SHAPING EMBODIMENT IN *THE SWAN*: FAN AND BLOG DISCOURSES IN MAKEOVER CULTURE

by

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THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in the
Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Summer 2012

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the ubiquity of North American makeover culture from a feminist cultural studies perspective. Using an interdisciplinary and multi-methods approach, I conduct discourse analysis of Fox network’s The Swan (Galan 2004), online audience research of web forums devoted to The Swan, and email interviews with a small group of bloggers who wrote about their cosmetic surgery experiences on the web portal, Makemehotel.com.

A postfeminist, neoliberal discourse of choice utilized in makeover culture belies the continued social and discursive regulation of embodiment, directed primarily at women. This re-regulation of embodiment contains the ontological threat of bodily hybridity made visible in makeover culture. In other words, the potential threat of the surgically altered body to expose the instability of bodily integrity is contained through makeover culture discourse that positions women as passive subjects while simultaneously addressing them as active agents.

I use a somatechnics rubric, a poststructuralist approach developed by scholars meeting bi-annually since 2003 at Australia’s Macquarie University, to interpret the hybridity I identify in makeover culture. Somatechnics scholars foreground the inseparability of the soma (body) and techné (technologies/techniques). My dissertation develops from the theoretical starting point that bodies are never pure, pre-cultural entities. Rather, bodies become meaningful through their relationship with technologies of daily practice. I add to somatechnics scholarship by concentrating on the nuances of makeover culture techniques afforded the most credibility.

Current academic work on makeover culture tends to make generalized assumptions about its participants. By adopting a somatechnic approach, I move beyond well-worn arguments determining agency or coercion of makeover culture subjects. Instead, I concentrate on ambiguities between the natural/constructed or authentic/inauthentic dichotomies in makeover culture discourse. The result is a project that destabilizes moralistic judgements about elective cosmetic body modification and its participants, and refocuses attention to the production of acceptable bodies in popular
texts and mediated personal narratives. This project makes an important contribution to ongoing feminist investigations of normalized body modification practices, and advances the study of makeover culture by relocating the site of analysis to the repetitive form(ul)ation of embodied subjectivity within its symbolic borders.

**Keywords**: makeover culture; discourse; cosmetic surgery; reality TV; postfeminism; online audiences; cosmetic surgery bloggers
DEDICATION

For Derek and Lucy
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my senior supervisor Dr. Helen Leung, whose encouragement, attention to detail, and grace I have benefited from immensely. Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Mary Lynn Stewart and Dr. Catherine Murray, for your challenging questions, your high expectations, and your interest in my work. I must also thank Dr. Jackie Levitin, and Kat and Roberta in the Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies. Thank you to my internal examiner Dr. Zoë Druick and my external examiner Dr. Cressida Heyes. I am grateful that you have shared your time, insight, and expertise with me. My colleagues Dr. Susan Pell, Dr. Trish Garner, and Kelly McManus have been wonderful friends and collaborators, and each has made my research better. I would not have begun this project without the encouragement of Dr. Laura Robinson; she has been a role model and friend, someone whose teaching excellence and passion I hope to emulate in my own career. Thanks also to Dr. Sal Renshaw and Dr. Wendy Peters, who have made my long-distance dissertation writing more manageable through their intellectual stimulation and the opportunity to teach in Nipissing University’s Gender Equality and Social Justice program.

For their technical support, I thank John at Qualis Research, and Sarah Perets at Makemeheal.com. Conducting online research can be challenging unless you have the support of people on the other end. I appreciate their time and effort. Thank you to the wonderful women who replied to my interview request. Your candour about your bodywork was a continued source of inspiration that helped me develop and strengthen my understanding of cosmetic surgery and makeover culture.

Finally, my family has always been incredibly supportive, and despite their occasional lack of clarity regarding what I actually “do,” they have made me the person I am. To my mom Glenda Petrenko, my dad Rick Petrenko, my brothers Matthew Pentney and Ryan Petrenko, and my incredible sister Erin Zapshalla, I love you and thank you all for being as funny, smart, and inspiring as you are. To my husband Derek Serafini and daughter Lucy; love and gratitude for all that you are and all that you share with me.
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1: CONTEXTUALIZING MAINSTREAM BODY MODIFICATION WITHIN FEMINIST THEORIES OF THE BODY: BEYOND THE VICTIM/AGENT DICHOTOMY

1.1 Overview

A ‘makeover culture’ has emerged in North America, in a way that has normalized particular cultural phenomena. For example, breast implants are frequently given to daughters as a gift for high school graduation; ‘Vaginal Rejuvenation’ has been marketed as a tool for women to overcome the physical markers of childbearing; the convenience of the ‘lunch-hour facelift’ has made cosmetic surgery more accessible and affordable to the middle classes than ever; and television programs award women and men who could not otherwise afford it, free, full-body cosmetic surgical procedures with the promise that a better life is sure to follow. Culled from popular culture, these examples point to a milieu of self-improvement that is discursively produced using postfeminist and neoliberal ideologies and marketed by the cosmetic-surgery industry, the weight loss industry, reality TV, and the self-help industry.

Until recently, the makeover was a staple of daytime talk TV and women’s magazines, but since the new millennium there has been such a proliferation and concentration of mainstream media events and related responses that personal transformation, especially elective body modification, has become a mainstay in ever-expanding cultural arenas. This is particularly so in the reality TV genre but also including online discussion networks, the news media, and even more heavily in print magazines (whose intended audiences are not necessarily female). This phenomenon has begun to attract scholars in media, feminist, and audience research.

My dissertation studies the manifestations of makeover culture in mainstream media, and the relationship of makeover culture to second wave and contemporary feminism(s), particularly as makeover culture discourse moves across spaces of online audience participation through media convergence. More specifically, I explore the ways that makeover culture offers guidelines for acceptable presentations of gender, sexuality, race, and class, and the extent to which those guidelines are applied, challenged, and
negotiated by different subjects operating within makeover culture. The centrality, prevalence and normalization of cosmetic surgery within makeover culture make it a focal point of my research.

I use the term makeover culture to describe a cultural atmosphere that has taken shape in Western mass media and popular culture since roughly the year 2002, in which individuals are encouraged to visibly demonstrate their ‘identity’ through the (often public) transformation of their bodies, homes, and lifestyles. The transformative aspect of makeover culture is new in the way that transformation is expected to occur, and in the outcome of such making over. Contemporary makeover culture proposes that individuals should work towards middle class indicators of status and taste through:

a) the accumulation of symbolic material possessions (i.e. granite countertops and stainless steel appliances are current examples of ubiquitous and required status pieces in the middle-class kitchen, as indicated by home makeover shows and shelter magazines),

b) the alteration of the body according to Western standards of beauty through the purchase of surgical, weight-loss, and exercise products, procedures and expertise, and

c) the shaping of one’s lifestyle to reflect participation in neoliberal ideologies of self-care and self-governance, through participation in self-help trends including yoga, meditation, life coaching, etc.

While home and lifestyle transformations often intersect with bodily transformation in makeover culture, physical alteration through cosmetic body modification and weight loss is the most prevalent form of transformation evident in makeover culture today. It is also incredibly lucrative.

The American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS), which identifies itself as “the largest organization of board-certified plastic surgeons in the world” with over 7 000 physician members states that “13.1 million cosmetic plastic surgery procedures, including those that are minimally-invasive or surgical, were performed in the United
States in 2010, up 5 percent from 2009. The organization claims that the economic downturn experienced in the United States has begun to improve, evident in the increase in cosmetic procedures in 2010. The upward trend from 2009 to 2010 is much smaller than the meteoric rise of cosmetic procedures from 2003-2004, when procedures rose dramatically (an increase of 44% from 8.3 million in 2003 to 11.9 million in 2004) (Wegenstein, “Introduction” 2). However, the ASPS takes an optimistic approach to the five per cent increase, arguing that it “mirrors the rise in consumer confidence throughout most of 2010.” By linking the rebound of the recession in America with consumption trends in cosmetic surgery, the ASPS highlights the powerful role that makeover culture plays in the American economy, with cosmetic surgery spending reported to be $10.1 billion US in 2010.

This upward trend in revenue is also reflected in other segments of makeover culture: in the weight loss industry, which saw revenues of almost thirty-five billion dollars in 2002 in the US according to the Federal Trade Commission (2002), revenues have almost doubled, taking in sixty billion dollars in the US in 2010 (Marketdata). While the growth from 2009 to 2010 was low, at less than two per cent, projections for the future indicate steady improvement. The self-help industry also boasts multi-billion dollar revenues, at $10.5 billion annually in the US. The cosmetics industry, another powerful industry within makeover culture (both ideologically and financially), saw sales at fifty-two billion dollars in the US in 2008 (G. Jones 367). Makeover culture discourse is created and disseminated within this economic marketplace, where Americans spend over $130 billion annually on products designed to help individuals transform into slimmer, younger-looking, more self-confident versions of themselves.


But what is makeover culture discourse, and where does it circulate? Do we have to be active makeover participants to partake in its discourse? We can begin to address these questions by considering feminist scholar Virginia Blum’s assertion that we are all a part of “postsurgical culture” whether or not we surgically modify our bodies, since changing perceptions of what it means to be healthy now more than ever include body maintenance in the form of elective surgery and other cosmetic procedures (44). Makeover culture operates by adapting popularized second-wave feminist ideologies into a discourse that equates body modification with choice, individual agency, and willpower. This discourse also works in synchronicity with widely circulating neoliberal ideologies, which propose guidelines for appropriate citizenship practices that celebrate individualism, self-discipline, self-determination, and a healthy consumerism (Ouellette and Hay; Weber Makeover TV).

Media scholar James Hay describes neoliberalism as operating within Western political economy and governmental (de)regulation, in addition to a more broadly-based “governmental rationality for a social arrangement that relies on new kinds of citizen-subjects and new techniques for governing them” (53, 54). He points to a “tendency to encourage an even greater reliance on self—self-expertise and self-governing as a necessary component of a political rationality affecting all aspects of life” (54), along with the decentering of the State in favour of free market ideology and dismantling of social welfare provisions (54). The template for the good citizen constructed within makeover culture also takes responsibility for his or her career success, relationship success, good health, financial stability, and social acceptance, through individual alteration and physical overhaul. Makeover reality TV most clearly focuses on the body as this site of transformation, and as a result, the good citizenship practices of participants of makeover shows reflect the expectations on North Americans to maintain a slim, youthful-looking, middle-class, white aesthetic. The tools made available for participants to do so most often include the advice of lifestyle experts, cosmetic procedures (both surgical and non-surgical), fashion and makeup supplies and advice, and diet and exercise regimens designed to create particular body types. As we will see in chapter three, makeover reality TV participants accept and apply these tools within a discourse of choice, empowerment, and self-care.

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5 See Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer; Deery “Trading Faces”; Heyes “Televisual Makeover”; Fraser; M. Jones Skintight; Weber Makeover TV.
Makeover reality TV’s use of discourses of choice, empowerment and self-care are exemplary of makeover culture in general, where more and more often cosmetic surgery is marketed and as a way for people to get and keep a particular job, relationship, or (healthy, youthful) lifestyle. Body modification is rationalized in relation to job security in an era of globalization, economic insecurity, and career-bouncing (Elliott); for example, a blog entry written for the Cosmetic Surgery Center of Maryland’s website states matter-of-factly:

We always say that cosmetic surgery is an investment in your personal well-being, but it can also be an investment in your professional well-being. A simple brow lift or eyelid procedure are small ways to create a fresher, more youthful look. For those in the business of person-to-person communications and networking (sales, marketing, retail, etc.), the cost is minimal if the result nets a consistent paycheck.6

Rationalizing the cost of cosmetic surgery by suggesting that a procedure to make one appear younger is the insurance necessary for a steady paycheck places responsibility on the individual employee, and belies the structural inequalities in the workforce, in addition to the national financial crisis facing the United States. Results from a telephone survey conducted in 2009 by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS) indicate that women are buying into the idea that cosmetic surgery is a useful way to advance or preserve their career. Thirteen per cent “say they would consider having a cosmetic medical procedure specifically to make them more confident and more competitive in the job market” and an “astounding three percent (nearly 3.5-million working women) say they’ve already had a cosmetic procedure to increase their perceived value in the workplace.”7 Securing a better future through bodywork, diet, and fashion accessories is not a new advertising tactic, but emphasis on these practices within a neoliberal context creates an opportunity for the cosmetic surgery industry especially to market itself as a

necessary tool in the arsenal of self-preservation and upward mobility.\(^8\) The body-as-investment has become a popular theme within makeover culture, and we learn that the responsibility for our success, health, and stability relates to our ability to adhere to good citizenship practices identified by makeover culture’s industries. For instance, the Atkins Diet website describes the diet as an “experience […] about taking charge of your life” and claims that it is a program designed for “helping you take charge of your health”.\(^9\) The “take charge” approach fostered in makeover culture has roots in the self-help industry, and is reflective of the individualized problem-solving solutions offered throughout makeover culture.

The transmission of makeover culture discourse in mainstream media, since 2002 with the emergence of ABC’s *Extreme Makeover*, has predominantly occurred through television broadcast. Reality TV programming makes up “56% of all of American TV shows” according to Nielsen Media Research (Wegenstein, “Introduction” 3). Further, eight of the top twenty primetime programs in the 2008/2009 season were reality programs,\(^10\) and, in terms of audience make-up:

> For the 2010-2011 season, reality TV programs have been the big winners among women ages 25-54 in broadcast primetime...the top four broadcast programs women ages 25-54 watched were reality TV as were half of the top 20 shows watched by this audience.\(^11\)

Reality TV programming has remained consistently popular with viewers since the premiere of CBS’s *Survivor* in 2000, when over fifty million viewers tuned in to the finale; a monumental feat given the summer time slot and the short season (Kissell). Makeover reality TV, a sub-genre of reality television that incorporates physical transformation via fashion, cosmetic surgery, weight loss and/or diet, has played a significant role in the


normalization of cosmetic surgery, and some argue, in the incredible increase of procedures seen year over year since 2003.

The connection between the sharp rise in cosmetic surgery procedures in the US in 2004, and the flood of makeover reality TV programming on network and cable television cannot be overlooked (Wegenstein, “Introduction” 3). In fact, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons has commented on the increases in cosmetic procedures with the popularity of makeover reality TV and the normalization of cosmetic surgery on television, warning that makeover reality TV creates unrealistic expectations and fails to educate people about the risks of cosmetic surgery (“New Reality TV Programs”). Despite the warning in the ASPS press release of 2004, the professional organization benefited from the popularity of the makeover genre. Cosmetic surgery industry research indicates that “plastic surgery reality television shows influence both the expectations and choices of potential cosmetic surgery patients” (Crockett, Pruzinsky and Persing); these findings have been supported elsewhere in academic and industry publications (Kubic and Chory; Markey and Markey; Mazzeo et al.; Sperry et al.; Theobald et al.).

This dissertation works to identify and understand the cultural and ideological factors leading to the findings presented by the above authors. Their conclusions suggest that some viewers are more willing to consider cosmetic surgery and related procedures because of exposure to makeover reality TV, and may be more inclined to understand their own bodies as in need of work. I undertake a broadly-based cultural studies approach to makeover culture in this dissertation, combining close-reading textual analysis and discourse analysis of trends among the makeover reality TV series *The Swan* (Galan, Fox 2004), with qualitative audience research including content analysis and discourse analysis of makeover reality TV web forums, cosmetic surgery blogs, and web-based interviews with bloggers. This multi-methods approach operates between a range of media platforms, primarily focusing on television and online media formats. Recognizing the trends of media convergence as well as the insidiousness of makeover culture, I focus on televisual and web-based sources in my project because makeover culture predominantly operates through complementary reinforcement and repetition in intertextuality across these media sites.

The research questions propelling this work include:

- What is makeover culture, and what discourses does it rely on? Where does makeover culture operate, and what kinds of intersections occur (among
genres, texts, industries, cultures)? How is makeover culture a new phenomenon?

- How does feminism(s) interact with, inform, and influence makeover culture?
- Do fans of makeover reality TV take up the discourse espoused in makeover culture, around choice, agency, and power? How? To what end?
- How do online fan forums reflect makeover culture at work? Do they concede to, replicate, or reject makeover culture’s discourse? Does media convergence create spaces for makeover culture discourse to flourish? Where? To what end?
- Finally, why has body modification in the context of mediated, publicly broadcast makeovers become normalized and even celebrated in North American popular culture?

By incorporating qualitative audience research alongside text-based analysis, I have the opportunity to move research on makeover culture in a new direction, providing a nuanced response to the predominantly text-based analysis of makeover reality TV and makeover culture in feminist media studies to date. Current academic work on makeover culture tends to make generalized assumptions about the viewers of makeover reality TV and participants in makeover culture. This dissertation analyzes the responses of viewers and participants alongside several examples of makeover culture texts, recognizing that makeover culture is made and remade for and by the people who experience it in everyday life, as well as by those who elect to make themselves over in one way or another.

I study the ways in which audiences become engaged in makeover culture as viewers, participants, and commentators in relation to the influence of media convergence in popular culture. By approaching makeover culture across three main research sites (television, web forums, and web logs), I raise questions about the changing nature of media genres and how we might study trends across platforms that are no longer separate. Communications researchers have begun to study the effects of the intertextual, multi-functional nature of contemporary media and the devices through which we access information and communicate (Skinner, Compton and Gasher; Jenkins Convergence Culture; Hay and Couldry). Structuring my dissertation is the underlying

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12 See Bordo; Covino; Deery “Trading Faces”; Heller et al.; McRobbie “Notes on ‘What Not to Wear’”; Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer; Heyes Self-Transformations; Tait; Weber “Beauty, Desire and Anxiety.”
theoretical recognition of the global trend towards the transformation of media industries into conglomerate mega-industries, resulting in previously-separate communications and entertainment genres merging, as fewer (but much larger) corporations become responsible for producing and disseminating more of the content made available in the mass media. The effect of media convergence on makeover culture has yet to be determined. My research begins to address issues such as cross-promotion tactics between media genres (product placement, advertising, spin-off events, etc.), the use of online communication tools such as blogs and webforums for the industries supporting makeover culture, and the methods through which consumers, viewers, and participants respond to and engage with makeover culture. It also aims to provide greater insight into the processes of ‘active’ viewing by makeover reality TV fans, and their processes of negotiation and internalization of makeover culture discourses.

My dissertation explores the relationship between popular feminism, neoliberalism, and the normalization of elective cosmetic body modification procedures on makeover reality TV. In doing so, I actively work to move past the victim/agency dichotomy that much feminist analysis gets bogged down in when conducting research on makeover culture’s most visible surgical participants. Specifically, media texts frame cosmetic surgery patients as victims. Scholars reproduce this framework by positioning cosmetic surgery patients as either uncritical or apolitical consumers (Bordo; Morgan; Negrin). If, as Blum suggests, we are all part of a post-surgical culture, then we need to overcome the moralistic undertones still present in much critical analysis of makeover culture from a feminist perspective, since these undertones assume that we can choose to exist outside of pervasive cultural discourses defining elective body modification in a makeover culture. I do not think that we can, or do, function outside of makeover culture discourse and the post-surgical culture Blum describes. Instead, as cultural participants we are engaged with and responsive to makeover culture in a myriad of ways, consciously or not. A unique and progressive feminist analysis of makeover culture requires the theoretical unhinging of assumptions about beauty and the body as necessarily objectifying or disempowering. According to Ruth Holliday and Jacqueline Sanchez-Taylor,

...the feminist intellectual ethic... has tended to reject the value associated with the beautiful body. Feminist politics concentrated on erasing the markers of beauty-as-labour from the body, because concern with beauty has come to signify women’s social oppression. (184-185)
Makeover culture research and its immediate predecessors in feminist cosmetic surgery studies have tended to rely on the foundational assumption that adherence to forms of mainstream beauty ideals or a demonstrated desire to achieve physical beauty reflects passivity and conformity to beauty norms on the part of the body modifier. As a result, analyses have continued to pit ‘culture’ against ‘the individual’ and research tends to subdivide categorically into one of two positions. First, broad overviews of cultural trends that focus on the (negative) disciplinary aspects of mainstream body modification within a sexist, racist, and ageist consumer culture (Bartky; Bordo; Morgan) or second, small-scale research with individual body modifiers that oversimplify the positive or empowering potential of beautification rituals and procedures for the women who undergo them (Davis *Reshaping*; Gimlin).

My dissertation seeks to refocus scholarly models of makeover culture analysis to a model that concentrates, above all, on “perceptual practices involved in the construction and regulation of (im)proper bodies/subjects” (Sullivan, “Self demand” 332) both in mainstream texts and discourses, and in academic analyses of such texts and discourses. The material concerns of makeover culture certainly include medical and economic risk. However, other ‘problems’ identified within makeover culture research, such as the time and money disproportionately spent by women on beautification, the pain of body modification, or the association of beauty with vanity, are only problems if we cannot dislodge the political implications of beauty work from the actions of individuals. I argue that we cannot dislodge them altogether, but we also cannot dismiss participants of mainstream body modification as operating under a false consciousness, because this oversimplifies the processes by which subjects engage with the world around them: sometimes critically, sometimes uncritically, but always in a more complex manner than the model of victim/agent dichotomy allows. In order to begin this shift towards a study of perceptual frames, I turn to somatechnics, a theoretical perspective that takes as its starting point the denaturalization of the division between soma (the body), and the technologies and techné (practices, crafts) through which embodiment is shaped and understood.

I do not deny that at the heart of makeover culture are normative representations of embodiment, subjectivity, and gender. The research conducted for this dissertation seeks to determine the problems and challenges inherent in such representations, which are reliant on traditionally racist, sexist, and classist belief systems. However, I am also
committed to considering the ways that participation in makeover culture through mainstream body modification and/or fan-based practices such as viewership may in fact provide some people with access to community support, opportunities for employment and social satisfaction, experiences of personal success and access to cultural status that is beneficial and rewarding. It is not possible to dismiss makeover culture and its participants, for two reasons. First, we are all participants of makeover culture, whether we engage with or refute its ideological framework, and second, adhering to normative behaviour is not always an indication of false consciousness. Research has demonstrated that people learn to navigate oppressive systems in order to reach a desired goal. For example, pre-operative trans people learn the required scripts necessary for professional diagnosis, as a means to medical and/or financial support (Dewey).

Taking a similar position to the one I develop, Laura Harvey and Rosalind Gill argue in their analysis of the sexualized subject on reality TV and what they refer to as a ‘sexual entrepreneur,’ that:

to note the extent to which this subject has become a normative ideal, then, is resolutely not to deny agency, but is instead to open up a language in which subject-object, power-pleasure, discipline-agency are no longer counterposed as antithetical, binary opposites.” (56)

Their position, which plants them firmly at the middle ground between the traditional victim/agent dichotomies, is a political and a purposeful one, and a position that I wish to take on as well. Adherence to a normative ideal does not preclude one from being a critical agent; moreover, the continued emphasis on the individual “choice-maker” is not productive for scholarly work on makeover culture. Instead, a study of the complexities and interconnectedness between all agents within makeover culture is more realistic, more productive, and more closely aligned with contemporary feminism, which demands acknowledgement of the pleasures and the dangers of makeover culture.

1.2 Feminist theories of mainstream cosmetic surgery

Feminist theory of the body is a dense field of study with multiple points of entry and a long history fraught with conflict and controversy. Perhaps because the physical body has been such a powerful site of oppression and subjugation, feminists have concentrated on interpreting women’s bodies within societies of the past, present, and
imaginary. To study “the Body” from a feminist perspective traditionally requires reliance on at least a few assumptions:

1. that “the Body” has been historically, philosophically, and scientifically hypothesized and normalized as male,
2. that the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy has led to hierarchical valuation of the mind (reason) over the body (nature),
3. that the mind/body split is implicitly and explicitly associated with another powerful dichotomy which leads to female oppression: masculinity with mind and femininity with body, and
4. that feminist inquiry should identify and rectify the ways that female bodies are negated and ‘Othered’ by patriarchal institutions of power, including medicine, the family, the Church, and the economy.

These assumptions have regularly come under fire from different postmodern and African-American feminist theorists for universalizing the female body, and thus subscribing to similarly limited and potentially oppressive ideas of ‘womanness.’ The result has been an effort to recognize the multiple ways women’s bodies can be identified and studied in addition to the position or location of gender, by opening up the study of the body to include the racialized body, the sexed body, the classed body, the disabled body, and the body as commodity, to name just a few.

From Mary Wollstonecraft’s critical analysis of women’s socialized and internalized vanity, to Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialist philosophy, to Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto,” feminists have often been positioned on opposing sides of a theoretical debate regarding gendered embodiment, agency, and the potential for subversion or resistance to dominant patriarchal ideology. Feminist positions on body modification often diverge between postmodern sentiments of liminality, heterogeneity, and subversion, and feminist criticism of body modification as self-mutilation and the reproduction of oppression, power and patriarchy on women’s bodies (Pitts 73).

Feminist theorists have often argued that women are under the control of a media and/or patriarchy and/or technology that determines an understanding of the female form. Thus, cosmetic surgery has been interpreted as the manifestation of gender discipline and the coercion of women to their own subordination (Bartky; Bordo; Covino; Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer; Weber “Beauty, Desire and Anxiety”).
Others position themselves against this model of domination and subordination, and develop a critique that seeks to denaturalize the division between technology and body (or, machine and nature). Postmodern feminists such as Donna Haraway and Anne Balsamo contend that body modification is only an extension of the growth of technology in all areas of life. Therefore, women could utilize cosmetic surgery for empowering purposes (Balsamo; Haraway). Still others posit that women’s voices must be privileged in discussions of body modification and power, and that we cannot dismiss women’s expressed experiences of pleasure, power, and satisfaction with cosmetic surgery (Davis *Reshaping*; Gimlin).

The work of Michel Foucault, particularly in the later stages of his career, has been fundamental to the direction of contemporary feminist theories of the body. While I will only superficially address Foucault’s work here, I do so in order to set up the implicit use of his theoretical work on power and subjectivity in somatechnics, discussed in more detail below. Feminists studying the representation of sexed and gendered bodies have developed Foucault’s reconfiguration of the definition of power (and its relationship to discourse). In doing so, they highlight women’s oppression and resistance to patriarchal sources of power, especially as they play out on the body in ways that do not overtly appear to oppress or resist, such as maternity, cosmetic surgery, and cross-dressing. In *The History of Sexuality* series, Foucault’s attempt to delineate the genealogy, or origins, of contemporary Western notions of sexuality culminated in the advancement of an alternative conception of power. This has been extremely important for the development of feminist theories of the body, because Foucault’s re-conceptualization of power relationships focused on the active nature of power, and developed the potential for resistance to dominant forces of power, since he argued that power is always shifting, contingent, and multivalent. Foucault challenged the traditional theory of “juridico-discursive power” by conceptualizing power as something not always negative, limiting, prohibitive, or censoring (83-85). Thus, power is not simply the tool of the state or the law, but exists at the level of the everyday (in voluntary, spontaneous events). For cosmetic surgery scholars who apply this theory of power to their work, cosmetic surgery can be a platform for female agency. Most notable is the qualitative research of Kathy Davis with cosmetic surgery participants: her findings suggest that women who undergo elective procedures do so in the process of self-actualization, from rational subject positions. Consumerism and new technology are tools of the individual to achieve happiness or success within the current cultural system, even if that system remains
more powerful than the individual does (Davis, *Reshaping* 17, 157-8). According to feminists such as Davis who see agency as a possibility for women who undergo cosmetic surgery, we are all active agents, with some degree of power, some of the time.

While Foucault’s theories of power may provide a way to conceptualize a subject’s agency and resistance to dominant power systems (and some feminists have embraced this possibility), he also produced a related but top-down description of “bio-power.” This theory exposed the strength of dominant power systems to control bodies, both individual and social, and seemed to dim the prospect of liberation from social, political, or juridical systems of power. Foucault suggested that the normative bodily practices of everyday life shape subjects, and that control over people is more effectively attained through productive measures (such as socialized codes of conduct) rather than rigid or direct physical enforcement. He argued that we participate in our own positioning because power engages us at the level of desire and knowledge (“*Body/Power*”59). Bio-power’s effectiveness exists in its positive, productive measures of conformity in order to produce obedient, willing bodies that work for the state. He claimed that control of the body by the state occurs most powerfully at the micro-level, through familial and social morals, ethics, and codes of conduct, and through the larger systems and institutions at the same time. Foucault’s concepts of power as both capillary in nature and top-down have had tremendous influence on the theoretical discourse of feminist analysis of beauty, cosmetic surgery, and femininity (see Bartky; Bordo; Fraser; Heyes *Self-Transformations*; Sawicki).

The question of individual agency has become central for feminists in the debate about mainstream cosmetic surgery participation. Many find that the potential for agency muddied by the limited scope for choice in mainstream body modification practices (Bartky; Bordo; Covino; Fraser). Cosmetic surgery media and advertising present an individualistic discourse and choice is limited to a particular homogeneous perception of beauty. In this context, choice and individuality exist within a framework of conformity and never-ending work (Bordo 295; Bartky 72; Covino 64, 90). These authors argue that the cosmetic surgery industry’s endorsement of cosmetic surgery as an active, empowering event ignores the larger, structural systems at work in the definition of beauty. Bordo notes that “to feel autonomous and free while harnessing body and soul to an obsessive body-practice is to serve, not transform, a social order that limits female
possibilities” (179). Critical of what Olivia Kahlo terms “makeover feminism,” these feminists argue that beauty-as-conformity complicates the possibility of individual choice, and that selling individual happiness or success through bodywork is not necessarily a viable means to personal equality. Subscribing to the cosmetic surgery industry’s palette of beauty, these feminists contend, requires buying in to the beauty myth that has created the “problems” of ugliness and aging in the first place (Bartky 42). More recently, men have become the target market for beauty and age-related products and services (often under the pretences of health and status, and closely aligned with morality and neoliberal discourse of self-maintenance), and academics have begun to study the effects of this on traditional understandings of masculinity and power (Atkinson; Bordo; Weber “What Makes the Man?”).

1.3 Subcultural body modification and active resistance/questions of agency

While many feminists have chosen to apply one of the two concepts of power in their work on beauty and body modification, some have worked to integrate a complex understanding of both expressions of power in their analysis of subversive and subcultural body modification practices. French performance artist ORLAN has become a popular reference point for feminists examining the subversive potential of cosmetic surgery (Davis “My Body is My Art”; M. Jones Skintight); she is a figure whose body modification and counter-discourse are interpreted as disruptive to normative beauty standards in mainstream media. ORLAN has turned cosmetic surgery into art exhibit and performance in order to challenge binary oppositions central in Western philosophy, such as nature/artifice, inside/outside, mind/matter, and active/passive. Her performance art project, The Reincarnation of St. Orlan (1990-1993) recorded and broadcast multiple cosmetic surgeries over several years in art galleries around the world, remodelling her face according to the dimensions of facial features gathered from classical works of art, including the chin of Botticelli’s Venus and the forehead of Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa. ORLAN’s intent was not to create a beautiful face, but rather to challenge the power of cultural institutions that define beauty. During the surgeries, ORLAN was awake and vocal, sometimes reading or singing, and she created a theatrical setting using costumes and props in order to blur the lines between medicine and art. The goals of this work

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included disrupting notions of unity, stability, homogeneity, and beauty by relocating the camera angle, by modifying her body in ways that were not considered to be improvement, and by re-imagining the relationship between patient and surgeon (Davis “My Body is My Art”). ORLAN’s re-appropriation of the tools, space, and purpose of cosmetic surgery forces viewers to consider the ways that body modification of all kinds (i.e. cosmetic, medically sanctioned, or otherwise), are part of a regulatory framework. Moreover, ORLAN’s public persona is “self-consciously, unapologetically manufactured” (M. Jones, Skintight 156).

Subcultural body modifiers also often enthusiastically distance themselves from mainstream embodiment, claiming subversive subject positions through the presentation of their bodies as mediated sites of resistance against cultural conformity and the associated assumptions about character or selfhood that the visible body conveys in society. Extreme piercing and tattooing, scarification, branding, cutting, cyberpunk practices including sub-dermal silicone implantation, and skin-suspension rituals are a few examples of subcultural body modification practices that have been demonized, marginalized, and labelled as perverse within popular culture. Subcultural body modifiers typically work outside of mainstream medical and aesthetic industries in order to complete their modifications, accessing the tools and information of specialists and professionals in order to become ‘experts’ in their field, since most medical professionals will not or cannot accommodate their requests for modification. Victoria Pitts-Taylor argues that this “deviant appropriation of medical technology” (168) reflects subversive and counter-hegemonic action.

In her study of subcultural body modification, Pitts-Taylor explored the gendered, sexualized, and racialized implications of these practices, and she considered how subject identity is conceptualized by subcultural body modifiers in the narratives they produce. For Pitts-Taylor, the discourse of the modifying subject is where she looked for subversion, which is substantially different from arguments made by feminists who see empowerment through the act of modification itself as subversive, even when patients
claim empowerment through conformity to beauty norms and conventions. Pitts-Taylor argues that since no bodies operate outside of power, resistance through subversive body practices may be possible, while at the same time affirmation of traditional gender and sex norms may occur when modified bodies are “read” by others (44, 46). In other words, a person can act out subversion through the body, but that body will never be entirely “self-authored” (44). Pitts-Taylor’s position aligns more closely with the work of scholars who are teasing out a theory of somatechnics, which I explore below.

These academic debates over agency, subjectivity, the subversive, power, and body modification have come to define the boundaries and tone of feminist cosmetic surgery studies, and victim/agent arguments have dominated the field. However, within these debates some scholars have begun to suggest that feminists must get beyond the victimization/agency dichotomy. Elizabeth Grosz points out that this dichotomy is not complex enough to use as a way to think about women’s bodies in contemporary culture. She suggests a re-visioning of the argument itself: we need not define “who” the patient is, but what the body does and what that means (14).

For instance, Virginia Blum argues that cosmetic surgery offers “a sustaining fiction of the self”; one that unifies, individualizes, and makes real (229). Not willing to deny the fact that the outcome of surgery feels good, and that her feminism does not preclude her from wanting more surgery, Blum is also critical of the pervasive power of what Deborah Caslav Covino calls the “aesthetic surgical imaginary” (Covino 15). Blum’s work operates from the postmodern position that the boundaries between human and machine have become ambiguous to the point that there is no precultural body, or no body existing in absence of modification (see also Balsamo; Haraway).

In a similar fashion, Bernadette Wegenstein poses a reconfiguration of the body as a medium of culture, pointing out that various philosophical, medical and popular conceptions of the individual from the Enlightenment forward have constructed the body as both fragmented and whole. She argues that this is not an oppositional framework, but rather that both concepts work together from a larger meta-framework of the body as

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14 In a similar vein, Lauraine Leblanc’s *Pretty in Punk: Gender Resistance in a Boys’ Subculture* (1999) defines resistance as a form of political behaviour, which requires that the subject recognize oppression, have a desire to counter it, and then undertake action (in word, thought or deed) to counter that oppression (18). This definition of resistance prevents researchers from interpreting ‘anything’ as resistant, implicitly challenging researcher/research subject power relations, and considers subversive practices as demonstrable and consciously undertaken.
mediation: “the medium that signifies the body, its representation, no longer is any different from the 'raw material' of the body itself” (Getting Under the Skin 32).

If we study practitioners of mainstream body modification with this point in mind, that representation and materiality are not mutually exclusive in makeover culture, we can begin to move the debate in cosmetic surgery studies forward, and past the victim/agent quagmire. This dissertation does so by advancing a theoretical concept of somatechnics in order to focus on the ways in which the mediated body is always already inflected with technologies of transformation, and how the mediated body can present a rupture in the fabric of normative embodiment.

1.4 Somatechnics and Makeover Culture

In recent years feminist and transgender scholars such as Nikki Sullivan, Susan Stryker, Jessica Cadwallader, Meredith Jones, Samantha Murray and Cressida Heyes have focused on the ways that mainstream cultures produce interpretations of body modification, without starting from a place of critical dismissal of certain forms of body modification. Their research challenges naturalized, ideological distinctions between different forms of body modification. By re-imagining the body-modifier as a self-defining subject, while also considering the ways that medical, legal, and popular discourse shape popular understandings of body modification practices (and what is socially and legally sanctioned), these authors both foreground processes of active self-fashioning, and compare otherwise-disparate categories of body modifiers. In the process, they examine discursive and disciplinary frameworks of thought: for example, comparing operative trans people and cosmetic surgery patients (Heyes Self-Transformations), or self-demand amputees and cosmetic surgery patients (Sullivan “Integrity, Mayhem”). Their work is influenced by post structuralism and a burgeoning theory of “somatechnics,” which has been developing through a network of scholars coming together bi-annually since 2003 at Australia’s Macquarie University.

The Somatechnics Research Centre, also based at Macquarie University, defines somatechnics this way:

“Somatechnics” is a newly coined term used to highlight the inextricability of soma and techné, of the body (as a culturally intelligible construct) and the techniques ( dispositifs and 'hard technologies') in and through which bodies are formed and transformed. This term, then, supplants the logic of the 'and', indicating that technologies are not something we add to or
apply to the body, but rather, are the means in and through which bodies are constituted, positioned, and lived. As such, the term reflects contemporary understandings of the body as the incarnation or materialization of historically and culturally specific discourses and practices. (Somatechnics Research Centre Home Page, par. 1)

My dissertation develops from this theoretical starting point, from the perspective that bodies are never pure, untouched, pre-cultural entities. Rather, bodies become meaningful through their relationship with technologies and techniques of daily practice from the time we are born and throughout our lives; in fact, one could argue that human development is somatechnic at pre-conception, and that bodies and technologies are intertwined in-utero and even before (through the cessation of birth control techniques/technologies, for instance). As such, the moral question of agency and choice in regards to cosmetic surgery practitioners shifts in the theoretical context of somatechnics. It becomes less significant if we understand that all choice, all agency, is technologically mediated. I align myself with somatechnics scholars and add to the developing field of study by creating a more productive examination of mainstream makeover culture that turns to the nuances of the techniques that are afforded the most credibility, or are the most naturalized (and therefore invisible), or those that constitute cultural values, practices, and legislation.

In Somatechnics: Queering the Technologisation of Bodies, editors Nikki Sullivan and Samantha Murray describe the organization of their edited collection in a way that:

move[s] from the macro structures of corporeal governance associated with social bodies such as the State...through to the (en)gendering of (sexed) bodies and selves..., and finally, to the micro bodily practices conceived here as techniques of the self... (5)

In a similar fashion, my dissertation is structured from broad to narrow, whereby I begin by studying macro-level disciplinary practices produced in makeover culture (chapter two), and within a particular makeover reality TV program, Fox Network’s The Swan (Galan 2004) (chapter three). I then move into an examination of the discursive engendering of bodies and selves in chapter four with a content analysis of online discussion boards devoted to the makeover reality TV program The Swan (Fox.com 2004). Finally, chapter five shifts towards a study of micro-bodily practices described in detail by cosmetic surgery bloggers in their online journals and in email-based interviews. The purpose for this organizational model is to look at the multiple ways in
which material bodies, bodies of knowledge, and bodies politic intersect with
technologies and techniques of makeover culture.

If social reality operates through discourse (communicative practices including
oral and written language, and the ‘language’ of signs), then knowledge is tied to
discourse and what can be known depends on what circulates, where it circulates, and
whether it is validated, repeated, and valued (and by whom) (MacDonald 1). Thus,
looking for the repetition of dominant discourse across multiple sites of makeover
culture, from the macro structures to the micro-bodily practices, can tell us about the
strength of the ideas inherent in the discourse. Having passed by a church in my
neighbourhood advertising “free extreme makeovers” on its outdoor signage in 2007, I
am quite sure that makeover culture discourse is far-reaching and accessible outside of
its own specific (yet varied) sites of practice. Adherence to a popular discourse does
not necessarily mean co-optation, and, as Foucault and others have demonstrated, the
flow of power is not one-directional. However, there is certainly a need to study in more
detail the movement and presence of makeover culture discourse at work in mainstream
culture.

Like feminist media scholars and cultural studies scholars, I see popular media
as an integral component of contemporary North American subjectivity. Audience
ethnographers examine the ways that people interact with media in their everyday lives,
and argue that studying audiences should not occur solely in relation to the media texts
they consume. Rather, both the audience and the text are interrelated components of a
larger discursive social context, where media is a part of social reality (Alassuutari 17).
As Elizabeth Bird points out, “the audience is everywhere and nowhere” (3). The
identification of makeover culture as a culture rather than merely as a product or text,

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15 Canadian Memorial United Church and Centre for Peace, Vancouver, BC, 2007.
16 The Term “extreme makeover” has become a regular catchphrase in ad campaigns for
business, housing markets, career development, faith-based practices, and elsewhere.
Christian self-help literature has utilized the slogan enthusiastically, with book titles including:
Extreme Life Makeover: Changing the Things that Matter Most (2008) by Julie Rice; Extreme
Church Makeover: A Biblical Plan to help your Church Achieve Unity and Freedom in Christ
(2005) by Neil Anderson; Extreme Personality Makeover: How to Develop a Winning Christ-
Like Personality to Improve your Effectiveness (2006) by Mels Carbonell; Extreme Prayer
Makeover: Remodelling Lives through Prayer (2006) by Joe Camenetti; Your Personal House
of Prayer: An Extreme Makeover for your Prayer Life (2007) by Larry Kreider; and Extreme
17 See Bird; Gray Research Practices; Press “Towards a Qualitative Method”; Radway
“Hegemony”; Schroder; Seiter Television and New Media Audiences.
complete with competing discourses and multiple subject positions, highlights the importance of considering broader social contexts and the players within them, as opposed to clearly identifiable audiences of specific texts.

Accordingly, chapter two of this dissertation defines makeover culture and examines its development in North American popular culture from the early twentieth century to the present. I focus on popular Hollywood films aimed at female audiences, the use of the term makeover in mainstream media including newspapers and women’s magazines, and the role of the diet, exercise, self-help and cosmetics industries in shaping makeover culture. I also trace the popularity of cosmetic surgery, particularly during and after a paradigmatic moment in North American popular television: the emergence of makeover reality TV in and around 2002 with the series *Extreme Makeover* (ABC 2002-2007). My examination of these related phenomenon situate makeover culture within a neoliberal and postfeminist cultural context, whereby makeover culture defines good citizenship practices through its discursive emphasis on self-care, self-discipline, and agency.

Chapter three moves into a case study of the Fox network makeover reality TV series *The Swan* (2004), beginning with an examination of the political economy of reality TV, followed by a brief consideration of representations of feminism in television series’ before makeover reality TV’s genesis. The postfeminist and neoliberal discourse espoused on *The Swan* emerges from a context of postfeminist sentiments already prevalent in mainstream media and in television aimed at female audiences, including the soap opera, the daytime talk show, and the sit-com. *The Swan’s* use of full-body cosmetic surgery and beauty pageant competition may have been new to network television when it premiered in 2004, but the ideological underpinnings run much deeper. After tracing some of the more widely studied examples of network series’ appropriations of feminism, I study the ways that confession, shame, and surveillance are used on *The Swan* to create subject positions that equate women participants with victims, while simultaneously promoting participants as active, empowered, and self-defining subjects. I trace the significance of the heterosexual crisis in the makeover narratives, and examine the ways that class and upward mobility play into the neoliberal ideologies of the series. In doing so, I argue that makeover reality TV and *The Swan* in particular reproduce hegemonic gender roles for women in order to blunt the ontological threat of
bodies being radically transformed on television. That is, the threat of the hybrid to disrupt normative forms of embodiment is quickly reined in through hyperfeminization.

In chapter four, I turn my attention to makeover reality TV audiences; specifically, online audiences that gathered in the Fox network discussion forums during the broadcast of seasons one and two of *The Swan*. My analysis of online audiences of *The Swan* attempts to bridge the divide between makeover culture media texts and the makeover culture citizenry, in order to demonstrate the complexity of constitutive forces that create and recreate makeover culture and its subjects. Using a random sample of 400 discussion threads on the network-hosted message boards, I conducted content analysis of the threads, and then closer interpretation of the thematic trends within the discussions. I focus on the prevalence of narratives written by discussion forum contributors who expressed desire to become Swan contestants, partly because these types of requests made up the majority of the content in my sample, but also because of the similarities in style to the confessional narrative exemplified on makeover reality TV. I argue that the hyperbolic language used in the forums by participants who expressed desire to become contestants on the series unwittingly exposes the violence of makeover culture discourse, and reveals the extent to which makeover reality TV contains the threat of bodily hybridity through victim narratives and highly regulated body modification.

Chapter five extends the work of previous chapters on the discourse of makeover reality TV and online audience practices among makeover reality TV discussion boards, into a study of cosmetic surgery bloggers. For this chapter I conducted email interviews with three cosmetic surgery bloggers whose blogs appeared on a popular website called Makemeheal.com (MMH). MMH is a blog host, discussion forum, and database for products, procedures, and practitioners of cosmetic body modification. Like the previous chapter’s aim, my goal in interviewing cosmetic surgery bloggers was to determine how themes in the popular discourse of body modification have developed through neoliberal and postfeminist channels in response to makeover culture’s growth. I communicated with women through MMH who had already-established blogs, and whose surgeries were complete. I asked them about their experience with cosmetic surgery, about their opinion of its accessibility and acceptability in today’s culture, about their decision to write about their procedures, and about the role of makeover reality TV in their decision to seek out or consider cosmetic surgery. I was interested in examining the discourses
operationalized to validate and support participants and others in their decision to undergo cosmetic procedures. I was specifically interested in themes of choice, will power, and agency and I wanted to know whether these were present in similar discursive patterns compared to contestants’ personal narratives on makeover reality TV and on the discussion boards. I found that while one of the interviewees readily adopted a victim narrative and confessional tone similar to the makeover reality TV narratives, the two other interviewees rejected this positioning and instead constructed stories of themselves and their body work in much less fraught terms. The differences between the blogs and interview responses of these three women demonstrate the complex and often-ambivalent subject positions available in makeover culture, and my interviews with them begin to peel back the layers at work in the balancing act required for participants to engage in body modification within its cultural parameters.

