bodily fallout, to being subjected to constant surveillance via the camera. Significantly, the women revealed, through their personal stories, that they did not simply accept these circumstances or living conditions but actively negotiated their participation throughout the competition process. Through my interviews with former contestants, I have also shown that understanding what happens off-screen is as important to making sense of the text as a whole, as it is to analyze show episodes or how audiences engage with reality TV. Given that reality show contestants are integral to the production of reality TV, it is truly surprising that so little research has been done on them. Hopefully this article will help to jumpstart the conversation and to keep the experiences and stories of reality show contestants, especially women, in the spotlight.

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Notes
1. Much of the criticism taps into the never-ending debates about the encroachment of American popular culture into Canada, as well as the loss of unionized jobs in the media sectors, as reality shows tend to rely heavily on non-unionized workers.
2. For instance, see Eric Olsen (2002); Jennifer Pozner (2004); Siri Agrell (2007); Edward Wyatt (2009); Camille Dodero (2011); Chris Talbott (2012).
3. Not all of the women struggled with such issues, as one former contestant spoke at length about her complicity with filming demands, even going so far as to chastise other contestants who complained. It should be noted that she was the most forthcoming about her desire for public exposure, and has since gone on to become a local celebrity in the Canadian fashion industry.

References
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