Together, these five chapters explore makeover culture and its discourses from several angles. By interweaving the discourses of many players throughout several media sites, I believe that I present a unique picture of makeover culture, and its role in shaping beliefs about bodies and body modification. My findings indicate that makeover culture is pervasive throughout popular culture and postfeminist in tone and imagery. This dissertation advances feminist criticism of makeover culture by rerouting the argument from choosing between critique or apologia, victim or agent. Rather, I approach the topic of makeover culture from a different set of ethical principles than those underlying the critique/apologia binary. Like somatechnics scholars, I am committed to focussing on the complicated spaces in between, which recognize that makeover culture involves both ideological compliance and partial agency of its participants. Moreover, I want to shift the analysis to focus on reasons why makeover culture reproduces hegemonic gender roles for women, and what is so discomforting about the modified body that requires such adherence to normative discourse and images.

Makeover culture encourages us to imagine ‘the body’ as a malleable entity, one that mediates the status, sexual desirability, and success of its owner. The tools and technologies of the makeover industry, including the surgeon’s knife, the cosmetic brush, the dieter’s scale, the gym equipment, daily texts from Weight Watchers, the chat rooms and web forums and blogs devoted to the personal makeover, position the body as an always-evolving entity. Making over, and making the body anew, is a never-ending
process; it is this opportunity for perpetual change that makeover culture espouses so successfully. Thus, the body in makeover culture is a potential body, and with that notion is tied the potential for a better self, a better life. However, while makeover culture overtly celebrates the body as a malleable entity, it does so with very narrow limits as to what transformations can and should look like. As such, I argue that the visibility of bodily transformation is only acceptable in mainstream culture so long as it does not expose the real potential to understand human bodies as hybrids, or to experiment with (and value) non-normative embodiment.

The ethico-political implications of the hybrid in mainstream makeover culture are significant. According to Kuortti and Nyman, “the power of hybridity is in its ability to question what appears natural and complete, to problematize naturalized boundaries” (11). The great potential of the hybrid in makeover reality TV specifically is in its ability to open up spaces for affinity, and to disrupt or queer the normative forms of embodiment available to women (and men) in mainstream culture. I have chosen to use the term hybrid in my analysis of makeover culture because somatechnics theorists posit that the body (soma) and techné (techniques, technologies) are inseparable. The term hybrid signals the mixing of bodies/technologies, human/animal, natural/artificial, self/other: an intertwining that cannot be undone or separated. Donna Haraway’s now infamous use of the terms “cyborg” and “hybrid” in her important postmodern feminist essay “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist- Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” provides a theoretical touchstone from which to position my analysis of hybridity in makeover culture, and its political potential. Haraway asserts that gender and sex, along with all aspects of a subject identity, are marked by technology to the extent that “we are all chimeras…we are cyborgs” (150). The cyborg metaphor re-contours the social-constructionist perspective popular in postmodernist and poststructuralist feminist thought, with a technological-constructionist position that destabilizes notions of organic wholes, completion, origin, and nature. As a hybrid creature, the cyborg is machine and organism, and is literally embodied in the many ways that bodies are altered, modified, and manipulated by machines in all aspects of physical life (from in vitro fertilization to dental implants to prosthetic appendages to pace-makers to virtual reality to electronics factory workers and more). Cyborgs represent resistance to domination, transgression of boundaries, and the possibility for political and social change (154).
The potential to queer the limited availability of embodied subjectivities arises when makeover culture exposes bodies in transformation (i.e. the inside/outside dichotomy is blown open when the body is modified on screen). Yasmin Jiwani discusses Foucault's contention that where there is power, there is resistance, by considering “...sites of intervention where power can be challenged, transformed or diverted in the interests of privileging subjugated knowledge(s), even if these ruptures are only momentary” (Jiwani xiii). The rupture in makeover reality TV is the momentary visibility of the hybrid—seeing women's bodies transformed through medical, surgical intervention. The potential to disrupt the sense of bodily integrity that remains central to western subjectivity emerges when viewers witness the in-process moments of the makeover, as sanitized and condensed as they are on makeover reality TV. The space between the “before and after” of the makeover have become “just as important, if not more important, than achieving the end result” (M. Jones, Skintight 55). Understanding our bodies as whole and complete is still a requirement for making sense of ‘the self.’ By disrupting that ontological reality through the visible body in transformation, the hybridity of body modifiers in makeover culture provides the opportunity to interrogate who is currently omitted from a conception of bodily integrity and wholeness, and why beauty ideals remain oppressive. This potential is momentary and quickly rebuffed with the recuperation of normative beauty ideals and hyperfeminized contestants, but it is there if we look closely.

It is not inevitable that the visibility of hybridity will be disruptive or resistant. I concentrate on the potential that is briefly made visible within a few places of rupture in makeover culture: on makeover reality TV’s The Swan, in online discussion boards dedicated to The Swan, and in cosmetic surgery blogs. I do not intend to glorify or idealize the idea of the hybrid: we do not know what the hybrid is until it appears, and the hybrid itself can be appropriated by the dominant culture. My intention in identifying hybridity in makeover culture is not to award (from above) an individual body modifier with agency, but rather to recognize the potential for the exposure of hybridity to imagine a different way of doing embodiment. For example, if a cultural understanding of bodily integrity has shifted as a result of makeover culture to include some bodies who have “healthy” tissue removed through cosmetic surgeries (i.e. fat, cartilage, hair), perhaps this can extend to consider other forms of body modification or embodiment that are currently silenced or othered. This has implications for subcultural body modifiers, people with disabilities, and people whose embodied experience does not measure up to
cultural ideals. There may be space within normative mainstream makeover culture to expand or unpack definitions of whole, complete or beautiful bodies.
2: DEFINING MAKEOVER CULTURE

Makeover culture is a term I use to describe a North American trend that encourages and concentrates on transformation, personal progress, and pathways to change (physical and emotional). It relies on and operates through the mass media in the form of advertisements, television shows, in film, online, and in print (books, magazines, and newspapers). Makeover culture is created and re-created in online blogs, web discussion boards, in letters to the editor, in activities of non-profit organizations and community events, in casual discussions, and in academic texts. The ubiquity of makeover culture ensures its presence in our lives in some way or another, whether or not we engage in the material aspects it espouses. It is quite difficult, in fact, to avoid makeover culture and its images and discourses, because immersion in popular culture inevitably leads to exposure to and engagement with the making of makeover culture (when we exchange and debate opinions about a procedure, a television program, its participants, etc.). Brenda Weber argues that the saturation of makeover culture has occurred in popular culture, exemplified through the parody of The Swan on Saturday Night Live (NBC 2004), which starred the Olsen twins and spoofed the makeover show. Indeed, the expectation is that the general viewing public will get the reference, and subsequently the joke, as it relates to makeover culture. This indicates makeover culture has made its way into the homes and collective cultural knowledge of North America.

Our familiarity with makeover culture includes more than cultural reference points and the names of popular products or procedures. The presence and repetition of makeover culture’s images and discourse(s) help shape what we know and come to understand about bodily upkeep, beauty, age, and gender. This chapter will provide a survey of critical literature on makeover culture and a discourse analysis of selected, significant cultural texts representative of makeover culture ethos. In doing so, I identify

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18 While this dissertation concentrates on online and television media, tabloid and print media have also been heavily invested in makeover culture discourse.
common themes in the ways that products, procedures, and subjects are represented, with the purpose of exploring how women's bodies come to matter in makeover culture.

I will begin by providing historical context of the term makeover and the use of themes of transformation in different genres, the role of the diet and exercise industries, as well as the role of the cosmetics and the self-help industries in shaping makeover culture. I will also briefly trace the ways that makeovers have become central within television and film aimed at female viewers, and the associated ideologies inherent in these media texts. I will then describe what I see as a paradigmatic moment in the twenty-first century in North America, when makeover culture could rightfully be defined as a culture. The normalization of cosmetic surgery since this moment will be explored, especially the themes and discourses related to neoliberal and post-feminist ideologies of choice, empowerment, and self-discipline used under the auspices of elective and cosmetic body work. Finally, I will analyze some interesting examples of resistive responses to makeover culture, by feminist non-profit organizations in the US and Canada, and by opinion pieces and editorials found in magazines and television during the busy days of makeover reality TV's emergence.

2.1 Historical Trends

The term 'makeover' has its origins in an issue of Vanity Fair published in 1860, and again in 1925 in the women's magazine Women's World, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Its current usage, which refers to “a complete transformation or remodelling; esp. a thorough refashioning of a person's appearance by beauty treatment,” has become ubiquitous in women's magazines and on television from about the mid-eighties, especially on television talk shows. One of the staples of makeover culture is the trope of before and after imaging, well suited to both print media and the televised format (Cassidy 127). For decades, the cosmetics and diet industries have relied upon the format of before and after imaging to sell their products as transformative. Product advertisements for wrinkle creams, skin bleaching creams, hair straightening products, and weight loss programs such as Nutri-system, Weight Watchers, and Jenny Craig, have operated on the visibility of dramatic transformation achieved using their products. The before and after images associated with makeovers

\[^{20}\text{See Kathy Peiss' Hope In a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture (1999) for analysis of late nineteenth and early twentieth century skin bleaching and hair straightening products marketed to African America women.}\]
past and current are embedded with ideological meaning that is prevalent in makeover culture more broadly, and is also culturally and regionally specific.

While I argue that today’s makeover culture is a recent phenomenon, stories of transformation have been central within popular entertainment for centuries. If one considers fairytales such as Cinderella, The Ugly Duckling, and The Little Mermaid, physical transformation has been a staple of the stories we tell for much longer than the emergence of makeover reality TV. In fairytales, a physical change from plainness or ugliness to beauty, often accompanied by shifts in class status from poor to rich, is usually the reflection of an inner quality possessed by the main character. Her reward for virtue, humility, patience, or essential goodness is beauty. One of the earliest examples of makeover reality TV makes this clear: Glamour Girl, a short-lived series that aired on NBC in 1953 and was a prototype of current programs such as Extreme Makeover. Women in unfortunate and unhappy life situations were awarded hair, clothing, and style transformations in an attempt at “curative glamour” (Cassidy 126). Marsha Cassidy’s examination of Glamour Girl describes the recipe of “deserving” miserable women, post-war consumer desire, and ideals of feminine beauty. In a similar fashion, contemporary makeover stories have continued to associate qualities of one’s character with embodied transformation.

Since its inception, North American film has utilized the Cinderella storyline. The coupling of physical and internal transformation continues to be an important narrative trope in films aimed at women and girls. Elizabeth Ford and Deborah Mitchell, among others, have studied the variations on the story of plain Jane becoming a beautiful, financially- and sexually-successful princess. They argue that class-passing and upward mobility, as well as the Pygmalion relationship between female characters and their male counterparts (who often have considerable influence in steering them towards a particular form of beautifying), lead to the continuation of gender stereotyping in film and a whitewashing of gender inequalities. Ford and Mitchell identify a shift in the 1990s when films for teen audiences became exceedingly interested in the Cinderella storyline. This occurred against a backdrop of the development of ‘tween’ culture and postfeminist girl power slogans, when pre-teen and teen girls were recognized as a lucrative consumer market (Coulter). The makeover in film, particularly those films that follow the familiar tale of rags-to riches for the deserving and lovely young woman who only needs a charming prince to see her true beauty, perpetuates ideas about how women and girls
should define success. The list of films in which the makeover is a central plot point is long, and even those films that may suggest a more progressive message (celebrating a young woman’s independence, intelligence, and creativity) tend to pair these progressive messages within a package that replicates beliefs about desirable bodies and a woman’s worth. My point is not to suggest that these films are ‘bad’ for viewers, but that they are another arm of makeover culture that supports a particular discourse of change, ability, and empowerment for women.

Ford and Mitchell studied makeover films of the late nineties and early 2000s, including *Pretty Woman* (Marshall 1990), *The Princess Diaries* (Marshall 2000), *Ever After* (Tennant 1998), *She’s All That* (Iscove 1999), *Maid In Manhattan* (Wang 2002), *Clueless* (Heckerling 1995), *10 Things I Hate About You* (Junger 1999) and *Miss Congeniality* (Petrie 2000). More recent examples indicate that the makeover remains a significant element in Hollywood films for women and girls: *The Devil Wears Prada* (Frankel 2006), *The Princess Diaries 2: Royal Engagement* (Marshall 2004), *A Cinderella Story* (Rosman 2004), *Mean Girls* (Waters 2004), *The House Bunny* (Wolf 2008), and *13 Going on 30* (Winick 2004). These films use the makeover as a way to develop the plot and propel the main female character towards her happy ending (popularity, recognition, heterosexual love, a choice career or opportunity). They most often involve a montage set to upbeat music, where the hapless but loveable fashion victim receives guidance towards fashion and beauty products from a knowledgeable friend. The success of the main character following her makeover (usually stalled briefly by a misunderstanding between the main character and her love interest), presumes that romantic success is in large part the result of the makeover. While the transformation allows other characters to see what the audience already knows about the main character (that she is both good and beautiful), the implication remains that the success of the main character could not have occurred without the outward transformation.

These examples demonstrate a familiar cultural narrative in mainstream North America that thematically delineates the value of a makeover for women whose stories are punctuated by life’s hardships (hardships that range from the mundane to disastrous). From traditional fairytales to beauty product advertising, to contemporary romantic comedies, the makeover has been a salient plot point in cultural storytelling for women. However, the movement towards contemporary makeover culture within the last decade in North America produces a new kind of value associated with the makeover.
The value of the makeover is linked with an essential inner self in a way that amplifies the perceived need for transformation, and without the makeover, there is no hope or potential for success. As I will demonstrate, success takes on new definition within makeover culture as well.

2.2 The Subject and the Self in Makeover Culture

Most of the stories told and products advertised in a new makeover culture are associated with celebrated qualities of femininity, class status, and heterosexual desirability. Based on recurring thematic and discursive trends across narratives and within media genres (i.e. the romantic comedy, the makeover reality TV format), it seems clear that makeover culture texts construct selfhood through the body’s appearance. A good example of this tactic is the advertising campaign for Botox, a cosmetic injectable that paralyzes facial muscles in order to smooth out the surface of the skin. Dr. Jean Carruthers of Vancouver is the co-creator of cosmetic applications of Botox (with her husband), and was interviewed on CBC Radio in 2006 during a feature about cosmetic surgery. When asked by “On the Coast” radio host Mike Clark, “Does Botox present an unrealistic representation of people?” Jean Carruthers answered:

“It’s not being unrealistic at all. They’re portraying who they really are […] Botox allows people to be more direct […] We respond more positively to individuals who are beautiful […] [Botox] is an incredible way for people to be more themselves.”

Dr. Carruthers’ answer suggests that Botox offers people the opportunity to be “more themselves,” a more true representation of themselves than what an aging (and therefore less authentic) face reflects. This statement implies that an unmodified face is indirect, inauthentic, and less beautiful than the injected face, and that unmodified people cannot “be themselves” in the same way as people who receive Botox. At the same time that Botox apparently satisfies personal authenticity, it also guarantees social acceptance, according to Carruthers. If “we respond more positively to individuals who are beautiful” then it stands to reason that anyone who does not use Botox is responsible for their own social misgivings. The conflation of the characteristic of directness with beauty and authenticity is common among makeover culture texts, where an improved appearance is one’s surest route to success.
This association between an inner self and outer beauty regularly occurs in cosmetics advertising, such as Unilever’s Fair and Lovely Skin Lightening products, which advertise life-changing career and relationship opportunities to Indian women with the use of their creams, and whose product slogan encourages users to “Feel good, look good, get more out of life” (“Fair and Lovely”). Skin lightening has a controversial history for several reasons, most notably the toxic effects of the products used to lighten the skin, and for the perpetuation of discriminatory practices associated with the desire for light skin (Peiss). Perhaps to counter the criticism of their product, Unilever (which also owns Dove, popular for its “Real Beauty” campaign), launched the Fair and Lovely Foundation in 2003, a campaign to empower Sri Lankan women with economic opportunities, using the slogan “Fairness that changes your destiny.”

According to Dana Heller, contemporary manifestations of makeover culture descend from ‘American Dream’ ideology, but with new and greater emphasis on the body as barometer of success and upward mobility (Great American Makeover 3). June Deery observes the relatively recent turn towards self-improvement in the form of improvement in appearance, as opposed to more traditional forms of moral or spiritual growth as self-improvement (“Interior Design” 169). Taking cues from the self-help industry, makeover culture unites physical self-improvement with internal transformation and personal progress. Elayne Rapping’s study of the self-help movement argued that women are taught to find solutions to their problems through individualized transformation, which depoliticizes women’s issues (including domestic violence, eating disorders, and self-esteem), and treats wide-spread social inequalities as personal weaknesses to be overcome. Likewise, the makeover industry ignores the causes of women’s desire to change their bodies (such as unrealistic and narrow expectations of beauty, thinness, and eternal youth) and encourages women to take action in the form of body work, rather than through challenging a system in which their body is not considered ideal or authentic.

A common appeal to indulgence across advertising media and within popular culture more broadly shape the methods through which this ideology operates in makeover culture. For women especially, advertisers of products and procedures claiming to transform the body (and by association the self), play up an affinity with hard-working, deserving women who have the right to indulge in something for themselves.
after having spent most of their lives taking care of others. Michelle Lazar refers to this phenomenon as “entitled femininity”:

...a subject effect of the discourse of postfeminism, which claims leisure and pleasure as women’s entitlement, along with the celebration of all things feminine and ‘girly’. There is a certain ‘knowingness’ that underlies this entitlement, which allows for the construction of a narcissistic, confident and fun female subjectivity. (Lazar 374)

Botox ads available online, in print, and in public displays (bus shelters in Vancouver in 2006), demonstrate this discursive positioning (see figure 2-1): in the copy accompanying a black and white image of a middle-aged, white woman’s face, looking upwards, Botox is marketed as a product that is: “For me, myself and I.”

Source: © Hamish MacGregor 2006

Figure 2-1 Botox Cosmetics bus kiosk ad campaign, “For Me, Myself and I” Vancouver, BC, 2006

The celebration of entitlement in this advertisement operates from a postfeminist position, one that encourages women to acknowledge their social roles and then reward themselves with Botox. Cosmetics giant L’Oreal’s signature slogan “Because you’re worth it” is a long-running and easily identifiable reflection of the trend to sell products from this vantage point. The appeal to indulgence through beauty treatments and body modification reflects a postfeminist ideology of upward mobility, empowerment and success measured through individual consumption, an appeal that functions across makeover culture.
2.3 Postfeminism and Makeover Culture

Postfeminist appeals such as the Botox ad and L’Oreal’s slogan mentioned above operate from an unspoken “acknowledgement of feminism as a feature of the cultural milieu” (Tasker and Negra 107), or, as Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards describe feminism, it has become so pervasive in young women’s lives it is, like fluoride: “simply in the water” (17). Coinciding with the emergence of self-proclaimed third wave feminism in the early 1990s in North America, a group of feminist writers emerged in the popular North American press who were highly critical of institutionalized, academic feminism. Identified as “post-feminists,” the authors, including Katie Roiphe, Camille Paglia, Naomi Wolf (Fire with Fire), Christina Hoff Sommers, and Rene Denfeld, called for a new kind of feminism largely based on liberal ideology, from a belief that women had achieved basic equality in North America. They also shared a desire to rid feminism of what was perceived to be a victim standpoint overused by feminists who were out of touch with ‘real women.’ Naomi Wolf coined the term “power feminism” to describe what she saw as the way to women’s equality and success, using the tools of capitalism and economic power, and developing in women the aggression, networking skills, and sense of entitlement associated with masculine success models (Fire with Fire). The association of feminist goals with American Dream ideology has become prevalent in popular culture, that is, the celebration of women’s individualistic upward mobility and success measured in material wealth.

Postfeminist discourse typically implies that feminism is redundant because it was successful in achieving gender equality. Contrarily, postfeminist discourse may appropriate and reposition feminist politics for individual and consumer-oriented ends (Lazar 505). Angela McRobbie argues that postfeminist culture celebrates as feminist the individual achievements of women rather than collective political action, and orbits around a knowing irony or cheekiness in “enacting sexism,” whereby feminism is invoked in order to facilitate the punch-line (by being undone) (“Postfeminism” 258-9). In a postfeminist media culture, feminism is caricatured as stodgy, outdated, and un-ironic, and women are encouraged to participate in the endorsement and normalization of sexual objectification (as sexual subjectification) as a form of empowerment (Gill, “Sexual objectification”). Choice, a term closely tied to second wave abortion discourse, is invoked and defined in relation to a “new regime” of sexuality, wherein enacting the ability to choose is associated with choosing to be objectified sexually (McRobbie...
“Postfeminism”). The result, according to McRobbie, is the re-regulation of women through “the language of personal choice” (262, see also Levy). Within this cultural context, “advertisers attempted to incorporate the cultural power and energy of feminism while simultaneously neutralizing or domesticating the force of its social/political critique” (Gill, “Empowerment/Sexism” 39). Tasker and Negra identify persistent themes of retreatism, “the ‘girling’ of femininity,” and a framework of consumerism and individualism within postfeminist culture (107-109). Taken together, these ideological preconditions set the stage for makeover culture.

The prevalence of postfeminist discourse in mainstream popular culture has been attributed to several factors, including feminist ‘backlash’ (Faludi), conservatism and cutbacks in Reagan-era US, the lack of shared-responsibilities necessary to balance out domestic and childrearing more equitably between men and women following women’s increased presence in the workforce, and what appeared to be a lull in feminism political organizing after the mid-1970s (Henry; Siegel; Wolf Fire With Fire). More specific to advertising, the increased presence of postfeminist discourse is a result of shifts in advertising strategies that occurred in the late 1980s in response to media-savvy, ad-saturated consumers exposed to second-wave feminist politics (Gill, “Empowerment/Sexism” 39). As well, postfeminist discourse flourishes in a culture that is awash in self-help ideology, which replaces collective feminist politics with individualistic therapeutic discourse (Mascia-Lee and Sharpe, in Hawkesworth 968; Rapping). Makeover culture enthusiastically utilizes postfeminist discourse in order to promote its wares. In the process, women are encouraged to see their body work as empowering and politically-minded (specific examples to support this hypothesis will be studied in detail below).

2.4 Legitimizing Bodywork

While advertisers encourage potential clients to indulge in beauty treatments and body modification procedures because they fundamentally deserve it, makeover culture has also begun to creep into the category of body maintenance and health care. As with regular visits to the dentist and doctor, the upkeep required to maintain a healthy looking (youthful and slim) body is treated as smart and reflective of responsible self-care, within a neoliberal cultural sphere. The use of scientific jargon in ads for skin-care products implies that anti-aging products are a part of a preventative health care routine, and
PRO+THERAPY Discover zeatin, the latest innovation in professional skin care. The Kinerase® Pro+Therapy Collection features zeatin—a next generation plant-based technology derived from RNA, available exclusively to the Kinerase Pro+Therapy collection. Studies have shown that zeatin improves the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles, skin roughness and hyperpigmentation. Zeatin and kinetin, when used together as part of the Kinerase skin care regimen, have a scientifically significant impact on the appearance of the more severe signs of skin aging. Kinerase Pro+Therapy products are available exclusively through physicians. The Kinerase Pro+Therapy Collection—Skin Smoothing Cleanser, Advanced Repair Serum and Ultra Rich Night Repair—are formulated to complement the Kinerase Core Collection. (“Pro+Therapy MD: Technology”)

Paired with before and after photos of an aging woman’s wrinkled eye and the lessening of her wrinkles after treatment, as well as graphs depicting the results of research on the efficacy of the products, Kinerase Cosmetics attempts to situate itself between a health care industry and a luxury cosmetics industry. The widespread promotion of ingredients such as Alpha Hydroxy acid, antioxidants, hyaluronic acid, retinol, amino acids, peptides, etc., in cosmetics and anti-aging products reflects the desire of the cosmetics industry to instil a sense of legitimacy through ‘science’ and its association with the health care field, while maintaining its appeal as an exclusive luxury brand.

The diet industry has also shifted its tone to accommodate the movement towards health and health care. Weight Watchers shifted its tone in 2008 with the ad campaign and slogan “Stop dieting. Start living,” and moved towards healthy living by claiming to teach women and men how to make smart, life-long food decisions based on over 45 years of nutrition-based research (Weight Watchers). The popularity of The South Beach Diet and the Atkins Diet over the last fifteen years despite concerns over their safety is related to the promotion of these programs as invented by doctors. The role of the health care ‘expert’ in legitimizing products and procedures within makeover culture has been central to its normalization, and will be examined in more detail in the next chapter (in The Swan).

The self-help industry, another important element of makeover culture, operates similarly from a neoliberal perspective of self-governing and individual problem solving...
within a context of healthy living and self-care. The popularity of self-help gurus such as Anthony Robbins, Dr. Phil, Oprah Winfrey, and Rhonda Byrne (author of The Secret), and the related seminars, books, films, events, and techniques for purchase weighs heavily on the discourse of makeover culture. “Become a better you!” is an endlessly repeated catchphrase that moves through makeover culture, with roots deeply set in self-help literature, and in the cosmetics, dieting, and exercise industries.

The apex of the self-improvement industry is the cosmetic surgery industry, which also relies on the notion of self-improvement through physical change. Cosmetic surgery has shifted popular culture dramatically since the emergence of makeover reality TV, and its role in propelling the limits of the body has garnered significant media attention and critical scrutiny over the last decade. Images, stories, opinions, and ideas about cosmetic surgery saturate makeover culture. Originating after the First World War, when reconstructive plastic surgery developed in the trenches as soldiers were injured in new and severe ways thanks to new military strategies and weaponry (Haiken), plastic surgery was first justified as a way for men to return to “normal” routines including work life and family. Plastic surgery was considered distinct from cosmetic surgery, which bore moral and ethical stigma associated with the sin of vanity. In the early twentieth century, reconstructive surgeons maintained a strict distance from what was considered a new breed of unlicensed, untrained “beauty doctors” and “quacks” who tarnished the image of the industry. Nevertheless, women became a target market for elective cosmetic surgery after the Second World War, as a result of as increased middle-class affluence for many Americans (Gilman, Haiken).

Despite the experimental nature of many procedures and the questionable knowledge of long term side-effects of many of the products used in cosmetic surgery throughout its history, cosmetic surgery has become more and more accessible and acceptable in recent years. Financing and loans for cosmetic procedures (which are not covered by most state, province, or extended health care coverage) are widely available through loan granting agencies and financial institutions such as Capital One. Moreover, the quickly-growing list of elective procedures that do not involve invasive surgery have made many procedures less prohibitively expensive than in the past; the American

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21 A few examples of experimental procedures include injecting paraffin wax into patient’s faces in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Gilman 254), injecting liquid silicone into women’s breasts in the mid-twentieth century (Haiken 247), and injecting Botulinum toxin into women and men’s faces today (the active ingredient in Botox).
Society of Plastic Surgery reports average surgeon’s fees for procedures, and several cost hundreds rather than thousands of dollars (2011 Plastic Surgery Report 20). Additionally, minimally-invasive procedures require considerably less recovery time than traditional surgical procedures, and most can be performed in a clinic setting rather than a hospital. All of these factors have led to the 123% rise in minimally invasive cosmetic procedures from 2000 to 2011, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgery (7).

2.5 The Normalization of Cosmetic Surgery

The normalization and acceptability of cosmetic surgery in North American culture did not occur overnight, and as Haiken and Gilman demonstrate, there is a long history of the emergence and marketing of cosmetic surgery in popular media. However, dramatic increases in the number of procedures being performed in the United States in the last decade suggests that there has been a shift in the way that cosmetic surgery is perceived in popular culture. Statistics from the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS) indicate that since 1997, cosmetic surgical and nonsurgical procedures have risen by 155 per cent (3). Similar statistics are not available in Canada since the professional organization representing plastic surgeons in Canada does not collect such data, according to Karyn Wagner, the Executive Director of the Canadian Society of Plastic Surgeons (email communication, Feb 2011). However, marketing trends and the availability of cosmetic surgery procedures in major urban centres in Canada suggest a parallel trend across the border. The International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS) concluded that in 2009, a total of 216 623 surgical and non-surgical procedures were performed in Canada by 425 plastic surgeons, accounting for 1.3% of the total number of procedures performed across twenty-five member countries (2). By comparison, the United States ranked first with 17.5% of total procedures performed by 5, 700 surgeons in 2009 (2). While the difference in amount of procedures and surgeons between the US and Canada seems staggering, breaking down the numbers per capita indicates that the industry is comparably thriving in Canada: there is one surgeon for every 54 035 people in the US and one surgeon for every 79 364 people in Canada.22 Further indication that cosmetic surgery is becoming normalized was recently released by the American Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery,

which found that “more than half (51%) of all Americans regardless of income approve of cosmetic plastic surgery, this is a 3% increase from 2009”.  

Contemporary representations of women who have had cosmetic surgery have begun to undermine negative associations of cosmetic surgery and authenticity and deception, at least from within cosmetic surgery advertising. For instance, Restylane, a cosmetic injectable filler used to smooth out wrinkles in the face, has launched an online advertising campaign based on aging women deceiving younger men. In an ad entitled “Happy Birthday,” a hand-held camera moves through a dimly lit bar-scene, while people speak into the camera and wish Barbara a happy birthday, many commenting on how fabulous she looks. The cameraman turns a corner and finds his friend passionately kissing a blonde woman on a couch. Cheers from the filmmaker turn into shock and disgust as he realizes his friend is groping his own mother. The ad copy reads “Age Disgracefully.” A second Restylane ad shows three women, each answering the question “Why do I use Restylane?” The first answers, “I use it to lose these wrinkles, and my inhibitions” as she rides a bucking mechanical bull in front of a cheering crowd. The second woman answers, “I use it to hide my real age, because he thinks I’m younger than I am,” as she prepares dinner with a handsome younger man. The third answers: “I use it to look good, even in fluorescent lighting” as she looks in the mirror of a public restroom. Both of these examples turn the negative implication associated with cosmetic surgery, that is, that women who undergo cosmetic procedures do so in order to deceive men about their “true” age, into a positive reason to use Restylane. The ads employ a knowing irony, and undermine the stereotype about older women on the prowl by invoking it and turning the negative presumption back on the viewer. Yet, Angela McRobbie’s observations about postfeminism and “enacting sexism” through irony suggest that these ads may be less subversive than they first appear (“Postfeminism” 258), because they perpetuate the idea that there remains something taboo about older women dating younger men. If the viewer does not perceive the satire, the figure of the deceptive older woman remains intact.

23 The study indicated that 53% of women and 49% of men approved of cosmetic surgery, “67% of white Americans and 72% of non-white Americans would not be embarrassed about having cosmetic surgery,” and 77% of Americans over 65 also would not be embarrassed (“Survey shows that more than Half of Americans Approve of Cosmetic Plastic Surgery.” American Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. 4 April 2011).


The ideological shift in the Restylane advertisements, using what has been perceived negatively as a tool in the attempt to sell the cosmetic product, is possible (and successful) within makeover culture because of a paradigm shift that occurred in the early years of the new millennium, when makeover reality TV exploded onto North American networks. This period is so important because it used an almost universally accessible media vehicle for disseminating images of cosmetic surgery into the home: television.

In 2002, ABC’s Extreme Makeover debuted to an incredible amount of media attention because of the program’s presentation of full-body cosmetic surgery to transform its contestants radically. A host of copycat programs, all concentrating on cosmetic surgery as makeover, quickly followed: Discovery Health’s Plastic Surgery: Before and After (2002), Fox’s The Swan (2004), MTV’s I Want a Famous Face (2005), TLC’s 10 Years Younger (2004), E! Dr. 90210 (2004), TLC’s body/Work (2004), and Bravo’s Miami Slice (2004). These American reality television programs constitute the makeover reality TV genre, and are related in tone and ideology to non-surgical makeover reality TV, which has also seen a flurry of new programming. For example: TLC’s A Makeover Story (2000), MTV’s Made (2002), UPN’s America’s Next Top Model (2003), TLC’s What Not to Wear (2003), Bravo’s Queer Eye for the Straight Guy (2003), NBC’s The Biggest Loser (2004), Fox’s Ambush Makeover (2004), Style Network’s How Do I Look? (2004), W Network’s Groomed (2006), Bravo’s Tim Gunn’s Guide to Style (2007), and Lifetime’s How to Look Good Naked (2008). These series exist along a continuum that reinforce the value of transformation and its effect on the individuals being made over.

Because of the widespread visibility of cosmetic surgery on television over the last decade, cosmetic procedures have become familiar in a way that has moved them into the mundane. Makeover reality TV relies on the shock value of making surgery visible, the painful aftermath, and the “reveal” moment as a way to pull in audiences, but this analysis will show that the genre itself created a glut of images, a saturation point, that has led to the normalization of cosmetic surgery. Bernadette Wegenstein points to the lag in cosmetic surgery industry growth in the years following the heavy inundation of makeover reality TV; from 2005 to 2006 the ASPS reported only a one per cent rise in surgical and non-surgical procedures and in the years following there has been a stabilization effect. Wegenstein suggests, “the heyday has been reached. We are now
facing the age of a normalized, slowly progressing growth in cosmetic procedures” (“Introduction” 2). Current statistics would suggest that Wegenstein’s plateau hypothesis is correct: from 2009 to 2010, the increase in surgical procedures was two per cent and five per cent for non-surgical procedures (ASPS Cosmetic Procedure Trends 2010). The ASPS credited the slow growth on the recovering economy, but Wegenstein’s contention that normalization creates a plateau is also significant. Indeed, while makeover reality programs featuring cosmetic surgery were produced by multiple networks between 2002-2007, currently there are relatively few North American cosmetic surgery-themed programs being broadcast (i.e. Bridalplasty on E! Network is one notable exception). This would suggest that the hype created around cosmetic surgery programming has worn itself out. At the same time, non-surgical makeover programming remains popular, with new programming including Plain Jane (The CW 2010), Shedding for the Wedding (The CW 2011), Scouted (E! 2011), RuPaul’s Drag U (OUT TV 2010).

The proliferation and continued popularity of makeover reality TV programming across network television over a short period, and the discourse it fostered, has relied on neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies. As a result, the makeover reality TV genre works in the service of advancing neoliberal citizenship practices to viewers.

2.6 The roles of Neoliberalism and Postfeminism in Policing the Boundaries of Makeover Culture

The programs listed above share several things in common with the umbrella genre under which makeover reality TV falls, lifestyle television (which includes home, career, and lifestyle makeover shows). Several scholars have studied the underlying neoliberal ideologies of lifestyle television programs, which concentrate on self-improvement through transformation (Dovey; Lewis; McMurría; Miller; Ouellette and Hay; Palmer; Weber Makeover TV). Lifestyle television instructs viewers how to transform and improve their homes, bodies, cars, and domestic responsibilities (such as cooking and gardening), with emphasis on self-care and self-discipline. According to Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, lifestyle television defines “good citizenship practices,” which correspond with the deregulation of the social welfare state, privatization of government

institutions such as health care, and excessive consumer capitalism. They argue that “[b]y demonstrating for and with viewers the techniques for taking care of oneself, reality TV supports the governmental rationalities of self-reliance that have become so pivotal to the current stage of liberal government” (16). Reality TV is thus a “cultural technology” that helps to instruct and regulate viewers (and, by extension, societies) in ways that deemphasize the role of the state and concentrate on the “good” choices made by citizens to ensure their happiness and welfare. While government reform may not appear to have any direct connection with lifestyle television, Ouellette and Hay argue that the celebration of self-care through good decision-making and consumer practices in contestants’ personal lives reflect disciplinary tactics at the micro level, or, “governing at a distance” (102).

Despite such normalization of cosmetic surgery in makeover culture, there remains a line between acceptable and unacceptable forms of body modification, carefully defined and policed within makeover culture itself. While it may be more acceptable and accessible to remove wrinkles and fat for the average consumer, it is decidedly not empowering or acceptable when a patient takes it “too far.” When a patient procures cosmetic surgery in a way that reveals the procedures on the body, or modifies the body in a way that exaggerates a feature or features, cultural boundaries are quick to emerge (see Appendix A for examples from the National Enquirer, a tabloid magazine that frequently recycles its “Plastic Surgery Shockers” cover story). Celebrities who make it to the “Plastic Surgery Shockers” covers are shocking because their cosmetic work is highly visible. Now infamous figures such as Michael Jackson, Joan Rivers, Heidi Montag and Jocelyn Wildenstein (the “Cat Lady”) are repeatedly referenced in the media as freaks and cosmetic surgery junkies (among other, slightly lesser newsworthy cosmetic surgery “addicts” such as Mickey Rourke, Janice Dickinson, Dolly Parton, Lisa Rinna, Meg Ryan, Courtney Love, Cher, Madonna, and Tori Spelling). The criticism of these celebrity figures in the pages of magazines and in tabloids, and more recently in the proliferation of online celebrity gossip blogs, indicates the extent to which perceived authenticity and adherence to something known as the ‘natural’ are still central to the acceptance of cosmetic surgery as a practice within makeover culture. The boundaries of acceptable body modification remain firm within celebrity culture, and they also emerge in fictional and reality TV.

27 Such as gossip websites Perez Hilton, Lainey Gossip, TMZ, Awful Plastic Surgery.com, Go Fug Yourself, DListed, and Oh No They Didn’t.
*Nip/Tuck*, a drama series created by Ryan Murphy and originally broadcast on FX (2003-2010), regularly featured the cosmetic surgery freak in its narrative, pairing cosmetic surgery with addiction, deceit, adultery, murder, excess, vanity, and sexual perversion. The association of body modification with moral laxity is highlighted from the start of each episode, when the surgical duo Christian Troy and Sean McNamara ask their prospective client, “What don’t you like about yourself?” *Nip/Tuck* exists within makeover culture as an interesting fictional parallel to the celebrated democratization of beauty witnessed on makeover reality TV, and it is decidedly much darker and cynical in tone (see Gever; Lyons; Tait). Similar to the association of cosmetic surgery with inauthenticity and negativity demonstrated regularly on *Nip/Tuck*, a 2008 ad campaign for New York Fries claimed that in a “fake world” (represented by a woman with cartoonish, augmented breasts), their product is “real” (figure 2-3). The ads appeared in women’s magazines including *Canadian House and Home, Chatelaine*, and *In Style* from 2008-2009, following makeover reality TV’s most popular run. What these examples indicate is that as much as makeover culture has normalized cosmetic surgery and related procedures, there remains a simultaneous cultural perception that body modification signifies dishonesty and inauthenticity.
The coexistence of pro-and anti-cosmetic surgery discourses in makeover culture, their normalization and simultaneous derision in popular media, can best be understood against a backdrop of postfeminism. The New York Fries ad above relies on postfeminism to be funny: put simply, viewers are permitted to laugh at a woman who chooses ‘fake’ breasts because feminism has taught us that women do not need to rely on sexual desirability to be successful. Of course, all women remain open to scrutiny under this kind of postfeminist logic.

At the same time that postfeminist media culture supports the boundaries of authenticity in makeover culture, postfeminist discourse also appeals to women using language that emphasizes choice, freedom, rights, empowerment and women’s
knowledge in order to validate and justify products, procedures, and lifestyle choices. Presenting themes similar to those found in the discourse of neoliberalism (individualism, self-discipline, self-governing), postfeminist discourse permeates makeover culture and shapes the ways that body modification and makeover practices are conceptualized and understood. Postfeminist ideology shapes the meanings associated with makeover and transformation in contemporary culture, and the centrality of the concept of choice is evident in every corner of makeover culture.

Published in 1990 in *Screen*, Elspeth Probyn’s “New Traditionalism and Postfeminism: TV Does the Home” is an early examination of postfeminism and ‘female-centred’ television. Probyn determined that new traditionalism and postfeminist culture reposition women in the home by way of a discourse of “choice” that is devoid of feminist politics (in *LA Law* (NBC 1986), *Murphy Brown* (CBS 1988) and *thirtysomething* (ABC 1987)). She notes that the return to domesticity is positioned as the natural choice for women as illustrated by the character of Hope in *thirtysomething*, who is idealized as a stay at home mother embodying a sense of home in her serenity (151). Although new traditionalism makes a return to the domestic seem like a new choice, or a different choice, than that which second wave feminists worked against, it remains “choice freed of the necessity of thinking about the political and social ramifications of the act of choosing” (156). Similar concerns emerge regarding the choice to undergo vaginal cosmetic surgery and the marketing of “Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation” as an empowering event.

The growth in elective vaginal cosmetic surgery procedures, spearheaded in the US by cosmetic surgeon David Matlock who has trademarked the terms “Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation” and “Designer Laser Vaginoplasty,” relies heavily on postfeminist discourse in its advertising and industry literature. This series of surgical procedures promises to tighten the vagina (vaginoplasty), create symmetry and restore youthfulness to the labia minora through laser sculpting (labioplasty), and recreate physical signs of virginity by simulating the hymen membrane (hymenoplasty). In 2007, the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery reported 4 506 vaginal rejuvenation procedures.

Vaginal rejuvenation is marketed as a solution for women with “vaginal looseness” who have been ignored by their health-care providers, and the sympathy evoked implies that Dr. Matlock’s team is feminist, interested in valuing women’s voices and honouring their concerns:
We have learned a tremendous amount from listening to women we have treated from all 50 states and 30 countries. Women come to us because they want knowledge, choice, and alternatives. Women want their gynecologist to listen to them and provide viable solutions. Women throughout this nation and the world have told us that Kegels do not work [to tighten the vagina] - but no one is listening.28

This pro-woman language of empowerment (through “knowledge, choice and alternatives”) is rampant in the advertising literature for Vaginal Rejuvenation. Patient testimonials are included on Matlock’s website as further testament to valuing women’s voices. These testimonials reassert the determination, choice, and agency afforded to the women who undergo vaginal rejuvenation in the care of Dr. Matlock, called “wonderful,” “genius,” a “pioneer,” and “truly a women’s doctor.”29 The individualistic logic of the marketing and testimonial text for Vaginal Rejuvenation is a familiar tactic of the cosmetic surgery industry, which has appropriated feminist rhetoric around ‘choice’ for the sake of selling products to women who believe that their bodies are deficient or deformed (see Bartky; Bordo; Davis Reshaping).

The medicalization of women’s bodies and physiological processes is not a new phenomenon. The medicalization of reproductive and mental health has led to the pathologization of women’s bodies since at least the nineteenth century. The extension of this phenomenon into makeover culture was introduced briefly with the example of beauty products such as Kinerase’s Pro+Therapy skin cream, which attempts to enhance its credibility as an anti-aging product through the use of scientific jargon in its advertising. In the process, aging is produced as an illness to be cured. Similarly, marketing of Vaginal Rejuvenation medicalizes the appearance of a woman’s vagina and then uses pro-woman sentiments to both name and ‘solve’ the problems associated with “the loss of the optimum structural architecture of the vagina.” Thomas Frank describes this phenomenon as “liberation marketing” (3). Liberation marketing:

imagines consumers breaking free from the old enforcers of order, tearing loose from the shackles with which capitalism has bound us, escaping the routine of bureaucracy and hierarchy, getting in touch with our true selves, and finally, finding authenticity, that holiest of consumer grails. (Frank 3)

Vaginal Rejuvenation has been branded as a saviour for women, a choice made in reaction against traditional medicine, where “no one is listening” to women’s complaints. As Frank points out, referring to liberation marketing tactics: “every brand must have an identity, and the most effective identities are found when a brand takes on the trappings of a movement for social justice” (6). By stating as its mission: “to empower women with knowledge, choice, and alternatives,” the Laser Vaginal Institute of Los Angeles appropriates feminist politics for consumer purposes. At the same time as it relies on a postfeminist discourse, Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation marketing also hearkens back to a long history of pathologizing women’s sexual organs.

Similarly, Penticton, British Columbia nightclub manager Florio Vassilakakis defended an event held at the Elements nightclub in 2005 using postfeminist rhetoric of choice for a contest that awarded one young woman with breast implants as a prize. The competition, called “Sextreme Makeover: The Titty Edition” received press and protest for sexualizing women in a marketing stunt. Vassilakakis’ response reflects postfeminist sentiments: “The entire women's movement is based on a woman’s right to choose what happens to her body” (“Club Owner Defends”). The winner, Tiffany Freisen, reflected on the protestors outside the nightclub using language also reminiscent of second wave feminist abortion rights activism, relying on rhetoric of choice and a woman’s ownership over her body: “They have their rights to believe whatever they want but it's my body and I'm going to do whatever I want” (Carmichael). This logic and the “right to choose” rhetoric appropriates feminist discourses in order to validate normative body work in a postfeminist culture, a trend explored in feminist media studies and makeover reality TV (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer; Crawley; Tait; Weber *Makeover TV*).

This discursive trend has caught the attention and scrutiny of feminist media scholars, who have reacted with mostly negative response to what is framed as an appropriation and evacuation of feminism's political goals. The problem is identified as the depoliticization of hallmark phrases like “A woman’s right to choose,” which is given new meaning in order to sell products using the illusion of feminist politics, or, alternately, postfeminist irony. The co-optation of feminist rhetoric by mainstream media is criticized as betraying ‘real’ feminism (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer; Bordo; McRobbie “Postfeminism”; Negra “Quality Postfeminism?”). These authors do not negate the pleasure gained through self-improvement or makeover culture texts, but they are
conflicted about the level to which they, or anyone else, should revel in the pleasure and spectacle of self-improvement in the name of feminism.

We can begin to address this conflict by returning to somatechnic theory, which reminds us that technologies “are the means in and through which bodies are constituted, positioned and lived” and as such, “the body [is] the incarnation or materialization of historically and culturally specific discourses and practices” (Somatechnic Research Centre par. 1). In contemporary makeover culture through Vaginal Rejuvenation marketing, the vagina has become a signifier of women’s entitlement to heteronormative sexual pleasure. This signification has its roots in second wave feminist demands for female sexual freedom and education in the 1960s and 1970s and could not exist without the women’s movement in North America, but it remains selective in its representation of women’s entitlement to sexual pleasure. Indeed, a Google Image search for “laser vaginal rejuvenation” demonstrates that marketing campaigns have made a vaginal aesthetic intelligible in a cultural context impacted by a history of feminist political successes, even as the campaigns remain visually conservative in their presentation of who has access to sexual pleasure through the procedures advertised (see Appendix B for a sample of images captured in this search). The search results I gathered reveal that in addition to eleven before and after images of surgically altered labia, there are seven images of white heterosexual couples embracing, and thirteen images of white women’s bodies in stylized “model” postures (mostly close up head shots) in the first three pages of images in the Google search (conducted October 14, 2011). Of the fifty-three images that appear in the first three pages of Google Image results, there are ten images of male doctors either posing for a portrait or in action, performing surgery. The overwhelming whiteness of the women featured in the search results, and the heterosexual pleasure implied by the couples embracing, indicates that vaginal rejuvenation is for white, affluent, monogamous, straight women. The empowerment and freedom of vaginal rejuvenation is for an exclusive few, based on the marketing of the clinics and surgeons offering vaginal cosmetic surgery. This anecdotal tally suggests the cosmetic surgery industry has incredible constitutive power to conjure pro-woman sentiments to support a set of surgical procedures that are at least discursively (and qualitatively) similar to female genital mutilation (see Sullivan “The Price to Pay”).
The World Health Organization defines female genital mutilation this way:
“Female genital mutilation (FGM) comprises all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.” Nikki Sullivan argues that FGM and vaginal cosmetic surgery are not qualitatively different, but that they are culturally polarized based on “white optics,” which criminalize non-Western “folk customs” as savage and mutilating (“The Price to Pay” 400). She suggests that intersex surgeries and vaginal cosmetic surgery are culturally accepted practices because Western medicine validates them, even if they produce similar results as FGM (the removal of healthy tissue of a woman or girl’s sexual organs). Despite the potential similarities between FGM and vaginal cosmetic surgeries, the circulating imagery of vaginal cosmetic surgery connotes pleasure, relationship satisfaction and agency. A comparative Google Image search for FGM reveals a polarity in cultural interpretations of the procedures (conducted October 14, 2011). The search for “Female Genital Mutilation” returned two images of a vaginal modification post-procedure, and fifteen images of women- and girls-of-colour crying or looking afraid in the first three pages of images returned. The women and girls in these images are ethnically marked by their style of dress in a kind of generic “third world” signifier of non-whiteness and economic disadvantage (they are photographed in spaces consisting of dirt floors, concrete block walls, or outdoors). The association of FGM with pain and fear is explicit based on their expressions and body positions. Importantly, most of the images that emerged in the first three pages of Google results do not feature the procedures in action. Instead, the expressions of fear or pain, the close-ups on the “victims” stand in for the procedures themselves. Of course, this comparison is anecdotal, and does not take into consideration significant issues of age and consent, or the conditions of the procedures. To be clear, I am not arguing that procedures identified as FGM are ‘the same’ as vaginal cosmetic surgery, or that they ought to be understood in a way that erases cultural and legal forms of oppression on the body. However, the example of the Google search does provide a visual marker of entrenched beliefs about culturally-differentiated vaginal modification: vaginal rejuvenation is self-affirming and freely chosen, while FGM is dehumanizing and coercive.

If, as a theory of somatechnics posits, “the body [is] the incarnation or materialization of historically and culturally specific discourses and practices” (Somatechnics Research Centre, par. 1), then the comparative images for FGM and Vaginal Rejuvenation reflect cultural beliefs about the differences in women’s freedom,
power, and agency within the developing and developed worlds. Bernadette Wegenstein’s premise that “the medium that signifies the body, its representation, no longer is any different from the ‘raw material’ of the body itself” is exemplified in this comparison (Getting Under the Skin 32). The images that signify non-white women who have their sexual organs modified do so apparently in a context of pain, fear, loss, and subordination, and white women have their sexual organs modified within a context of choice, power, sexual pleasure, and self-ownership. By keeping in mind the cultural parameters that shape and constitute the meanings associated with different (and similar) types of body modification, we can begin to interrogate the roots of the distinctions. What we find is that medically sanctioned procedures are anything but neutral or clear-cut.

2.7 The Role of Media Convergence

The postfeminist, neoliberal discourse of choice, empowerment, and self-care that circulates in makeover culture is intertextual and repetitive across media sites. Media convergence blurs the boundaries between media genres in a way that makeover culture becomes impossible to avoid. While television is arguably the most pervasive medium for disseminating makeover culture’s discourses today, it is flanked by media industries that work in tandem to produce and promote makeover culture, including advertising, print media (especially magazines), and the Internet through blogs, web discussion boards, and websites. The physical and generic distance between these media sites has lessened over the last decade as new technologies merge types of media (i.e. all-in-one portable devices that allow people to communicate, watch film and television, surf the Internet, and record their experiences through film and photography). Additionally, the structure of media industries has changed in the face of corporate conglomerates and mergers that put relatively few corporations in charge of a vast range of media outlets. Henry Jenkins describes media convergence as “a situation in which multiple media systems coexist and where media content flows fluidly across them” (Convergence Culture 322). It is the “ongoing process or series of intersections between different media systems” (322). Cross promotion, branding, viral advertising, new and increased forms of product placement, and the emergence of video-sharing sites such as Youtube have transformed the way that mass media operates. Convergence makes makeover culture the elastic, mammoth, and multi-vocal entity that it is.
Convergence also provides the space for public response to makeover culture in multiple formats, which shapes the way that makeover culture develops and often provides a counterpoint to the positive outcomes associated with body modification and transformation through makeover. Makeover culture is not separate from but encompasses the overarching neoliberal discourse that emerges in response to its pervasive media presence, including analyses of aspects of makeover culture found in both mainstream media and in academic formats, such as book and television reviews, letters to the editor, grassroots activism, and feminist media studies. A few examples of newspaper opinion pieces provide some indication of the tone of early media responses to the new genre of makeover reality TV, such as: “Soul Destroying reality TV Shows” (Toronto Star, 19 April 2004), “There’s Nothing Beautiful About ‘The Swan’” (USA Today, 12 April 2004), “Plastic makes the Extremely Made-Over Woman” (The K/W Record, 31 Jan. 2004), “Makeover Mania” (Today’s Christian Sept./Oct. 2004) and “End TV’s makeover madness” (Toronto Star, 13 June 2004). These popular responses to televised ‘extreme’ body modification tended to reflect moral outrage at grotesque images or expensive self-improvement procedures. Critics described makeover culture and its participants as intellectually and morally bankrupt and reflective of a devolving state of affairs in North American culture. For instance, the story “Soul Destroying reality TV Shows” featured in the Toronto Star shortly after the premiere of the Fox network’s reality series The Swan responded to the series this way:

But the message it sends - that everyone would be a better person all around if they just looked better - is horrible. And anyone involved, from the producers to the surgeons to the viewers who push ratings high enough to keep the show on the air, should be ashamed of the roles they have played in developing an ethos that can destroy other people’s lives.

This position demonstrates a powerful discourse within makeover culture, and appeals to commonsense values that trivialize the concerns of subjects engaged with makeover culture. There is no potential for agency in this popular model of interpretation.

From another angle, grassroots activist responses to makeover culture have included online and on-the-street protest work, in some instances making strange

bedfellows of Christian church organizations and feminist non-profits. The outcry regarding the Sextreme Makeover event in 2005 emerged from the Penticton Area Women’s Centre as well as the Holiness Bible Movement, both concerned about the normalization of cosmetic surgery and the continued sexual objectification of women’s bodies. About-Face, a San Francisco-based organization that educates girls and women about gender and media, staged demonstrations asking women to fill out posters that begin with the words: “I don’t need a makeover because…,” in response to The Swan, a show they identify as the “worst perpetrator yet” of media messages that normalize cosmetic surgery (see figure 2-3). The organization completed a letter-writing campaign requesting that producers terminate the series, and they offer workshops for women and girls on media literacy.

The image above depicts four young women, holding signs that say “I don’t need a makeover because...”: “I’m already happy”, “look at me!”, “I’m comfortable as I am” and “I’m cool like that.” The statements, together with the women holding them up in front of their bodies, demonstrate an active resistance to makeover culture messaging that instructs us that makeovers are always in one’s best interest.

In a similar fashion, in 2004 the Vancouver Women’s Health Collective, a feminist non-profit organization, responded to Vancouver’s own version of Extreme Makeover, the “Vancouver Extraordinary Makeover Event” through protest action that forced the BC College of Physicians and Surgeons to weigh in on their surgeons performing surgical
procedures as prizes. They pretended to panhandle in front of the hotel hosting the Vancouver Extraordinary Makeover Event while donning facemasks and wearing signs reading “spare change for a face lift?” (figure 2-4).

![Image of protest action](image)

Source: © Vancouver Women’s Health Collective

**Figure 2-4 Vancouver Women’s Health Collective “Extraordinary Makeover” Protest, Vancouver, BC, 2004**

The theatrical protest action honed in on the profit-driven and potentially exploitative nature of the contest by exposing elective cosmetic surgery as a class-privileged medical field. The women’s organization turned the focus away from what they saw as a sexist and dangerous advertising campaign for local private health clinics, and critiqued the ethics of doctors participating in events where surgery was awarded as a prize. They were successful at pressuring the BC College of Physicians and Surgeons to enforce policies in 2004 that restricted their members from taking part in such activities. A 2004 newsletter on the College website reflects the ethical and professional disapproval:

> The Ethics Committee of the College strongly disapproves of anyone offering a medical or surgical treatment as a prize in a competition or lottery or at auction. The Committee will recommend to the Council of the College that a specific policy forbidding such “marketing” be instituted. To disregard such a policy might well have severe consequences...You have been warned!!!

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The above examples provide alternative discourses to the most pervasive discourse of makeover culture, that is, the discourse that supports body modification by linking it with ‘inner beauty,’ possibilities for financial and personal success, and from a position of neoliberal, postfeminist ideology. Both the Vancouver Women’s Health Collective protest and the About-Face campaign attempted to subvert the commercial goals of industries invested in the growth of makeover culture’s products, by highlighting the ideological and financial motivations in the ads, programming, and events.

The political work of About Face and the Vancouver Women’s Health Collective are important because they present arguments that point to the profit-driven framework of makeover culture, and because they directly oppose what they see as sexist beauty norms. Their work is valuable and necessary. However, it also relies on some problematic assumptions. The protest work of the feminist organizations detailed above constructed their criticism of makeover culture discourse and images using an underlying ideology that celebrates a pre-cultural, natural body. They imply that the un-modified, non-surgical body is the best body for women, and championing acceptance of different body types is a significant part of the mission of these protest actions. Their demands for media producers to acknowledge and refrain from exploiting women’s bodies are quite common, but their arguments present a narrow perspective of the role of technology and body modification in contemporary culture. To suggest that an un-modified body on display is somehow more true, more real than a modified body, sets up a fallacy that is merely the mirror image of the claims made by makeover culture, which suggest that one can be more true, more one’s self, with modification. Their criticism relies on a moral standard for body modification, and presumes to identify which types of modification are reasonable, and which are not. In the example of the protest by the Vancouver Women’s Health Collective, interviews with the Executive Director highlight the difference between ‘legitimate’ medical procedures and those that are deemed superficial and toxic (G. Johnson). The problem with this method of delineating body modification,\(^{32}\) is that it is limited in what it can offer to body modifiers beyond assumptions that render them cultural dupes. Women are reregulated by feminist institutions that discredit their bodywork as vain or misdirected. It denies the claim of Haraway that technological interference/integration/infusion/immersion means that “we are all cyborgs.” While I think

\(^{32}\) Often used to differentiate breast implants for breast cancer patients who have had radical mastectomies, and needs-based assessments of other forms of plastic surgery (e.g. reconstructive surgery, surgeries to repair a cleft-palette)
that the work of these two feminist organizations provide important counter-positions to those within makeover culture that tend to endorse cosmetic surgery enthusiastically and without recognition of its risks, they still reproduce essentialist positions for women that celebrate a natural body that is arguably a fiction.

A more productive feminist critique of makeover culture and surgically-altered bodies that adhere to hegemonic gender norms takes a step back from the individual bodies being represented and asks, if makeover culture produces normative models of successful femininity, what is the purpose and what might this be working to mitigate? If there is no pre-cultural body (and therefore the attempt to recuperate a “natural” body is moot), then the question of the right or wrong way to “do embodiment” is misdirected. So too, deciding who is empowered or victimized is misdirected, because such arguments ignore the arbitrary nature of the meaning associated with the body parts being transformed. A wrinkle-free face is not innately more or less ‘feminine’ than a wrinkled face, it is only associated with idealized femininity because a cultural history of storytelling and images have made it so. Therefore, to embrace wrinkles as an act of defiance or resistance is to subscribe to the same set of ideologies and reproduce the binary. Instead, it is more useful to consider why makeover culture simplifies and exaggerates femininity on the transformed body. I will argue in the following chapter that makeover reality television celebrates transformations that reproduce normative femininity and heterosexual desirability because the hyper-visibility of body modification is threatening to the ontological security of the human body’s stability, wholeness, and integrity. Meredith Jones contends that cosmetically altered bodies on makeover reality TV “traverse boundaries between representation and reality, and between skin and screen. They are therefore potentially both radical and terrifying” (“Media-Bodies” 75-76). The in-betweenness of the modified body, opened up and re-imagined on television, is threatening because it has the potential to undermine the very norms that shape it. A repetitive discourse emerges where there is only one possible outcome for makeover recipients: modification that stays within the limits of feminine beauty norms, and within a narrative that associates completion, wholeness, and integrity with the makeover itself.

We must begin to get at some of the “radical and terrifying” dimensions that are exposed on makeover reality TV through the visibility of bodily hybridity, which I will explore in subsequent chapters. If femininity and beauty can be surgically and cosmetically added to the body, what makes them natural, authentic, or reflective of
one’s self? The answer, as so many feminist scholars have pointed out, is nothing. First, gender is not essential but is a repetitive, learned process formed in and through cultural exchanges and policed by various social, medical and legal institutions, among others (Butler, Lauretis). Second, there is no pre-cultural body, so to assume we can add femininity to the body assumes there is a template ready to be written upon that is untouched or unmarred beforehand. We are cultural beings from the beginning. Makeover reality TV programs such as The Swan propose a storyline that allows for both external and essential femininity in its contestants. This contradiction is unproblematic on the series but it cannot always be tidily maintained, and there are moments of rupture that expose the hybridity of bodies undergoing surgical transformation and healing. The Swan reregulates contestants into hyperfeminized subjects but it does so because the alternative is not yet imaginable in mainstream media. It is to a closer examination of the series that I now turn to begin to address some of these concerns.
3: THE SWAN, FINDING FEMINISM ON TV, AND MAKEOVER REALITY TV

In this chapter I will narrow my focus to an in-depth study of Fox’s *The Swan*, in order to map out the ways that makeover reality TV’s most notorious show perpetuated standards of beauty using a feminist-inspired discourse of choice and empowerment, and neoliberal ideologies of self-care and self-discipline. The series perpetuated class divisions while claiming democratic access to beauty through its program; and constructed authority relationships between patients and experts that replicated traditional gender roles. Before beginning this analysis, I will briefly discuss the political economy of the reality TV genre, some of the main concerns identified by media scholars regarding reality TV’s emergence and solidified presence in the global television market, and its impacts on the production of television. I will also establish the televisual context from which *The Swan* emerged, since it was not the first North American television show aimed at a female audience to employ a postfeminist ideology and choice discourse. This work helps anchor the study of *The Swan* by recognizing that its existence is a result of trends that have solidified in other genres and decades, namely the soap opera and the primetime drama. The question under consideration is not whether *The Swan* accurately or inaccurately represents feminism,33 but rather, if we can agree that feminism, by virtue of its presence in popular culture, informs makeover culture, then how is feminism appropriated for the cosmetic surgery industry, and to what end? I will argue, with somatechnics as my theoretical touchstone, that feminist-inspired discourse and the physical transformation of women’s bodies through cosmetic surgery, diet and exercise reproduce hegemonic gender roles for women on *The Swan*; and that this occurs in order to contain the ontological threat made visible in the creation of a

33 The purpose of feminist media studies is not to determine or suggest a more accurate version of feminism or ‘womanhood’ on television: “As Judith Mayne has pointed out in her discussion of *LA Law*, what is at stake is not the authenticity of television’s representation of feminism but rather the way that television as a mass cultural form appropriates a politically informed practice of cultural critique” (Rabinovitz Note 10, 164). Karen Boyle echoes this point by suggesting that the purpose of feminist criticism is not to determine whether a program is feminist or not, but how to “engage with and negotiate feminist questions” (187).
hybrid being on makeover reality television. In this way, I shift the analysis from the victim/agent dichotomy that limits criticism to the individual participating (or ‘the system’), and towards a culture-based critique that examines how popular texts deal with the challenges of producing narratives and images of women as in-between beings, whose transformations are deeply troubling at the same time as they are deeply satisfying to watch.

The hybridity that is exposed on The Swan makes visible the soma and techné as a both/and construct rather than an either/or dichotomy. The division between nature/artifice, body/culture, human/machine is undone on makeover reality TV when women’s bodies are shown undergoing surgery, healing and physical change. This hybridity is recuperated through the hyperfeminization of The Swan contestants in order to mitigate the undoing of (the idea of) a stable female body. Malleability is threatening inasmuch as it is liberating or equalizing, because it disrupts the mythology of the essential self, especially of gender as essential.

3.1 The Political Economy of Reality TV: How did we get here?

The genre of reality TV has changed the ways that the business of television operates on a global scale, but its emergence also indicates that profound change was already afoot in the television industry when, in the late 1990s, more and more reality TV programming spread across network and cable television in the US. Several contributing factors have led to the proliferation of reality programming across North America in the early 2000s, the most significant factors beginning in the 1980s (Moran 20; Murray 1900). The impacts of a widespread and heavy reliance on reality programming by network and cable channels are still being determined, but scholars indicate that the television landscape has been fundamentally altered (Andrejevic Reality TV; Moran; Murray and Ouellette). Alison Hearn describes reality TV as:

a thoroughly promotional gambit that worked to distract attention from the significant changes taking place in the mode of production and business practices of the mainstream television industry. Production was being cheapened, writers and actors discarded, and “real” people summoned to “be themselves” for a nominal appearance fee, often humiliated or manipulated in the process. (315)

Hearn’s definition draws attention to the economic factors leading to the current trends of reality TV in the American television marketplace. These include: deregulation of
television standards and media ownership rules in the US by the Federal Communications Commission beginning under the Reagan administration and further chipped away at by the Telecommunications Act of 1996; push-back from the networks against demands made by unionized employees (such as the Writers Guild of America strike of 1988) (Murray 1900); increasing production costs for fictional television; trends towards growing media convergence; narrowcasting, and the shift in media ownership towards fewer and more powerful global media conglomerates (Andrejevic *Reality Television*; McMurria; Murray and Ouellette; Rapheal; Spigel). Additionally,

Since the 1990s, the broadcasting industry has faced a thornier economic environment and increased competition within the expanded channels and multiple distribution outlets, ...Compounding this problem is the increasingly fragmented audience, the rapidly rising cost of ‘above-the-line’ labor, and the dilution of advertising revenues. (Jian and Liu 526)

Looking more broadly at the global trends in television production and media ownership, changes in international television distribution have also been powerful in shaping the media landscape of which reality television is a part (Sender 4; Kraidy 208; McMurria 184). Marwan Kraidy identifies the sale of reality TV formats globally by a small number of media corporations as an important element of reality TV’s popularity and presence:

The worldwide popularity of reality television reflects an emerging media environment combining the national and transnational expansion of commercial television, format-adaptation, convergent media platforms, and new labor relations...Worldwide, most reality shows are adapted from formats owned as intellectual property by a handful of European companies like Endemol and Fremantle. Format-adaptation is attractive because it eliminates program development costs, standardizes production, and minimizes the risk of commercial failure. (208)

Format adaptation, or what Albert Moran calls television programme remaking, is “now a principal driver in global television” and he notes that makeover programs are particularly well suited to “format mobility” (Moran 25). The factors listed above worked together with incredible ratings, to create a space for reality television to flourish. For example, US network reality series such as *American Idol* (Fox 2002), *The Bachelor* (ABC 2002), and
Survivor (CBS 2000) have each broken previously held network ratings records and have some of the highest ratings records in television history.\textsuperscript{34}

By 2004 television network executives were in panic mode regarding the unknown but weighty impact of reality television on relationships with advertisers, production companies, and the long-term sustainability of dramatic programming. In an article in the popular trade magazine Brandweek, some of the country’s most powerful shareholders in television and advertising predicted the role reality TV would have on the future of television. Jordan Levine, then CEO of the cable channel The WB (Warner Brothers) stated:

“It’s kind of scary, because broadcast networks have been the backbone of the TV industry...Networks generate shows that have value for secondary and tertiary usage. There is a detrimental value to undermining the production model for scripted programming, which has a down-river effect on stations and cable networks. It certainly is a game-changer.” (qtd. in Schmuckler)

The traditional television season (fall to spring) was blown open by reality TV, which increased the demand for production and put pressure on networks to create new content rather than relying on reruns on the off-season. Reality TV also created an environment of increased volatility for network schedules, which was predicted to negatively impact “audience flow and retention” according to Irwin Gotlieb, then CEO of media agency Group M (ibid). Gotlieb remarked: “all this churn on the schedule makes it more and more impossible to promote and to attract an audience, and that is deeply troubling...My issue is that it’s so disruptive that it’s damaging to the medium long-term” (ibid). The fear of reality TV’s short shelf-life and its fleeting audiences, as well as its impact on production studios and networks, did not prevent networks from including more and more reality TV programming in their seasonal line-ups. Sam Haskell, then-head of television at the William Morris Agency (now William Morris Endeavour, the largest talent agency in the world), predicted that “if reality were 50 percent of the schedule, the ripple effect could be astronomical, but it will never get there” (ibid). But it did, and Nielsen ratings data indicates that reality programming currently makes up 56%

\textsuperscript{34} The Bachelor saw just under 26 million viewers tune in during its first season finale (“The Bachelor finale crushes Victoria’s Secret TV Special”), and more than 38 million total viewers watched the 2\textsuperscript{nd}-season finale of American Idol in 2003 (Rocchio and Rogers). Perhaps most impressive was the season finale ratings for Season one of Survivor, which premiered during the summer months, and garnered an average of almost 52 million viewers according to Nielsen Media research (Kissell).
of American TV shows and “about 69% of TV programming worldwide (cable and broadcast)” (Wegenstein, “Configurations” 2-3).

The profitability of reality TV is related to its use of non-scripted participants, who are not typically paid and who do not have access to recourse via state and federal labour laws (Andrejevic, “Real-izing Exploitation” 20-21). In terms of production costs, Chad Rapheal notes that while prime-time dramas and sitcoms were losing hundreds of thousands of dollars per episode by the early 1990s, fledgling reality TV such as America’s Funniest Home Videos (ABC 1990) and COPS (Fox 1989) “was the only category of prime-time programming that was not deficit financed” (127). The lower costs of production made reality TV an appealing approach to short term recoupment of some much needed profit, particularly given the “high levels of corporate debt incurred by the big-three networks [ABC, NBC and CBS] after each was sold in the mid-1980s” (121).

Another profitable trend in reality TV is the move toward embedded product placement and crossover advertising strategies. In response to growing concern over time-shifting and digital video recording (DVR) such as TiVo, advertisers have become increasingly interested in brand integration and “virtual product placement” (Boddy 120-121). Reality TV’s accelerated use of such advertising tactics is evident in Nielsen’s “Top Ten list of Primetime Programs with Product Placement Activity for 2011,” where nine of the top ten programs are reality shows.35

3.2 Themes across Makeover Reality TV

Fox’s reality TV show The Swan is representative of a larger television phenomenon that began in the early 2000s, when cosmetic surgery became a mediated event on network television, contextualized through the stories of non-actors chosen to undergo cosmetic procedures in a public forum and under isolation from their families and friends. The genre of makeover reality TV capitalizes on the global success of reality TV since the debut of CBS’ Survivor series in 2000, and a booming market for cosmetic surgery. While not all makeover reality TV shows include cosmetic surgery, they all operate from the unquestioned belief that physical transformation is worthwhile and desirable, because it moves individuals closer to self-actualization, personal success

and happiness. The association of progressive, positive movement towards self-betterment through body work is demonstrated on makeover reality TV through intense dieting, fashion and beauty advice, and cosmetic surgery (not always on the same program). Series in the genre that focused exclusively on ‘extreme’ dieting and exercise included The Biggest Loser (NBC 2004), Celebrity Fit Club (VH1 2005), You are What you Eat (Channel 4 2004), Weighing In (The Food Network 2006); Honey, We’re Killing the Kids (BBC 2005), Taking it Off (Life Network 2001), X-Weighted (Slice 2006) and Bulging Brides (Slice 2008). These shows equate slimness with moral strength and share many ideologies with recent socio-political public commentary around the ‘obesity epidemic’ prevalent in North America. Physical transformation as self-improvement was also prevalent on makeover reality shows that focused on fashion and etiquette, such as: Style By Jury (W Network 2004), What Not to Wear (BBC 2001), What Not to Wear (TLC 2003), How to Look Good Naked (Channel 4 2006), Tim Gunn’s Guide to Style (Bravo 2007), Style Court (Style Network 2003), Ambush Makeover (Style Network 2004), Look-a-Like (Star! 2004), and Queer Eye for the Straight Guy (Bravo 2003). On these shows, participants are encouraged to become better versions of themselves by dressing differently and styling their hair and makeup with the help of experts. Angela McRobbie has argued that the original British series What Not to Wear (BBC 2001-2007) reintroduces shaming as acceptable behaviour for upper class women ‘experts,’ against their working class female participants (“Notes on What Not to Wear”).

Makeover reality TV shows that include cosmetic surgery, cosmetic dentistry, and/or non-surgical procedures (such as cosmetic injectable fillers like Botox, Juvederm, or Restylane, or microdermabrasion, chemical peels, or laser skin resurfacing) are perhaps the most striking of all makeover reality TV programming, for their manipulation of the body in order to attempt to transform and improve participants. Penetrating the skin with a scalpel or needle creates a level of interest and often disapproval from viewers, and can raise questions that might go unasked in other formats of the makeover reality TV show. Changing a hairdo or dress style seems instinctively, intrinsically less permanent, invasive, and potentially dangerous than elective cosmetic surgery or injection, and somehow less exploitative. These initial responses, my own and those that poured out of opinion columns, entertainment blogs, and news media when cosmetic

36 For critical analysis of the construction of the obesity epidemic see Boero; Fraser, Maree, Maher, and Wright; Samantha Murray; Rich and Evans; Rothblum and Solovay; Saguy and Almeling.
surgery makeover programs began to appear in 2002 with the premiere of ABC’s *Extreme Makeover*, require more careful analysis because they are in part responses to cultural assumptions about authenticity, the natural, and the boundaries of the self.

Different shows in the makeover reality TV genre display subtle variations based on the broadcast network; for instance, *Plastic Surgery: Before and After* (Discovery Health 2002) tended to position itself closer to medical and documentary programming, while MTV’s *I Want a Famous Face* (2004), TLC’s *10 Years Younger* (2004), E!’s *Dr. 90210* (2004) and ABC’s *Extreme Makeover* all took advantage of the spectacle associated with reality TV, compelling viewers to tune in based on the promise of a shocking revelation or action. Despite these differences, makeover reality TV programs that feature cosmetic surgery share several thematic traits.

First, stories of transformation on makeover reality TV rely on binary notions of the inner self and outer body at odds. The aberrant or abject body on makeover reality TV is that which is overweight, wrinkled, asymmetrical, poorly styled, or containing features that do not adhere to standards of beauty normalized in a North American, Eurocentric, heterosexist, ageist, and ableist culture. Bodily signs of age, motherhood, excess (weight, skin, fat) and ethnicity are diagnosed by cosmetic surgeons and marked with real and digital pens. Plans for ‘fixing’ the body are indicated through a digitized, technological-looking backdrop on both *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover*, where the patient’s body is set against a ‘neutral’ computer screen and surgical procedures are listed alongside the body parts in need of repair. This perceived neutrality attempts to present an objective, scientific basis for the beautification of participants and the scrutiny of their bodies, wherein offending body parts are overlaid with a digital bulls-eye or square box, and images of the participants in their underwear are spun 360 degrees while a narrator describes their flaws (figure 3-1).

Source: © Fox Network

*Figure 3-1 Identifying bodily flaws on a contestant of The Swan, Screen shot (Season 1, Episode 1. Director Kent Weed, 7 April 2004)*
This diagnosis and surveillance of the ‘flawed’ body is a key normative technology on makeover reality TV. The shaming of participants routinely occurs during this process, in what Brenda Weber refers to as the “affective domination” of experts, who “point out flaws in a combined gesture of humiliation and care” (Makeover TV 43). The experts then suggest ways to manage, cure, or redefine the body in order to make it more acceptable and more reflective of the participant’s ‘true’ self.

The cosmetic surgery industry is portrayed in a positive light, often as progressive, accommodating, and heroic in the quest to rectify the discordant body/self of the participants. Participants are required to both submit to a program of transformation designed by ‘experts’ which includes diet, exercise, therapy or coaching, cosmetic surgery, and fashion advice, and simultaneously demonstrate their independence and willingness to take charge of their own lives through assigned body work. The ritualized tearing down of the participant, through shaming and stripping, having participants bare their bodies and personal problems, is the required currency in exchange for bodywork and support. Notably, the majority of surgical participants on makeover reality TV are white and female, and the majority of cosmetic surgeons are white and male. This generic trope is reflective of the industry statistics, where 78.6% of procedures are performed on Caucasian patients (ASAPS 2011 Report 14), 90% of patients are female (ASAPS 2011 Report 3), and eight out of nine cosmetic surgeons are male (Heyes and Jones 3).

Another common trope in makeover reality TV is the use of lower-middle class and working class participants, who in almost all cases could not afford the surgery, treatment, and makeovers they receive when they agree to have their bodywork recorded for network television. The class status of participants is a central component of makeover reality TV as it relates to the personal narratives of confession. In order to create a deserving and empathetic character, rather than one criticized for their vanity or superficiality, producers choose participants who are needy and deserve sympathy. The result is the ideological intertwining of cosmetic surgery makeovers with the potential for upward mobility and access to the material indicators of style and taste. The class-based distance between experts and patients also establishes a clear power and authority differential, where patients are under the care and tutelage of benevolent father figures during their transformations. One exception to the class division between patients and doctors is E!’s Dr. 90210, a series that shares the stories of predominantly upper-class
clients and surgeons in Beverly Hills. This changes the dynamic between surgeons and patients to some extent, but the American dream ideology remains present and legitimizes cosmetic surgery as proof of success, particularly affluence.

The makeover reality TV genre, along with lifestyle television in general, shares a climactic moment across all episodes and series: The Reveal. The Reveal is the moment when participants reintroduce themselves to experts and their family and friends, after their bodywork has healed and after participants have been styled to look like celebrities or beauty queens. The Reveal crystallizes the reunification of body and self, and ensures that each participant is a successful surgical case. The debut is also used as a social device, which signals acceptance and inclusion by the participant’s community of peers. Viewers are reminded of the ‘before’ version of the participant’s aged, tired and saggy or overweight body through comparison pictures, and participants express their happiness with their new look. The Reveal occurs at the end of an episode, and is opposite the tone and language of the personal narratives establishing participants in victim or loser roles at the beginning of an episode. Depending on the series, victimhood is framed in different terms and with varying levels of melodrama, but generally participants relay stories of bullying, relationship problems or failures, or challenges with parenting or employment, such that their bodies are constructed as evidence of the toll of their hardships. The Reveal implies global change for the better for the participant. Along with hair extensions, dental veneers, and the nip and tuck by the cosmetic surgeon, makeover reality TV participants’ bodies become markers of the potential for financial and personal success and happiness. The tidiness of the conclusion of makeover reality TV episodes signifies finality, as though the bodywork is the ultimate fairytale ending. In this narrative structure, there is no room for backsliding or failure, and there is no indication that anyone’s bodywork will not be fulfilling or empowering.

This structuring discourse running through makeover reality TV, and makeover culture more broadly, is a depoliticized ‘choice’ discourse, often associated with a move towards personal empowerment and self-care after a lifetime of hardship, betrayal, or bad luck. Sue Tait argues:

The domestication of cosmetic surgery is a part of a broader cultural post-feminism expressed through media texts which figure women’s empowerment and access to public culture, but which render this through individualist and consumerist frames. (122)
Empowerment becomes synonymous with personal, physical transformation, and appearance demonstrates selfhood. Neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies support this choice discourse, but these ideologies are not limited to the makeover reality TV genre. In fact, network television and advertising have appropriated a discourse of choice aimed at women audiences since the mid-1970s. Feminist television scholars have studied the ways that feminist-inspired discourse and characters have flourished on television since second wave feminism took hold in North America. The appropriation of feminist ideology has greatly affected the characters and storylines of prime-time television, particularly in traditional "women’s genres."

3.3 (Post)Feminism on TV and resolving the ambivalent pleasures of television

Television’s place in the home has made it a critical site of study for feminist media scholars interested in the portrayal of feminism interpreted for the small screen. Recognizing television as the central medium for postfeminist culture, I will briefly compare feminist responses to manifestations of feminism and postfeminism on television, in order to establish the context from which Fox’s *The Swan* arose in 2004.

Since the 1970s feminist media scholars have focused their attention on diverse topics related to television, including female audiences (Ang *Dallas*; Bird; Brunsdon; Press; Seiter); ‘women’s genres’ (Ang *Dallas*; Brunsdon; Hobson; Kuhn; Modkeski); the inclusion of women working in television behind the scenes (D’Acci; Lauzen and Dozier; Ross); intersectional issues such as race, class, sexuality, and nationalism as they appear or fail to appear on television (Bobo; Desjardins; Torres; Wallace); fan practices (Bacon-Smith; D’Acci); television’s place in the domestic sphere (Brunsdon; Gray; Modleski; Morley); and the representations of various facets of femininity and womanhood through narrative structures, characters, etc. (Akass; Banet-Weiser; D’Acci; Dow; Haralovich; Heinecken; Kaplan; Mayne). Analyzing these interrelated aspects of television from a feminist perspective is important because the media are a “central site of consciousness formation and knowledge production” (Garrison 24), and television especially “has begun to alter our very ways of seeing and knowing” (Joyrich 22; Haralovich and Rabinovitz). Thus, television not only represents or reflects our culture, it is a part of our culture, shaping how we understand and talk about ideas, events, and people.
Andrea Press identifies television as having had a hand in shaping postfeminist ideas in culture, specifically through the circulation of negative representations of the women’s movement, through the treatment of gender inequalities as personalized, individualized problems for women, and through the commercialization of feminism (*Women Watching* 39). Narratives that focus on individualized solutions to problems for women on television tend to depoliticize those solutions. Wider social inequalities are boiled down to individual ‘women’s issues’ on talk shows, reality shows, and within fictional genres such as soap opera and drama. This affects what feminism looks like on TV, such that feminist discourse is disengaged from feminist politics and instead defined “by factors of lifestyle and attitude rather than politics and activism” (Lotz, citing Dow 111).37

Domestic retreatism is an important aspect of postfeminism on television (Tasker and Negra 109). Evident on contemporary drama series such as *Desperate Housewives* (ABC 2004) and *Sex and the City* (HBO 1998), the return to the domestic is constructed as an individually political choice, available because of feminism. However, choice is a “rhetorical fiction” when structural inequalities persist between men and women (Dow 194), and when the choice to return to the domestic sphere is only available to a small group of privileged middle and upper class heterosexual women. Feminist media scholars have looked at television shows such as *thirtysomething*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *Sex and the City*, and have been critical of the ways that a discourse of choice masks the ‘retreatism’ of powerful female characters. Kim Akass refers to this phenomenon as the “Post-feminist mystique” (53).

Despite these and other concerns with postfeminism as it appears in television, it would be a mistake to suggest that representations of gender, women, and feminism on television in a postfeminist context are entirely bad, or bad for us. Feminist television scholars no longer tend to take such uncomplicated positions. Indeed, in 1985 Ien Ang was already critical of the “paternalism of the ideology of mass culture” employed in feminist television criticism in its early days, which she argued resulted in feminist condemnation, hostility, and dismissal of genres enjoyed by great numbers of women (*Dallas* 118-9). Ang concluded feminists must figure out how to incorporate the pleasure found in women’s popular culture with feminist politics (132). More than twenty years

37 See also Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 265; Boyle 180; D’Acci 161; McRobbie, “Postfeminism” 258; Press 39; Rabinovitz 145; Shattuc, “Freud Versus Women” 122; Tait 122.
later, Tasker and Negra are posing the question slightly differently: “if postfeminist culture tends to produce highly ambivalent pleasures, how do we make that ambivalence a well spring for effective [feminist] critique?” (108).

Studies of early postfeminist television texts that recognize the complexities of contemporary television and its dealings with feminism include Kathleen Rowe’s “Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess.” Published in 1990, the article described the unruliness of the character of Roseanne as mother and woman as ambivalent, in that her role in the sitcom both exposed and reasserted dominant ideology regarding motherhood, female sexuality, and desire (81). Similarly, Jane Shattuc underscored the contradictions at work in the talk show genre, which has roots in second wave feminist consciousness-raising and feminist therapy. Shattuc recognized the problems with talk shows, but argued against dismissing them as entirely sensationalistic, melodramatic, or consumerist because they also focus on women’s voices, validate personal experience (as authoritative), and mediate a collective female audience (“Freud versus Women” 122). Thus, without denying the significant problems with postfeminist television, there is evidence of a residue of political feminist discourse.

We should not ignore Bonne Dow’s warning that “Prime–time feminism has drawn from and capitalized on this general tendency to turn feminist politics into feminist identity” (209). However, Merri Lisa Johnson, in the introduction to the first collection of third wave feminist television criticism, makes an important point when she observes that rampant sexism, racism, and heterosexism are neither new nor shocking for third wave television critics. What is the intellectual purpose of continuing to dissect television in order to expose how misogyny and patriarchy function in all sorts of subtle ways, or, “for those of us who already get it, we want to know, what else is there to say?” (Italics in original, 14). Johnson argues that the purpose of third wave feminist media theory is to highlight the discontinuity between pleasure and danger evoked in relation to television, a discontinuity that has yet to be reconciled for women (22). Michelle Lazar poses a challenge similar to the questions raised by Tasker and Negra, and Johnson, above:

The increasing ubiquity and political ambivalence inherent in the discourse of postfeminism requires more, rather than less, critical

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38 Elayne Rapping echoes the ambiguity and contradiction in her broader examination of the recovery movement in *The Culture of Recovery*; she is highly critical of the discourse of addiction that upholds the movement, but also recognizes that the recovery movement and the problems it brings to light could not exist without feminism.
scrutiny. The kind of feminist discourse analysis best suited to this task is one that is able to self reflexively and nimbly negotiate texts and practices that are disarmingly seductive and innocuous. As a first step, it is important, as media critics have done, to reconcile politics and pleasure, rather than treat them as unrelated or oppositional. (Lazar 397)

*The Swan* is a relevant text to study against the backdrop of postfeminist culture, feminist media studies, and third wave response to feminism on television. It often elicits a kneejerk response from feminists (and others) that is automatically judgmental of participants who undergo such extreme bodywork on television. Yet, *The Swan* was popular with audiences because it is also pleasurable, for the shock value of seeing multiple cosmetic surgery procedures and their results on ordinary individuals (and perhaps also for what it can offer to those interested in the procedures themselves). The transformative element remains a compelling and common narrative trend in makeover reality TV. My goal is not to recuperate *The Swan* from a critical feminist analysis. I am interested in studying the complexities of “the discontinuity between pleasure and danger” found amidst a series that purports to be for women, inspired and produced by a woman who claimed to be working in the interest of women (nelygalan.com), and supported by a production crew made up of more women than industry averages.  

I argue that scholars must shift an analytical focus on the individual contestant (as powerless or empowered, choosing or being coerced), to one that recognizes that while makeover reality television is highly problematic in its reproduction of hegemonic gender roles for women (and I will demonstrate how and where this occurs), this genre promotes such images of beauty, success and self-care because it is the necessary counterpoint to a highly discomforting image of bodily hybridity, one that places women in “potentially both radical and terrifying” subject positions (M. Jones, “Media-Bodies” 75-76). In other words, to make the hybrid body less ontologically threatening, to make the surgical body palatable/knowable, the framework around that body requires a traditional, subordinating ideology. The discomfort (and “ambivalent pleasure” that Tasker and Negra identify), or the “discontinuity between pleasure and danger” (Johnson), is produced in the attempt to rein in a subversive and incredibly powerful transformation (at the level of the body, but also at the level of how we understand the boundaries of the

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39 Of the fifty-four people listed in the show’s credits as producers, writer, editors, directors, executive producers, and director of photography, twenty-seven have gendered feminine names. At 50%, this doubles the average number of women in those roles according to 2010-2011 prime-time data (Lauzon “Boxed In”).
human body). Meredith Jones describes the reason for makeover reality television’s messaging this way:

I suggest that the highly conservative presentation of gender in CSRTV [cosmetic surgery reality television] happens partly because of the ways in which it produces radical media-bodies. Subjects who have had cosmetic surgery, particularly those on CSRTV, cross many boundaries: human/animal (many injectable wrinkle fillers are made from animal products, including cow skin and the combs of roosters), organic/synthetic, normal/celebrity, real/represented, and even the once uncrossable boundary of ugly and beautiful. But hybrid creatures are disturbing: their in-betweenness creates uncertainty and they signal changes to the accepted order. (“Media-Bodies” 81)

The Swan (and other makeover reality TV programs) sanitized and condensed cosmetic surgery procedures; viewers were not privy to the complete surgical events or the minutia of healing or complications, and they were certainly not informed about the risks of cosmetic surgery in a way that is considered appropriate, according to a press release from one of the leading professional surgical associations in 2004 (ASPS “New Reality TV Programs”). The Swan and other programs were careful to angle cameras in such a way as to limit the ‘gore’ associated with the opened body. However, makeover reality TV was the first genre to provide mainstream audiences with access to regular footage of cosmetic surgery in process, and the visible, painful recovery period. The programming that emerged on broadcast television in the early 2000s that featured cosmetic surgery was likely the first time many viewers had ever seen cosmetic surgery stories on screen, on a weekly basis. In the process, industry terminology was demystified and procedures became familiar; cosmetic surgery moved from a sign of upper class vanity to a mainstream opportunity for self-improvement (Heyes “Televisual Makeover”; Tait). The visibility of the made over body in process, and not simply the before and after image, exposed not only the event of surgery and its aftermath but also

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40 Camera angles typically signal more than they show of cosmetic surgery: it might be useful to understand this type of representation as “surgery light.” Often, viewers are positioned behind a surgeon working on a prostrate patient, so the surgeon’s back shields the viewer from the work they are doing on the body, or the camera lens is blurred so the shot is softened, or the shots are cut strategically to avoid the excessively grotesque. For instance, I have never seen a face peeled back during a facelift procedure on a makeover show, but I have seen an incision for a facelift being made. Despite this careful tidiness around the surgeries presented on makeover reality TV, when I screen clips from shows such as The Swan or Extreme Makeover, there are always viewers who visibly squirm or avert their eyes when the surgical moments occur. I think this is partly an expected social response to viewing graphic content in a group, but I am surprised that my clips never fail to elicit this response from at least a few members of the audience. Perhaps claims of normalization are premature?
the potential for bodies to become something other than the normative models created on makeover reality TV. It is from this perspective that I begin a close reading of The Swan, examining the images and accompanying discourses that support the make-over of sixteen women in season one.

3.4 The Swan

The Swan was a co-production of several media corporations, including Galan Entertainment Inc. (Nely Galan’s production company), George Paige Associates Inc., A. Smith and Co. Productions (producers of Fox’s Paradise Hotel), and FremantleMedia North America, Inc., a subsidiary of Bertlesmann AG, one of the six biggest global media conglomerates with annual revenues of 15.8 billion dollars in 2010. FremantleMedia has also produced Fox’s American Idol (2007, 2008), NBC’s America’s Got Talent (2009) and Fox’s The X Factor (2011). Contestants were recruited for season one in late 2003 by solicited video-taped submissions and open auditions in twelve major US cities. Additionally, casting directors used on-the-ground tactics such as “putting thousands of fliers on cars at a suburban mall on big sale days; tacking up posters at Curves, a chain of gyms for women who are new to working out, and at weight-loss centers; and trolling Yahoo groups for obscure issues like ‘military wives who don’t feel attractive’” (Hollihan).

Premiering on April 7, 2004 on the Fox network, The Swan debuted to fifteen million viewers (Marwick 254). The series averaged 9.1 million viewers per episode in its first season, which aired on Monday nights at 9:00pm on Fox (Schneider). The first season’s final episode, which featured the Swan beauty pageant, was “a telespectacle that was watched by more than 10 million Americans” (Wegenstein, “Introduction” 4). Advertising rates during the first-run broadcasting of The Swan on Fox for a thirty-second spot was $118 200, which was considerably lower than the comparable ad rates.

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on ABC, CBS and NBC for the same time slot, which ranged from $315,850 for CBS's 
_Everybody Loves Raymond_ to $182,861 for NBC's _Las Vegas_.

Despite a downward dive in ratings in its second season (Marcwick 254), the show was incredibly appealing to potential participants: 300,000 applied to be on the second season, and 500,000 applied to the third season, which was produced but never broadcast (Wegenstein, “Introduction” 4-5). While the program was short-lived, with only two seasons both broadcast in 2004 (twenty-two episodes that ran from April-December), the residual impact of _The Swan_ has been significant. It remains a salient cultural text, as Weber and Tice explain:

_The Swan_ continues as a media touchstone, since it is still broadcast, talked about, referenced, and parodied. The show is a highly successful export commodity (it was sold to more than 50 international media markets), redistribution (it airs in the US on Fox Reality and the Style network), product (both boxed sets of the television and the spin-off book, _The Swan Curriculum_, are available for sale online and in stores), and social phenomenon (in addition to the reality celebrity that enabled participants to become models, television personalities, and cover girls, _The Swan_’s experts and style gurus appear across the makeover canon, including on such shows as _10 Years Younger_ and _How Do I Look?_). (Weber and Tice par. 10)

Each season presented sixteen women competing for a spot in a beauty pageant (two stories were featured per episode), after having undergone up to fifteen cosmetic surgery procedures as well as dental work, dermatological work, diet and exercise routines, and weekly therapy sessions over a three month period in Marina del Rey, California. Galan estimated that each woman featured in the series received $250,000 worth of cosmetic surgery and other services. The woman crowned the Swan in season one’s pageant was awarded prizes (in addition to her surgical procedures and physical training) that included a modelling contract, a designer wardrobe, trips to Hawaii and Las Vegas, a scholarship to an accredited university offering distance education through online courses, $10,000 of personal coaching through self-help celebrity

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Anthony Robbins’ company, a 2004 Jaguar, and $50,000 in cash (The Swan, Episode 9, 2004). Nely Galan estimated the prizes were worth an additional $250,000 dollars.\(^{46}\)

The Swan was created by self-proclaimed “Latina media dynamo” and “women’s empowerment advocate” Nely Galan,\(^ {47}\) former President of the television network Telemundo. Galan has said that she envisioned The Swan as a democratizing tool for women who needed a break from the challenges of their daily lives (Pliagas). She claims to have been inspired to create the series based on her own experience with depression, and what she called an “epiphany” when she realized that she needed to take care of herself physically and spiritually after years of putting herself last. She states in a blog entry: “inspired by this experience [of depression and healing at a health spa], I created the hit Fox reality television series, The Swan, which put me directly in touch with thousands of women who, like me, had hit a wall.”\(^ {48}\) In addition to being executive producer and creator of The Swan, Galan also acted as the show’s resident life coach, weighing in on each candidate’s progress as part of the “dream team” of experts (including cosmetic surgeons, personal trainer, cosmetic dentist, and counsellor), and meeting with the candidates throughout their preparation and recovery period.

Galan’s subsequent media projects have included an online community for women in business, called Ms. Mogul: “a forum for female entrepreneurs aimed at providing support and sharing resources” and The Adelante Movement [Move Forward!], a touring workshop series sponsored by Coca-Cola that Galan describes as “a grassroots movement that unites and empowers Latinas socially, economically and politically in the US.”\(^ {49}\) Her celebrity has extended to an appearance on The Celebrity Apprentice (NBC, Season 7, 2008), and she has also created a daytime television series, The New You (produced by Galan Entertainment, no network or air dates available yet), bringing together the professionals featured on The Swan to conduct consultations and less-invasive makeovers on women in front of a studio audience. The series, which has yet to be released, grew out of a featured series on The Today Show, where Galan has been featured as a guest “expert” (NBC 2006). Galan’s professional interest in women’s empowerment relies on pro-woman sentiments that reproduce

\(^{46}\) Ibid.


\(^ {48}\) “The Swan: That extreme show and the essence of me.” Nely Galan. 23 Aug. 2011, <nelygalan.blogspot.ca>.

neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies, familiar in makeover culture discourse. Galan identifies her mission this way:

My mission is to push women to take action in their lives. They must understand that they come first in their families, so that they can keep their families healthy and happy. First and foremost, women must take care of their health. Prevention is the key to a long and healthy life. They must take care of their nutrition and exercise, their soul and spirituality. They must also take care of their beauty: it is their God-given gift. They must maintain their wellness and upkeep in all of these areas in order to truly love themselves.50

The pro-woman sensibility in Galan’s statement implies that women’s self-worth and ability to succeed are connected to the maintenance of their “beauty,” a trait bestowed by god. Thus, beauty work is the responsibility of the individual (as both civic and spiritual duty), and one’s personal as well as familial happiness depends upon it. It is from the same makeover culture ethos that The Swan emerged in 2004. It is to a close analysis of this series that I now turn.

3.4.1 Methodology

For this chapter I viewed all twenty-two episodes of The Swan (seasons one and two) on the DVD set of the series (Xenon Pictures 2006), making extensive notes for each episode of season one. I also viewed both seasons during the time of their original broadcast in 2004. Over the years, I have actively sought out popular press coverage and academic articles on The Swan, and I have routinely carried out Internet searches for information about the series and its creator, Nely Galan. I have complemented my viewing of The Swan with casual viewing of other reality television series within the makeover genre, including Extreme Makeover (ABC 2002), I Want a Famous Face (MTV 2004), Bridalplasty (E! 2010), Ten Years Younger (TLC 2004), What Not to Wear (TLC 2003), The Biggest Loser (NBC 2004), The Last Ten Pounds (Slice 2007), Bulging Brides (Slice 2008), and lifestyle programming more broadly, such as Flip this House (A&E 2005), Extreme Makeover: Home Edition (ABC 2003), Honey We’re Killing the Kids (TLC 2006), Holmes on Homes (HGTV 2001), Sarah’s House (HGTV 2007), and Nanny 911 (Fox 2004). I have also read Nely Galan’s The Swan Curriculum, a marketing

tie-in and self-help workbook promising to “create a spectacular new you with 12 life-changing steps in 12 amazing weeks.” I have also carefully explored Nely Galan’s professional website (nellygalan.com), and Fox Network’s The Swan website (the former web address was www.fox.com/swan, but it is no longer available).

My approach to studying The Swan series has been to observe discourses, themes, and imagery for dominant and repetitive ideologies pertaining to cosmetic surgery, transformation, femininity, authenticity, expertise, and success. These ideologies include choice, self improvement, and entitlement, which I have explored in chapter two. I engage in critical discourse analysis for this chapter, from the perspective that experiences are filtered through discourse, but not contained by it (MacDonald 37). I rely on Communications scholars Myra Macdonald, Susan Yell, Joke Hermes and David Hesmondhalgh for my definition of critical discourse analysis, in which discourse is “a system of communicative practices that are integrally related to wider social and cultural practices, and that help to construct specific frameworks of thinking” (Macdonald 1).

Hesmondhalgh describes critical discourse analysis as “draw[ing] connections between the use of language and the exercise of social power” (122), citing Norman Fairclough’s system for analysing media texts in terms of representation, identity, and relationships (122). Macdonald suggests that focussing on media discourse can avoid the limitations of ideological inquiry, which rely on an underlying belief in the ‘real’ (29). She argues that focusing on discourse, which carries “latent ideological consequences” that are activated differently depending on specific contexts and conditions (28), helps us move from a representational model to a constructionist model. This “emphasize[s] the provisional and contested nature of forms of knowing” (14). Susan Yell encourages us to understand texts as “communication practices” (10), and as both products and processes (13). She points out that critical discourse analysis “does not see language as separate from the domain of the social” (17), and as such, the text cannot be abstracted from the context in which it exists.

This chapter also relies on an approach guided by the theoretical undertakings of somatechnics, in order to interpret the hierarchical construction of acceptable feminine bodies through makeover culture discourse on The Swan. While analyzing the series, I worked from the perspective identified by Joseph Pugliese and Susan Stryker, who remind us that:
somatechnics troubles and blurs the boundary between embodied subject and technologized object, and thus between the human and the non-human, and the living and the inert, and it asks us to pay attention to where, precisely, a prosthesis stops and a body starts (1-2).

This perspective steps away from the victim/agent interpretive model and instead studies the way that embodiment is “historically and culturally [contingent]” (Pugliese and Stryker 1). In doing so, the somatechnics theoretical model requires a “breaking down [of the] distinctions between ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’ modificatory practices (along with the moral judgments too often attached to those supposedly diametrically opposed qualifiers)...” (Pugliese and Stryker 1).

My answer to the ontological question asked by Pugliese and Stryker, where a prosthesis stops and the body starts, is: it depends. It depends on the type of prosthesis and procedure under scrutiny, and with whose body the prosthesis is associated.\(^5\) The cultural values surrounding types of bodywork determine the level of ‘boundarylessness’ that occurs. Cosmetic surgery’s elective nature and its controversial history at the edges of the medical establishment means that it remains exposed to accusations of ‘fakeness’ that still circulate in popular media and audience responses (examined in chapter two and further in chapters four and five). A somatechnics approach requires that we scrutinize the many ways that cultural values shape popular understandings of body modification. For example, Cressida Heyes, in her consideration of feminist analyses of ‘Asian eyelid surgery,’ points out that the accusations of racial treachery and internalized racism that predominate in cosmetic surgery studies ignore the fact that “all cosmetic surgery is ‘ethnic.’” Heyes contends that a cosmetic procedure such as the facelift is treated as neutral because of its predominance among white women, yet beauty ideals are based on a white standard that many white people cannot attain (“Ethnic” 203). Heyes advises that “feminist analysis of ethnic cosmetic surgery badly needs to learn the lessons of critical whiteness studies” (203). This example demonstrates that determining where a prosthesis stops and a body starts is a tricky business, dependent on cultural beliefs and historical patterns of thinking (e.g. whiteness as an invisible signifier; its role in shaping culturally acceptable forms of body modification). I turn now to a closer study of The Swan and its themes in order to begin to trace the ways the series deals with the

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\(^5\) Prosthesis connotes an addition or replacement to the body but I interpret the use of this term to mean technological association with the body more broadly, in the spirit of the use of the word techné in somatechnics.
ontological implications of Pugliese and Stryker’s question, and how it incorporates narratives of pain to do so.

3.4.2 The series

Each episode of The Swan began with an extended opening montage, the first frame setting the show’s tone with a silhouette of a crowned young woman, raising her face upwards. A male narrator then described the series:

In the most unique competition ever... a group of ordinary women... hand over their lives to a team of cosmetic and plastic surgeons. ...They will be put through a brutal 3-month process...all for the chance to become beauty queens. ...Each week two contestants will be transformed, but only one will be judged beautiful enough to move on to the pageant. The Swan transformation requires discipline, sacrifice, and pain. They will be constantly evaluated... and they will do all this without ever seeing their reflection, until the final reveal. All in the quest to be crowned the Swan. (Season 1 Episode 1)

The narration establishes the program as competitive, challenging, transformative and shocking. The focus on judgment, brutality, discipline, sacrifice and pain is reminiscent of the old adage, “it hurts to be beautiful,” taken to the extreme. The emphasis on constant evaluation and subjecting oneself to full authority in the name of beauty lends credence to a Foucauldian reading of the series from the start, where surveillance and docility are requirements for the program. The end goal, becoming a beauty queen, seems out of order with the type of suffering required by the participants, but the images accompanying the narration help validate the claim, that such pain and suffering is worth the result.

A visual montage, a rapid sequence of cuts with at least 140 shots (in a two-minute segment), accompanies the narration. The shots capture contestants as they are chosen to participate, as they enter the Swan program, as they consult with their plastic surgeons, endure surgery, recovery, and gym workouts. Almost one third of the shots provide glimpses of surgical procedures, bandaged women, their bruises, and the after-effects of intensive surgery on the participants. The extended focus on the bodily suffering in the visual element of the montage acts as the hook to draw viewers in; a spectacle of pain keeps viewers tuned in week after week. The montage inserts overlapping dialogue from the show’s experts between the narration, including phrases such as:
We have to be a little bit more dramatic to her face (Dr. Haworth); “Come on Tanya!” (Greg the trainer); “This process is not easy!” (Nely Galan); “The liposuction will give her a killer body” (Dr. Dubrow); “I told you, you were going to get depressed” (Dr. Dubrow); “From this moment on...you’re going to have to think military” (Nely Galan); “You’ve got to eat properly..24/7” (Greg the trainer); “I would hate to see all the work you’ve done and then butter makes you lose the pageant!” (Nely Galan); “She could go into an emotional tailspin.” (Dr. Haworth)

These sound bites provide the viewer with a synopsis of the series, introduce the experts as authority figures, and establish the tone of the show. The experts judge and diagnose the contestants, they demand discipline and self-determination, and they assert their authority from the beginning. In contrast, participants appear emotionally unstable, untrustworthy, and in need of supervision from authority figures lest they fall off the self-improvement wagon. Experts demand self-governance from participants while laying blame on those who do not give themselves over wholly to the process.

Intermingled with the narration and the experts’ commentary are sound clips from participants. While the narrator and experts use language that conveys order and bodily pain as a requirement to achieve transformation and success, The Swan participants’ sound bites are entirely affective. Their words display emotions ranging from joy, to pain and anger, to frustration, to surprise and celebration:

“Oh I’m so excited!” (Kristy Garza); “I never thought in a million years this would happen to me!” (Kelly Alemi); “I was just an easy target for kids to pick on; I am going to be a new person.” (Kelly Alemi); “I just don’t know how much more of this I can take” (Tanya Slavich); “I feel worse than I expected and I need to lay down before I punch somebody in the face” (Tanya Slavich); “I have to get out of here; I don’t know what I’m doing!” (Christina Tyree); “oh my goodness, no mirrors!” “No mirrors” “no mirrors” (various contestants); “O my god I am so beautiful!” (Christina Tyree)

The focus on the emotionality of the participants establishes their position as slightly juvenile in relation to the experts and narrator, whose language and tone are dominant, authoritative and knowledgeable. As with the expert sound-bites in the opening montage, the participant sound-bites also summarize for the viewer the tone of the series and the subject roles of the participants as victimized, transforming, struggling and finally, triumphant.

After the opening montage, each episode introduces two women chosen to participate in the program, with sixteen women participating in total, per season. The
participants range in age from mid-twenties to late-thirties, and present as working-class (discussed in detail below). In terms of race and ethnic identity on the series, whiteness is the unspoken norm, an “unmarked category” reflected in the expectations of idealized feminine beauty norms (Weber and Tice par. 5). Weber and Tice note, “throughout the run of the show, almost a third of the participants were marked as ‘non-white.’ Most, like Sylvia [Season two], were generically termed Latina” and this identity category was typically invoked in order to demonstrate a lifestyle flaw such as poor-food choices or personal struggle (Weber and Tice par. 17). All participants identify as heterosexual in their introductory segments, and despite their individual problems and concerns regarding their appearances, the participants present a homogeneous picture of the woes of negative feminine self-esteem.

Viewers first see the participants as they learn they will be contestants. All react predictably as though they had won the lottery. Each contestant is depicted in her home with her family, as she narrates her life’s story that has led up to this point. Each contestant has either experienced bullying as a child, some form of parental abandonment, or relationship problems. Consequently, viewers are meant to understand that each woman suffers from low self-esteem about her appearance, which hindered her current relationship or limited her from seeking out a new relationship.

3.4.3 The Heterosexual Crisis

In season one, almost every contestant is portrayed as experiencing a heterosexual crisis of instability or undesirability, a result of what Laurie Essig has called “ordinary ugliness” (10). The women chosen for The Swan are all able-bodied, without visible signs of deformity or disease. Instead, they would be, as most other makeover reality TV contestants, categorized as ‘normal,’ or average looking. But in a celebrity culture where women are valued based on their visible heterosexual desirability, it is no longer enough to be ordinary looking. Instead, fat, cellulite, wrinkles, lack of symmetry, and a lack of cartoonish sexual embodiment (i.e. large breasts and eyes, small waist, slim ankles) become woven into a story of crisis. Kelly Alemi, a 28 year-old flight attendant from Maryland, admits to being teased mercilessly as a child in her introductory personal narrative, and she cries about her self-hatred as she examines herself in a mirror at home (see figure 3-2). Her boyfriend Bob is interviewed in this segment and admits that Kelly’s self-esteem issues “do strain the relationship” (Episode
1). Kelly is more frank: “Bob and I have been intimate probably about seven or eight times in the last three years.” This heterosexual failure elicits a reaction of shock from the expert panel, shown glancing at each other and shaking their heads in dismay.

![Image of Kelly Alemi]

Source: © Fox Network

Figure 3-2 Kelly Alemi interview, Screen shot (Season 1, Episode 1. Director Kent Weed, 7 April 2004)

Kelly’s tears signify her instability and utter lack of self-esteem on the series, and the close-up screen shots of her face as she struggles to explain her body restrain her in a powerless subject position.

Repeatedly, as viewers meet the Swan contestants, we see that their heterosexual relationships suffer or do not exist because of contestants’ body issues. Rachel Love-Fraser’s husband calls her “a little average” (Season 1, Episode 1); Christina Tyree admits to considering divorce because she feels she is holding her husband back from a good life: her inability to belly-dance for him with a post-partum, stretched stomach is symbolic of the sexual distance between them (Season 1, Episode 2). Cindy Ingle also feels like motherhood has taken a toll on her body in a way that has affected her relationship with her husband: she will not have sex with him with the lights on (Season 1, Episode 3). Merline Norman similarly describes feeling badly about her post-partum body, which she claims has affected her sex life with her husband, despite a “really great sex life” before she had children (Season 1, Episode 8). Beth Lay experienced similar feelings of shame about her body after the birth of her child, which she claims has led to intimacy issues with her husband. However, compounding her heterosexual misery is the knowledge that her husband kissed another woman. Beth’s response indicates her association of her body with her heterosexual desirability:
“I didn’t leave him because I guess I’m afraid that nobody else will ever love me... I’m hoping this transformation will increase my self esteem.” (Season 1, Episode 4)

The available solution to Beth’s experience of adultery in her marriage is her own transformation, internal and external. The implication is that her appearance and related self-esteem issues are the cause of her pain, rather than the infidelity itself. Swan contestant Andrea Morris echoes the sentiments above in her personal narrative, as she acknowledges that her attitude (a result of being bullied for her appearance) may end her relationship with the father of her child, Zach:

..."I think that our relationship will eventually end if I don’t take care of some of my insecurities, and I don’t want to do that to Zach, you know, because that will be my fault, that his dad’s not around and that’s hard to think about.” (Season 1, Episode 5)

Three other contestants from season one are portrayed as post-relationship: Sarina Voight, whose husband was cheating with another woman (Season 1, Episode 6), Marnie Rygievitz, whose partner did not want to stay in a relationship after the birth of their children (Season 1, Episode 7), and Tawnya Cooke, whose husband left her (Season 1, Episode 3). Their transformations are an investment in their future heterosexual recovery and success.

Not only is contestant Belinda Bessant post-relationship, she is also introduced as a repeat victim of domestic violence. A 28 year-old nurse in Las Vegas, Belinda is a former model who has experienced a series of abusive relationships. Her decision to take part in the Swan program is associated with her desire to overcome the trauma of abuse: “My dream for myself is to learn to know that I deserve someone to treat me good” (Season 1, Episode 5). Dr. Terry Dubrow, who links recovery with therapeutic cosmetic bodywork, fulfils this dream. He says:

“I know she has some history of abuse in her past, and it’s really great to be able to give her a gift like this through the Swan program. We can really transform her both from the inside and the outside.” (Season 1, Episode 5)

Defined as a gift rather than a complex series of consumer transactions, cosmetic surgery is a therapeutic event, part of a rebuilding exercise that will make Belinda into a strong, self-loving woman, whose self-love will prevent her from becoming a victim again. Cosmetic surgery as investment moves well beyond cost in this moment.
These examples are just a few of the personal narratives that introduce viewers to contestants in a way that establishes them within a crisis of heterosexuality. The Swan program stabilizes heterosexual relationships and restores self-esteem as a solution to a lifetime of abuse, neglect, bullying and loss. Within such a framework, cosmetic surgery, diet, exercise and styling are endowed with the ability to resolve the problems of infidelity, betrayal, domestic violence, sexual inhibitions, and relationship problems, which all apparently stem from body issues and the associated lingering insecurities. These problems are in addition to the usual “problems” of the signs of aging and childbirth on women’s bodies, identified in the early consultations with the cosmetic surgeons. For instance, Dr. Randall Haworth interprets the physical signs of breast-feeding and motherhood on the body this way: “Through the ravages of nursing and pregnancy, these poor breasts poop out and give up!” (Season 1 Episode 8), in order to justify Tanya Slavich’s breast augmentation. Here, motherhood is like a disease on the female body. For contestants who have experienced bullying (i.e. in season one, seven contestants admit to being bullied as children), the solution presented by the Swan program presumes that bullying is an individual problem rather than a larger social issue. Further, bullied contestants cannot overcome the experience of bullying without physical transformation to cut off the offending part. The bullies are not criticized, condemned or sought out to atone for their actions, which have left long-standing internal scars for the adult victims; instead, the contestants overcome their self-hatred by becoming a body that does not warrant bullying.

The emphasis on individual transformation and empowerment through bodywork appropriates a feminist-inspired discourse of agency and self-care. Many of the contestants stake a claim to “me time” once they have confessed their angst, unhappiness, and body-flaws in their personal narratives. Season one contestant Beth Lay changes the tone of her voice during her personal narrative when she announces emphatically, “This is the first thing I’ve decided to do, and I told everyone: ‘You know what, this is what I want’...This will change my life forever” (Season 1, Episode 4). The acknowledgment by contestants that they deserve personal space, care, and time is a valid claim and one that feminists have made for generations. Contestants and experts agree that Swan contestants are overworked, care- and timeworn, and prematurely aged. Particularly for those contestants who are mothers, there are echoes of the need to acknowledge the hard work and selflessness of the contestants, and that they take a stand against the children and husbands who demand their energy, time, and use up
their youth. The Swan program becomes a spa-like getaway, an opportunity to focus inwards, to pamper and restore what has been lost for these women (or what has never been). Cosmetic surgery is framed as restorative and morally sanctioned, indulgent in a positive sense.

In addition to extensive body modification, the series makes a superficial gesture towards psychological therapy, with weekly therapy sessions prescribed alongside contestants’ physical plans. Compared with two-hour daily gym sessions, it is clear which type of bodywork is more important to a contestant’s transformation. While contestants and host Amanda Byram are quick to emphasize that the internal transformation is as significant as the external transformation, the spectacle of physical transformation is more compelling and more easily visible than the talking cure. Therapy sessions receive scant coverage in each episode and are used as plot-movers to indicate either the progress or the unwillingness of the participant to let go of bad behaviour. Despite the peripheral coverage of therapy on the series, and the rumoured illegitimacy of The Swan therapist’s credentials (The Smoking Gun reported that Dr. Lynn Ianni got her PhD from an online diploma mill in its article “Fox Doctor’s Diploma Mill Degree”), the brief nod towards therapy in each episode helps to align cosmetic surgery with an empowering, healing process culminating in each contestants’ self-actualization.

3.4.4 Feminizing the Swans

Perhaps not surprisingly, the predominant solution for the crises expressed by the contestants, heterosexual or otherwise, is extensive bodywork that seeks to “feminize” their bodies. Areas that require feminization typically include eyes, noses, cheeks, chins, trunks, breasts, teeth, legs, and arms, achieved through the cosmetic surgery, cosmetic dentistry, and gym work. Repetition of the phrase “we need to feminize her _____” by the cosmetic surgeons, cosmetic dentist, and physical trainer, indicates that there is an unspoken cultural understanding of the term “femininity,” since the team never has to explain why an ankle ought to be made more feminine. Thus, bodywork shapes aberrant or insufficient femininity into more acceptable, even nameable, feminine standards. Making these women more feminine is a process never overtly defined, but the experts and contestants are equally able to identify non-feminine body parts, therefore shaping the definition of femininity inversely. In the process, non-
feminine traits become barriers to happiness and peace: facial hair, fat in the wrong places, deflated breasts, strong or big noses, and cankles are all signals of failed femininity. A somatechnics-inflected analysis can help us move from simply observing the normalization and naturalization of certain types of femininity, towards an interpretation of surgical transformation as constitutive of femininity within a very specific cultural context and location. A closer look at season one’s Cindy Ingle and the representation of her pre-operative facial hair demonstrates the formation of Cindy as a woman through cosmetic bodywork.

Season one contestant Cindy Ingle is constructed as the most monstrous of all pre-operative Swans, because she must shave her face daily. Shots of her using a cordless shaver replay repeatedly in the episode in which her transformation is featured and in the longer version of the opening montage of the program. The repetition of this series of shots clearly outlines the boundary of femininity that Cindy’s body violates. In doing so, in making female facial hair monstrous, The Swan effectively shores up acceptable femininity by framing Cindy as freakish. Real women, real femininity, does not include facial hair: before her laser hair removal, Cindy states, “Next time I look in a mirror, I’m going to feel like a woman” (Season 1, Episode 3). Feeling like a woman, then, is possible through technological instruments that remove the occurrence of naturally occurring facial hair on the contestant, which marks her as unnatural according to culturally defined standards of beauty. But it remains that Cindy Ingle both has facial hair and is female. The Swan resolves this paradox by naturalizing the removal of hair and associating it with authentic femininity.

This example explores what the series does more broadly: the surgically altered body on The Swan is more authentic than the non-surgical body, and cosmetic surgery becomes the vehicle through which contestants become more themselves, better selves, and the selves they have always been. However, the type of body modification conducted on the series is limited to a standardized set of procedures that concentrate on bodily characteristics associated with codes of mainstream, youthful, heterosexual femininity, such as breast augmentation, lip enhancement, abdominal liposuction, and a brow lift to widen the appearance of the eyes. There are no contestants for whom subcultural or controversial body modification (such as branding or scarification) is the key to unlocking authentic selfhood. This absence reveals the narrow ideological limits of somatic technologies to inscribe meaning onto bodies within makeover reality TV.
The continued marginalization of subcultural body modification practices and their virtual invisibility on makeover reality TV occurs because procedures such as tongue-splitting, sub-dermal silicone implants, facial tattooing and branding (to name just a few examples) do not adhere to conventional gendered beauty norms, and as such, cannot conceal the ontological threat of body modification or the hybrid bodies created from body-technology interaction/fusion. The opening up of the body on primetime television remains contentious despite the popularity of makeover reality series that conduct cosmetic surgery, exposing more than fat and bone. The potential for female bodies to be(come) machine-like chimeras, fantastical creatures made by combining the living and the inert, reconfiguring the body by removing fat and replacing it on other sites of the body, is still too raw. This is also why the roles of female contestants on *The Swan* are so diminutive despite their claims of self-empowerment and self-care. Below I explore the rationalization of cosmetic surgery based on the inside/outside dichotomy and the related argument regarding authenticity, as well as the role of experts in situating *The Swan* contestants in infantilizing roles. This exploration works to develop my argument that *The Swan* recuperates the pleasure and danger of hybridized female bodies by diminishing the visibility of the hybrid itself.

### 3.4.5 The Inside/Outside Dichotomy and the Authentic Self

Contestants routinely discuss their inner selves, or their real selves, in relation to the Swan program and their surgery. *The Swan* contributes to makeover culture discourse that separates and polarizes an inner, spiritual self and an outer, physical self. The body is an unruly and inauthentic representation of the inner self, until it embodies normative standards of beauty. The assumption is that good people, people who have suffered and who have worked hard, ought to have their looks reflect their moral character, and anything less is a betrayal of the body. However, the easy distinction between moral, deserving inner self and wayward appearance is a slippery one in the series. The inner self also needs work, especially for women whose lives have included pain, loss, suffering, self-hatred, bullying, and sacrifice. But what does the inner self become, after the Swan program?
Kelly Alemi claims that the program has helped her to “restructure the inside” in addition to her outside when she enters the mansion for her reveal (figure 3-3). She states:

“The Swan program has changed my life forever; I’m a completely different person. I could never ask for anything more. I would tell everyone in the world that if they have a dream follow it, and things do happen for a reason, and wishes do come true.” (Season 1, Episode 1)

Kelly claims that she changed, inside and outside, but a nagging question remains under the surface of her bubbly response: did she change on the inside because she has been changed on the outside? The oversimplification of her message, ‘follow your dreams’ combines the transformation of both her inner and outer selves into a singular event, even though it is her body work which is celebrated at The Reveal. Perhaps her words are more a good performance of the makeover script, rather than the true account of her experience of change.

Kristy Garza echoes the messy separation of inner and outer self in her introduction, as she states “I wanted to be on The Swan because I’m not happy with who I am on the outside” (Season 1, Episode 2), immediately followed by a personal narrative recounting paternal abandonment and maternal betrayal. The outer self is discordant, but the inner experience of parental failure is what motivates the Swan team to characterize Kristy as a worthy candidate.

In the same episode, Christina Tyree introduces herself with the statement: “It’s not just the outside I want to change, it’s the inside too.” Her personal narrative begins
with this claim, and then traces the story of her adjustment to the United States after emigrating from Ecuador, including her challenges in finding work, several miscarriages, and the decision to divorce from her husband because of her feelings of inadequacy. She ends her personal narrative with the statement: “I just want to be, not a completely new person, but a better, a better Christina” (Season 1, Episode 2). Christina maintains the division between inner and outer self from the beginning of her confession, but by then end of this segment, she has blurred the inner and outer in the expression of desire to be “better.” Moments prior to her Reveal, Christina associates her transformation with her achievement of The American Dream, the ideology that anyone can succeed with hard work and dedication, and that people get what they deserve: “I came for a dream, for the American Dream, like all the Latinas do, and I got it!” (Season 1, Episode 2). In this moment, ethnicity and nationality are tied into Christina’s transformation, something woven into her story through her desire to be able to belly dance for her husband in traditional costume. Her visibility as a woman of colour is utilized as proof that the neoliberal spirit of the self-enterprising citizen rewards those who are deserving; here, immigrants who change themselves to become “better,” more attractive US citizens. Christina’s proclamation stands out because it crystallizes the ideological framework of the series. In this moment, The Swan not only restores confidence and beauty, it also restores national pride. The overtly racialized framework around Christina’s transformation produces her bodywork as a positive step towards American assimilation, but she remains marked as “other” throughout the episode.

Contestant Merline Norman also embraces a binary mind/body discourse, moments before her reveal. Host Amanda Byram asks “How do you feel?” and Merline responds:

“I actually feel like my inside has not met the outside yet. Like, I feel awesome inside. Great, like I’m ready to take on the world. I just don’t know what I look like on the outside, so it’s not matching, but I feel great inside.” (Season 1, Episode 8)

Once she has seen her reflection, Merline enthusiastically announces “Oh my god! Okay, I am as hot as I feel!” Merline’s experience of disassociation from her body comes after three months of intensive surgery and dental work, healing, and exercise, so that her response seems disconnected from the physically gruelling nature of the events portrayed on the series. However, the series removes mirrors and reflective surfaces for the duration of the program, so viewers are encouraged to interpret the Swan program
as primarily focused on internal transformation, since the visual reminder of the body is a
distraction. This plot device ensures that viewers and contestants understand that their
inner and outer selves are separate entities, and often at odds.

The maintenance of the inside/outside dichotomy on *The Swan* helps constitute a
cultural understanding of agency and subject identity, fundamentally connected to
representations of class status in the series. The “outside” is inadequate, flawed,
problematic and in need of repair when it does not adhere to normative standards of
femininity, as demonstrated above; but intertwined with acceptable gender presentation
are the visible indicators of class status on and around the body. Each episode positions
the Swan contestants as working class and/or lower class through their appearance,
their clothing, their homes, and their work environments. The series chooses participants
who could not otherwise afford extensive cosmetic surgeries and related body work;
contestants are predominantly employed as office assistants, or described as stay-at-
home mothers. Their bodies are coded as working class in specific ways that remain
unspoken throughout most of the series. There are textual moments that expose the
challenges facing lower- and working-class women, but neoliberal discourse of self-care
and self-government quickly appropriate them. In the process, Swan contestants appear
upwardly mobile through their bodywork. Their class, taste and style progressively
improve as their bodywork is deemed successful.

### 3.4.6 Class and Body Modification on *The Swan*

At different points in an episode, a contestant’s lower- or working-class status is
treated as either circumstantial or a lifestyle choice. Both treatments establish working
class challenges as individually surmountable, as long as one sticks to the program, has
a good attitude, and invests in personal improvement. Just as fat, facial hair and cankles
are problems to overcome on the way to desirable femininity, visual indicators of lower
class status have moral value, such that sloppy jogging suits, a modest or messy home,
and poor dental hygiene are wrapped up in the judgment of each candidate’s
personality. In this context, a working-class appearance is something to overcome and is
tied to the ‘before’ conceptualization of each Swan contestant. This is most visible in the
pre-surgical diagnosis of the contestants’ bodies, when their procedures are named and
their abject flaws are highlighted by digital bulls-eye. Their uniformly grey, unsupported
sports-bras and saggy underwear convey both a lack of femininity and a lower-class budget. The pre-surgical body is unadorned, and entirely desexualized.

In the beginning of each episode as contestants share their personal narrative, the setting conveys their working-class status. It is circumstantial along with the other things that have made a contestant’s life difficult, such as bullying, relationship problems, or divorced parents. Their personal narratives connect their lack of time for self-care with their class positions, and contestants interpret the Swan program as an opportunity for escape. For instance, Merline Norman has always wanted braces to fix her crooked teeth (which she feels self-conscious about), but admits that her own dental health was not a priority due to financial constraints:

“I always say: ‘Next month I’m getting my braces,’ but you know, the money always goes somewhere else. You know, the kids need shoes, my braces can wait, I’ve already waited 10 years.” (Season 1, Episode 8)

Merline’s Swan program will provide her with the dental care that she has not been able to afford on her own. The Swan and its experts become goodwill ambassadors for the Fox Network, taking care of the public who cannot afford to support and manage all of their health care needs. The network do-gooders who donate their services are not without financial perks; surgeons Randall Haworth and Terry Dubrow reported significant increases in their patient load after their premiere of The Swan (Green and Lipton), and the series acts as an extended advertisement for their surgical practice. In addition, the charitable acts of the Swan team of experts provide them with a considerable amount of symbolic and literal power. In an interview with Larry King on CNN, a month before The Swan’s season two premiere, Dr. Terry Dubrow discussed the rewards associated with being a cosmetic surgeon:

KING: Do you get a lot of rewards, Dr. Dubrow, about what you do?

DUBROW: Yeah, I mean, financial obviously, being a plastic surgeon is very rewarding that way. But it’s incredibly rewarding emotionally. I mean, we get to change people.

KING: You also do a lot of work at hospitals when people are in accidents, you know, that don’t come to you just to get a better nose, but who are in bad shape.
DUBROW: Honestly, I've done that. I don't do as much of it now, because to be honest, I'm really popular now, so I don't have as much time, but I do do charity work for organizations where homeless people are involved. I do a lot of that. ("Interview with the Swan Cast")

The seamless blending of financial, celebrity and non-monetary rewards associated with performing cosmetic surgery on The Swan and in Dubrow’s career as described in the interview above work to dampen the criticism that Dubrow and Haworth are the real winners of the series. After the first season of The Swan, People Magazine reported that Terry Dubrow’s wait list jumped to six months, while Randall Haworth’s increased to nine months (Green and Lipton).

The price to participate in the Swan program is the surrendering of privacy in exchange for $250,000 worth of cosmetic surgery and other services, and contestants must confess their experiences of pain and hardship, and bare their bodies for the experts and viewers to judge. They must accept public scrutiny in order to move up the symbolic class ladder. Contestants must also surrender to the rules and expectations of the program, which above all, demand a positive attitude throughout their immersion in the program. In a People Magazine interview after season one, Nely Galan responded to accusations that the Swan program was gruelling: “That’s too bad! On our show, you don’t walk away with nothing; you walk away with $250,000 worth of services from day one. And that’s the price you pay” (Green and Lipton). The price the contestants pay is high, but according to Galan, a necessary exchange for services provided. The consequences for contestants who display a ‘bad’ attitude, “negativity” or “whining” may include an intervention and parental scolding from series creator and ‘life coach’ Nely Galan, being excluded from the pageant, or elimination from the show before the Reveal. Each of these consequences are utilized throughout the series as a way to create drama before the Reveal, but more subtly, the shaming and punishment of contestants who are resistant to submitting to the show’s demands reinforce gendered and classed boundaries. None of the contestants escaped scolding, and in fact, all contestants demonstrated some element of resistance that ‘required’ punishment and shaming. The reining-in and punishment of angry, pained, and frustrated expressions of emotion by the contestants conveys their powerlessness, at the same time that the series invokes a discourse of choice and individual empowerment to make cosmetic surgery a liberating tool in the quest for personal happiness.
A good example of the way that this symbolic power operates is through the treatment of class status as a lifestyle choice, especially regarding the dental health and weight issues of Swan contestants. The Swan team of experts are entitled to pass judgment upon contestants, implying that their lives could have been different had they only worked harder to eat a balanced healthy diet and keep up with regular dental health checkups. Most of the contestants have poor dental hygiene and the Swan team’s dentist, Dr. Sherri Worth, routinely laments the challenge posed by each contestant and her gum disease or tooth decay. Each episode features at least one contestant who requires extensive dental procedures to correct years of neglect, and camera shots of rotten teeth and dental intervention cycle through previews of the series. In Episode five, Andrea Morris must have a tooth pulled by Dr. Worth, a procedure that host Amanda Byram introduces with the warning: “Andrea learns there may be a high price to pay for neglecting her teeth” (Season 1 Episode 5). Andrea is visibly upset in the dentist’s office and weeps when she finds out she must have a tooth pulled. However, Dr. Worth treats her like an overly emotional child:

Andrea: “I knew I needed a crown on it but I couldn’t afford to get one...”

Dr. Worth: “Here’s the deal, the worst thing is it’s one tooth, it’s not a big deal.”

Andrea: “I just wish I could have tooked [sic] care of it before it got this bad.”

Andrea’s emotional reaction to the news that she will lose a tooth reflects the frustration and loss she feels at not being financially able to prevent the decay, a common reality in America where millions of people go without routine, preventative dental care.52 Dr. Worth’s reaction disregards Andrea’s class circumstances that make it difficult for her to maintain professional dental care, and belittles her by scoffing at her emotional response. After Andrea’s dental work segment, Dr. Worth interprets the event for the camera, and has the final, authoritative word, implying that the loss of her tooth is a reflection of Andrea’s lack of responsibility: “It’s too bad we had to pull this tooth; a little hygiene and maintenance could have prevented this.” The expert opinion shuts the door on the issue, ideologically fixing Andrea as a subject in need of order.

Just as dental care (or lack of it) measures a contestant’s moral worth and class standing, so too does food and weight. All but one of the contestants in season one is

52 See Bloom and Cohen; Choi; Kaylor, et al.; Manski et al.
deemed overweight or flabby, and all are put on low-calorie diets for the duration of the Swan program. Belinda Bessant’s liposuction procedure is interpreted by Dr. Dubrow as evidence of her lack of restraint in helping herself to fast food, a common generalization made about the working class in news media about the ‘obesity epidemic’ in America: “You see how nice and golden the fat is? That’s a lot of cheeseburgers in the tube” (Season 1, Episode 5). The food choices and weight loss of contestants are carefully regulated on the show and when contestants fail to lose weight, or fail to lose ‘enough’ weight, they are interrogated by series life coach Nely Galan. Her condescending lectures remind the women that they must work harder, dedicate themselves more fully, and give up the offending high-calorie food that has made them fat in the first place. In episode two, Nely Galan shames Christina Tyree into recommittig to her diet: “You’re the only Swan in the program that has gained weight: you’ve ordered strawberry ice cream and full-fat yogurt eighteen times in one week!” To the camera post-interrogation, Nely laments: “Ice cream on a diet? I mean come on! Clearly this is her weakness.” Nely implies that Christina’s weakness is moral in nature; Christina’s lack of will power is evidence that she is overweight because she is just too lazy to try. This laziness is also associated with her class status, implying that her food choices are a lifestyle choice and therefore personal and individual.

Contestants transition into upper class spaces and are adorned in ways that signify upper class status for The Reveal ceremony. The Reveal ceremony occurs in a ‘mansion’ set in Beverly Hills, complete with an elaborate curved staircase, double doors opened by men in tuxedos, a chandelier, marble flooring, classic-looking paintings and sculpture, and velvet curtains over a gilt mirror. These familiar cultural markers of wealth are signposts that signify the achievements of the contestants and their bodywork. They now belong to this space because their bodies project an image of beauty. The frumpy grey sports bra and granny panties are replaced with lacy lingerie for the ‘after’ shots, and side by side images not only indicate the physical transformation of the contestants, but also that the physical transformation makes their bodies appropriate for beautiful and expensive garments. The contestants enter the mansion set at the end of each episode on the arm of a tuxedoed man, dressed in evening gowns and styled to look like celebrities or beauty queens. The ideological relationship between upper class status and beauty encoded onto the contestants’ bodies also incorporates renewed sexual desirability and visibility. The ‘before’ images capture the women in forward-facing, non-smiling poses, make-up free and un-styled. In the after images, set beside the ‘befores’
for full impact, the contestants are heavily styled, smiling provocatively, and coyly looking at the camera with side-long glances.

Despite the presence of material and embodied indicators of wealth on the contestants after their makeovers, the Swan program does not offer any tangible skills to help the contestants work towards more stable or successful financial positions or lifestyles. Instead, the appearance of wealth stands in for wealth itself, and it marks each contestant as whole, complete, and successful at the end of her transformation. As such, *The Swan* contributes to the tendency within makeover culture to conflate representation and materiality; they become interchangeable, and makeover reality TV (as a product of visual culture) produces a simulation of wealth through body modification. Brenda Weber discusses this phenomenon in her analysis of masculinity and makeover on *Extreme Makeover* and *Ten Years Younger*, when she notes that the appearance of masculine strength (i.e. a chiselled jaw and chin) seems to be enough to satisfy the genre’s desire for congruence between masculinity and maleness, even if the body modification does not produce the strength that it makes visible (“What Makes the Man?” 293-294).

Similarly, the contestants’ post-surgical bodies are surrounded by markers of wealth as a way to present them as newly valuable beings, whose inner and outer selves are in balance and whose bodies are worth being the object of the gaze.

Mark Poster considers makeover reality TV such as *The Swan* transgressive for its presentation of formerly private medical procedures and the intimacy with which participants share their stories (and their innards) on television (171-172). He suggests that *The Swan*:

> acknowledge[s] that [it is] pushing the limits of acceptability... by its posh, chateau-like setting, its homage to “the team of experts,” and its Puritanical morality that judges contestants by how hard they have worked to change themselves. These are defence mechanisms to gain audience acceptance for crossing the line of privacy. (171)

I would argue that in addition to a defence mechanism against social codes of conduct that might have labelled makeover reality TV tasteless or grotesque, the story of class mobility told through the bodies of the contestants helps maintain a positive story affiliated with American Dream ideology, however transient the class mobility is in the contestants’ lives. In doing so, attention shifts from the potential threat of the exposed fracture of the inside/outside dichotomy and the challenge to an authentic self that makeover culture works so carefully to uphold.
While contemporary makeover culture has marketed itself as able to make one’s ‘inner self’ match one’s outer appearance, historically there has been a recurrent social fear regarding the use of cosmetic surgery to deceive others. The emergence of the cosmetic surgery industry during the nineteenth and twentieth century elicited public and professional fears that aesthetic surgeons would aid criminals in hiding their “true selves” (and their guilt) through surgery that would profoundly alter the appearance (Gilman 27). This fear of deception through body modification surfaces in mainstream American film in the mid-twentieth century, explored by Elizabeth Haiken through her analysis of Rock Hudson’s Seconds (Frankenheimer 1966). I would also include more recent filmic examples such as Scalpel/False Face (Grissmer 1976), Death Becomes Her (Zemeckis 1992), Face/Off (Woo 1997), Vanilla Sky (Crowe 2001), and The Skin I Live In (Almodavar 2011) to the list of popular films whose stories revolve around fears about the insubstantiality of the authentic self and the ability to recreate bodies outside of the realm of acceptable beauty norms and consumer choice. Even as makeover culture is continuing to normalize cosmetic surgery as a positive and empowering set of procedures, these films portray cosmetic surgeons as powerful creators but as either unstable or untrustworthy.

The Swan mystifies the threat of the hybrid body, at once machine and human, by producing a Cinderella story that is familiar and moralistic. In the process, a team of experts monitors the contestants, keeping their transformation in check and within the parameters established by the series. This regulatory practice, made visible on the series in highly charged moments of resistance and acquiescence to power, subordinates the Swan contestants and neutralizes their potential symbolic power as hybrids, or cyborgs. They become the products of experts, so that their transformation is witnessed as not of their own making, and impossible without intense surveillance and correction.

3.4.7 The Dream Team: Class, surveillance, and self-governance

The authoritative judgment of the experts on the series, exemplified above in the characterization of class as a lifestyle choice, extends to the relationships between the contestants and all of the members of “The Dream Team.” The team of experts on the series includes the physical trainer Greg, the therapist Dr. Lynn Ianni, the cosmetic dentist Dr. Sherri Worth, Nely Galan the life coach, and the two cosmetic surgeons
featured on the series, Dr. Randall Haworth and Dr. Terry Dubrow. In stereotypical caricatures of gendered parental roles, Dr. Haworth and Dr. Dubrow are “white-coated” father figures whose expert skill and natural talent bestow them with authority, trust, and respect. The indicators of upper class status surrounding the cosmetic surgeons bolster their expertise: their whiteness, their slightly taut facial features (suggesting they have had work done), their sophisticated clinic spaces, and their roles at the boardroom table in the Swan mansion all invest them with credibility and symbolic power. They use this power to praise or to scold the Swan contestants, depending on the level of compliance they are met with by the contestants.

The paternal role of the surgeons occasionally swings toward the sexually suggestive, as is the case during Beth Lay’s liposuction, when Dr. Dubrow exclaims to Dr. Haworth, whose liposuction wand, or cannula, is longer than Dr. Dubrow’s: “You know there is one thing I object to though- look at the size of my wand! That’s not fair” (Season 1, Episode 4). Comparing ‘penis size’ over the unconscious, prostrate, naked body of contestant Beth Lay demonstrates the depth of the symbolic, gendered power of these two surgeons. The father-figure role supplements an image of the cosmetic surgeons as artists (figure 3-4). They refer to themselves in this way, but the other experts on the series, who defer to the expertise of their judgment, also treat the surgeons as ‘the talent’. Dr. Dubrow refers to Beth Lay as “our masterpiece” at her Reveal ceremony, as though she were a piece of artwork. Dr. Haworth notes: “the nose jobs is one of the most artistic operations in plastic surgery” during his consultation with contestant Kathy Rickers (Season 1, Episode 4). The contestants become products of the artistry of the cosmetic surgeons, and their own role in the transformation is diminished as a result.

Source: © LA Times

Figure 3-4 Dr. Terry Dubrow preparing Christina Tyree for surgery (Season 1, Episode 2. Director Kent Weed, 12 April 2004). Shari Roan. “Watching Plastic Surgery on TV causes Anxiety” LA Times, 27 Jan. 2009. Photo Credit: Robert Voets, Fox
The paternalistic power of the doctors to define feminine beauty and alter offensive body parts complements the previously mentioned authority of Nely Galan, series creator, cast in the role of mother figure.

The cosmetic surgeons diagnose and authorize bodywork, but Nely Galan is the visible force that demands adherence to the plan, and she expresses displeasure when candidates do not measure up or fall off the wagon. Her attempts to motivate and inspire through scolding and shaming always focus on the attitude of a contestant. Negative attitudes, failure to lose weight quickly and stick to a diet, failure to wear post-operative garments, failure to be grateful for the opportunity to be a Swan, and failure to give themselves over to the program “fully” are all punishable under the purview of Nely’s watchful eye. For instance, Nely visits contestant Marnie Rygiewicz after learning that she has not been wearing her post-operative compression garments, telling Marnie: “I don’t want to have to tell you this again” (Season 1, Episode 7). To the camera, Nely elaborates:

“I’m very disappointed in Marnie, she’s being given all these gifts, she says she wants to change her life and the simplest task, wearing garments so that she heals well, she’s incapable of sticking to it.” (Season 1, Episode 7)

Nely interprets Marnie’s failure to follow instructions as ingratitude, and for that, we are told Marnie has jeopardized her chances to appear in the Swan pageant. In a similarly nagging tone, Nely tells contestant Dawn Goad, after learning about her poor food choices and weight gain while in the program: “No no no no! The party's over. If you don’t change your eating habits you’re going to be a tub when you get home” (Season 1, Episode 7). The public shaming of the contestants re-establishes the authority of Nely and the program, but her visits are meant to be caring and her role as benevolent. Above all, Nely’s role as life coach of the contestants is constructed as supportive, and for their own good. When contestants fail to shape up after their scolding, they are either eliminated from the pageant or kicked off the show altogether. The message is clear: a difficult experience is “the price you pay” for the ‘gift’ of cosmetic surgery.53

For instance, Tanya Slavich, the most outwardly frustrated contestant in season one, is characterized as ungrateful and excessively emotional. Tanya is a 31-year-old mother from Olympia, Washington who works as a data processor. When she is

accepted into the Swan program, her personal interview focuses on the bullying she experienced in her past. Tanya’s husband Brian states: “Tanya’s problems with herself cause problems between herself and the outside world. It’s something that she can hopefully get over with this” (Season 1, Episode 8). Tanya’s procedures include a nose job, brow lift, cheek implants, chin implant, upper lip lift, lip augmentation, Lasik eye surgery, a tummy tuck, breast augmentation, breast lift, dental bleaching, veneers, gum surgery, dental deep cleaning, a diet and exercise regimen of two hours per day in the gym, and a 1700 calorie per day diet, as well as therapy (Season 1, Episode 8). The series frames Tanya’s recovery as problematic before her surgeries even begin, with Dr. Randall Haworth admitting his concern over a potential “major meltdown” with Tanya because of her nervousness going into surgery (Season 1, Episode 8). Predicting her failure in this way suggests that Tanya is a suspicious participant, and her post-operative outburst is proof that she does not have what it takes to be a Swan. During her recovery from surgery, she announces to the camera: “I feel worse than I expected and I need to lie down before I punch somebody in the face” (Season 1, Episode 8). In the episode featuring Tanya’s transformation, the above statement is proof of her instability and bad attitude. Series promos and the opening segment of each episode repeat the statement as evidence that the Swan program is a gruelling challenge.

Tanya’s refusal to remain positive, as well as her decision to disobey the no-mirrors rule results in her disqualification from the Swan program before she has the opportunity to participate in the Reveal ceremony at the Swan mansion. The confiscation of her contraband mirror by a man identified as a security guard occurs on camera, but there is an interesting shift in the mise-en-scène: the shakiness and poor lighting from the use of a hand-held camera is reminiscent of crime-based reality television such as COPS (Fox, 1989-present). As a result, the event is manufactured as criminal, and it indicates Tanya’s moral bankruptcy: she no longer deserves the transformative opportunity. Cressida Heyes notes in her examination of makeover reality TV that there are no immoral or bad beauties in its universe, because morality and beauty go hand in hand (“Cosmetic Surgery” 28). Therefore, Tanya is unsalvageable, and The Swan maintains its ideological worldview by celebrating the more compliant Swan contestants.

The mishaps of the remaining contestants are frequently labelled as a symptom of depression; a diagnosis meted out by virtually every voice on the series, including the host, the contestants, Nely Galan, the cosmetic surgeons, and the resident therapist.
Depression becomes a catchall term treated as an indication of weakness on the part of the contestants: their inability to follow the rules, their ‘inappropriate’ response to physical pain, or their unwillingness to surrender fully to the rigours of the Swan program. The cosmetic surgeons label almost forty per cent of season one contestants at-risk of depression after surgery, in an accusatory tone that implies depression is something the women ‘do’ because they are spiteful or childish. Season one contestants Kelly Alemi, Marnie Rygiewicz, Tawnya Cooke, Tanya Slavich, Andrea Morris, and Dawn Goad are all identified as depressed in the course of the episodes in which they appear. Ethically, this raises questions about the surgeons’ willingness to conduct such extensive surgery on women with mental illness. More realistically, the series uses the term liberally (and inaccurately) to describe participants’ response to pain and to pathologize any behaviour or expression of emotion that does not correspond with expectations of femininity and beauty defined by the Swan program.

The Dream Team brand Dawn, Marnie and Tawnya as depressed at the beginning of their episodes, before they enter the Swan program and undergo surgery. The approach to treating their depression underscores the ideology of the series, where physical transformation is a curative measure. Dr. Dubrow states: “Dawn always felt like the ugly kid. It’ll be interesting to see if we can help her depression, by helping to improve the way she feels on the outside” (Season 1, Episode 7). When contestants express pain, anger or frustration, they are described as experiencing “an emotional tailspin” or a “major meltdown” and viewers are reminded that this may put contestants at risk of elimination from the series without a chance to perform in the pageant. Kelly Alemi’s emotional state is a risk from the beginning of the episode, and after conducting her surgery, Dr. Dubrow warns: “I am concerned about one thing with Kelly, she’s very emotional. Some percentage of patients go into a significant depression after surgery, and she’s at risk for that” (Season 1, Episode 1). Dubrow does not elaborate on the reasons why some patients may be at risk of post-surgery depression, nor does this observation appear to affect his decision to perform her cosmetic procedures. However, as predicted, Kelly’s post-operative recovery is difficult and her attitude is deemed negative. She receives a visit from Nely Galan and Dr. Dubrow, whose first words to his patient upon entering her room are: “I told you [that] you were going to get depressed didn’t I?” (Season 1, Episode 1). The accusatory tone of the surgeon-as-expert reaffirms his authority over the wayward patient, whose whining is unbecoming of her newly sculpted body. Kelly’s ‘depression’ prevents her from being chosen for the pageant and
she is sent home with the reminder that she could have done better. At the Reveal, Dr. Dubrow comments: “I’m a little disappointed; I’m not sure Kelly took it as far as she could have” (Season 1, Episode 1). Kelly returned to the pageant finale as the “wild card” contestant, but she was not able to shake off the negative judgment assigned to her during her transformation.54

The diagnosis of the contestants as depressed medicalizes the untoward physical and emotional responses of these women and places boundaries around the interpretation of their outbursts. By framing their pain and anger (and threats of violence, such as Tanya’s statement that she would punch someone in the face) as depressive behaviour, the series minimizes the tension produced by unruly bodies that expose as illusory the limits between human and technology. The experts hint at a history of female pathology in their sweeping accusations of depression. The professional opinions of the experts imply hysteria, and then produce the techniques through which the Swans can regain favour (and a spot in the pageant). These techniques include diet, therapy, and commitment to the transformation through adherence to the rules of the show, namely: no mirrors allowed, and give yourself over to the program. Therefore, the series produces the discourse and machinery to contain the threat of discordance and hybridity made visible in the contestants post-surgery.

The relationship portrayed between experts and contestants demonstrates that women’s empowerment comes from docility and obedience to authority figures. The more willing a contestant is to place herself under surveillance by a regulatory body (the experts), the more likely she is to succeed, both in her “overall transformation” and in her chances of participating in the Swan pageant. According the Nely Galan, season one pageant winner Rachel Love-Fraser advanced to the pageant “…because she surrendered to the transformation in the most incredible way” (Season 1, Episode 1). The Reveal ceremony at the end of each episode partially returns agency to Swan participants through a congratulatory moment for each contestant after they have seen their reflections in the mirror. The experts applaud the contestants, host Amanda Byram reminds them: “You have yourself to thank, as well as all the experts.” The series does

54 In the interview on Larry King Live preceding season two of The Swan, Nely Galan called Kelly “a difficult swan.” Kelly adopted this position and solidified her role as such by responding: “I was the bad swan. Nely was very, very hard on me. She gave me a lot of tough love, but I really needed it” (“Interview with the Swan”).
not expose the combined celebration of surrendering and being personally responsible for one’s transformation as contradictory. Instead, placing the contestant at the centre of the transformation in the discourse of the Reveal ceremony dilutes the surveillance and regulation of the contestants during the majority of each episode, and the event becomes personally empowering and progressive for each woman. That is, until the judges choose one contestant to advance to the pageant and one to send home.

*The Swan* pageant is structured like a traditional beauty pageant with judges awarding points to the contestants based on their performance in evening gown, swimsuit and lingerie competitions. In addition, the Swans are judged on their responses to questions drawn randomly from the panel. Interspersed with the pageant are recaps from the contestants’ makeovers, their reflections on the experience, and their work in preparation for the pageant. The episode features contestants before the pageant, learning choreography and the proper way to walk down a runway, and participating in their first photo shoot. The celebrity treatment is a positive effect of the Swan process, including the ever-present video camera documenting the events leading up to the pageant. Now that the contestants occupy desirable bodies, surveillance is a way of life that helps reaffirm the value of those bodies. The women smile and wave at the video camera as they enter the dance studio, fight over bikinis, and are prepped for their photo shoots, as though the camera is a friendly addition to the group. Here, hyper-visibility, as a reward of beautification, establishes surveillance as not only routine but also desirable. Heterosexual ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ is a sign of success, and the contestants voice this sentiment in their interpretation of the pageant lingerie competition:

Rachel Love-Fraser: “I feel sexy and I’m ready to show it to the world and say look what I’ve accomplished” (Season 1, Episode 10)

Sarina Voight: “Coming out in lingerie, it’s a celebration of: ‘I am woman, hear me roar!’ It’s just great.” (Season 1, Episode 10).

These contestants appropriate a feminist-inspired discourse of empowerment in order to define their publicly approved, heterosexually desirable bodies as accomplishments. Sarina’s reference to Helen Reddy’s “I am Woman” (1971), a song associated with the women’s liberation movement, is perhaps the most poignant example of the postfeminist culture of the show. The statement infuses power in the sexualized body on display, and
demonstrates what Rosalind Gill calls “sexual subjectification” (“From Sexual Objectification”).

As Rachel Love-Fraser is crowned the Swan of season one, host Amanda Byram signs off with the statement: “And ladies, always remember where you came from, celebrate how you got there, and don’t forget to live happily ever after” (Season 1, Episode 10). The neat and tidy closure of the series implies that the body modification of the contestants has been total, and is final. This moment fixes the contestants and there is no consideration of future marks of time, loss, or pain left on the body, now that they have become pageant-worthy. Maintaining whiteness and upward mobility as the invisible norm, the unspoken ideal subject, allows the contestants, the experts, and the host to continue to celebrate the Swan transformation as a process of self-determination and empowerment, one that exposes their unique individuality even as it produces an uncanny similarity in the facial features, body shapes, and adornment of the contestants.

Repackaging beauty and sexual desirability as power for women is a common postfeminist trend as I have demonstrated in the previous chapter. It works to mask the more troublesome transformation of the contestants, who are deemed successful if they have internalized the surveillance of the experts. The manufacturing of willing, surveillant subjects on The Swan, who are celebrated for their ability to simulate proper femininity and upward mobility, normalizes an entitled, constant, and objectifying gaze. Cultural Studies scholar Jonathan Finn has called this process “seeing surveillantly”: that is, he claims that contemporary societies have begun “to situate surveillance less as a technology than as a social practice: a way of seeing, understanding and engaging with the world around us” (2010). Therefore, the most successful contestants are those who no longer need The Dream Team because they have incorporated self-governance and surveillance as a way of life.

On the other hand, those contestants who did not complete the Swan program according to expectations, or those contestants who acted out in moments of pain and frustration, exposed cracks in the foundation of the program itself, and in makeover culture more broadly. What contestants like Kelly Alemi, Tanya Slavich and Marnie Rygiewicz bring to light is the unruliness of the hybrid. Reigning in the behaviour of ‘bad’ Swans was necessary for the program to contain the threat of exposing bodily hybridity and its associated truths: that all bodies are in processes of becoming, we are all hybrids, and modifying one’s body will not remain under the purview of experts. Perhaps
most notable for marking the hybrid as an unruly being was Tawnya Cooke, noted as the ‘oldest’ Swan of the season at forty, who rejected Dr. Haworth’s suggestions for a facelift and a nose job (Season 1, Episode 3). Her decision to forgo the nose job was especially significant, because it addressed the issue of family, appearance, and identity in ways that the series had not done up until that point. Tawnya’s two daughters inherited the bump on Tawnya’s nose and she decided she did not want it removed because she wanted to share this visible family trait. This noted exception to the experts’ surgical plans led to responses filled with suspicion and negativity from life coach Nely Galan, her surgeon Randall Haworth, and the series host Amanda Byram. Each reflected their disappointment in Tawnya’s decision, and the narration of her experience by host Byram reminded viewers that Tawnya was “backing out of another surgery” and she was “the first contestant to turn down the doctor’s plan” (Season 1 Episode 3). As expected, Tawnya’s ‘defiance’ of the experts was used to justify her elimination, when it was determined that Cindy had given herself over to the process more fully and therefore deserved a spot in the pageant. Tawnya’s rejection of two significant procedures created a Reveal ceremony that did not measure up to the other contestants in its ‘wow factor,’ and this is likely the reason for her dismissal (provoking a dip in ratings as if her less-than-shocking reveal underwhelmed audiences). Ideologically, Tawnya’s acknowledgement of and desire to protect her family’s shared facial characteristics in spite of being considered ‘flaws’ is significant. First, it demonstrated an alternative to the standard set of procedures provided to all candidates, regardless of age or body type. Second, it was the one instance in the series when a contestant actively determined the course of her surgical bodywork. This rupture of the logic of the expert gave way to a momentary insight into the hybrid’s potential to disrupt technologies of embodiment that work in the service of dominant gender ideologies. While Tawnya’s Reveal did reflect close adherence to gender norms (as a thin, white, blonde, large-breasted woman in an evening gown), the moments that she resisted the face lift and nose job remind viewers that embodiment can take many shapes, including recognizing value in one’s unique physical markers. I am not suggesting that Tawnya’s resistance is important because she retained a “natural” body in spite of surgical pressures, but rather, that her negotiation of the limited space available provided a momentary shift in the mainstream transformation narrative. This shift allows for subsequent questions to emerge regarding the politics of body modification that The Swan does not address elsewhere in the series.
Makeover reality TV documents a spectacle of embodied transformation that millions of viewers all over the world have tuned in to witness. It is my contention that makeover culture’s discourse has been shaped by the discourse of shows like The Swan and Extreme Makeover in powerful ways that trickle down to viewers, such that all citizens become implicated in a surgical imaginary (Covino 4). The ways that viewers have come to imagine and understand cosmetic surgery have shifted dramatically because of the normalization of televised multi-procedure events and the promise of life-changing opportunities afforded by cosmetic surgery and other bodywork. The subject identities associated with transformative bodywork link upward mobility and successful femininity with beauty, and lower class signifiers with failure and immorality. In the process, some women’s bodies are valued more highly, and a strictly gendered, classed, and raced body (re)emerges as ideal. The bodywork highlighted on The Swan is packaged as part of an empowering journey towards authenticity and self-actualization. In the process, feminist-inspired ideologies promote women’s self-care and potential, but they also obscure the regulatory practices and surveillance, which produce docile bodies of the contestants. Gender and class stereotypes are reinforced as the authority figures shame and then celebrate the contestants, as long as contestants have demonstrated their ability to adhere to the rules of the Swan Program.
4: THE SWAN FANS AND THE FOX NETWORK’S ONLINE FORUMS

4.1 Overview

Television industry statistics indicate that the original broadcast of *The Swan* on Fox was quick to gain viewers, which resulted in an early order for a second season that premiered in the fall of 2004 after the unexpected success of season one in the spring line-up:

"It's doing really good numbers from virtually no lead-in at all," Fox alternative/specials exec VP Mike Darnell said of the show’s Monday 9 p.m. timeslot. "And we can feel the show growing." Darnell said the pickup -- after just four episodes -- was the fastest he had ever ordered a second season. "There was no reason to wait," he said. "The faster the better." (Schneider)

The speed with which season two of *The Swan* was ordered resulted from high early ratings, which indicated that the series was averaging “a 4.2 rating and 10 share among adults 18-49 after four airings,” 55 with just over nine million viewers per episode (Schneider). The early success of the series was a surprise, given that it was competing with the long-standing Monday night cable centrepiece ABC’s *Monday Night Football*, CBS’s long-running sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond* (in its final season), and NBC’s *Las Vegas*. Its early popularity resulted in online buzz, in the form of discussion boards and web forums devoted to the format (e.g. Television without Pity, Reality TV World, Fans of Reality TV, TV.com).

The movement from large-scale national ratings of a series to the study of fans on one web forum is challenging. Clearly a study of a select group of online fans of *The Swan*...
Swan is limited in its generalizability, because, as Joan Conners reminds us, “[w]hile reality television garners substantial viewing audiences, the vast majority of viewers do not discuss their impressions of the programs or questions about the content in online venues” (60). Rather, those who go online to discuss a series with others are fans, and their production/activity outside of viewing set them apart as more heavily invested in a series or genre. Conners also indicates that fans of makeover reality TV who participate in online discussion do so as a way to extend their experience with a text in a social space. She notes that online fan discussions typically reflect self-selected fans that enjoy the programs they are discussing, therefore:

they may not be as sceptical about the representations they see as non-viewers....Rather they participate in online discussions as an extension of their viewing, as an opportunity for social interaction about the programs with other plastic surgery reality television fans. (66)

This does not make the online audience research less useful or valuable. If the general tendency is to assume that fans of makeover reality TV are more susceptible to its messaging about body modification, then it is necessary to find out what self-identified fans say about the series. Web discussion boards are valuable online spaces available for critical inquiry, containing cultural residue from a moment in time not otherwise available through other research methods. Web discussion boards have also become convenient and (relatively) accessible spaces for fans to find other fans and discuss the shows they watch, transforming a once-marginal practice, fandom, into a global phenomenon.

Going online to discuss a television show in a forum requires computer and Internet access and time of course, but it also requires literacy, some technological skill, and interest. My sample is also overwhelmingly American-centric. This limits the pool of people from which to draw conclusions about makeover culture discourse. However, I think that makeover reality TV web forums such as the one I examine are exciting and valuable sites for audience research because, even despite these barriers, many thousands of people took the time and effort to create user accounts, log in, and speak up. Determining how they identified as fans is a way to begin understanding how successful or pervasive makeover culture discourse has been.

Moreover, research in the US and Canada indicates that the Internet has become a more and more central part of people’s communication and information gathering
processes. The Pew Research Center data collected for the *Pew Internet and American Life Project* reports that by February 2012, eighty per cent of American adults use the Internet. Their research also indicates that of the total number of American adults using the Internet, eighty per cent do so in search of health or medical information (2010), and twenty-two per cent use the internet to “participate in an online discussion, a listserv, or other online group forum that helps people with personal issues or health problems” (2006).\(^{56}\) Statistics Canada reported identical numbers in 2010; the *2010 Canadian Internet Use Survey* found that eighty per cent of Canadians aged sixteen or older use the internet. This study found that sixty-four per cent of Internet users in Canada searched for medical or health-related information, and fifty-eight per cent of users participated in social media.\(^{57}\) These findings indicate that the Internet has become a part of the majority of North American’s lives in some way, and primarily as a communication tool and a place to find information.

My goal in chapter four is a closer look at the ways that discourses about bodywork, beauty, and success migrate across industries, media genres, and between viewers in makeover culture. Specifically, I examine the Fox network-hosted web forums for fan discussions of *The Swan*,\(^{58}\) forums that were active during the broadcast of seasons one and two in 2004 (and closed to additional posts in January 2005). The web forums offer a snapshot on what was a paradigmatic moment in makeover culture. Collectively, they reflect the ways that the discourse of makeover culture travelled and changed as viewers, fans, and detractors developed the discourse amongst themselves in an online environment. They make up a valuable research site to address the following questions propelling this chapter: Are there common characteristics among *The Swan*’s online fans? What does a makeover reality TV fan culture look like/do? Was *The Swan* effective in producing a discourse replicated by viewers, who latched onto themes present in the series in order to create their own (potential) makeover narratives? If Swan contestants were positioned in ambivalent and contradictory roles as victim/agent, subject/object, hybrid/unified being, did that ambivalence re-emerge in viewers’ online

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\(^{58}\) Available online as read-only, searchable text hosted by Mzinga Inc. at the time of this project’s completion (July 2012), here: <http://forums.prospero.com/foxtheswan/start>.
discussions? How did the Fox network impact or shape the web forums and fan culture through its structural and regulatory practices?

In order to answer these questions, I begin by describing my theoretical and methodological approaches to studying the web forums. In order to examine the forums in some detail, I collected a random sample of 400 ‘threads’ (discussions) from the Fox network-hosted site. Using the profile information provided by the web forum contributors, as well as content analysis of each thread, this chapter provides demographic information about the contributors. It also provides descriptive information about the trends emerging from The Swan web forums. I describe the ways that contributors self-regulated, managed and reflected on the forums; I describe the forum contributors and their modes of identification; and I consider the application of specific subject identities in their writing. Finally, I examine the content of the forums and the trends in discussions of makeover culture as they emerge from my sample.

As with the previous chapter, this analysis operates from the theoretical influence of somatechnics, wherein “the term reflects contemporary poststructuralist understandings of embodiment as the incarnation or materialization of historically and culturally specific discourses and practices, as fundamentally intercorporeal, (trans)formative and ethico-political” (Sullivan and Murray 3). I contend that the discursive engendering of bodies and selves in online spaces helps constitute the lived experience of those bodies outside of the Internet environment by providing a space to write the body (in a very particular way, through the confession narrative, which I elaborate upon below). In doing so, authors, whom I refer to as forum ‘contributors’, also shape the Internet environment itself, even within the confines imposed by the Fox network that hosts the site.

Studying the reproduction of makeover culture discourse in network-hosted web forums has led me to the conclusion that fans adeptly appropriate makeover culture discourse in a way that mimics the televised discourse to such a hyperbolic extent that it undoes, or exposes, the scripts necessary for makeover culture to remain acceptable and embedded in the mainstream. In other words, the potential threat of the surgically-altered body to expose the instability of bodily integrity and a clear-cut mind/body dichotomy is contained through makeover culture discourse. The discourse positions participants as passive, compliant, feminized subjects, while simultaneously addressing them as active, empowered agents in control of their bodies. Participants on Fox’s The
Swan web forums reproduced this discourse too well, and in doing so, they unwittingly uncover the symbolic violence contained in makeover culture discourse. Keeping in mind the indivisibility of body and technology (somatechnics), or the ways that technologies and (social, political, medical, mediated) bodies of knowledge craft the way fleshy bodies come to matter, exposing the violence of makeover culture discourse is critical in understanding how it is that gender, sexuality, and beauty are mapped onto bodies in makeover culture. Before exploring this further and in more detail through the web forums, I outline my methodology for approaching the online forums and data collection, and I consider the implications of understanding fan (inter)activity as unpaid labour within the Swan forums.

4.2 Methods

4.2.1 Conducting online research: Web forums as culture/cultural artefact; ethical considerations

Web discussion boards are tricky things to pin down: what are they exactly? Places? Spaces? Public? Private? Texts? Transcripts? There is no doubt about the mediated and communicative foundation of web forums, but a definition of Internet data is not altogether straightforward. Christine Hine suggests that the instability or slipperiness of the Internet makes it an exciting research site (35), in part because it does not always exist as a reliable and retraceable space/text, but also because it defies easy definition. She notes that the Internet “can be shown to have multiple temporal and spatial orderings which criss-cross the online/offline boundary” (11), and is always being constructed and reconstructed (35). Thus, studies involving online data require creativity and adaptability, and a willingness to “[experiment] within the genre as a response to novel situations” (13). Her virtual ethnography work considers the Internet as a culture and a cultural artefact, “a discursively performed culture and a cultural artefact, the technology text” (39). The value of considering web forums as both cultural space(s) and cultural artefacts is in the recognition that they occupy multiple roles at once, and defy easy borders.

How one defines a web forum determines how one shapes the research questions and interpretation strategies that follow. For this project, I treat The Swan web forums as static texts (cultural artefacts) in order to analyze the content of the discussions, thinking about them as closed, complete and finite, but also not inevitable.
That is, they are “the product of culturally produced understandings that can vary” (Hine 9). *The Swan* web forums have been archived online by a software company affiliated with Fox; but I recognize that they were once a “place” that people visited and congregated virtually (a culture). The host brand, Fox, constructed and shaped that place. The forums currently exist in the public domain and are accessible without password or membership to the forum, but they have become difficult to locate using basic search engine functions. It is no longer easy to stumble upon the Fox network-hosted forums, in part because Fox no longer hosts them on its parent site, but also because in a television age of high turnover and a seemingly endless parade of new series, *The Swan* has become a dated television text in a North American context. When the forums were active in 2004 and 2005, participation (beyond reading) required logging in either as a guest or creating a user profile, so the boundaries of the forums as well as their “location” have shifted since they have become inactive. Over the lifetime of *The Swan* forums online, their ‘liveness’ and mutability has changed into something made complete by a finite beginning and ending (the first and last posts).

In terms of the role of researcher in identifying a research site and collecting data, my decision to think about web forums as a culture and a cultural artefact provides some (artificial) distance from the people who have contributed to the web forums, those who have provided the ‘meat’ of the cultural artefact. However, I have tried to remain reflective about this constructed distance, so as not to assume that I am free from responsibility to the people who contributed to the forums. The university policies and procedures regarding the ethics of research involving human subjects (Section 1.4) do not require ethics approval for research data derived from material in the public domain. Since *The Swan* web forums hosted by the Fox network are archived in the public domain and are accessible to anyone who goes looking for them on the Internet (no password or membership required), this component of my dissertation did not require ethics approval. However, in spite of university ethics policies that permit this type of online research without going through the ethics application process, feminist researchers doing online data collection have raised important questions about researcher power, (un)informed consent, and the use of people’s written work in ways that it was not intended.\(^59\) Lotz and Ross point out that university policy might not be up

\(^{59}\) See Gajjala; Gray *Research Practice*; Hermes “Politics of Method”; Lotz “Assessing”; Lotz and Ross; Press “Towards a Qualitative Method”; Radway “Hegemony of Specificity”; Roberts, Smith and Pollock; Sharf.
to date regarding Internet research and may simply adapt traditional informed consent procedures onto new sites of research (506). Despite potential institutional oversights in this area, Lotz and Ross argue that scholars undertaking ethical cyberspace audience research should “sustain a sense of responsibility to and respect for their respondents” (508).

There seems to be a commonsense assumption within mainstream culture (and I would argue within academia as well) that the Internet is not a private space, and that people’s online footprints are easily traceable; therefore, the onus is on the individual to self-regulate their use and participation. It is still worth asking questions about a researcher’s ethical responsibility to her research subjects. My research data collection and interpretation is indebted to the actions of people who committed to conversing online about makeover culture. They did not engage in these conversations with the knowledge that their words might be used in future research, and as Lotz and Ross suggest, contributors were likely unaware of the possibility that the forum material would later be archived (503). I feel certain that my work will not unduly harm the forum participants, but this is not the only ethical consideration for feminist researchers, who have noted the importance of self-reflexivity and the intersections of power that operate between researchers and their research subjects.\(^{60}\) For instance, the people whose posts I am studying did not have the opportunity to respond to my interpretation of their posts. This one-sided analysis can present concerns about exploitation and worse, inaccuracy of interpretation. However, I think that because my interest lies in the patterns that emerge from the discourse and not in exposing an authentic self or the “truth” of someone’s words, it is not as essential that I work towards research subject inclusion. Moreover, the logistics of contacting each contributor for permission and follow-up would be unwieldy.

The distance of time elapsed since the forums closed, and the anonymity built into the web forums originally are also worth considering: Lotz and Ross point out that “context is crucial in determining stringency of methods used to maintain anonymity” (505). While I do not want to expose the forum contributors and I take care to omit user names in most of my findings, the threads I cite retain their original numbering system. This means that the original online text is accessible to readers. User profile information

\(^{60}\) See Gray *Research Practice*; Hermes “Politics of Method”; Lotz “Assessing”; Press “Towards a Qualitative Method”; Radway “Hegemony of Specificity.”
is still available online, and links to email contact buttons are still accessible. But I think that it is misleading to over-invest in the need for maintaining anonymity in this project: the forums were originally located on a commercial website, which does imply a certain level of understanding on the part of the contributor that their personal stories, confessions, and expressed interests in *The Swan* could be read by countless others. Indeed, personal responsibility (laid out in the Fox terms of use policy available on the fox.com website) diffuses some of the potential ‘harm’ associated with inclusion in this study because contributors would have been expected to become familiar with the terms in order to become active on the discussion boards.

The relative anonymity of *The Swan* web forums was in-built, as the majority of contributors created user names that were not personally identifying. Personal disclosure of identifying information was typically absent or discouraged in the forums. For example, contributors would chastise those who provided contact information in the hope that a network executive would contact them to be on the show. This demonstrates a fixed boundary that already existed in the data to ‘protect’ the contributors. In my analysis, I occasionally refer to contributors by their user names, but these are cryptic pseudonyms. I use a notation system for referencing posts in this chapter that refers to the original threads and posts (e.g. 6566.91, in which the number to the left of the decimal point refers to the thread number while the number to the right of the decimal refers to the individual post number in the sequence of the thread). This makes the posts searchable outside of this work, but retains the anonymity of the contributors in the body of the dissertation. I think that the value of making these threads searchable to readers of this project is worth more than the complete erasure of any identifying or traceable information in the forums. I do not want to de-contextualize the data to such an extent that it loses its connectivity to the archived forums, and I think that the concentration on discursive patterns does shift the focus from individuals to texts in a way that removes potential for exposure or harm. This is quite different from my approach in the following chapter, in which I analyze cosmetic surgery blogs and email-based interview data with three bloggers. In that case, I am invested in protecting the anonymity of the women I worked with, and I will discuss the differences in my approach and my rationale in chapter five.
4.2.2 The Fox network-hosted forums

I chose to focus on the Fox network-hosted The Swan web forums in my research on fans because they were certainly the most accessible forums online via a simple Google search. They also seemed to be the most popular, active, and comprehensive of the forums I visited (including Television without Pity, Fans of Reality TV, and TV.com). Active during the broadcast of seasons one and two, the online discussion boards generated 8,377 discussion threads, containing a total of 100,763 individual messages. They were disabled after The Swan's season two finale, with the promise from forum moderator, STEVO47, that they would reopen as the premiere date of the third season approached (8377.1). Fox never aired a third season of The Swan, and the online forums have remained closed ever since. They were also moved from the fox.com website to the current host, and the Internet address changed to reflect this shift.

I did not begin to read The Swan forums for this project until 2006, after Fox had already closed the forums to further comments. This means that I have only worked from the archived forums and am not familiar with their original layout and any additional content that would have been present when they were active (such as advertising). Some current trends observed on “community” pages hosted by Fox suggest that there was likely advertising on The Swan forums as well as cross-promotion of other Fox products. Currently each Fox-hosted community web page includes links to other Fox television series as well as integrated advertising from major brands including Ford (on the American Idol site), AT&T (Bones), Chevrolet (So You Think You Can Dance), and Pepsi (The X Factor). However, a substantial difference from earlier network-hosted web forums to Fox’s present format for fan community web pages is a heavy reliance on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube, all of which launched after the first season of The Swan. It is safe to say that fan interactivity has changed

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62 Interestingly, The Simpsons seems to be the only Fox television series whose website is not visually inundated with outside advertising or overt links with other Fox products.
dramatically because of social networking and advances in mobile technology in the years since Fox began hosting *The Swan* web forums in 2004, to the benefit of networks and advertisers. One brief example to demonstrate my point: the *American Idol* “Idol Nation Fan Hub” community page hosted by Fox boasts a “Twitter count” of 505,124 tweets in the week of May 6, 2012, five times the number of posts on *The Swan* forums in an eight month span. The role of Fox as a recognizable brand was similarly pervasive in 2004 as it is now, and as such, my decision to study the network-hosted forums was based on what I believed would be a first-stop for fans of the series.

Choosing to work from the Fox network-hosted forums was a strategic move, since I believed it was more likely that fans of the series would seek out the “official” network site to discuss a series and because I believed that Fox’s presence at the top of a search engine’s results would make fans likely to visit these forums in particular. This decision does require some thought as to how Fox would have shaped the content of the forums, for its own benefit. After I describe the process of recording and coding my data, I will turn to an analysis of interactive fan practices as (unpaid) labour, in order to develop an understanding of the role of Fox in shaping the form and content of *The Swan* discussions.

### 4.2.3 Organizing and treating the data, and why use Ethnograph

In order to avoid the problem of hermeneutic circularity identified by Radway in her article “The Hegemony of Specificity” (240), I used an online random sampling tool called Research Randomizer to generate 400 random numbers between one and 8,377 (the total number of threads). I did this to produce a manageable data set from which to begin content analysis (the sample is representative of five per cent of the total threads in the forum). I searched for corresponding threads in the archived web forums and copied each thread into the qualitative coding software program, The Ethnograph. I chose to use The Ethnograph because it seemed to provide a flexible enough template for the creation of a searchable database of threads. While the program was designed for more traditional qualitative methods such as interviews, I thought it would work for the web forum data I collected. It was recommended to me as user-friendly software, accessible to someone without experience in this type of data collection and analysis.

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Of the 400 discussion threads I collected for my random sample, I copied and saved 354 threads in a project folder in the software program, The Ethnograph. Either the forum moderator or the original contributor had deleted the remaining forty-six threads.\textsuperscript{64} The 354 accessible discussion threads contained posts by 1 190 individual users, many of whom posted only once, but several of whom posted thousands of times during the eight-month period that the forums were active. 3 684 individual messages were originally posted and contained within the random sample. Web forum contributors ranged widely in their participation levels. Thirty-five per cent of the contributors in the random sample posted only once to The Swan web forums. Fifty-four per cent posted between two and fifty times during the eight months the forums were active and accessible. Four per cent of forum contributors posted between fifty and one hundred times, and seven per cent of contributors posted more than one hundred times.\textsuperscript{65} The average number of posts per contributor within the sample was forty-nine. For those contributors who had a high-volume of posts, the web forums became a space for discussion among online friends, and the makeover reality TV series that may have originally brought them to the site diminished in the content of their posts quite quickly. Instead, the forums were a platform for personal discussion (explored in more detail below).

The forums were organized chronologically, with the most recently updated threads appearing at the top of the home page. Updated threads bumped newer but less frequented threads down the page. Despite thread movement on the home page, threads retained their chronological identification through a numerical system, with the earliest thread available dated April 3, 2004, four days before the premiere of the first

\textsuperscript{64} That nearly one-eighth of the threads in my random sample “[did] not exist,” in the language of the forum, will be dealt with in more detail below, as it exemplifies some of the issues that arise when internet-based researchers seek to answer the questions: “what is missing?” or “what is unspoken?” in online data analysis.

\textsuperscript{65} Within the high-post contributor category (those who had posted more than one hundred messages to The Swan forums), eight had posted more than 500 times, and sixteen had posted more than 1000 times. Although the contributors who had posted more than 1000 times only made up one per cent of the sample, their representation within the sample was high because of the frequency with which they posted.
season. An advanced search function within the web forums also allowed users to search for specific posts or threads, individual user names, by date, or by subject term.

The forum threads were organized into topic-related folders, creating an artificial division among topics largely ignored by forum contributors, the vast majority of whom posted within the “General Discussion” folder. Table 4-1 provides a breakdown of the forum folder names and the number of messages within each folder.

Table 4-1 The Swan forum folder names and the number of messages within each folder

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Swan Web Forum Folder Name:</th>
<th>Number of messages in folders (total messages 100 763):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Want to be on the Show?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Discussion</td>
<td>90 325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’d Love to be on the Show!</td>
<td>2 653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Experts</td>
<td>892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tips and Advice</td>
<td>681</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Swans (on the show)</td>
<td>1 336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-Topic Discussions</td>
<td>4 874</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The numbers indicate that most contributors chose to participate in web forum discussion using the “General Discussion” folder as an entrance point. While the folders were intended to maintain topic-specific areas of discussion, there was cross-pollination between threads, and discussion topics routinely shifted from the topic of the folder it was housed within. Thus, in this case, users undermined the structure created by the Fox network hosting the forums, when they opted to overlook the categories distinguishing subjects from one another.

66 The first accessible thread in the forums is titled “Maybe NOT all about looks,” posted by Aubie89 in the General Discussion folder. It is numbered 3.1, and contains twenty-four posts. The posts move from speculation about the series before its premiere, into a larger discussion about the merits and intentions of Fox, the “choices” available to participants, the unequal value placed on women’s beauty, and the authenticity of cosmetic surgery.
After inputting all of the threads from the sample into Ethnograph, I went back to the web forums and inputted user profile information into Ethnograph for all of the individual forum contributors in my sample, including (when available) identifiers of age, gender, and number of posts in the forums (studied in more detail below). I then began the process of coding, which developed differently than I had originally anticipated. At the beginning of the project, I intended to trace the feminist-inspired discourses of choice, empowerment, and freedom at work in the forums. This presumed that a) such discourses existed in the forums and that b) they would be searchable based on the terms I was using to describe feminist-inspired discourse (rather than the language employed in the forums themselves). This, as I learned, was not an appropriate way to conduct credible research and would most likely lead me to a pre-determined conclusion. I stepped back from my preconceived framework and instead created codes that were in part based on my familiarity with the data as I had recorded it, and that would create categories of fan practice that were thematic, which I could then interpret and examine for signs of feminist-inspired discourse (if it were present). Briefly, I found that my original assumptions about the forums were not borne out by the data. Rather, the predominant form of the confessional narrative and the appropriation of victim subject positions in order to express interest in becoming a participant on The Swan seemed to prove my original hypothesis incorrect. While there were certainly narratives expressing strength and empowerment, this was not the overarching trend. As a result, my focus shifted towards the symbolic violence in the “trauma talk” of the majority of threads expressing desire to become a Swan contestant.\textsuperscript{67} I also concentrated on additional themes appearing in the forum sample, including discussions of the structure of the forums and the level of moderator authority in managing the forums, general discussions of the series (which tended to celebrate the transformations of the contestants), discussions of racism and ageism at work in The Swan, and finally

\textsuperscript{67} Elayne Rapping uses the term “recovery talk” and Janice Peck refers to “therapeutic discourse” to describe discursive trends that have emerged within self-help culture, particularly on daytime television talk shows such as The Oprah Winfrey Show (OWN). While both of these terms are important to understand self-help culture, I think that the term “trauma talk” is more appropriate to a consideration of personal narratives within makeover reality TV and its offshoots including online discussion spaces. I use “trauma talk” to describe the confessional narratives of some forum participants, who, in expressing desire to be a Swan contestant, recounted experiences of abuse, bullying, social isolation, poverty, and feelings of inadequacy. These narratives became repetitive in the sample and appeared as scripts that amplified the confessional narratives evident on The Swan and within makeover reality TV series more widely. In these narratives the admission and description of past and current trauma is used as a way to demonstrate one’s need for a radical makeover.
backlash within the forums against the confessional narratives. I discuss these themes in more detail in the remainder of this chapter (see Appendix C for code list).

4.3 Makeover Reality TV fans and the labour of interactive fan practices

This chapter operates from the standpoint that a productive analysis of makeover reality TV fan participation recognizes the labour of fan interactivity and the potential for networks to profit from audience data collection and tracking, but that fan participation also provides an opportunity for fans to come together and work out some of the pleasures and problems they identify with makeover culture. For example, the inherent ageism and racism at work in makeover culture and makeover reality TV, and inequalities facing women based on appearance.

In chapter one I referred to research studies that have linked makeover reality TV with viewers’ self-esteem and expectations around cosmetic surgery, as well as hypotheses that makeover reality TV has led to an increase in cosmetic surgery procedures (Crockett, Pruzinsky and Persing; Kubic and Chory; Markey and Markey; Mazzeo et al.; Sperry et al.; Theobald et al.). While the researchers are hesitant to over-invest a direct cause and effect relationship between makeover reality TV and viewers, recognizing that many other factors are at play in a person’s life that may impact their self-esteem and consideration of cosmetic surgery, their findings do suggest that viewers take away some elements of makeover culture discourses and imagery. Joan Conners’ study of online fan forums of makeover reality TV programs Dr. 90210 (E! 2004) and Plastic Surgery: Before and After (Discovery 2002) concluded that online fans did not challenge the tendency of makeover reality TV to “fram[e] ... plastic surgery as a risk-free option for improving oneself” (61). Additionally, we know that makeover reality TV normalizes cosmetic surgery as a curative measure for “ordinary ugliness” (Essig 10) and emotional trauma, and as a beauty ritual akin to preventative health measures. Popular press critiques of makeover reality TV vilify the subgenre as morally corrupt and demonstrative of social decline, and position viewers as “cultural dupes” (see examples in chapter two). But without research to demonstrate who the fans are and what they think, these criticisms remain speculative and hyperbolic, and often misogynist. Moreover, they ignore the complex role(s) fans play in the dynamics of reality TV, such as the “cultural labour” they perform:
Not only have amateur performers been incorporated into the production process of cultural industries, but audiences/consumers have also been transformed into a type of labor that contributes to the manufacturing of the cultural commodity. The cultural labor that audiences/consumers perform is twofold. First, they provide ‘free labor’ when they voluntarily, and without pay, participate in the production process. Second, they perform the ‘TV-watching’ itself, which has become creative and cultural labor. (Jian and Liu 532)

The genre of reality TV relies on viewer interactivity, and constructs roles for audiences as active and participatory in the process of making reality TV. This occurs in a few ways: a) overtly, as fans are encouraged to vote by telephone for their favourite candidate such as on American Idol, b) as supplemental, when fans are encouraged to produce questions for contestants such as on Big Brother, or to vote for a “Fan Favourite” consolation prize winner on Survivor, or c) as personally-enhancing, such as when viewers are encouraged to log on to The Biggest Loser website and download the app to join the club to lose weight alongside the reality TV contestants with specialized diet and exercise plans (Ouellette “Technologies of Convergence”).

The enhanced participation of viewers in the production of reality TV’s inter- and extra-textual content demonstrates the ‘active’ element of active audiences that has been celebrated in cultural studies for its subversive potential (Bacon-Smith; Baym; Bury; Gwenllian; Jenkins; Scardaville; Scodari). However, fan activity in the age of interactive reality TV is also potentially exploitative, as producers rely on fans to extend their interaction with a series beyond the act of viewing, and effectively work in the service of a television series (Andrejevic, “Watching Television without Pity” 25). This work may include activities such as series promotion (e.g. “liking” a Facebook promotional page, or encouraging other people to vote for a contestant on a series), or through the creation of buzz about a series via participation in online discussion boards. Mark Andrejevic, a leading scholar in reality TV and audience studies, demonstrates that fans who contribute to online discussions believe their online activity impacts production output, by creating a visible fan base that demands accountability and provides valuable feedback on storylines and production quality (26).

More importantly, he suggests that viewer interactivity reflects neoliberal modes of governmentality and self-enterprise, “where the consumer is increasingly encouraged to make the investment of time and energy it takes to be an interactive consumer responsible for his or her own viewing and consumption practices and experiences” (31).
Networks utilize fan interactivity in reality TV for several reasons, including the potential profitability of fan activity for networks through direct advertising, the collection of audience information, and the value of the interest generated through fan activity online for other potential viewers (42-43). According to Andrejevic, fan labour has become a valuable and lucrative tool for media production industries: “the work of making their preferences transparent, of allowing themselves to be watched as they do their watching—is an increasingly important component of the emerging interactive economy” (33). Keeping in mind the (monetary and cultural) value of fan activity for networks perhaps dampens the subversive potential imagined in the act of “textual poaching” (Jenkins). Yet, fan interactivity is also recognized as satisfying and community-forming (Bacon-Smith), it occurs voluntarily, and is in part a product of increasingly technologized lifestyles. Thus, we return to Negra and Tasker’s “ambivalent pleasure” conundrum, or the murky space between pleasure and danger, identified by third-wave feminist television scholar Merri-Lisa Johnson.

If interactive fans are ‘used’ by media corporations to produce extra- and inter-textual content for a series, or if they are relied upon to extend a series’ hype, or if personal information is collected by corporate websites and sold to marketers, does this render fan participation entirely co-opted and compliant? In a word, no. Fan practice is much more complex than the either/or, victim/agent dichotomy allows, and as I have argued in chapters two and three in regards to makeover culture participants, reality TV fan participation is both ideologically compliant, and partially agentic. What Andrejevic’s work on fan labour demonstrates, as outlined above, is that a study of fan practice should not over-determine the level of freedom, choice or agency in the ‘active’ audience, because today’s active audiences participate from within a highly regulated framework that works in the service of corporate profit. Thus, an active audience is not necessarily resistant or subversive. Yet, when Andrejevic asks, “When we are engaged in social networking on a commercial website such as Facebook, are we entertaining ourselves, socializing, or working (generating value for a third party)?” (“Real-izing Exploitation” 19), I am left wondering if he might rephrase the question from an ‘either/or’ to a ‘both/and’ proposition, because I would argue that we are immersed in all three when we engage in social networking on a commercial website: entertainment, socialization and work. Similarly, fan pleasure and labour are inseparably intertwined on network-hosted discussion boards. The following discussion illustrates how I see this occurring in the forum data.
4.3.1 Forum contributors and the Labour of interactive Reality TV Audiences

An interesting phenomenon within the forums was the active information sharing about *The Swan* application and casting process, work that Andrejevic would characterize as unpaid labour that produced value for Fox. For instance, within the sample, two per cent of contributors used their own experience with applications or casting calls for *The Swan* to situate their discussion of a thread topic. These contributors demonstrated a form of expertise-through-experience and other forum contributors often asked questions of them once it was clear that they had been through the application or casting call process. Their willingness to offer advice or make suggestions regarding the strategies of applying to become a contestant may indicate the shared interest of an online community, but more directly, the ‘work’ undertaken by these contributors to help others have successful auditions operated in Fox’s best interest to produce stronger candidates, or candidates that more accurately lived up to what they were looking for in potential Swans. For instance, one contributor who had posted 934 times in *The Swan* forums regularly directed readers to the application site, and instructed readers on the regulations of *The Swan* over and over (and over) again. She posted the following message multiple times, and others in a similar vein:

In order to apply to be a contestant on The Swan there are procedures you have to follow. The producers of the show will not pick anyone who only posts in this board. You must have health and dental insurance and not be recovering from any surgeries or illnesses. You must be 21-45 years old. There are eligibility requirements, applications forms, and a video that must be submitted when the time comes for the next casting call. Since the dates for the next Swan casting have not been posted on this web site, you will have to keep checking back for FUTURE casting calls

http://www.fox.com/swan. (Tasha (tkramer7))

This contributor denied working for either *The Swan* or Fox (7635.10), and did not appear to be a site moderator, but rather, a knowledgeable forum contributor who shared information with the purpose of being helpful (7967.6).

While she claimed that she did not intend to apply to *The Swan*, she posted messages with information regarding the application process and eligibility requirements no less than eighty times on the boards. Her role on the forums was occasionally questioned (some were suspicious of her knowledge and her willingness to enlighten...
others), but more often than not she was treated by other contributors as having expertise, and people regularly posted questions regarding the application process to her specifically. The intentions of this contributor are not clear in her posts aside from her disassociation with Fox, but the cultural capital that came with knowledge about casting may have been a motivating factor in her repetition of the message to those looking for casting information. She may have also been working to clean up the forums by trying to curtail the repetitive questions about application procedures. Whatever her intent, Tasha’s ‘labour’ is a clear example of the work that interactive fans of reality TV conduct in the service of a network. While Fox did not provide identifiable representatives on the web forums to direct people to the correct online location for casting and application information, in a sense the network did not have to, since forum contributors such as Tasha took on the responsibility to serve the fan community.

4.3.2 Interactive Fan Labour in/and Commercial Fan spaces: Site Moderation, Banning, and Fox’s role in shaping the discussions

Boundary-enforcement of the content and structure of the web forums operated on a few levels, including: a) externally, through site moderation enforced by a moderator known as STEVO47, b) through the ideological structure imposed by forum contributors who shamed hyperbolic confessions and parodied whiners, and c) internally, as contributors policed one another through accusations of poor etiquette and rude behaviour. In this section, I concentrate on external site moderation and the environmental structure of the forums to determine the impact on contributors’ movements and actions within the forums (although I do illustrate b) and c) later in this chapter). Nikki Sullivan and Samantha Murray describe the way that somatechnics theory focuses on: “the notion of a chiasmic interdependence of soma and techné ...And here technologies are never simply ‘machinic’ as they so often appear to be in the popular imagination. Rather, techné s are necessarily epistemic” (3). In regards to The Swan web forums, Fox delineates the boundary of what is knowable and speakable, but the contributors co-constituted the forums by providing the content. Together, structure and agent (Fox network and forum contributors) establish the environment for the discursive embodiment of contributors within the context of a fan space of a makeover reality TV text.

The definition of somatechnics outlines technologies and “techné s [as] the dynamic means in and through which corporealities are crafted, that is, continuously
engendered in relation to others and to a world” (Sullivan and Murray 3). The Swan web forums act as technologies of makeover culture which dictate the direction and context of user engagement (managed by the Fox brand), through the terms and conditions of use on the site\(^68\) (which remove any responsibility from Fox to the user), through site moderation, and through the structure of the forums as the vehicle of communication for users. This structure is not totally restrictive or oppressive, because we do see places where forum contributors acknowledge and expose arbitrary organization, resist the enforcement of regulations from Fox, or ignore the established structure (i.e. avoiding the topic categories for threads and using ‘general topics’ folder almost exclusively). Moreover, somatechnics reminds us that technology “is always already enfleshed” (ibid), which helps to avoid technological determinism by recognizing that online spaces are produced by people, and not inevitable or ever complete.

The identified site moderator, STEVO47, did not have an ambiguous role in the forums; “he” was identified as moderator of the site, but he also acted as a spokesperson for Fox, reflecting the cross-promotional tactics of the network (prevalent on television, so not surprisingly on the network-hosted forums, too). A good example of STEVO47’s commercial role on the forums is the final post available on the site, which instructs readers that The Swan forums have been closed. The post does more than this, though, as it informally suggests other forums and series to check out in the meantime:

Hi all. Now that the Season Two finale has aired, this forum is now closed. You can still read all of the conversations that have taken place in the past, but you won't be able to add to them. We will open the forum back up when we get close to the premiere of the next season. Thanks for watching the show and coming to the forum. If you would like to continue conversations begun here, please stop over to the just-opened forum for the show Point Pleasant, at http://forums.prospero.com/foxppleasant. I hope to see you there. Also, don't forget to watch the premiere of the fourth season of 24 and the finales of The Rebel Billionaire and North Shore next week, as well as the premieres of American Idol, Point Pleasant, and Jonny Zero the week after. – Steve (6 Jan. 2005, 8377.1)

STEVO47’s advertising pitch in the final Swan forum post provides a clear reminder of the purpose of the Fox network-hosted forums. They provide an additional outlet for Fox to promote its products. This commercial purpose inflects the forums, the content, and the direction of the forums, albeit rarely this overtly.

More often, the site moderator was active in deleting posts or threads that were reported for their inappropriateness or identified as inappropriate according to the Fox terms of use. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, forty-six threads found in the random sample were unavailable on the archived web forum site; this represents twelve per cent of the sample threads. The empty or deleted threads had either been rendered out of existence (i.e. “This discussion does not exist”) or marked as a deleted file, with all information missing from the original thread, including titles, name of contributors, and number of posts within each discussion. While it is not useful to speculate about the contents of the deleted and missing files, it does raise a question for online qualitative research more broadly: what about the silent or silenced participant? What is the meaning of their absence in the forums? The empty threads mark a conspicuous absence, where Fox’s role in monitoring and regulating the forums becomes visible through their removal.

Monitoring and removing content left a noticeable gap in the web forums, embedding the governing mark of Fox in the discussions themselves; however, this did not go entirely unnoticed by forum contributors while the site was active. Some of the threads in the sample indicate that forum contributors were talking about forum moderation that they considered lacking objectivity and perceived to be arbitrary. High-posting forum contributors provided responses to post and thread deletions, indicating their disapproval of what they perceived to be censoring or over-moderation of their posts. Some contributors felt unfairly targeted by the site moderators, and there were complaints regarding the seemingly random deleting of posts and threads. Seventeen contributors commented on banning practices and the arbitrary way that moderators barred forum members from participating (e.g. 6566.86, 4598). Twenty-two posts expressed confusion or annoyance at lost or deleted posts and threads (e.g. 2923, 6532): each of these were by high-posting contributors, indicating that site moderation was a concern for those who were invested in the forums as a space for discussion that went beyond cursory comments of The Swan. While these posts represent less than one

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70 Clearly, a sample audience is always particular and contextual, and much more complex than their role as an audience, and not always generalizable or representative of the fan group or audience base of a show or genre, and sometimes not even generalizable as an audience, as a group.
per cent of the sample posts (0.6%), they at least suggest that a few contributors were reflecting on the site moderation and what it meant to their online community.

Some contributors went so far as to speculate about the personality of the main site moderator, STEVO47, whom they felt took his role as overseer too seriously. The tone of the posts commenting on his moderation practices was cheeky and judgmental, accusing him of expressing frustration at his real-life powerlessness through his vindictive actions on the forums. For example, “...he arbitrarily deletes whoever displeases him i think....the power of the little red button has to get you after awhile” (4598.96). Contributors also debated the content of deleted posts, and some contributors voiced dismay at what they saw as over-compensation on the part of site moderators to police and control the forums.

The forum moderation certainly shaped the way that the forums appear in their archived format, since there are inaccessible threads as well as posts that were deleted and the content is limited. But it is also likely that the moderation influenced the shape of the forums during their active period, since contributors who were frequent participants took notice of moderation and commented upon it. Moderation may have led some contributors to self-censor for fear that their posts might be deleted, or worse, banned from the forums altogether. Fox’s moderation therefore structured the discussions by establishing the borders of acceptability, and eliminating content that did not adhere to its expectations for acceptable use. On the other hand, some contributors were persistent in pushing the boundaries of the forum and its moderation from above, refusing to be limited by the system of regulation implemented on the commercial site.

For example, one or more banned contributors attempted to circumvent their blacklisted status by the site moderator by signing in as a temporary anonymous guest with no profile, or creating alternate accounts when they began to have difficulties with site moderation. These “guest” contributors interacted with other contributors in a way that suggested they were high-post contributors, familiar to others on the site despite their stripped profiles. At times, contributors playfully referred to the “guest” poster’s indiscretions on the forums, joking about the strictness of the moderator: “Damn girl! What did you say to get Stevo’s panties in such a wad?” (4598.11). There was also a mock-secrecy about the identity of some of the generic guest contributors, with two high-posting contributors “outed” for using guest status or for creating new user profiles to evade site banning: Shebou (4598.18) and MalloryKX (aka Malsrevenge1) (2635.122).
Both of these contributors were high-posters (1885 and 1306 posts, respectively), and both seemed to have been banned by the site moderator at one point, but had logged back into the web forums with new accounts in order to continue communicating with others. Below is an excerpt from a discussion between a guest contributor and a high-posting contributor:

Guest: Weird...Usually banned people have all of their posts disappear... Yours, um, I mean MalloryKX's are still showing... Even in this thread.

Malsrevenge1: wow, that's strange.... i heard tell she couldn't log on....poor thing....shouldn't have been so rotten! (2635.121-122)

Here, the guest contributor (familiar to Malsrevenge1, suggesting that the guest is also a former high-poster who was banned) exposes Malsrevenge1 as MalloryKX, a previously banned contributor. Malsrevenge1 responds in a thinly veiled tone of reproach, mocking the moderation and rules that led to her exclusion from the forums. This example is representative of the twenty-two posts that expressed frustration or annoyance at the site moderation and banning practices. It suggests that some high-post contributors were unwilling to adhere to Fox's regulation and the talking-back or sideways exposure of “guest” contributors was a way for these frequent contributors to undermine the one-sided policing of the forums, by chiding the moderator and showing STEVO47 that they had evaded regulation.

This example is statistically insignificant but it does suggest that the high-post contributors who used the Fox network-hosted discussion board were insulted when forum moderators imposed rules on them (since they were “regulars” perhaps they believed they should be able to operate outside the Fox terms of use). The high-posters may have felt entitled to a discussion free from regulation from above, despite their use of a commercial site as a vehicle for their discussions. At least in the research sample, this contradiction was not observed or noted by any forum contributors, high posting or otherwise. What we see from this small example is the push and pull of the contributors with(in) a commercially-hosted forum, who had intentions of their own in establishing a space for fans to communicate. This demonstrates that while forum contributors would have laboured for Fox, producing buzz about The Swan, instructing others on application procedures, as well as providing forum content and advertising revenue for Fox, there
were also contributors who worked against the model Mark Andrejevic describes, and who actively worked to undermine the forum controls from above.

It would seem an appropriate place to begin a breakdown of the ways that forum contributors identified themselves within their user profiles and in their posts. Since I have spent time examining the structure of the forums in order to establish the environment from which contributors participated, it is useful now to move on to a description and analysis of the bulk of contributors and the themes of the forum discussions themselves. My findings return to a discussion of makeover culture discourse and the role of confession in establishing a desire to participate on *The Swan*. The rest of this chapter explores the ways that contributors constructed personal narratives of trauma and the exposure of the violence of makeover culture discourse as a result.

### 4.4 Contributors to the Forum

#### 4.4.1 Self-identifying gender and sexual orientation

Of the 1190 individual contributors to *The Swan* web forums within the random sample, 1060 identified as women in their personal profiles, or eighty-nine per cent of the sample. This number mirrors the most recent American statistics on cosmetic surgery, which indicate that in 2011, women made up ninety-one per cent of patients undergoing cosmetic surgery procedures in the US.\(^71\) The gender dynamic of the web forums also reflects the intended audience of makeover reality TV. Thirty-one contributors did not provide identifying information in their personal profile regarding their gender, and ninety-nine contributors identified as male.\(^72\)

Only one contributor identified as transgendered in the collected sample. The male-to-female web forum contributor claimed that she would make an excellent candidate for the program because she would demonstrate a remarkable transformation, and because she wanted her family’s acceptance and did not feel as though this were possible until she transitioned through surgery, which she could not afford on her own.


\(^72\) Of the male contributors, almost one-quarter suggested a “Male Swan” version of the show, and expressed interest in applying if such a version of the show was established.
This contributor’s thread received no responses. The silence around this contributor’s personal narrative is worth further consideration, as it is contrary to the tendency of contributors to respond to these types of posts; expressions of desire/requests to become participants on the show frequently produced more and similar types of posts, or sympathetic posts offering support (explored in more detail later in this chapter). Perhaps forum readers simply overlooked this post, but I am more inclined to read the empty thread as indicative of the invisible borders around cosmetic body modification in a mainstream television series. Expressing similar narrative conventions as those in personal narratives of *The Swan* contestants was not enough to overcome the exposure of the constructed or performative nature of the feminine that a trans narrative brings to light. Makeover reality TV normalizes elective body modification on gender-sex congruent subjects and presents it as a means to restore order to a ‘naturally’ feminine body; a similar narrative produced by a transgender person disrupts the naturalized gender-sex congruent transformations on *The Swan*. The series depicts the application of feminine markers onto the body of a woman as a necessary and appropriate solution to low self-esteem and heterosexual crisis; there is not a similar consideration of necessity for bodies that are not already sexed female. The web forum contributor who identified as trans trespassed a border implicit in makeover culture discourse and was ignored and therefore silenced within the forums as a result. This exposes the extent to which makeover culture, which promotes a view of the body as a potential and malleable entity, clearly restricts the parameters for who that position is available.

In makeover reality TV, the malleable, potential, becoming body must reproduce normalized gender and sex dichotomies; otherwise, the threat of the hybrid body becomes visible. The threat contained by gender-sex congruity in makeover reality TV (and by default, within the web forums as well), is that gender and sex are not self-evident, innate, or stable categories of being. Makeover reality TV shows the work of aligning sex and gender on the body but recuperates the naturalized affiliation between the two by only reproducing the already-accepted form of feminine embodiment, on bodies that demonstrate a (safe) amount of to-be-fixedness.

The lack of response to the transgender narrative in the sample silenced it through a collective refusal to acknowledge its presence, just as heteronormativity directed the presence and absence of self-identified sexual orientation. Only seventeen
per cent of the forum contributors identified as heterosexual in their posts. Most did so peripherally, in the development of their personal narratives as a way of defining themselves (as a wife, as divorced, as engaged, etc.). The absence of a direct statement of a sexual orientation reflects heteronormativity at work more broadly in mainstream society. The unspoken assumption that individuals are straight until they identify otherwise accounts for the relative silence about sexual orientation in the threads or personal profiles. There were a few instances where contributors asserted their heterosexuality by denying or deflecting a homosexual identity. For instance, one contributor commented on the beauty of *The Swan* pageant winner, Rachel Love-Fraser, this way: “Racheal [sic] was so beautiful, and charming that If i were gay- She would be my pin-up girl” (475.4). In response to a poll asking forum participants to answer questions about the show, one contributor established her heterosexuality by denying homosexual attraction to *The Swan* participants:

4. Who would you marry out of all the contestants?

I would definately [sic] NOT marry any of them because I am a woman rofl!!!

5. Would u marry the women before or after their transformations?

Neither, wouldnt [sic] marry them because they arent [sic] my type. :P (3956.4)

These two examples imply that heterosexuality and homosexuality are binary and opposing, and mutually exclusive. No forum contributors identified as non-heterosexual, and most forum contributors did not share their sexual preference in their posts, demonstrating an underlying assumption that contributors were straight unless otherwise noted.

### 4.4.2 Race and Ethnicity Identifiers and discussion

Race and ethnicity were also largely undeclared in the sample, reflecting a similar tendency as heteronormativity. That is, in North American culture, whiteness is normalized as an invisible signifier that stands in as the natural centre to which “others” are compared with and identified against (Dyer; Negra). Whiteness need not be named because it is assumed unless proven or identified otherwise and it is often obfuscated to be free from racialization; thus, when talking about ‘race’ in the forums, contributors
typically meant African American, reflecting an American cultural imaginary in the forums. One forum contributor made visible the presumption of whiteness in her identification as Native-American after a heated discussion began in a thread about the potential racism inherent in *The Swan*; she called into question the assumption of another contributor that she was white, because she had not stated otherwise (4310.53), but this was certainly the exception to the norm. When forum contributors did identify with a particular racial group or ethnicity, it was either included in their personal narrative as one component of their identity, or to situate their opinion in a debate about the existence of racism in makeover reality TV and the media more broadly. Notably, only 1.4 per cent of the sample contributors identified as black, most in the context of constructing a personal narrative in which they expressed desire to become *Swan* contestants. Just twelve forum contributors identified as white, or one per cent of the sample. Three contributors identified as Latina, two contributors identified as Native American, and two contributors identified as women of colour, but did not specify their ethnicity. This relative invisibility of racial categories in the web forum sample is reflective of a similar trend of racialized invisibility in *The Swan*, wherein beauty is naturalized to mirror white, upper-class indicators of style and taste and where at least two thirds of the contestants were visibly white.\(^73\) However, the relative silence within the posts or personal profiles regarding race did not preclude heated discussions about whether *The Swan* was racist in its choice of contestants and depictions of beauty.

The forums produced criticism of the show because of what some forum contributors perceived as racism, since they identified most of the women featured on the show and chosen for the pageant as white. Ten threads, or 2.5 per cent of the threads collected in the sample, were devoted to discussing racism and debating whether *The Swan* and other makeover reality TV shows were racist. These ten threads contained posts from eighty-six individual posters, or just over seven per cent of the contributors in the sample. Some of these contributors argued that television was predominately represented by white bodies and that minorities were underrepresented in media overall, and *The Swan* was simply another example of under-representation in a wider media landscape (e.g. 7959.1; 7959.4; 7656.1). Accusations of racism in the

\(^73\) We can return to Cressida Heyes argument that all cosmetic surgery is “ethnic” and therefore white people are “engaged in racial and ethnic projects of bodily conformity or appropriation” (193), since “...cosmetic surgery invokes norms that almost no white, Western people can actually live up to, its projects might furthermore be understood as fantasy constructions as much as attempts to literalize ‘the’ white, Western body” (203).
series also emerged from contributors who expressed a desire to be on the show, appealing to producers to increase ethnic and racial diversity by choosing them to compete (e.g. 3277.1; 4732.1; 5809.2). For example:

WHY DON'T THEY DO WOMAN OF COLOR. THE SHOW MUST BE RIGGED. NEVER A PERSON OF COLOR. WE WOULD LIKE TO BE BEAUTIFUL TOO. WHY NOT INCLUDE US.(3066.5)

Others argued for equal access for all types of people, regardless of skin colour, body size, or beauty (e.g. 824.1). For example:

It should all be equal. Average women, plus women, black women, asian [sic] women, hispanic [sic] women. It should be women who could use it not just to "be pretty" but to actually help impact their lives. (5809.46)

This contributor’s argument for equal access replicates the discourse of makeover reality TV. She was a high-post contributor who was deeply engaged in the discussion about access in the thread in which she posted (“A Swan Show Suggestion”). The Swan’s creator and executive producer Nely Galan was vocal about creating a democratic space of transformation for women who could not otherwise afford the care and work of the experts on the show, so it is interesting that some perceived the series to be undemocratic or not available to all potential candidates equally.74

Equally interesting as the claims of a lack of equality in the choice of contestants on the series in the quote above, is the assumption by the contributor that the white women who had been chosen to participate had less important needs than others. The contributor assumed that participating on The Swan “just to ‘be pretty’” was their sole, superficial motivation, while others had greater needs that would lead to a greater personal impact. What this post reflects is a moralized hierarchy of the deserving nature of some (potential) body modifiers over others, a trope that The Swan put to use in its framing of contestants as deserving of transformation. Thus, even in her call for equal access, this contributor marks the division between those who could benefit from body modification in ways that would be more significant than others would. The Swan mirrors the contradiction by promoting greater access to average women to become pageant-

74 Galan stated in People Magazine: “If I see Miss USA, I'm a short girl, I don't feel happy watching that. If I watch The Swan and I'm overweight and sitting at home and feeling like the pits, I'm inspired because anybody can be a Swan” (Green and Lipton).
ready beauty queens, but then eliminating those who did not live up to its rigid rules of participation.

There was vehement denial by some forum contributors, who implied that racism was no longer an issue in American society and that by bringing up the topic of racism on the show, contributors were in fact revealing their own racism (e.g. 7959.12; 4310.51). These posts falsely assumed that to acknowledge the social impact of racial categories makes one racist, based on the notion that any identification of race reflected one’s own attempts to racialize people. One thread, entitled “Enough with the colored people” (316), posed this question: “Why doesn’t everyone get over the ‘colored,’ people thing and talk about the show!” (316.1), presuming that a discussion of race and racism was unnecessary. Yet, the reliance on the term “colored” belies the neutrality or post-racial sentiments of this contributor, who reproduced offensive terminology in reference to black contestants. One of the responses to the question posed above demonstrated some critical analysis of systemic oppression on the basis of race, and the possibility that the exclusion of non-white women from makeover reality TV wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, since the effects of racism were still pervasive:

Have you stopped to think that the ideal image of “beauty” that the media portrays is not inclusive of women of color anyway? Everyone wants to be tall, thin, and blonde when 90% of the world looks quite the opposite [...] I’m happy they’re [sic] no colored people on there... We’re already dealing with enough psychological and systemic oppression [sic] as it is! (316.3)

This contributor’s use of the first person plural (“we”) aligns her with “colored people” in order to argue that a lack of diverse representation may indirectly benefit women of colour, since beauty standards are based on a white ideal that non-white women cannot achieve anyway. In this way, the author circumvents criticism of the series or the broadcast network, Fox, for failing to represent racial diversity and argues instead that including women of colour would have led to further oppression. This sort of opting-out rhetoric actually works to remove media corporations from further responsibility or accountability to a more diverse representation, a contradictory position if the contributor is in fact concerned with systemic oppression.

Those who argued that the show was not, in fact, racist, pointed to creator and executive producer Nely Galan as ‘proof,’ since she was a Cuban-born woman who herself had recruited other Latina women for the show (e.g. 7656.4). Others argued that black women were more prone to keloid scarring and therefore were too risky as
contestants (e.g. 7959.27; 7959.28; 5809.13; 4310.10). This type of rationale relied on a naturalized, biologically-determinist reason for the omission of black women on the series, which contributes to the discursive reproduction of standards of beauty that are available to a select few (white) participants. Similarly, some contributors suggested that perhaps no women of colour had applied to participate (e.g. 5809.13; 5809.40; 7959.5; 7656.12; 270.2; 4310.18; 4310.21; 4310.25); or, that women of colour had higher self esteem than white women, and as such, were not compelled to appear on makeover reality TV because they were happier with their bodies than the Swan contestants (e.g. 7959.8; 7959.15; 4310.4; 4310.32; 4310.47; 4310.48). In the process, these contributors provided Fox with the unpaid ideological labour of defending a network that was silent about its lack of diversity in its choice of makeover recipients.

Still others accused critics of the show of reverse discrimination or whining, for wanting more than their fair share of attention, jobs, or representation in popular media (e.g. 5809.11; 7656.3; 7656.12; 4310.5; 4310.25; 4310.26; 4310.53; 4310.60). For those contributors who defended The Swan's lack of racial diversity by claiming reverse racism, they tended to rely on a critique of affirmative action that assumed that demands for equality and affirmative action were mutually exclusive:

The race thing has got to go. If people keep wining [sic] about it how can we ever get past it? There are places where people are racist but it's not just white's [sic] against blacks or asians [sic] or mexicans [sic], it goes the other way too. A lot of minorities hold on to the hate and they are guilty of exactly what they are complaining about[...] To say that the Swan is racist is just a cry for attention and is a sign of a very bitter and sour person. (7656.16)

and,

...You can't have it both ways and I think that is part of the problem in this world. You can't stand there and say "don't judge me on the color of my skin, but you have to choose me or consider me becuase [sic] I'm black/latino/etc., and you haven't picked any of "us of color" yet. That is so backwards... (4310.26)

These contributors turned the criticism on to the people raising concerns over a lack of diversity; in doing so, they ignored the historical impact of racism on exclusive practices in social institutions that continue to oppress certain people and privilege others. Also inflecting this chain of responses was the American Dream ideology, and the assumption that all people have equal opportunities and begin from a level playing field.
What these examples reflect is a broader tendency to deny embedded racism in mainstream media (as well as political, legal and economic institutions), and contributors’ attempts to fashion a post-racial understanding of the world in spite of continued racial tensions and stereotypes. The perceived threat of equal access and treatment (undermining white privilege, as exemplified in the two posts above), demonstrates a desire to individualize and downplay challenges to a lack of representation as personality flaws of “bitter” people (e.g. the references to bitterness and backwardness).

4.4.3 Age of Forum Contributors

Only twenty-two percent of the female-identified forum contributors disclosed their age in their profile information (232 contributors). Of these, seventy-five per cent identified as between the ages of twenty and thirty-nine. Both the average and median age of the sample (who included their age in profile information) was thirty-two years old. While only representative of less than a quarter of the forum contributors in the sample and therefore not appropriate for generalization, the numbers are reflective of a few things. First, the majority of the contributors who disclosed their age fit the age requirements of potential Swan contestants, listed as between twenty-two and thirty-eight years old for season one casting. Interestingly, the predominant age of the forum contributors who disclosed their age is not within the age range of the majority of women electing to undergo cosmetic procedures in the US. Forty-eight per cent of the total number of people who underwent cosmetic surgery in the US in 2011 were between the ages of forty and fifty-four. The discrepancy between the average age of the forum participants and those who typically undergo cosmetic procedures in the US can be attributed to a few different hypotheses. First, forum participants may have been over-...

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75 See postcolonial media theorist Yasmin Jiwani’s *Discourses of Denial: Mediations of Race, Gender and Violence* for her consideration of the ways that “discourses of denial [in Canadian media] contribute to the erasure, containment, trivialization, or dismissal of racism as a form of violence” (xv).

76 For an example of the conflicted discourse produced by post-racial ideologies, see Joseph Ralina’s “‘Tyra Banks Is Fat’: Reading (Post-) Racism and (Post-) Feminism in the New Millennium” in *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26.3 (2009): 237-254.


representative of the age range of *The Swan* participants because the series was effective at producing interest in the show (and the makeovers) for those viewers within the designated age range, mining a new target market for elective body modification. Second, fans of makeover reality TV tend to be women aged eighteen to forty nine and thus, the forum contributors demonstrate the series’ success at producing fans within its targeted demographic. While I do not want to over-determine the accuracy of these statistics, since the number of forum contributors it relies on is too small to make any generalizable claims, it does suggest some interesting parallels that would be worth investigating further.

4.5 Discussion topics and the Contents of the Forums

Not surprisingly, the random sample indicated that within *The Swan* web forums the majority of threads involved some discussion of either *The Swan* or cosmetic surgery, or both. Table 4-2 provides a more detailed breakdown of the thread topic distribution.

Table 4-2 Thread topic distribution from sample of 400 threads

| Included some discussion of *The Swan* | 310 threads |
| Included some discussion of cosmetic surgery but not *The Swan* | 15 threads |
| Included some discussion of *The Swan* but not cosmetic surgery | 185 threads |
| Included some discussion of both *The Swan* and cosmetic surgery | 125 threads |
| No discussion of *The Swan* or cosmetic surgery | 30 threads |

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79 Only five male forum contributors identified their age in their user profiles.
Eighty-seven per cent of the threads in the random sample included some discussion of *The Swan*; this is unsurprising given the specific focus of the web forums. Only five per cent of contributors self identified as fans of *The Swan*, although this figure does not accurately represent the number of viewers and fans of the show that were active on the web forums. Most contributors who discussed the show, or aspects of the show and its contestants, did not come out and state their position as fans of the program. Instead, the content of contributors’ posts usually reflected their support or criticism of the show, rather than their direct identification as a fan. Threads demonstrating support for the show (but not desire to be a participant) included titles such as: “Anything is valid to be happy”; “Everyone deserves a chance”; “Finally, real women get a break”; “good show”; “Making the world a better place”; and “Why not feel beautiful?” As these thread titles (and the posts within them) suggest, contributors linked support for the show with equalizing the beauty playing field and personal entitlement to happiness through body modification.

### 4.5.1 *The Swan* episodes and program

Twenty per cent of the threads in the sample were created to discuss the contestants and episodes of the show; including discussions of the procedures that contestants underwent, their diet and exercise plans, their results, their personal history and experiences (speculation about their relationships or dating opportunities), the experts and host of *The Swan*, and debates about the who was chosen to participate in the *Swan* pageant season finale, as well as the season winners. The contestants who received the most attention in the sample were all contestants on season one: Marnie Rygiewicz, Kelly Alemi and pageant winner, Rachel Love- Fraser. Amid praise for Marnie’s transformation was speculation about whether she actually needed the

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80 Seven and a half per cent of threads in the random sample did not include any discussion of cosmetic surgery or *The Swan*. The contents of these threads varied widely, from suggestions for unique and inexpensive Christmas gifts, to recipe exchanges, to a list of favourite television couples, to a discussion of the recent death (and life) of Christopher Reeves, to discussions of other reality television series (*Nanny 911*, *The Biggest Loser*, etc.), films, dreams, difficult family relationships, vacation plans, weight loss strategies, to the difficulty of dealing with a family member who has been released from prison but who still faced social stigma. High-post contributors occupied over half of these threads, who referred to one another with familiarity and often used humour and inside jokes in their communication. Thirty-six high-post contributors were active in the off topic discussions. The off topic threads demonstrate the ways that online discussion spaces can foster community even after interest in the topic has waned.
cosmetic surgery she received, as contributors suggested she was already quite pretty, and could have done just as well with hair and makeup.

The most popular discussion about season one winner Rachel Love-Fraser was not her pageant win, but rather her husband, and the poor attitude he displayed towards her transformation on the premiere episode of The Swan. Many people who watched the show encouraged her to leave her husband for not being more supportive and emotionally available for her. The episode that featured Rachel’s bodywork gave the impression that her husband was nearly impossible to contact on the telephone, and when reached, he was less than enthusiastic to hear from her. Forum contributors felt that he was a jealous and possibly abusive husband who did not deserve Rachel: “...I think her husband is a cheater. He was too cold and uncaring, especially after not talking to her for three weeks. Didn’t even tell her he loved her” (529.2). Rachel’s fan base was loyal, and she seemed to be the favourite contestant for the web forum contributors before and after her pageant win. On the other hand, forum contributors routinely lambasted Kelly Alemi, whose transformation was also featured on the premiere episode of season one, for being whiny, weak, and emotional: “Kelly is a whining, spoiled brat. I knew she wouldn’t go on to the pageant. Kelly needs serious therapy” (475.19). Kelly was criticized for her perceived weakness as a woman, and her lack of grace and appreciation for the opportunity, during times of stress or pain. Her inability to remain composed during interviews, and her lack of energy or excitement in her healing and exercise regime, made her regular fodder for web forum discussions of contestants’ merit. In this way, the criticism of Kelly’s poor attitude and her perceived weakness reflected a sense that she wasted her opportunity, a crime within a web forum so interested in accessing the makeovers.

Popular topics in these threads involved speculation about the quality and necessity of procedures performed on contestants, exemplified in threads with titles such as: “Boob jobs”; “Hocus Pocus, Gina!”; “Is it just me?” (in which contestants were compared with drag queens); and “Their brows are too high, ever notice?” Forum contributors also speculated about what would happen to The Swan contestants in the future, once they were no longer accessing diet and exercise support, and once some of the procedures had dissipated or aged. Examples such as the threads entitled “After the Show” and “Can the Swans replicate the look at home,” were relatively neutral in their discussion of the Swans in the future, but the thread “Reunion show 10 years from now”
(4064), took a comic approach in considering what the Swans would look like once they had aged ten years:

jaytee88: I think they should do a reunion show and bring back all the contestants 10 years from now. I wonder what the ratings would be on that one? :-)

deerme29: I wonder what will be sagging or falling off!

kkeight: There'll be someone behind the contestants with a broom, sweeping up the plastic parts that have fallen off!

safronica: It will probably be like that movie Death Becomes Her. You remember when Goldie Hawn and Meryl Streep fell apart at the very end after they had been spray painting each other for years. I see that happening here! If you haven't seen the movie, just for the sake of knowing what will happen to the Swans, rent it! Not a great movie, but it proves my point!

kkeight: Yes, I saw that movie a long time ago, and I think the reunion show will be very similar! I wonder if Fox is giving the contestants funds for the future, you know, to take care of touch-ups and things. Hair extensions, etc., don't last forever.

Jaytee88: ooh, I'd forgotten about that movie. But now that I'm reminded of it, you're absolutely [sic] right!! --LOL :-)

This thread reflects the perception that The Swan contestants’ surgically altered bodies will ‘out’ them once time has passed, because their bodies are incongruous with the “plastic” of their procedures. The speculative discussion above was similar in tone to the popular response to the series in mainstream newspapers and opinion columns identified in chapter three, and residual criticism of cosmetic surgery as inauthentic described in chapter two (e.g. the New York Fries “Real Fries in a Fake World” campaign). While the thread does not explicitly state that cosmetic surgery makes the contestants ‘fake,’ the contributors do assume that cosmetic surgery is impermanent and incompatible with the ‘natural’ body, using the example of the film Death Becomes Her (Zemeckis, 1992) as a comparison. We can return to Pugliese and Stryker’s question,
“where, precisely, a prosthesis stops and a body starts” (2), to expand the analysis (and my own suggestion that it depends whose body and what type of prosthetic). I contend that the basis for the humour in the thread above (i.e. the notion that the Swan’s bodily integrity is unstable in its plasticity) is not similarly applicable to other types of body modification or surgical intervention. The “plastic parts” used in cosmetic procedures are understood to be only temporarily integrated into the contestants’ bodies and will “fall off” in time. The thread reflects the ‘technologies’ or bodies of thought that shape embodied practice through social and medical institutions.

By way of brief comparison, reality TV series that feature stories of people undergoing medically-necessary procedures are treated quite differently than cosmetic surgery patients, despite the similar rendering of the body as a malleable entity transformed by technologies that penetrate the body or replace parts of the body through surgery. As T. Garner has noted, “technologies of the natural” function to erase the constructedness of the naturalized body (46). Procedures deemed necessary or life saving by medical institutions effectively obscure the hybrid body as they simultaneously produce the hybrid. In doing so, the procedure stabilizes a subject’s authenticity even if it produces similar human-machine results as cosmetic surgery. For example, ABC’s reality series *The Miracle Workers* (Renegade 83 Entertainment, 2006) marketed itself as “a life-changing series about real people overcoming almost insurmountable odds with the help of an elite team of medical professionals” (“ABC Announces”). In its first two episodes, doctors performed procedures including restoring a blind man’s sight through living stem cells and cadaverous tissue, implanting expandable metal rods into the spine of a boy with scoliosis, and regulating the electrical currents in the brain of a girl with Tourrette syndrome through a computer implanted in her brain.81 These stories of bodily hybridity and intervention are shielded from the sort of mocking against cosmetic surgery makeover recipients (noted in the thread above), because the (moralized) dimension of medical need frames a common sense, clear-cut celebration of the procedures as life saving rather than superficial. Therefore, there is not a similar popular discourse of derision aimed at these “reality show” participants, because their stories highlight the inseparability of body and technology for the “greater good” and in the name of medical advancement.

Criticism of *The Swan*, the contestants, and cosmetic surgery within the web forum sample tended to reproduce this division between need and desire, which framed elective surgery as inauthentic because of the lack of visible or medically-defined need. Contributors were vocal about the impact of media on women’s perceptions of beauty and their own bodies. Twenty-nine threads, or just over seven per cent of the threads in the sample, were dedicated to topics that were oppositional or critical of *The Swan* and its message of happiness and success through beauty, but critical posts peppered the sample, with varying responses in support of and in opposition to the concerns raised. Based on the tone of the titles, the twenty-nine threads that engaged in oppositional or critical discussion of *The Swan* indicate the type of opposition common in the web forums. A few of these thread titles were: “Plastic surgery & woman’s right to choose”; “Pathetic!”; “There’s nothing wrong with these girls!”; and “Absolutely disgusted.”

Criticism of *The Swan* and cosmetic surgery was most often associated with negative effects of the media on women’s body images, and impossible standards of beauty established by the media (e.g. 4084.1; 6582.8; 754.1). Contributors also pointed out the ways that makeover reality TV distorted the dangers and pain of cosmetic surgery, making the process appear quick, tidy, and risk-free (e.g. 1495.1; 2148.1). A few contributors expressed their criticism of the show and its premise based on their religious belief that a higher power had created them a certain way, and that to interfere with God’s work was sacrilege (e.g. 3923.1; 1286.1; 2148.2). More often, contributors were critical of what they saw as a cash-grab by the cosmetic surgery industry, using people’s insecurities to make a profit (e.g. 5387; 6642.11; 6292.6). Most contributors defaulted to a ‘natural’ beauty versus surgically-constructed beauty dichotomy, and argued that women’s bodies should be celebrated as they are, not as popular culture demands. For instance, one contributor wrote: “Shows like this teach us to hate our natural selves in hope that we will buy the new one that they’re selling - making everyone [sic] look like a carbon-copied Barbie and borderline [sic] drag queen” (316.3). Critics suggested that women ought to “Be happy with who you are” (5387.1). This tone was similar in style to the protest work of feminist organizations About Face and Vancouver Women’s Health Collective explored in chapter two, which continued to delineate natural and unnatural bodies along moral distinctions of need.
Other contributors criticized the show because they saw it as evidence that North America was becoming “a drive thru society” (1286.2), or that makeover reality TV was comparable to cloning and “designer babies” (1286.5). This suspicion of technological inauthenticity (and determinism) is similar to the type of criticism leveled by forum contributors at the surgery performed on *The Swan* participants and the jokes about disintegrating bodies, explored above. Most often the criticism of the contestants and their procedures (or the surgeons who had performed their surgeries), emerged as insults, comparing the contestants’ to Barbie dolls, plastic, or drag queens (e.g. 2081; 5387.6; 4106.1; 8185.1; 6710.4; 6582.52). These comparisons called into question the authenticity of the representations of beauty, femininity, and youth on the show, and indicated that there was some fear that the Swans were ‘tricking’ people from visually identifying their natural and essential selves.

The popular response to critics of *The Swan*, cosmetic surgery, or reality TV, on whatever moral, ethical, or political grounds, was most often based on the ideology of free will and personal choice, routinely associated with the fundamental rights of American citizens (6582.27). Supporters of the show, its contestants, or cosmetic surgery more generally, told detractors to change the channel, and get some perspective on what was, at its core, simply a form of entertainment (e.g. 1286.8; 8022.3; 5879.4; 349.1; 5387.3; 446.1; 3796.27). The second most popular response to critics of the show was to argue that surgical body modification was only different than other types of adornment and body modification such as cosmetics, fashion, and exercise by degrees. If someone disagreed with the procedures celebrated on the show they might want to “face reality” and come to terms with the fact that people are regularly judged based on their appearance, like it or not (e.g. 7443.36; 5387.13; 3796.35; 2622.6; 2494.1).

### 4.5.2 Constructing confessional narratives in expressions of desire to become Swan contestants: The formation of discursive subject identities

More prevalent than the general discussion of *The Swan* in the forum sample were forum threads by contributors who wanted to become contestants of the show. Thirty-nine per cent of forum threads in the sample were initiated by forum contributors expressing desire to be a contestant on *The Swan* (157 threads), and most of these
included requests for information on how to apply for the show. The weighty presence of these threads makes them central to my analysis of the web forums and the reproduction of makeover culture discourse. However, these threads also return to questions about the unpaid labour of reality TV fans, what they produce, what they ‘give’ the networks and marketers that may use their ‘work,’ and how this data could be used to determine the response to the show. In the case of the fan culture of Fox’s *The Swan* web forums, participants who expressed interest in becoming a Swan contestant by writing a personal narrative operated as though they had something to gain by sharing their stories and appealing to someone for help on the web forums. This personally invested fan culture presumed that Fox network employees monitored the discussions and posts. Here, the benefit of fan labour was imagined to be mutually beneficial; sharing one’s story provided a way in to the series.

If we understand the Fox web forums to be controlled commercial spaces, the forum participants who utilized the space to appeal to the series producers did so from the belief that their confessional would produce access to a makeover. How then, does that reflect the dynamic of network ‘control’ in online interactive fan spaces? Mark Andrejevic reminds us that:

> The forms of interactivity enabled by networked media also allow formerly nonproductive activities to generate valuable information commodities to the extent that they take place within the monitoring capacity of an interactive digital enclosure. The work of being watched doubles as yet another form of unpaid labor. ("Watching Television" 42)

While Andrejevic’s framing of interactive fan labour seems beneficial for only the “networked media,” in the case of the Swan web forums, contributors who posted expressing interest or desire to become a contestant on the series did so anticipating monitoring and surveillance within the forums, and attempted to use the forums in order to make a direct appeal to producers. In this case, forum contributors understood that their unpaid labour had the potential to become compensatory.

The threads created by forum contributors demonstrating a desire to be a contestant, and inquiring about how to enter *The Swan*, concentrated on questions and

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82 Sixty-eight threads contained a single post expressing desire to be a contestant, while eighty-nine threads contained more than one post, and sometimes a thread would contain dozens of posts piggybacking off the original thread post, asking for help and expressing interest in becoming a *Swan* contestant.
statements about how to prepare an application, how and where to attend a casting call, and the finer details associated with getting on the show. Most of these accompanied explanations why a contributor should be considered for the show, or why a contributor would make a good candidate for a makeover. Many contributors constructed detailed narratives of their lives and subject positions in order to contextualize their desire for a chance to be on *The Swan* and undergo what most felt was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for transformation. Within the sample, thirty-one per cent of forums contributors (366) included personal narratives and expressions of interest in becoming Swan contestants in their posts.

A narrative pattern was present in these personal narrative-style posts, both in content and structure. Usually two to three paragraphs in length, the posts in which contributors expressed their desire to be on *The Swan* almost always began with an informal introduction by the contributor, who would include their first name, age, and another piece of information establishing a subject identity. Mother and wife were the most common subject identities named, similar to the contestants’ profiles on the TV series. Contributors would also often identify as a viewer or fan of *The Swan*, followed by a statement of desire to become a Swan contestant. Next, contributors would construct a biographical summary, which usually involved the description of one or more hardships faced by the individual in his or her life. Contributors would then relate the opportunity to become a contestant with the potential to begin a new stage of life, by providing the contributor with the time and space to attend to self-care and self-reflection. Finally, the contributor would ask for help locating the application information, or more generally, help in turning their life around or making their dreams come true.

This contributor demonstrates the narrative pattern in her post, in her request for information on season two casting:

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i would love to be on swan 2. i think i would it would [sic] be the right thing for me to do. i have been picked on my whole life. iv [sic] been wherein [sic] glasses all of my life, i have been teased beat up. called names ext. [sic] im a 33 year old wt feamale [sic]. i have a lot of things i would like done ,so i can love my self. can u help the all ways [sic] ugly duckling please heip [sic] thanks Karen (2986.56)
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The personal narrative exemplified above, and similarly throughout the web forum in posts where contributors expressed interest in becoming *Swan* contestants, demonstrates a confessional style, a narrative trend that has been traced through
television talk shows and self-help culture more broadly (see Dovey; Gamson; Livingstone and Lunt; Peck; Rapping; Shattuc).

Therapeutic discourse, or the “talking cure” has been a staple of North American daytime talk TV for at least three decades; notable hosts of such programs include Sally Jesse Raphael, Maury Povich, Oprah Winfrey, and more recently, Dr. Phil and Dr. Oz. The incorporation of this trope from the daytime talk TV genre to makeover reality TV, is not surprising, given the themes of self-help and the reliance on personal narratives-as-truth in both. Jon Dovey claims confession narratives on reality TV foreground “individual subjective experience as guarantor of knowledge” (21), where personal experience is understood as the most reliable source of commonsense knowledge. Just as daytime talk TV broaches broad social issues by individualizing and personalizing them, makeover reality TV purports to repairs ‘damaged’ bodies and damaged psyches, one person at a time. Cressida Heyes argues that makeover reality TV repeats the “trope that cosmetic surgery can negate experience, especially experience of suffering and poverty” along with the erasure of less desirable bodily characteristics (such as wrinkles and fat), which relies on the implicit assumption that one’s body reflects one’s identity (“Cosmetic Surgery” 22). The web forum contributors replicate the narrative style of confession constructed and repeated on makeover reality TV, thereby demonstrating their ability to recognize and appropriate a required narrative of the genre. Constructing stories of pain, hardship, and loss, and associating their inability to move forward in their lives with their discordant self/body, web forum contributors who posted expressing desire to be on the show, in most cases, did so in the vein of the makeover show narrative style of confession. They also routinely argued that their lives would be better, in terms of love and employment opportunities, self-esteem, relationships with children, and general health, if Fox chose them as contestants. I turn to the specifics of these confessional narratives below.

My goal in examining the narrative trend of confession in the web forums is not to determine the authenticity of the personal narratives shared by forum contributors, but rather, to identify the type of language invoked in the process of demonstrating interest in becoming a Swan contestant, as it occurred on the web forums. Press releases from October 2003 announcing open audition dates and casting information highlighted the importance of a confessional narrative and a “compelling” life-story in the search for contestants (see Appendix D). Thus, the tendency for forum contributors to create
confessional narratives was not surprising, since casting information and the series itself produced the confessional as a necessary precursor to bodily transformation. Forum contributors were operating from within the parameters outlined by the makeover reality TV series as acceptable. In what follows I identify the most prevalent subject identities described and exhibited by forum contributors who were interested in becoming Swan contestants, with examples of how these subject identities were developed and used.\(^3\)

4.5.3 Mothers

Fourteen per cent of forum contributors in the sample identified as mothers, in posts that expressed interest in becoming a contestant for The Swan. Most of these contributors claimed that while they loved their children and their role as a mother, they were exhausted and in need of some space and time for personal reflection. They also described their disgust with their bodies after having children, including loose skin, stretch marks, belly fat, and sagging breasts: “Let’s [sic] face it having kids wreaks total havoc on the female body” (1011.1). The desire to return to their “pre-baby” body was a common remark, in addition to comments that demonstrated the contributors harboured feelings of shame and embarrassment that prohibited their ability to be intimate with their husbands or partners, because of their bodies post-pregnancy. Some contributors described their situation as unfair, and more lamented their pre-baby bodies as a lost part of themselves, a loss they did not bargain for when they became pregnant. There was no space in these narratives for a consideration of the marked maternal body to be beautiful, consistent with widespread makeover culture discourse that pathologizes the maternal body as used up, deformed, and in need of repair (e.g. Laser Vaginal

\(^3\) While I take pains to separate out subject identities constructed in contributors’ posts, I do so in order to examine the ways that contributors employed different types of subject identities, and not to suggest that I, or the contributors, only understood themselves as singular in identity. In fact, in most cases the personal narratives developed by forum contributors reflected several subject identities at once.
Rejuvenation promotional material and the creation of the “mommy makeover” in recent years).

Many of the forum contributors who identified as mothers did so in order to express their desire to focus on themselves (through body modification), after long periods of time spent focused on the duties of parenting:

Hi. I am intrigued by the show previews and want to know how to possibly get on. I am twenty-nine and live in South Carolina on the Winthrop University campus with my son. He is seven years old and goes to a local elementary school. I am a single parent trying to better myself and be a good Mom. I rarely have time to do anything special for myself or date and this leaves me feeling at times like I am not as attractive as the teenagers and twenty-somethings I attend school with. If I had the chance to start my professional, after college, life with a better self image I would be eternally grateful and hopefully much happier. (69.1)

This contributor associates her attempts at good parenting through education and financial stability, with her desire for personal reward for her efforts (via body modification), which she then associates with the possibility of even greater future success and happiness. Many other posts replicated the blending of parental work, lack of self-care, and a desire for body modification as reward and investment. For instance, the contributor below captures this combination almost identically to the preceding example:

Hello, I am a single mom with a beautiful daughter. I work very hard everyday to try to make my daughter happy with the best I can. With all this hard work I tend to put myself in the side. Watching this show has made me realize that I should make myself happy also. I would really love to join this show, and feel like e [sic] teenager all over again. Please at least make this dream come true that is what I wish to look beautiful. (3059.6)

These two contributors rely on the cultural link between youth and beauty in explaining their bodily dissatisfaction, and they fail to question the underlying ideology at work in

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84 The Mommy makeover is described by cosmetic surgeon Dr. Susan Kaweski, the “Dr. Mommy Makeover ™”, this way: “Motherhood is an intense and rewarding experience. Childbearing, on the other hand, puts significant strain on a woman’s body and takes a predictable yet distinctive toll. Principally, a Mommy Makeover utilizes cosmetic surgical procedures to reverse and correct the visible, unwanted signs of childbearing, breastfeeding and childbirth. But a Mommy Makeover isn’t only about trying to work against nature; it’s also about turning back the clock and enhancing your overall appearance.” “Mommy Makeover San Diego.” Aesthetic Arts Institute of Plastic Surgery. 28 April 2012, <http://www.plasticsurgerysandiego.com/body-procedures-la-mesa/mommy-makeover/>. 
the logic of comparing the bodies of teen girls to those of women who have borne children, as though they are oppositional and mutually exclusive. Moreover, these two posts reflected a sense of entitlement to beauty rewards based on the challenges of parenting (and the mothers’ attempts to better themselves), that was also present in makeover culture more broadly (e.g. the Botox ad campaign “For me, myself and I”). The reproduction of this sensibility, that the individual, hard-working mother deserves cosmetic surgery as a way to acknowledge the work and sacrifice of parenting, ignores a larger analysis of systemic inequalities that make it more challenging for women to succeed as parents in their careers, finances, and educations.

A related issue in the posts of forum contributors who identified as mothers was the expression of guilt at being unable to model positive self-esteem for their children, because their unhappiness with their own bodies was not allowing them to do so authentically:

I am a 27 yaer [sic] old mother of three boys. who I love and spent all of the time seeing about. I work at least 45 hours a week. so you know that already is not leaving a lot of time. If i could afford some of this I would take care of myself. For the most part I can not complain. I love those boys to dealth [sic], but I always reminde [sic] myself that although I try to teach them to stand tall and love who you are. I am living a lie and teaching a lie, because I don't like what I see in me. When I look at me see some [sic] who makes me sick. (7007.5)

The self-loathing demonstrated in this passage is illustrative of the tone of the confessional narratives created around interest in becoming a Swan contestant. The logic behind this narrative convention was utilized regularly on the forums, with different experiences standing in as deserving of transformation, including being an older woman, being overweight, having experienced abuse or trauma, or being bullied or teased because of one’s appearance. It is to these stories I now turn, framing the analysis of trauma talk within a consideration of somatechnics and what I determine is a hyperbolic use of trauma talk in these posts, which unwittingly undermines the naturalization of symbolic violence in makeover culture discourse. The repetition of personal narratives relying on trauma talk and the magnification of trauma in the narratives exposes the inadequacy of cosmetic surgery to solve the kinds of problems identified by contributors, as I will detail below.
4.5.4 Older women

Twenty-two contributors identified as older women in their posts expressing interest at becoming Swan contestants, older being relative to the age restrictions imposed by Fox on The Swan applications, in which women had to be between twenty-one and forty-five in order to qualify to enter (season two). While only representative of two per cent of the total number of forum contributors in the sample, their concerns were poignant, especially as they represent the demographic of people who are most often having elective cosmetic procedures in the US (ASPS 6). These contributors expressed anger and frustration at what they saw as ageism at work on the show (1188.2), describing older women on television as a “forgotten species, we Senior ladies” (6642.1). Some interpreted this slight as a reflection of the social stigma attached to aging women, and the powerlessness that comes with “losing” one’s looks. Two examples reflect this observation by contributors:

I’m 51, soon to be 52 in January. But, my God, American Society just disregards older people, women included, as if they are not as valuable as the young. (6642.20)

and,

I am 55 years old and my husband just passed away in May of this year. I’m now left with starting my life over, and feel as if my looks and body will prevent that ever happening. (6642.12)

These two posts reflect an awareness of cultural barriers for aging women, but that recognition does not diminish the personal desire to look younger.

Others recognized the stereotypes aligned with aging women and defied them by expressing their youthful spirits, their hard won successes, and their renewed interest in sexual exploits:

I am in such a hungry state to look like I feel,,,,,,,,,and there is nothing to feel badly about that.................keep writing them.......we are important and are so young for our age and as I said, we are not in rocking chairs anymore baby.....we are totally awesome, and have great strenght [sic] both mentally and physically!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! (6642.18)

and,

We are not over the hill and have paid our dues.. I am happy for these younger women, but don’t forget about us.. We have waited way longer and are still very much alive. I also believe that this would make a great
show, doing one about older "girls", showing that there still is hope and that our dreams can still come true, no matter what your age is...(6711.4)

In the process of challenging the stereotypes attached to aging women, these contributors also challenged Fox to defy ageist stereotypes by lifting age restrictions so that women over forty-five could apply. A few contributors in this self-identified category noted that women over forty have immense power in contemporary North American media; therefore, they should be included in the program (e.g. 6642.22). These contributors suggested different titles for their proposed version of The Swan, including Silver Swan, Senior Swan, and The Queen Mother Swan (3381.1, 6642). Their personal narratives and requests for consideration both challenged and accepted that older women have less cultural currency than younger women, because their looks are considered to be in decline.

While the examples above indicate that the forum contributors saw these stereotypes as problematic, others utilized the association of age with wisdom and argued that because of their longer journey, their perspective, and their long-standing difficulties, they deserved a makeover more so than younger women did. In this way, the group of forum contributors who identified as older women both used the stereotype to their advantage, and denied the ‘truth’ attached to such stereotypes. The threads dedicated to a consideration of older women on The Swan challenged the logic of the series that provided opportunities for women who were still ‘young enough’ to capitalize on the value of youthful appearance. In contradiction, these contributors also requested access to participation in order to create the image of youth on the body, as though cosmetic surgery was a means to stop or reverse the visible signs of aging.

4.5.5 Women who are Overweight

Unlike the older women who both utilized their age and rejected stereotypes about aging in order to justify deserving a place on The Swan, the forum contributors who identified as overweight had no desire to incorporate fatness into a more democratic image of beauty. Thirteen per cent of forum contributors in the sample identified as overweight in order to situate their opinion of a thread or topic, and almost all of these did so in the form of a confessional narrative where they described their situation in order to justify their need to become a contestant on The Swan. Many claimed that The Swan was their one opportunity to change, because diet and exercise did not work for them,
they lacked the time because of work and childcare commitments, or they had physical
disabilities that made it impossible to lose weight. The descriptions of their own
overweight bodies by the forum contributors reflected a discourse of self-loathing,
through the admission of personal disgust and shame:

Now just to get rid of my too well fed tummy and these chubbery rubbery
inner thighs .. oh and the birdflapping goose greese that hangs from my
upper arms like extra crisco in a skin sack .. Yucko! ;) (5108.3)

Several contributors expressed their inability to leave their house, go swimming or to the
beach, or wear certain articles of clothing, because they perceived other people to be
looking at and judging them based on their weight (e.g. 6266.1; 3325.1; 3059.15;
1277.1; 7729.1; 1740.1; 2986.58; 2986.77; 2986.84; 2986.109; 2986.119). Contributors
perceived social scrutiny and surveillance as a limitation that they wished to overcome
with access to The Swan program.

Contributors who described themselves as overweight often qualified their self-
identification by describing the lengths they had gone to in order to try to lose weight:
diet, exercise, gastric bypass surgery, etc. They also often recounted stories of
childhood bullying because of their weight, and a desire to pamper themselves for the
first time. For example:

... All I have ever wanted was to be smaller...I am a very good person that
has always been there for everyone else and never done anything for
myself. I think this is the one thing that I could do for myself. With the
weight loss it would help me with my self-esteem and overall out-look on
life. I don't wanna be made fun of anymore. Please Help. (7154.1)

The assumption that The Swan could provide the key to effective weight loss
demonstrates a lack of clarity in the web forums with regard to the limits of cosmetic
surgery in transforming bodies on this particular makeover reality TV series. Liposuction
and tummy tucks are marketed as procedures for people who have already achieved
their weight-loss goals, but forum contributors who were overweight seemed to ignore a
repetitive visible message of The Swan, that is, that there is no significant weight loss for
Swan contestants during the program’s three-month duration. Certainly weight-loss is
established as a critical determining factor of whether a contestant has what it takes to
succeed on the series (the willingness and determination to work hard, as well as the
ability to take orders and ‘give in’ to the process). However, the weight loss exhibited on
the program did not rely on stories of “extreme” weight loss, such as the weight loss recorded on the NBC reality series *The Biggest Loser* (2004-present).85

One contributor did recognize incongruity in *The Swan*, which provided bodily transformation for contestants on the show who were not, according to this contributor, overweight, despite what she defined as national hatred of fat bodies. She identified the social stigma associated with fatness, and wondered why there were no overweight women featured on the show:

I would love to be apart [sic] of one of these life changing shows. But i fail to ever see one where they take an already fat person and help them, mold them, and make them beautiful. Lets [sic] see some BBW's [Big Beautiful Women] on this show made into SBW's. Who's with me?!... I am a willing BBW ... I'm 25 and I have never known what it feels like to be skinny, or anywhere near there. I think America would love to see what it (hates) so much turned into what it (loves).... Come on give a big girl a chance at a new life!!!!...(2421.1)

This contributor did not see the series as an opportunity for personal transformation because of her weight, but she did imagine the potential of the series to work on already-marginalized bodies, something she indicated was more pressing and impactful than a series that focused on women of an ‘acceptable’ size. In this way, the contributor challenged Fox to do more extreme bodywork than it was doing, in the name of positive transformation. However, the logic of this post relies on the marginalized body remaining marginal, where success is individual and accommodating. The implication is that *The Swan* would achieve higher ratings if it were to feature the types of transformations that Americans valued, that is, overweight bodies transformed into thin bodies. This post re-values thin bodies, even as it interrogates the social stigma attached to fatness.

### 4.6 “So how ugly do you have to be?”: Forum contributors and the boundaries of the fixable body on *The Swan*

The idea conveyed in the example above, that *The Swan* contestants were not fat *enough*, occurred elsewhere on the web forums, in suggestions that *The Swan* ought

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85 An article reporting on the spokesperson partnership between season two pageant winner DeLisa Stiles with NutriSystem, the official weight loss program of *The Swan*, noted that the sixteen contestants of season two collectively shed “more than 200 pounds”; averaging out to less than fifteen pounds per contestant, give or take the interpretation of “more than” in the article (“*The Swan* Becomes Next NutriSystem Spokesperson.” Internet Wire. 21 Dec. 2004, <http://business.hightbeam.com/436102/article-1G1-126355811/swan-becomes-next-nutrisystem-spokesperson-us-army-reservist>).
to produce a season featuring women with facial deformities or disabilities (5809). Suggestions of this sort imply that some people are more worthy candidates than others, based on the amount of physical and emotional suffering they have had to endure because of their appearance. One contributor phrased the question this way: “So how ugly do you have to be?” (6232). In the post that followed this thread title, the contributor fleshed out their question in more detail: “I'm just curious...do they want REALLY ugly people or just ordinary people? If you went to the casting call, what are the typical applicants like?” (6232.1). This contributor brought to the foreground much of the underlying tension in the confession narratives elsewhere on the forums: that is, who is fixable? Who is worth fixing? How damaged, or fat, or ugly, is too damaged, fat, or ugly?

The exposure of the ideological underpinnings of makeover reality TV in this contributor’s question begs a somatechnic analysis: how are the boundaries of embodiment engendered in makeover culture? The contributor’s question was practical, and related to the application process. But it is also an ontological question. The Swan answered clearly in presenting sixteen women per season who were (merely) plain looking. So how ugly do you have to be? The answer is, not very ugly. The fixable body is that which is only slightly outside the borders of normative beauty, ‘requiring’ only minor adjustment. This is not to suggest that the procedures were not invasive or painful or potentially dangerous; however, the featured transformations refined already able-bodies, (relatively) slim bodies, gender-sex congruent bodies, and (relatively) youthful bodies in very normative ways. The absence of non-normative bodies or body modification procedures demonstrates that makeover reality TV such as The Swan produces “technologies of the natural” (Garner 35), even as it exposes the construction of naturalized bodies. Garner defines technologies of the natural this way:

“technologies of the natural” or “naturalisation techniques,” [are] the specific discursive operations through which the male and female body are materialised as natural, in other words, how the natural sexed body is itself constructed. By applying the term ‘technology’ to the idea of the ‘natural,’ two concepts considered mutually exclusive, I maintain the emphasis on the principal tenet of ‘somatechnics,’ that the body is always in a state of becoming, even the “natural” body. I undermine the binary of constructed versus natural by changing the terms to constructed versus naturalised, where the naturalised body is one whose construction has been successfully erased. (35)

On The Swan, body modification is a means to realign naturalized femininity on a wayward female body, but the discourse of choice and empowerment and a celebration
of the post-makeover authentic self erase the construction of that femininity through surgery. Web forum participants interrogated these discursive limits in their discussions regarding qualification and application to the show. In particular, mental health history and access to health insurance were two discussion topics in the forum sample that exposed the boundaries of fixable bodies in makeover reality TV.

4.6.1 Mental illness, health insurance, and exclusion

The issue of ‘fixability’ emerged in discussions about mental illness and qualifying for the program. Contributors wondered if mental illness such as depression might disqualify them from applying or participating, and speculated that a history of depression and prescription drug use or therapy might be too risky for the network:

Other things such as a history of depression with either therapy or prescriptions [sic] needed or not having "traumatic experiences" due to your looks play a role too. They want you to show emotion without a total breakdown. (5592.1)

Responses to this speculation showed that contributors felt it was unfair for the network to disqualify applicants based on their mental health, partly because so many people suffer from some form of depression throughout their lives:

If you get disqualified for having had depression [sic] and seeking therapy and using medications, then that would exclude a lot I imagine. I had postpartum depression after my children and took medication but am now medication free. While on it I went to therapy to also help deal with how I felt as well. I don't feel that should make someone ineligible for this...Oh well, the more I am hearing the more frustrating it seems. I can understand some of the things that would disqualify some but some sounds harsh. At least that is my view...(5592.3)

This contributor takes for granted that the rewards of reality TV should be accessible to all, and based on need, which naively assumes that a commercial enterprise has an ethical responsibility to help others equitably. It ignores the bottom line of any commercial television production, that is, profit. Similarly, another contributor thought it would be unfair to disqualify candidates for mental health issues, especially if they had been treated and managed successfully:

Hmmm.. I wonder why they would arbitrarily just toss people for having had councelling [sic] ..LOL .. seems like those folks would be BETTER candidates because they have already been someplace bad and have done something to try and move their lives somewhere better! (5592.6)
This post relies on a neoliberal discourse of the rewards of self-responsibility for individuals who “move their lives somewhere better!” It parrots the ideologies at work in The Swan, when ‘deserving’ women who work hard to pull themselves out of unfortunate positions advance to the pageant. Moreover, the “arbitrary” nature of Fox’s choices is of course anything but arbitrary. The simple answer to the question posed by the contributor above would be that Fox is invested in producing a series that would leave the network open to the least amount of financial liability. Therefore, people with a history of mental health issues would be considered higher risk than those without such a history. This post, and the eight threads whose main focus was discussion and questions concerning potential reasons for disqualification of an application, including mental health issues and a lack of private health insurance coverage, ignored the commercial motivations of The Swan. In these instances, the series foregrounds its self-defined benevolence successfully, so much so that forum contributors presumed that The Swan could and should help people.

Far more prevalent than the concern over barriers to access to The Swan based on mental health history, was the concern raised by contributors regarding the stipulation that applicants have extended medical and dental health coverage. It seems that Fox systematically answered the question “who is fixable?” or “Who is worth fixing?” when it determined that people without extended medical and dental health insurance did not qualify as applicants for The Swan. Realistically, a for-profit television model imposed the barriers to accessing the series (or at least the application process), whereby applicants with medical health insurance might be more likely to have had continuous, preventative health care than those without. The response to this rumour on the web forums was high; eight per cent of all posts in the sample responded to the concerns raised about health insurance coverage and barriers to the application process. Contributors felt it was unfair to disallow the very people who needed free medical services the most, those people who could not afford insurance. Again, this type of reasoning assumed that Fox had some moral responsibility to take care of those in need:

Now there is just another slap on the face for a 23 year old woman who just wants to be beautiful and not cry over how she looks. I love this show and sit and dream what it would be like to have just that one chance to be beautiful on this inside as well as the outside but like i said no chance for us girls who have literally nothing in our lifes [sic], no money, no insurance of any kind, no self esteem and i could go on and on. (6566.1)
This contributor expressed her frustration with what she saw as an added blow by Fox, to an already difficult financial situation in her life. By characterizing herself as the victim in this situation, she positions herself in the same way that the series positions its female contestants; that is, as victims who suffer in their day-to-day lives and are in need of bodily transformation. Yet, here, the continuation of the victim narrative is a result of The Swan’s seemingly arbitrary barriers to access. This exposes the flimsiness of The Swan’s claims to equalize access to beauty, since it is so limited in who it can benefit and the lack of change possible outside of the narrative parameters of the show. Moreover, the contributor above relies on the leap in logic that “that one chance to be beautiful” would be the corrective for a life with “literally nothing.” Upon deconstruction of the logic implicit in this post, we can see a hyperbole that does not stand up to rational scrutiny. In the process, The Swan is unwittingly exposed for its symbolic violence and inability to equally address ‘need’; something it claims to achieve in the promotional coverage of the series, especially Nely Galan’s claims of democratic access to beauty through the show.86

The logic demonstrated in the post above was repeated elsewhere in the eight per cent of posts in the sample (288 posts), generated within the eight threads concerned with reasons for disqualification, most of these focusing on the issue of health insurance. Speculation emerged in the forums regarding the reasons behind Fox’s stipulation that applicants must have extended coverage, including increased liability issues and the need for a history of good health (indicated by preventative care). Most contributors agreed that it was unfair to exclude people on these grounds, especially because many felt like it was their only hope for a positive change towards good health, both physical and mental. Interestingly, these critiques included no mention or scrutiny of a national government that did not provide access to free, equitable, quality health coverage for all its citizens.

4.6.2 Hyperbolic trauma talk in personal narratives of abuse: Exposing makeover culture’s symbolic violence

The association of good health and mental well-being with cosmetic surgery and diet and exercise programs was common among the contributors who expressed concern over the stipulation that applicants have medical insurance, but this was a more general

association made by many of the contributors who shared personal narratives on the web forums. A large number of contributors who expressed desire in becoming a Swan contestant and who submitted confessional-style narratives shared stories of pain and suffering which they related to their appearances. Eleven per cent of the contributors in the sample (126 contributors) who expressed desire to be a Swan identified as having suffered because of their appearance, either from being teased or insulted because of their appearance, or because of their own perceived ugliness which had led to what they identified as “low self-esteem” and depression. Most of these contributors also described experiences of trauma or abuse in their personal narratives. Table 4-3 provides a breakdown of the different identifying factors that were included in the personal narratives of the contributors who claimed to have suffered trauma and/or abuse, and the occurrence of each factor in this sub-set of personal narratives. The popular use of the confession in personal narratives by contributors who expressed desire to participate in the show indicates that suffering was a perceived prerequisite for a deserving place on the show. Makeover reality TV contributed to this perception, as participants were always introduced to viewers via personal narrative and confessions of trauma (i.e. heterosexual crisis, low self-esteem, abuse). Each contestant on seasons one and two of *The Swan* shared their own stories of loss, trauma, pain, deformity and hardship as a preface to their physical and surgical transformations.
Table 4-3 *The Swan* forum confessional narratives of trauma and abuse, by type of trauma

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trauma and/or abuse identifiers</th>
<th>Number of times this identifier appeared in personal narratives of trauma and/or abuse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Illness</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scarring or problems resulting from previous surgery</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems with spouse/partner</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth defects or deformity</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injuries caused by an accident</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trauma caused by the death of a spouse, parent, child, friend or relative</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unexpected violence</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug or Alcohol Addiction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems with the law</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal/mental</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unnamed</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The utilization of trauma talk in the personal narratives of forum contributors expressing desire to become *Swan* participants relied on the implicit assumption that
body modification that produces a gender-normative body can and will solve the problems that stem from the trauma, abuse, loss, pain, and injury described by forum contributors. Whether or not forum contributors were genuine in their belief that beautification can alleviate the pain caused by life experiences, they were well versed in the script of makeover discourse, and were able to replicate it in the hope that it might provide an opportunity for participation in the series. In this way, the web forums contribute to the blending of elective, normative body modification with individualized models of healing and success. The following examples of confessional narratives of abuse highlight this blending:

I'm needing help on how to get on swan i would like to make myself a beeter [sic] person. I'm in an abusive relationship mentally and physically i'm always told that i'm to [sic] fat that no one would ever want me my nose is some what big i get hit in the stomach and he tells me he'll keep doing it until i loose [sic] it i want to beleave [sic] that i can be a beutiful [sic] person and get out of this relationship for my children and myself and especially for my beloved baby brian who passed away jan 28,04 at 4 mon. i would rather try to make a better life for myself and for the rest of my children that i have. i'm only 23 and have been fat since i had my first child i would love to have this make over to better myself for my children and myself. thanks ruby12804 (2405.1)

and,

...My self-esteem is very low. I want to feel better about myself so I can be much happier for myself and my girls, And eventully [sic] happy with that someone special in my life if he is out there.. As a little girl i was abused sexualy [sic] and i believe that has alot [sic] to do with how i feel and the older i get the worse [sic] i feel emtionaly [sic]. If I could have a better body and looks i would be much happier i feel. I just cant do it alone. I want to be alive again. (2986.40)

and lastly,

Hello. I am 31 one years old. I have been through abuse and neglect in the past. This has left we [sic] with no self esteem. I barely graducated [sic] college do [sic] to the abuse I endured. I have now moved on and am currently working on my masters degree. I have 2 boys from my privious [sic] marriage. I have an anger problem that my oldest (6) is now beginning to show signs of. I want to break the cycle. I don't want my children to grow up miserable. Besides the low self esteem and anger problem, I am over weight. This is a BIG concern to me because of family history with obesity, diabetis [sic], and other health concerns. I would love to be considered for the next swan. Please tell me when and where to sign up. (2986.95)
These three examples are from forum contributors who express desire to become contestants on *The Swan*, and who associate the opportunity to make over their bodies with a therapeutic opportunity to deal with the abuse they have endured. The first example relies on the premise that a makeover would give her the strength to leave her abusive partner and create a better life for herself and her children. The second example also synthesizes beauty and happiness, by restoring life and overcoming the psychological trauma of childhood sexual abuse. The third example refers to the cycle of violence and indicates a desire to end that cycle through her physical transformation. Taken together, these examples reflect a faulty logic wherein body modification is a cure-all, supported and encouraged by makeover culture.

The violence embedded in the personal narratives goes beyond the confessions depicted by *The Swan* contestants on the series. While Belinda Bessant’s personal narrative involved accounts of past abuse at the hands of her previous boyfriends, none of the other episodes approached the levels of admission and description of violence as the above examples. Here, the exaggeration of the trauma talk to include physical and sexual abuse does the opposite of the confession on makeover reality TV. Instead of creating a link between deserving candidate and transformative makeover, the link is exposed as a construct of makeover culture itself. By shifting the tone of the confession towards a more overt image of violence against women, the structure of makeover culture discourse begins to erode. Thus, unwittingly, these forum contributors unveil the logical fallacy that gender-normative body modification can heal the effects of abuse, or, that the signs of past abuse are marked on the female body in ways that diminish a woman’s potential beauty.

In suggesting that this fallacy is exposed unwittingly, I do not mean that I think the forum contributors are unaware of the narrative patterns they adopt. Quite the contrary, by adopting the confessional narrative complete with hyperbolic angst, these particular forum contributors demonstrated their ability to navigate makeover culture in order to achieve their goal. If confessional narratives, including painful memories of abuse, trauma, selflessness, and bullying, are a required plot point in the makeover reality TV genre, then web forum contributors who replicated this format were simply working within the parameters of the system in order to increase their chances of
successful participation.\textsuperscript{87} My intention is not to undermine or discredit the stories of abuse identified by the contributors noted above. However, it is worth considering the manufacturing of trauma talk because the application of the script of makeover culture in the web forums lacked any subtlety because of the missing visual and auditory cues that accompanied the personal narratives of \textit{The Swan}'s contestants. The result was an exaggerated narrative that turns a spotlight onto the discursive trope, revealing the tenuous linkages between abuse, healing and cosmetic surgery.

So pervasive was this pattern of trauma talk in the personal narratives of web forum contributors expressing their desire to become \textit{Swan} contestants, other forum contributors began to recognize and comment on it. For instance: “I want so badly to be on the show, but I guess I couldn't because I don't have a sad sob story like everyone else. I was never raped or beaten or run over or bitten [sic] by anything. I just used to be thin and beautiful and now I'm not” (7036.1). This reader was responding to what she recognized as a narrative trend of the web forums; a hyperbolic confessional style recounting moments of extreme pain and hardship that validated a desire for bodily modification (and with it, transformation).

Other contributors expressed annoyance at the narrative trend, particularly the confessional aspect, which this contributor associated with pity seeking:

Okay... Now, I don't want to appear insensitive to your plight, but, this is the HAPPY THREAD! If you want to lament about the sad state of your life, you should start your own UNHAPPY THREAD!

This thread is strictly and exclusively for brightening someone’s day. There are a few hundred threads in this forum that are geared towards getting people to pity them. This is not one of them. (1936.22)

The author of this post had created a thread asking contributors to describe things that made them happy, in an attempt to escape what she saw as excessive negativity within the web forum. When a contributor submitted a post to the thread that criticized \textit{The Swan}, and described her own relationship problems (which she attributed to beauty standards established by cosmetic surgery and makeover reality TV), the creator of the

\textsuperscript{87} Kathy Davis traced this practice in cosmetic surgery candidates who attempted to have their breast augmentation funded by a national health care system in the Netherlands, “provided their appearance was classified as falling ‘outside the realm of the normal’” (\textit{Reshaping} 6). Proving this meant convincing a medical professional that suffering had been endured because of a lack of normalcy.
thread referred to the narrative trend in the web forums in order to keep the thread on topic. Others echoed her response in the same thread:

And this was going so well....couldn't you whine on some OTHER thread? We're trying to be HAPPY here!!! why don't you just take some boxing lessons, and suck it up or something? jeeeeez! (1936. 25)

These two examples associate the narrative trend of the confessional with whining and self-pity, a common criticism in this thread (made up of 173 posts with thirty-four individual users). High-posting individuals populated this lengthy thread and attempted to carve out a space that they refused to have manipulated by what they identified as unhappy, clichéd writing. This thread demonstrated an outcropping of discussion peripheral to The Swan, in terms of its content, but was reflective of the complexities of the fan culture on the site. The forums were not simply for personal narratives and trauma talk, but included some elements of criticism of the demands for confession inspired by the makeover reality TV series.

While these types of oppositional responses were in the minority (most personal narratives received responses of either support, information for applying for the show, or subsequent personal narratives by other forum contributors), they were peppered throughout the sample, some more crude than others. Below are two examples of a more mean-spirited tone, which refer to the confessional personal narrative format and its presence in the web forum:

yeah, we're talking KANKLES here folks...and not mine, either. We've got a veritable kankle club goin' on, what with people sharing measurements, and sob stories......daydreaming about kankle surgery, lobbyin' to be on The Show...sick! (2458.1)

and,

Here’s a tip for the Swan wanna-bes, put down the chocolate donuts, turn off the tv and take a walk around the block. With any luck you'll get hit by a car and be put out of your misery. (1495.2)

Both of the above examples employ sarcasm and insult as they comment on the narrative trend of the confessional. The latter was in response to a contributor who had started a thread suggesting that forum contributors should offer support and information to people inquiring about cosmetic surgery, rather than negative “diss[es]” (1495.1). The latter example relies on a neoliberal ideology of ‘self-responsibilization’ to make its point:
individuals are responsible for the state of their own happiness, and therefore the “misery” of “Swan wanna-bes” is a result of a lack of self-care (poor food choices and a lack of exercise). This alternate angle demonstrates how neoliberal discourse can work both for and against makeover culture participants. Makeover culture uses neoliberal discourse to promote individual action and transformation, but it is also applied as it has been above, as a way to blame individuals for their lot in life. Taken further, neoliberal discourse can position victims of abuse and trauma as inauthentic, whiny, or self-imposed, where seeking assistance can be deemed weak (since the individual is the sole bearer of self-advancement through proper regulation).

While there were many patient contributors who shared information with people making requests (i.e. Tasha), there were also several instances in the sample where contributors sarcastically noted the over-abundance of people asking for help. In one thread, one high-posting contributor requested that the site moderators make the application and casting information “sticky” so that contributors asking for the application information would receive it immediately (the implication being these contributors would then stop clogging up the message boards with their repetitive requests) (4022). The thread included forty-nine posts, all but two of which included Swan casting website info at the bottom of every post. The outlet of contributors’ annoyance became a joke, like this parody of a television commercial for an infomercial-style Swan ad:

Thank you so much Sister Goldie.  
Now a word from our sponsors.  
Feeling dumpy?  
Feeling Lumpy?  
COME TO OUR SPRING BLOWOUT EXTRAVAGANZA, WHERE YOU CAN ENTER TO WIN A WHOLE MESS OF PRIZES.  
*que [sic] cameras to model.....NOW*  
Expanse [sic] your intellect as well as your bosom...  
*que [sic] camera 2 to fitness trainer...NOW*  
Build your buns with a personal trainer.  
*que [sic] camera 2 back to model. Now now now*  
Have a complete makeover with chances at HUGE MONEY PRIZES AND THE TITLE OF MS SWAN!  
*que [sic] Legal disclaimer*  
*silly man talking really fast, Last thing he is heard saying silently is "boob sizes may vary"*  
http://www.swancasting.com/ (4022.26)
This contributor created a parody of *The Swan* and claims made in the show about the transformative capacity of *The Swan* program. At the same time, the author backhandedly poked fun at the requests made by countless people on the web forums, whose appeals imply that their lives would be better if they were to become participants on the show. The example above highlights the clarity with which these contributors understood the marketing machine at the heart of *The Swan*, and the association of personal value (here, intellect), with physical beauty. It also highlights a keen understanding of the role of camera angles in creating a sense of excitement in the program. Amongst the parody and continued reference to *The Swan* casting website throughout the thread are two genuine requests for *Swan* application information, a serious discussion of adoption, foster care and parenting between three contributors, (which moves from generalizations, to offence at perceived insult, to apology and finally celebration of the accomplishments of the contributors). As well, a list of contributors’ favourite comfort foods, and two supportive and encouraging responses offered to one of the women requesting application information occur in the thread. This thread demonstrates a discursive complexity that is indicative of the web forums more broadly, and the challenges that can occur with several contributors participating in asynchronous communication.

These examples of sarcasm or parody illustrate the ability of some forum contributors to identify and interpret generic tropes, both in the reality makeover show and the web forums. The above examples are from threads primarily populated by high-posters, forum contributors who have posted between one hundred and several thousand times. Therefore, the tone of these humorous and critical posts emerges from experience with the forums and familiarity with the confessional narrative so often repeated on the forums. The high-post contributors upheld a clear division on the forums between appropriate and excessive behaviour within makeover culture by attempting to shame those contributors who wrote hyperbolic, angst-ridden confessionals. While their purpose would have likely been related to a desire to de-clutter the forums to make their (non-Swan) discussions more accessible, these sarcastic posts also set a tone of exclusivity; the high-posters established themselves as a group set apart from the desperate masses who logged on to seek the help of a makeover show. Moreover, the authors of these sarcastic and parodic posts took on the duty (and labour) of policing the forums, encouraging people to find a more appropriate outlet for their pain, or, redirecting them to the contact information for application. In the process, they
inadvertently mimicked *The Swan’s* embedded neoliberal ideology promoting self-care and the moral hierarchy that determined who was a deserving candidate for a makeover and who was too excessive in their confessional narrative.

### 4.7 Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to describe in detail the web forum contributors and the content of Fox network’s *The Swan* web forums, based on the random sample of 400 threads collected and catalogued in The Ethnograph. The decision to include several lengthy samples from the web forums was deliberate, and I hope the reader feels some familiarity with the web forums and the contributors based on their presence in this chapter. In qualitative research, it is difficult to paraphrase, though one must do it if one is to make any claims about a data set. However, the contributors must also ‘speak for themselves’ if we are to get a sense of the style, tone, and content of the dialogues captured in the sample.

Some challenges with the software prevented me from investigating specifics in more detail. The Ethnograph is not an ideal coding software program for web forum interaction, I have learned. It requires updating that reflects more diverse formatting possibilities, and remains more relevant to interview transcription in its current edition. Some seemingly arbitrary restrictions made it impossible for me to trust identifier searches (used to search individual forum contributors, to determine, for instance, how often high-post contributors posted in the sample). This limitation was especially frustrating because it made it impossible to study in more detail similarities and differences between gendered contributors, or between high- and low-posting contributors. Silence on the part of the tech support department in the latter half of this research has made it impossible to resolve these issues.

Another challenge has been determining how to deal with questions of class. Certainly, it would seem logical that forum contributors expressing interest in becoming Swan contestants did not have access to the financial means to fund such extensive body modification. While some contributors made it clear that financial barriers were preventing them from having the body work that they wanted, most contributors were silent about their class position and its role in shaping their interest in *The Swan* and Fox’s web forums. The poor writing evident in the samples provided within this chapter may indicate a lack of education associated with pervasive financial barriers. However, I
am not willing to extend this speculation into deeper analysis, because it remains so tenuous in the sample data and because I am disinclined to reproduce stereotypes that link ignorance, poor writing, and people experiencing financial barriers to equality. It would probably not be a stretch to assume that fans of The Swan were likely those who saw themselves reflected in the women featured in the series makeovers, who were overwhelmingly stuck in low-paying or unpaid domestic labour. Yet I am hesitant to make claims about class that the data does not support more fully. Thus, a gap that remains in the research findings is a nuanced analysis of the ways that class positions intersect with forums contributors’ discursive construction of identity on the boards.

In spite of these challenges, the chapter provides a close examination of a makeover reality TV fan space that is innovative and thorough in its approach. In conducting such a close study of a particular fan site, I have teased out some of the more complex conundrums present in mainstream concerns over body modification and makeover reality TV than a textual analysis could provide on its own. Coupled with the textual analysis of The Swan in chapter three and the email interviews with cosmetic surgery bloggers explored in the next chapter, this chapter fleshes out the tricky waters navigated by fans and potential makeover candidates. What I found was that forum contributors provided labour for Fox by drumming up interest in the series but also in policing the boundaries of acceptable confession narratives (not too whiny, not too dramatic) as well as acceptable body modification (determining how much was too much, or who was a worthy and viable candidate). Their labour also worked in the service of Fox by directing interested parties to the appropriate application procedures. In addition to the self-regulation of forum contributors evident on the forums was the regulation imposed on forum contributors by Fox, through structural elements of the site as well as site moderation. The ‘space’ of the forums was a commercial space and as such appealed to contributors as media consumers. This would have helped to shape the content of the forums and the discursive limits of the site. Site moderation imposed overt limits that got in the way of fan activity, and they saw the moderation as heavy-handed and arbitrary. Despite the work of Fox (through STEVO47) to monitor and eliminate content that went beyond the terms of use applied by Fox, some forum contributors evaded such boundaries and worked instead to carve out spaces for discussion between high-post contributors.
There was a popular trend in the forums to reproduce the trauma talk of the personal narratives present in the makeover series as forum contributors appealed to Fox for inclusion as Swan contestants. However, in the process of constructing personal narratives that they hoped would give them access to the show, some forum contributors instead created a tone of hyperbolic angst and self-loathing, based on subject identity categories of motherhood, aging, being overweight, and suffering abuse and/or trauma. The repetition of trauma talk and the format of the confessions caused a tear in the fabric of makeover culture discourse. What became obvious in the forums (to other contributors who commented on them) was that forum contributors were following a script of confession narrative that required a story of victimhood in order to justify the ‘need’ for a makeover that seemed out of proportion with the narratives in the actual series. The level to which contributors worked to justify their desire for transformation exposed the necessity of violence in makeover culture discourse, because their own discursive violence (self-hatred, harm, abuse, unhappiness) was concentrated and excessive in the forums and took up a lot of virtual space. What I found in collecting and reading the stories of trauma from the web forums was that in the process, the designation of gender-normative body modification as a curative balm for violence, injustice, abuse, and discrimination is exposed for what it is: fallacious.

In the final chapter, I study the blogs of three women who have undergone elective cosmetic surgery procedures within the last ten years, alongside email-based interviews I conducted with the bloggers over a period of ten months, in order to investigate the ways they discursively construct their engagement with, healing from, and reflection upon normative body modification procedures. I purposefully move outside of the makeover reality TV realm but remain within an online research site; this way I continue to trace the movement of makeover culture discourse across different sites (closer to and farther from the reality TV text). Despite the limited possibility for generalizability in the study of only three bloggers, I think that the benefit of close comparative analysis offers a nuanced consideration of the application of makeover culture discourse in the (written/reported) micro-bodily practices of the bloggers, or, in other words, the technologies of the self in the stories they tell of their body modification. These stories operate as a useful comparison against those of the web forums, which are so heavily structured by the reality TV text they mimic.
5: BLOGGING THE MAKEOVER: INTERVIEWING COSMETIC SURGERY BLOGGERS

5.1 Overview

This chapter extends the work of previous chapters on the discourse of makeover reality TV and online audience practices in makeover reality TV discussion boards, into a study of cosmetic surgery blogs and bloggers. For this chapter I conducted email interviews with three cosmetic surgery bloggers whose blogs appeared on a popular website called Makemeheal.com (MMH), a site that hosts thousands of cosmetic surgery blogs and message boards, extensive before and after photos of cosmetic procedures, a practitioner directory with ratings by patients, a “plasticopedia” (what the site calls its celebrity plastic surgery encyclopaedia), and hundreds of products for purchase related to cosmetic surgery healing and aftercare.

Like the previous chapter’s aim, my goal in examining blogs and interviewing cosmetic surgery bloggers was to determine how themes in the popular discourse of body modification have developed in response to makeover culture’s growth, especially the presence of cosmetic surgery on television. I communicated with women through MMH who had already-established blogs, and whose surgeries were complete. I asked them about their experience with cosmetic surgery, about their opinion of its accessibility and acceptability in today’s culture, about their decision to write about their procedures, and about the role of makeover reality TV in their decision to seek out or consider cosmetic surgery. I was interested in examining the discourses operationalized to validate and support participants and others in their decision to undergo cosmetic procedures, and I was specifically interested in themes of choice, will power, and agency. I wanted to know whether they were present in similar discursive patterns as compared with contestants’ personal narratives on makeover reality TV. I wondered whether cosmetic surgery blogs would reproduce the trauma talk that became such a prevalent script on The Swan web forums, and whether the bloggers would engage more critically with the contradictions of makeover culture discourse than the forum contributors generally seemed to in their posts. I wanted to explore the discursive shifts
between voicing a desire for cosmetic surgery (witnessed on *The Swan* web forums), and the process of writing about the details of cosmetic surgery before, during and after. In doing so, I concentrated on the micro-bodily practices that each blogger/interview subject brought to light in their cosmetic surgery narratives. Perhaps not surprisingly, their blog entries and interview responses provided a much more nuanced consideration of cosmetic surgery and transformation than either *The Swan* TV series or Fox network-hosted *The Swan* web forums did.

My own interest in blogs is threefold. First, the global reach of the Internet provides a much broader platform for both bloggers and blog readers than would be available otherwise. Second, this platform is available to non-professional writers who can ‘publish’ their stories, perspectives, and experiences with relative ease. Third, the public access to what may otherwise be private and intimate details of a person’s life creates an interesting space for inquiry, where discourse almost singularly represents the ‘self.’ How bloggers use language to construct a public persona, the words they use to flesh out their personal experiences, can tell us a lot about how popular discourses are made meaningful in everyday practice (and alongside mainstream corporate media spaces). Cosmetic surgery bloggers emerged at a time when cosmetic surgery procedures began rising exponentially, when makeover reality TV was exploding on network television, and when social networking sites such as Livejournal and MySpace were changing the way that people used the Internet and shared information. Taken together, these variables provide rich and innovative research potential that has been untapped by feminist and new media scholars thus far.

Using email-based interviews, I spoke with and questioned three female bloggers from MMH periodically over a period of ten months, from August 2009 to July 2010: Janice, Sondra and Carol (pseudonyms used to protect the anonymity of interviewees). Our conversations began with ten structured interview questions established by me ahead of time, and evolved into email exchanges that were specific to each blogger’s experiences and role on MMH (see Appendix E for interview questions and letter of intent). Their stories and procedures were quite different, but they did share similar “interpretive repertoires” (Potter and Wetherell) in the construction of their cosmetic surgery narratives. The interviews and blogs demonstrate the complexity of cosmetic surgery narratives and flesh out what is often a caricatured and over-generalized group of people, those who elect to undergo cosmetic surgery procedures. I work towards a
greater understanding of the “discursive layers” between individuals and media culture in this chapter (Hermes, “Media Figures” 71), as I examine some of the complexities mentioned above, while also identifying the patterns that are shared between makeover culture discourse and the bloggers, which reflect the postfeminist and neoliberal ideologies of self-discipline, choice and agency. For the bloggers I interviewed, body modification was described as risky and rewarding, life-altering and disappointing. These ambivalent reflections, shared by each of the bloggers, undermined the overwhelmingly optimistic narratives present in makeover culture discourse popularized in mainstream media. Thus, even as the bloggers I interviewed utilized makeover culture discourse in their cosmetic surgery narratives, they also moved outside the limited confines of its themes to describe problematic issues in the cosmetic surgery industry and the media that support it.

What I found was that the bloggers were willing to deal with the underlying violence of makeover culture that the web forum participants exposed in their hyperbolic and angst-ridden requests, but, for the most part, did not seem to be aware of. I also found that the bloggers could reconcile the hybridity that materialized in the process of becoming a body modifier in makeover culture. This was something that The Swan reality series struggled with as a makeover culture text, reproducing normative frameworks for the women it featured in order to alleviate the threat of the hybrid body made visible on each episode. Even as the bloggers relied on normative beauty standards in their own decisions to have cosmetic surgery (they were working towards closer approximations of conventionally-beautiful bodies, refining their bodies to more accurately represent normative gendered feminine bodies), they were equally candid about the mess, the pain, the fear and the unruliness of the body in transition/flux/transformation. The ontological insecurity that body modification seemed to conjure on The Swan, which was then buried through hyper-feminization of the contestants’ bodies, was less burdensome in the narratives of the cosmetic surgery bloggers whose blogs I studied and who answered my interview questions. In their “telling [of] the flesh”88 the

88 In Sonja Boon’s academic blog Telling the flesh: Life writing, citizenship and the body, she invokes the phrase “telling the flesh” to address the following questions: “How do people narrate the stories of their lives? How do they narrate the stories of their bodies? And what stories do bodies have to tell? How might we capture stories that exist beyond language? What happens when the body and its workings come into language? How does language shape our understanding of our bodily selves? How do our bodily selves inform our language? Can our stories exist without our bodies? Can we exist without our bodies?” (Boon, Sonja. “Telling the Flesh: About.” 3 April 2012, <http://tellingtheflesh.com/about/>).
bloggers did not shy away from the threat of the hybrid body disrupting a sense of bodily integrity. Nor did they produce tidy conclusions to their cosmetic surgery journeys. Instead, they dealt with hybridity in their cosmetic surgery narratives. This may have rendered the hybrid body safe once more (at least discursively), but the exposure of the micro-bodily practices, the minutia of healing and change, resisted the orderliness of the stories presented on The Swan. In this way, the cosmetic surgery bloggers present an important correlative to the texts that I have explored in chapters two and three.

I begin this chapter by describing my research site, starting with a brief discussion of the role of the Internet and social media in the cosmetic surgery industry. I then move into a description of the Make Me Heal (MMH) website and the blogs I studied, and my reasons for choosing this particular web portal for analysis. Similar to The Swan web forum contributors, MML bloggers and forum contributors can be understood in relation to the interactive labour they perform for the “e-commerce player” that is Make Me Heal. I address this briefly in my description of MMH. I also discuss my methodological and ethical considerations as well as challenges I experienced during the data collection and recruitment phase. Finally, I develop an analysis of the blogs and interviews of the three women who shared their experiences with me.

5.1.1 Cosmetic Surgery, the Internet, and Social Media

The interest in the role of the Internet and social media for the cosmetic surgery industry has grown as more surgeons and practitioners become invested in developing and maintaining an online presence and web-based advertising strategies. Publications in professional journals indicate that social media is a topic of increasing importance for cosmetic surgeons (e.g. Aicher; Camp et al.; Walden, Panagopoulous, and Shrader; Wheeler et al.; Wong and Gupta). Plastic surgeons Steven Camp and Daniel Mills describe the role of “world wide web” on their industry this way:

It is an expansive tool with seemingly endless implications for the modern plastic surgery practice. The ease with which ideas can be exchanged through the Internet will undoubtedly continue to alter how we conduct the business aspects of our practices and the process by which patients make choices about the services we provide. (Camp and Mills 349)


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Indeed, a study conducted by cosmetic surgeons on one hundred American breast augmentation clients reported that Internet research was the primary tool used by potential surgery patients in their decision-making process regarding their procedures. Walden et al. found that “[t]he primary source of educational information regarding breast implants was Internet research (66%), with BA [breast augmentation] portal Web sites specifically listed (31%), then the plastic surgeon’s Web site (18%), the implant manufacturer’s site (5%), or a Weblog (4%)” (Walden et al. 397). Respondents considered the plastic surgeon a primary source of educational information in only twenty-eight per cent of responses (ibid).

These findings indicate that online resources are becoming increasingly more important in potential patients’ search for information, perhaps even more important than face-to-face consults with cosmetic surgeons. Cosmetic surgeons have recognized this trend and use websites and online advertising more now than ever: “[t]oday, the Internet plays a vital role in practice development; almost all [plastic surgery] practices, even academic ones, have websites” (Wheeler et al. 435). Of the one thousand American Board of Plastic Surgery-certified plastic surgeons surveyed in Wheeler et al.’s study, ninety-two per cent maintained a website for their professional practice, and twenty-eight per cent were using some form of social media to reach potential clients (Facebook and Twitter, primarily) (436).

Emerging alongside (and in cooperation with) industry practitioner’s web-based advertising and communication are commercial sites devoted to promoting different procedures (i.e. non-surgical fillers and injectables such as Botox, Restylane and Juvederm maintain professional websites that include search functions that will suggest clinics or doctors in your area who can provide services). As well, online hubs have sprung up, which cross the spectrum of plastic, cosmetic, and non-invasive surgical procedures and products, such as Makemeheal.com, Realself.com and Beautyforlife.com.\(^9^0\) These sites create a ‘one-stop-shop’ experience, with extensive before-and-after photos, ask-a-surgeon functions, product and surgeon reviews, discussion boards, and products for sale. Identified among “the websites of the largest corporate players in the cosmetic field” by Camp et al. is Make Me Heal, the research site I used to locate cosmetic surgery blogs and bloggers for this chapter.

\(^{90}\) See Camp et al. for a breakdown of web metrics for these websites.
5.1.2 Make Me Heal: “The Gateway for all your Cosmetic Surgery & Anti-Aging Needs”

Make Me Heal (MMH) is an American online hub for cosmetic surgery-related products and communication that began in 2002. It is a commercial site that sells all sorts of products related to preparing for and recovering from cosmetic surgery, such as creams, compression garments, scar-reduction products, and vitamins and supplements. It also provides information on cosmetic procedures and surgeons in what it calls “the world’s largest and only patient-reviewed Plastic Surgeon and Dermatologist Directory of its kind.” The site describes itself and its consumer reach this way:

Based in Los Angeles, Make Me Heal is among the world’s largest websites for all things plastic surgery, beauty enhancement, health, and anti-aging. With over 2 million members and over 1.5 million unique visitors per month, Makemeheal.com is a one-stop portal for all the products, services, and information resources needed by the consumer for a wide variety of health and beauty treatments and conditions. Serving all major countries in the world, Make Me Heal’s shopping division is comprised of over 100,000 products.

Defined primarily as a consumer site in the passage above, MMH’s home page reflects this purpose with its featured “bestsellers” prominently displayed in the centre of the screen. Banner ads featuring a contest called “Has cosmetic surgery changed your life?” are coupled with ads for anti-aging products, before and after photos of surgery recipients, and featured specialists from the plastic surgeon directory. In addition to identifying as a commercial site, MMH’s “About” page describes the site as a “beauty + health social network.” The site appeals to consumers by identifying site visitors as “friends” and the MMH team as a “family.” This marketing style complements a discourse that frames consumers as empowered and in control, a style that is similar in tone to makeover culture marketing described in chapter two. For example, the website addresses readers this way:

For the last 10 years, Make Me Heal’s mission has been to cure this deficiency [in consumer resources and information] and help consumers with all of their important health and beauty needs. By eliminating the black information holes and providing you with a community of knowledgeable experts and consumers who are going through the same issues, coupled with the best products, you are more empowered [sic], feel in control, and have peace of mind while making important life decisions. Whether you’re considering a plastic surgery, emerging from having a key

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surgery, or just looking to look your best - both inside and out - we’re here for you and have all the information and products that you need to live your best life.

Importantly, MMH frames living one’s “best life” in relationship to consumption practices. This is of course, by now a familiar theme of makeover culture. In recent years MMH has expanded its product line and begun to cross-promote its products to consumers not necessarily undergoing elective cosmetic surgery, including listings for hair care products, men’s skin care, maternity products, products marketed to transgender people (predominantly breast prostheses), and a full range of medical devices. It has also launched a Youtube channel, a Facebook profile, a Twitter feed, and a low budget “Celebrity Plastic Surgery TV Show,” a web series which has focused on reporting the Oscars from a cosmetic surgery angle.

I chose to focus on MMH blogs and bloggers because of the website’s size and presence online. Camp et al. reported in the Aesthetic Surgery Journal that MMH pulled in more traffic than either of the official websites for the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (Plasticsurgery.org), or the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (Surgery.org) during a twelve month period between September 2008 and 2009 (616). While Camp et al.’s data is becoming out of date and does not reflect the current statistics represented by MMH, it does place MMH in the realm of the main contenders for online cosmetic surgery information and communication.

Similar to my approach in using the Fox network-hosted web forums, I chose MMH as a research site because I believe that using a popular cosmetic surgery website is valuable for its size and popularity. I thought that it was important to maintain some consistency between the types of online spaces I utilized, in terms of scale and popularity/accessibility. I also believe that using a popular cosmetic surgery website as a research site would provide a greater pool of potential participants. I thought I would be able to reach more people, with greater ease, on this site than on other blog hosts not organized around a theme, such as Blogger, Livejournal or Wordpress. I based my decision to search for blogs and interview subjects through MMH on the range and diversity of blogs and discussion boards available on the site, which included blogs and

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92 The discrepancy could be related to user growth over time, since Camp et al.’s research was conducted four years ago. It may also be that their research methods inaccurately reflected site visits, or, that Make Me Heal inflates its statistics.
discussion topics on all types of cosmetic surgery and non-surgical procedures, in addition to general discussions about anti-aging, health care, celebrity gossip, etc.

MMH hosted personal blogs on its website from 2006 until 2010. In 2010, the site moved to a new platform; old blogs were permanently removed and the option to create or add to a blog was removed from the site. I saved the blog posts of the three interviewees I spoke with in my research collection stages, but the data for this chapter is no longer accessible online. Individual blogs were all similar in appearance, a result of the template available to users, which did not seem to allow for user customization beyond superficial modifications. Blog posts were organized chronologically from the most recent to the oldest, and readers could leave comments to bloggers through MML by email, instant messenger, or through a public comment left on the blog. External advertising was present on the MMH blogs through banners and links on the sides, top, and bottom of the screen.

The role of imposed advertising on the MMH blogs meant that the ‘free’ blog platform came at a price for bloggers and blog readers. By this, I mean that bloggers provided unpaid labour for MMH by drawing readers to its site and ideally keeping readers on the site or clicking links to affiliated advertisers. Blog readers would have been exposed to advertising on the site if they wanted to gain access to the blog posts. MMH mediated the MMH ‘community’ space of blogs and discussion boards to sell products, procedures, and to market cosmetic surgeons to potential clients. This commercial structure is important to keep in mind because the visual environment of the blogs would have shaped the blog content, implicitly and explicitly, whether or not the bloggers were thinking about the platform as they wrote and published blog entries on the MMH site. While I do not want to suggest that the site’s advertising erased the potential benefits experienced by bloggers and readers from shared information, this point does help tease out the complexities of the online space of MMH; its role as a communication tool and consumer space. The site relies on user content as well as advertising and product sales, even though these things may bump up against one another on the site. For example, a blog post or discussion thread detailing the alleged malpractice of a cosmetic surgeon could be positioned alongside a banner promoting MMH’s “Featured Specialists” (which tend to occupy space on all of MMH’s web pages),

potentially advertising the practitioner under scrutiny in a particular thread or blog post. This hypothetical example reflects the sometimes-contradictory ways that user content and the site’s mandate as a commercial space can exist together on MMH. Moreover, it serves as a reminder that MMH, despite its rhetoric of ‘friendship’ with site users, constructs a website that keeps the consumer element of online participation front and centre.

5.2 Email-based interviews with bloggers: Methodological and ethical considerations

Conducting research on blogs and with bloggers is a relatively recent scholarly undertaking, since blogs have become familiar Internet media sites only in the last fifteen years or so. Much of the current research being conducted on blogs tends to divide into a few main channels of inquiry. The most prevalent topics of contemporary research on blogs and bloggers focus on the role of blogging on the mainstream news media, its impact on marketing and journalism practices and information distribution, and its potential for ‘democratizing’ corporate news (e.g. Biswas; Hewitt; Kline and Burnstein; Kozinets et al.; Myers; Rodzvilla; Stassen). Feminist research on blogs and bloggers is widespread but also notably thematic, in that many feminist scholars who study blogs and bloggers are interested in questions of identity, self, and alternative spaces for traditionally silenced or marginalized groups of people (e.g. Amir-Ebrahimi; Mitra; Roth; Somolu; Wood). By far, most research conducted on blogs does not include qualitative research with bloggers, but rather remains at the level of text-based analysis, treating blogs as texts in and of themselves.

Determining the parameters of a blog in order to study it or its author is also still a challenge because blogs remain ephemeral and diverse in their make-up. Like the web forums, personal blogs are hybrid spaces, straddling a line between public and private, and existing as public diaries of a sort (which are sometimes paid, sometimes supported by ads, sometimes anonymous, sometimes restricted to members-only access, sometimes associated with a celebrity brand, etc.). Perhaps this public/private hybridity or indeterminacy is what makes cosmetic surgery blogging and discussion boards so attractive to users. The hybrid identity created through body modification is supported by a hybrid form of story-telling. The soma and techné, in this case, parallel one another,

94 “At Make Me Heal, you're not a ‘customer’…You're a friend” (“About Make Me Heal”).
because they do not fit into the tidy, orderly, easily delineated binaries of public/private or inside/outside.

The decision to contact cosmetic surgery bloggers evolved from a desire to ask bloggers to reflect on their decision to tell the story of their surgical journey. I wanted to know more than what bloggers provided in their posts, and I wanted to push them to talk more about the hybridity and ambiguity I was noticing within the web forums, in The Swan series, and in the cosmetic surgery blogs I was reading on MMH. I decided upon email interviews for a number of reasons, not the least of which was a desire to converse with cosmetic surgery recipients that I did not have ready physical access to in a small Northern Ontario community with no cosmetic or plastic surgeons practicing in the city.95

Email interviewing, or asynchronous computer-mediated communication, is gaining popularity as a tool in qualitative research. It has been utilized in studies across the social sciences, health sciences, and communication studies with varied levels of success.96 There are some obvious benefits to email interviews: most notably, online interviews provide researchers with access to otherwise physically inaccessible research participants, opening up the research pool to potentially global proportions. Similarly, email interviews provide some research participants with an opportunity to participate that may not have been possible through traditional face-to-face interviews. For instance, people with mobility issues or speech impairment may be unable to take part in face-to-face interviews and therefore excluded by design. Nicole Ison’s research with young people with cerebral palsy was enhanced by her use of email interviews; she concluded that email interviews created a level of convenience, physical comfort, and depth of content (through writing, reflection, and editing opportunities) for her research participants that would have been impossible through face-to-face interviews aided by a proxy (167). Email interviews can also provide participants with benefits that move beyond access, to healing, empowerment, and a sense of care, as expressed by women who experienced birth trauma in email interviews with Cheryl Tatano Beck (416-420). Indeed, one of my own interviewees said she felt “useful” being a part of my research project (Janice, June 16, 2010).

95Non-invasive elective procedures have begun to spring up in the four years since I have been living in North Bay, Ontario (a mid-northern town of fifty-thousand people, with an economic history based on logging, mining, railway and a military base): for example, since 2011 my family physician has begun to advertise and perform Botox treatments in his office.

96See Anderson and Kanuka; Bampton and Cowton; Beck; Hunt and McHale; Hamilton and Bowers; Ison; McAuliffe; McCoyd and Kerson; Olivero and Lunt.
Other benefits of email interviews combine with feminist concerns over power dynamics and the researcher/participant relationship. Choosing non-physical encounters can potentially alleviate perceived power imbalances between the scholar and the subject, or between class, race, ethnicity, ability, language barriers, and/or gendered dynamics that may affect rapport between a researcher and their interview participants. While email interviews do not eliminate the need to navigate the power dynamics between researcher and participant, they do provide an alternate form of information gathering that can be as useful as face-to-face interviews. Certainly, a researcher still has the ability to select what aspects of the interview she will share in the final product, and their interpretive decisions will affect how a participant’s voice is known, but this may be tempered by a method that intrinsically allows for reflection, revision, and response through email. The concept of power between researcher and research participant in face-to-face interviews is also not one-directional, since research participants can and do self-censor, for a variety of reasons. Donna McAuliffe admits to limiting her participation in in-person interviews and focus groups, or responding in a guarded fashion to interview questions, because of a fear of damaging her professional reputation as a social worker (58). Her critical consideration of this personal reflection led her to develop email-based interviews for her own research with social work practitioners. She hypothesized that email interviews might provide a valuable distance and time for reflection to allow participants to disclose sensitive and ethically challenging information that they might not share in a face-to-face interview setting (59). I think that email-based interviews with cosmetic surgery bloggers can similarly take advantage of the valuable distance produced with researcher-absent methods.

Researchers have noted some hurdles to email interviews, such as Bampton and Cowton; Fontana and Frey; and Selwyn and Robson (as cited in Olivero and Lunt). The most prominently voiced concern with respect to online research is the absence of nonverbal cues that often tell a researcher as much about an interview subject as their words. The complement of subtle body language and emotive physical responses such as crying or laughing during an interview are not available in computer-mediated communication, and this is often lamented as a loss. Arguably, one can overcome this sense of loss if one does not assume that face-to-face interviews (or any, for that matter?) provide objective, true accounts or representations of a research subject’s essential self. Fontana and Frey note that in the US, interviews have been “relied on as a basic method of data gathering” with an “inherent faith that the results are trustworthy
and accurate” (646). I do not maintain such faith and instead consider interview data useful in determining discursive patterns across media sites. If the goal of an interview is to study and record the ways that patterns of discourse are shaped and utilized by a particular group of people, then the question of authentic self-representation (and the ability to discern authenticity using nonverbal cues) loses its relevance, whether the interview is face-to-face or virtual.

According to Graham Murdock, interviews “are always performances in which respondents assume identities and manage impressions” (188). Thus, face-to-face interviews are not inherently more valuable than web-based interviews, because each is a type of performance. Fontana and Frey remind us that interview data is not “directly derivative of the pre-formed individual”; instead, the data is produced collaboratively as a part of the interview event (665). People perform their subjectivities differently in different situations, and over time, our memories change as we narrate our lives. As such, the concerns over authenticity can be limiting in discourse analysis.

Most relevant to my project and the main reason why I chose email interviews with cosmetic surgery bloggers, is the fact that the methodology is appropriate to the research topic. Since my interviewees are bloggers, they are already comfortable with and adept at computer-mediated communication. They write about themselves in an online format, and they are familiar with questions and comments from blog readers. As well, Elizabeth Bird argues that “researcher-absent methods” such as online interviews or telephone interviews can be useful if the methods complement the research question (8). My questions are about blogging and the process of writing about cosmetic surgery; therefore, it is not simply a matter of convenience that I have conducted online research with online practitioners. As Mann and Stewart contend, “the Internet is both a technological and a cultural phenomenon” (7, italics in original). As computer-mediated communication makes cosmetic surgery blogging possible, so should cosmetic surgery blogger research engage in the medium through which bloggers operate. As Nancy Baym has pointed out: “…the focus on language practice is particularly well suited to the study of online communities in which language stands in place of the geography, institutions, and artefacts taken for granted in offline communities” (23)

With this in mind, and with my interest in the development of a makeover culture discourse between media texts, fan discussions, and cosmetic surgery bloggers, the decision to conduct email interviews with bloggers seemed appropriate and exciting. I
developed a series of ten questions that were intended to be open ended and related to the bloggers’ decisions to have cosmetic surgery, including their thoughts on the process of writing about it, and their perceptions of the acceptability of cosmetic surgery in society. The initial ten questions were a structured introduction to what I hoped would become a more conversational email dialogue between the interview respondents and me. I planned to adapt my tone and questions to the receptivity I perceived from the interviewees. Myra MacDonald’s discourse analysis framework inspired this approach:

...an analysis of discourse starts its enquiry with an ear to the texts themselves, and in a spirit of openness to the patterns that may emerge. It also avoids the pitfalls of an ontological/epistemological split between an objective ‘reality’ out there in the ‘real world’ (ontological ‘state of being’) and an interpretive form of knowing (epistemology) achieved through the media. Instead, it acknowledges the role of the media in constituting the very realities that are referenced in media texts... (2-3)

I treated the blogs and the interview responses as complementary texts and moved between them in my analysis, using them in parallel to explore themes within makeover culture and in comparison with each other.

My desire to maintain openness in my work and the potential for extension and expansion of the studies I have undertaken have led me to include the raw email interview data in an appendix (see Appendix F). I removed names and collated the material into chronological order, but otherwise the email exchanges are in their original state. I have done this to work towards transparency and to avoid the “hermeneutic circularity” warned against by Janice Radway (“Hegemony of Specificity” 240), whereby a researcher analyzes ‘data’ from the field in order to support his or her already-established thesis. I encourage readers to look at the interviews exchanges in full, to situate the pieces I have pulled out for consideration in the greater context of the interviews. I think that offering the complete and original data begins to address the challenge of hermeneutic circularity, as does the “spirit of openness” and “an ear to the texts” that MacDonald encourages (2).

In relation to ethical considerations and the email-based interview, I was invested in maintaining the anonymity of my respondents in a way that did not seem as essential to me in the web forums. Despite the ability of MMH site visitors to contact bloggers via email, blog comment, or instant message (therefore opening bloggers up to personal contact by design), I was committed to maintaining anonymity in my analysis because
the bloggers had each established their blogs anonymously and I wanted to extend that decision into my own research. I changed all names, blog names, and screen names in my research findings. I also opted to omit any photos included in blog posts or links to photo albums in my reporting so that bloggers could maintain anonymity in my work. I did this in part because I thought that potential respondents would be more likely to respond if they understood that their anonymity was not in danger, if that was important to them in the first place.

In terms of my own role as interviewer, I decided to disclose very little about myself to the interviewees outside of my role as researcher and student, except to state that I had not personally undergone elective cosmetic surgery. The unspoken gender, race, and class positions I occupy remained absent in the email exchanges. The omission of my own subject positions in the interviews was not accidental: I chose not to disclose personal information in part because I wanted the focus to remain on the interviewees. I am aware that there can be a danger in an overly “autobiographical turn” in ethnographic research that I wanted to avoid (Moores 60). Having said that, I did not pretend to be disaffected or unbiased. My questions developed out of my personal and analytical struggles with makeover culture and cosmetic surgery, and I chose to approach the discussions from a collegial perspective rather than a detached academic voice because I wanted to create a conversational tone. I was also conscious of the point that interviews are never neutral events. As Fontana and Frey note, interviews involve “active interactions between two (or more) people leading to negotiated, contextually-based results” (646).

Finally, I was reflective about the question of power role differentials between myself as “the researcher” and the bloggers as “my research subjects,” even though I did not bridge this issue overtly with the interviewees. I believe that the email-interview method allows for reflection and revision that recuperates some of the power differentials that have troubled feminist researchers in the past. Bloggers had the opportunity to follow up on questions or simply ignore questions they did not want to answer; I checked in with them regarding their continued participation and I reminded them that they could opt out of the project at any time. I also relied on them to offer suggestions about my project and worked to create alliances that recognized their specialized knowledge of MMH and their procedures that I appreciated learning about. Their self-selection and
participation in the project also demonstrated to me their ability to recognize the relationship between us established at the outset of the interviews.

5.3 Recruiting interview participants

While Internet research and email interviews in particular may provide a valuable method for qualitative researchers, there are challenges that affect data collection from online arenas, identified in Mann and Stewart: "[r]ecruitment from previously established lists is not without difficulties. Advertising the research in, for instance, relevant newsgroups requires a 'hook' which will attract attention" (26). Potential participants are more likely to commit to becoming research subjects if the project has direct bearing on their lives and experiences (29). Moreover, unsolicited mail and a lack of monetary reward may be disincentives for participation (28-29). I encountered each of these issues in my attempts to recruit bloggers from MMH to participate in my study. Using MMH as a portal allowed me to access thousands of discussion board readers and bloggers, but with that came the added challenges that bloggers had already been (over-)exposed to requests for participation in surveys and questionnaires from MMH, and that bloggers and discussion board participants had encountered “trolls” who may have made them suspicious of outsiders.

In my first attempt to solicit bloggers for email interviews, I contacted twenty-six individuals through their MMH email or personal messaging accounts in August 2009 (see Appendix E for original request). I based my contact criteria on three factors: blogs with a minimum of six entries that told a person’s cosmetic surgery story from before to after their procedure(s) (based on my familiarity reading the blogs on this site, six posts seemed to reflect the detail and depth I was looking for in a cosmetic surgery story), blogs which had been viewed at least 1000 times (I did this to establish readership), and blogs written from 2008 forward. I chose to begin from 2008 rather than from 2006 when the blog function became available to users on MMH because I thought that the timeline would increase my response rate; I assumed that earlier blogs may have links to email addresses and user profiles that were no longer accessible or in use. From this initial contact, I received two responses from bloggers who were willing to participate in the study. Unsure about the reasons for the lack of response, I resubmitted the request to the same group of twenty-six and began thinking about alternate methods of recruiting.
After several months without further response, I found a thread on the MMH message boards discussing my research request, entitled: “MMH wants to interview me?” This thread contained twenty messages, following the initial respondent’s question: “Did anyone else get this email?? They want me to fill out a LOT of info on my sx [surgery]. I am just curious how they choose [sic] me or if everyone got the same request?” In the discussion that followed MMH users reflected on my request, my intentions as a researcher, whether or not I was abusing MMH forum policies, and why discussion participants would or would not participate in my project. From this thread, it became clear that MMH and other unnamed sources had solicited forum participants in the past with requests to participate in surveys and other types of information-gathering exercises, probably for commercial purposes. MMH is a popular commercial site with advertising dominating most of the visible space on the site and a discussion board dedicated to polls and surveys. Using MMH as a recruitment and research site brought with it challenges of access by virtue of the overexposure of readers to other requests. Moreover, as a graduate student offering nothing in return for their time and effort, my request could not stand up alongside solicitations that may have included bonuses or rewards for participation, such as savings on products for sale on the MMH website.

The discussion group offered additional reasons why they would not participate in such a project, including past participation in similar exercises, or the perception that they were uninteresting, or that their stories were already available either in blog form or in the discussion boards and so it would be redundant to comply:

*Respondent 6:* “I have gotten a few times actually......I figure my story is all over this board already! 😁”

*Respondent 7:* “I got one and filled it out. It took awhile. but it was cool to write it all out.
It was posted at one time.

Live,Love,Laugh”

*Respondent 8:* “I received a few...but never responded - I am a pretty boring person 😁”

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Respondent 9: “You R NOT... 😏
I’ve thought somewhat the same about myself, and never bothered with it, heck look at my posting numbers, not much more to tell, huh?”

Amidst the reasons for or against participation (two respondents did state they would participate and one noted that it was a “very good research topic”), were five messages from a site moderator, who weighed in on the legitimacy of my research request and directed participants to be wary: “FYI: Ladies and Gents make sure they are from Make Me Heal, if they are not feel free to report them to Customer Service, Miki (YourOwnChoice ), myself or any Make Me Heal moderator.” The overall tone of the thread was light, but the suspicion in the first post (through double question marks in the first sentence, and capitalization emphasizing the amount of detail being requested), indicates that the MMH community may be guarded, and unwilling to open up to strangers or outsiders. The warning from the moderator, who clearly identified as an authority figure in the thread, was also a hint that the MMH community did not trust these types of requests. I attempted to address the concerns raised by the participants in the discussion thread by responding to the questions and explaining more about my project. My post never received a response in the body of the thread, and it was eventually deleted by forum moderators who warned that my account would be deleted if I continued to solicit research participants without the permission of MMH.

After my first attempt to solicit interviewees individually through MMH blogs and private messages, and in response to the notice from MMH that they deleted my post, I contacted the forum moderators to request permission to post a general call for respondents on the various message boards housed on the site. The message boards are categorized by type of procedure, as well as additional boards devoted to asking plastic surgeons questions, etc. I posted the same message on thirty-two message boards in February 2010, directed at MMH bloggers, entitled “Research request for members with blogs” and while I received only one personal response and online interview participant, readers viewed my message 2130 times on the thirty-two message boards.

This abysmal failure to recruit participants helped solidify my suspicion that MMH members were overexposed to research requests from within MMH, but also that they were suspicious of non-surgical members who were looking for personal information.
One of my interview participants, Janice, confirmed my hypothesis. Janice was also an active MMH forum member and moderator. When asked why she thought so few people had responded to my research requests on MMH, she answered:

Janice: “I also think that many of our anonymous posters are afraid of you and your intentions. They see you as an outsider looking in to a private group who share a common need. They are cautious [...] We've had intruders, we call them trolls. People that like to make trouble. Sometimes I've had to deal with some pretty nasty stuff.”
(June 10, 2010)

My other two interview participants also weighed in on the challenges to email interviews recruited through a message board, reflecting on their own decision to answer my ad. Carol explained that she thought I was sincere, that she likes to communicate with others online, and that she thinks it is better to be up front about one’s cosmetic surgery to avoid gossip. She suggested that others are not so willing to talk about their procedures because of the danger of negative feedback: “I think most people do not want to talk to anyone about plastic surgery unless they have had it done because there is a lot of negative comments made” (July 23, 2010). Sondra admitted that she was “a bit sketchy about replying cause you can never tell if it’s a spam letter or not” but she decided to answer my research request because she “like[s] to be helpful” (July 15, 2010).

The sense of researcher as outsider is not limited to online research of course, and has to do with larger issues of rapport and trust between researchers and their participants. Gaining rapport and trust from a pre-established online community that has experienced scrutiny in the past from “outsiders” is especially challenging, because there is little recourse for the researcher who receives no response. If a researcher is charged with “spamming” potential participants by sending personal emails or posting on a discussion board without permission from site moderators, they can be banned from accessing the site altogether by having their profiles deleted.

The failure to recruit more than three interview participants from thousands of potential respondents may have also been a result of my research questions and my approach. I suspect the academic jargon required in the pretext of my request may have disinclined people to read the entire request and questions. As well, I did not establish
myself as a familiar discussion board member before submitting my requests. This would have made it easy to ignore my requests given I was a stranger (even though I provided information about my institutional affiliations and myself in my request, and I was a regular “lurker” on the site and familiar with its discussion boards and blogs). This is a good indication of what a researcher may give up in choosing to remain outside of the online discussion: when it comes time to recruit participants, a lack of familiarity may diminish the likelihood of participation.

In an attempt to alter my approach and recruit more participants, I employed the snowball method of recruitment, by having one of my respondents who was a MMH board moderator and member to vouch for me and drum up more interview participants. Janice, who acknowledged that she had a modest following on MMH due to her presence and longevity on the discussion boards, took my request to some of her MMH moderator peers with the request that they participate. Even with her intervention and support, I did not receive any further interview respondents.

Despite the challenges with recruiting email interview participants, the participants I did come to interview provided thoughtful and nuanced responses to my questions, and each continued to correspond with me after they answered the initial interview questions. Each participant encouraged me to continue contacting her if I needed further clarification or wanted to know more. Likely, their willingness to respond in detail and maintain correspondence related to their interest in the research topic, in addition to their ability to write, their willingness to be self-reflective about cosmetic surgery and their own writing, and more practically, their access to a personal computer and free time to respond to my questions. I did work to establish rapport in my contact with the interview participants, which also worked to keep the lines of communication open and ongoing. My approach to establishing rapport and trust with my interview participants involved establishing a conversational tone in my emails. I wanted to demonstrate through my questions and comments that I did not have a predetermined conclusion in mind with regard to my project, that I respected and valued their opinions and insight, and that their experience using MMH and with cosmetic surgery was interesting to me on many levels. I tried to convey my genuine curiosity and my respect for them, and I made it a point to share my own struggles with some of the concepts we were discussing. For example, in my second interview dialogue with Janice, I phrased
my question about her repeated use of the term “normal” in a way that also shared my own concerns with the term:

“I don’t think that it is the responsibility of those people who undergo cosmetic surgery to become martyrs for the cause of self-acceptance, and I can understand that it would be desirable to eliminate experiences of ostracism, criticism, and discrimination through surgery, but I do wonder about our individual ability to resist media images and cultural practices (such as beauty pageants) that have a long history of sexism, racism, ageism, ableism, fat-hatred, etc. I was wondering if you could share your thoughts on this (what has become a complicated conundrum for me).” (Author, June 10, 2010)

I feel as though this approach garnered productive and equally conversational results from my respondents. I also tried to tailor my language to the tone and style of my participants. Janice was highly educated and wrote well; her responses were thorough and lengthy. As a result, I felt confident in writing lengthy and detailed questions and using an elevated language and style. In contrast, my responses from Carol tended to be short and direct and so I adopted a writing style that mimicked her own. This approach was successful, in part because I think it appealed to each participant’s writing preferences.

The challenges I encountered in recruiting email interview participants do not overshadow the fruitful conversations I did have with three women who I communicated with over the course of ten months. These three interviewees produced rich insights, which shed light into an area not previously studied. While my findings cannot be generalized to make conclusions about cosmetic surgery bloggers, they do highlight important links between cosmetic surgery blogger discourse and the discourse of makeover culture.

5.4 The Make Me Heal Bloggers

5.4.1 Sondra

From MMH, I received three responses from bloggers who were interested in being interviewed. All three are female and American. The first blogger, Sondra, was 34 at the time of her surgical procedure in 2008. She is a single, heterosexual woman with no children, and is African American. As an African American woman, Sondra is part of a small but growing demographic engaged in pursuing cosmetic surgery. The American
Society of Plastic Surgery reported that in 2010, 1.1 million African Americans, or eight per cent of the total number of patients, underwent elective cosmetic procedures. The procedures that Sondra has had, liposuction and a breast reduction, are the top two procedures requested by African American patients. Sondra has completed a Bachelors degree and works in entertainment as a costume maker and designer. She travelled to Beverly Hills, California from her home in Florida for her procedure, which consisted of liposuction to her abdomen and lower back. Her blog contained thirty-two entries, beginning three days after her procedure and following her healing process until she was three months post-surgery. Sondra wrote an average of one paragraph per post, and her posts described her challenges with pain, swelling, and the frustration of having to wait to see the effects of the procedure. She wrote regularly about her compression garments, her workday, her clothing and her weight. Sondra had the support of her family and friends, and did not keep her procedure a secret from them. In her blog, Sondra expressed satisfaction with her procedure, her cosmetic surgeon and his team, and her results. By June 2010, Sondra’s blog had recorded 8 280 visits since she began writing in 2008.

Sondra wrote her blog using an informal and congenial tone, and she regularly made statements at an implied reader looking for information on liposuction. She also included several “note to self” statements within her posts, as though she were writing personal reminders about her healing process. One of the most frequent topics of discussion on Sondra’s blog was the lumpiness and swelling she experienced after her surgery, a common side effect of liposuction that results from fluid collection in the treated area, which Sondra described as feeling “like a sack of potatoes” in her abdomen (May 21, 2008). In her blog she described the levels of swelling, fluid retention, and lumpiness she experienced on a day to day basis, and despite her concerns with these post-surgical effects, she always maintained a positive voice and claimed that it was all worth it for the end result, that is, a defined waist and buttocks. Sondra used positive self-talk in her blog entries, rationalizing her moments of pain, fear and frustration with reminders to herself to be patient:

So my night was not too great. Instead of pain meds, I took a muscle relaxant. It didn't work. My body feels like a train ran over it. Now that I am

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bloated the compression garment is getting tighter and harder to wear. I’m getting tired of feeling like an invalid. My brain is saying move faster, but my body isn’t doing it. It’s harder for me to feel weak because I am so used to feeling strong being able to do things by myself and not needing help. In my limited mobility, definitely having someone around would be great. I’ve been getting frustrated at myself for not being able to do things. I gotta keep reminding myself that all of the pain is worth it in the end. I am finally going to have my dream shape, no belly bulging. I know it takes time to heal and I have to be patient. (May 18, 2008)

Sondra’s procedure challenged her independence and she struggled repeatedly with having to take things slowly, particularly her gym routine. After having spent one year working with a personal trainer before surgery, Sondra expressed concern that her lapse in gym workouts would result in weight gain, which would sabotage the nine pounds of fat removed with liposuction. She wrote about unsuccessful post-surgery gym workouts in her blog entries, when her over-exertion led to pain and swelling (May 28, 2008; June 10, 2008).

Another concern raised by Sondra in her blog was the irregularity of her menstrual cycle post-surgery. She was told that one of the side effects of liposuction may be irregularity, but after six weeks of bleeding, she admitted, “this is nuts” (June 25, 2008). In a similar fashion to the optimism demonstrated in the longer quotation above, Sondra followed her frustration with positive self-talk, claiming that the results were worth the pain and side effects of liposuction: “It was still worth it for me to have the procedure done. Nothing beats looking at yourself in the mirror and actually loving what you see...” (June 25, 2008). A recurring theme in her blog is the acknowledgment that pain is a requirement for beauty, and she refers to herself as a “glutton for punishment” when she admits that working out causes her pain and swelling (June 12, 2008). She also rationalizes the pain she feels because of having had fat removed from around her tailbone, stating, “I think I would not be in as much pain had it not been for that area. But beauty is pain and because I had that area done, now I have a booty!” (May 26, 2008).

The notion that a woman’s appearance requires alteration and that process of alteration is a painful one, is consistent with the discourse and imagery in makeover culture, and makeover reality TV in particular. However, the micro-bodily practises of self-care detailed by Sondra in her blog go further than the transformation stories on The Swan, and in doing so, Sondra’s blog posts reveal her body in continuous transformation and potentially out of control. The Swan reigned in the out-of-control body by shaming it into...
submission (i.e. contestants who complained too much, ate too much, or refused to comply with the aftercare requirements of their post-surgical regimen were eliminated).

Sondra’s physical limitations after surgery conflicted with her “brain” and her sense of herself as a strong person. The mind/body opposition persisted beyond the procedure, even though makeover culture discourse promises a truer reflection and harmony of the mind and body through body modification. Sondra dealt with this persistent divide through the personal reminder that pain would lead to positive results. Thus, she recuperated the physical pain in her “technology of the self” in a way that
naturalized its presence, despite her frustration and temporary disability. Sondra replicates makeover culture discourse here by framing pain as a necessary part of the story, a rite of passage rather than a burden. The vivid detail with which Sondra describes the pain and discomfort of her healing body exposes the violence done to the modified body in makeover culture, similar to that made visible by The Swan web forums. However, Sondra’s documentation of the pain she experienced is contextualized within a story that has a beginning, middle and ending. This narrative insulation ‘makes sense’ of the pain she endures, while trauma talk in the personal narratives of the forum contributors was never resolved. Instead, it was magnified by its lack of resolution and the repetition by so many contributors. While the forums brought the violence of makeover culture into relief for what it promised to women who had suffered trauma and abuse, Sondra’s blog entries lingered on the post-surgical pain of healing from the trauma inflicted on her by the liposuction procedure itself. Two sides to the same coin, if you will; writing the violence of makeover culture in what it promises to solve (emotional pain) and in what it does to the body afterwards (physical pain).

Sondra’s blog also utilized a popular trope of makeover culture, the Reveal, to describe her first encounter with her family at a wedding she attended approximately one month after her procedure. Sondra noted that she had to “do show and tell” for her family members, who “asked [her] a million questions” about her liposuction. She received positive feedback from her family, who “kept remarking how great [she] look[s]. They were very surprised to see [she] had a booty now!” (June 4, 2008). Sondra described this event and the support she received as “exciting,” and described her pleasure when she received compliments about her post-surgery weight from her co-workers (June 16, 2008; July 28, 2008). She expressed excitement about buying and fitting into new clothes and attracting male attention as positive effects of her surgery. She joked about
becoming a narcissist and an exhibitionist because she was so happy with the way that she looked: “This is the first time in my life that I can say I look better out of clothes than in them! I’m endangered [sic] to become an exhibitionist!” (May 30, 2008). Her comment about becoming narcissistic was similarly phrased, and appeared at the end of the blog entry in the same location as the comment above: “If I’m this happy about clothes fitting better when I’m only 11 days postlipo then I’m endangered [sic] to become a narcissitic! [sic] (Just Kidding) I will still remain my normal crazy self but HOTTER!!” (May 23, 2008).

Sondra’s cosmetic surgery narrative correlates personal success with visual pleasure. She links happiness with her appearance and her ability to adorn her body in ways that were unavailable to her in her pre-surgical body. She playfully invokes narcissism and exhibitionism to express pride in her body. Furthermore, the approval of others reinforces her expression of pleasure at looking at her new figure, including her friends, co-workers, family, and male acquaintances. The discourse of Sondra’s blog entries demonstrates what Rosalind Gill describes as the construction of “new femininities” in postfeminist culture, whereby the sexual objectification of women in media and popular culture is knowingly recuperated and “organized around sexual confidence and autonomy” (“Sexual Objectification” 103). Gill calls this shift a movement from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification. Sondra’s blog associates her heterosexual desirability with her body shape, and she measures her success with the looks of, and the desire to be looked at by, heterosexual men. Indeed, she identifies the “best part” of her surgical experience this way: “men I have known are looking at me differently. (exactly what I wanted!!)” (July 13, 2008). Sondra’s narrative reclaims the look of the desirous male and turns it into a self-empowering and self-motivated act, a postfeminist trend that has been identified in contemporary porn culture (Levy; Pitcher; Whitehead and Kurtz), advertising (Gill “Empowerment /Sexism”) and reality television (McRobbie “Notes on ‘What Not to Wear’”). These elements of postfeminist discourse, operationalized in Sondra’s blog, are heightened in Sondra’s email interview responses. Her discursive choices utilize postfeminist ideologies of individual choice, freedom, and self-governance. In doing so, they demonstrate some of the inherent contradictions of makeover culture.

Sondra thinks critically about the media’s portrayal of women, and identifies as a feminist. She wrote a blog about her cosmetic surgery experience in order to “educate
other black people by sharing what went on and showing [her] results,” because she claims, “there are not many black people that have plastic surgery that share their experience” (September 17, 2009). She identifies problems with images of women in popular culture, and accepts her body despite its differences from idealized and normalized images of beauty:

Sondra: “The thin frame, large boobs and small waistlines are all over magazine covers. I can see how that can wreak havoc on a woman’s self esteem. I have learned over the years to accept some things about my body. I will never be a size five or be called dainty by any means.” (ibid)

Alongside her critical perspective of notions of beauty, Sondra simultaneously appropriates a neoliberal and postfeminist discourse of choice when describing why makeover reality TV shows like The Swan are empowering: “More power to the people that got that opportunity. And if you think getting your flaws fixed will help that than [sic] do it.” (ibid). Sondra described her liposuction as an “enhancement of who [she is]” and that her surgery allowed her “to pursue [her] dreams” (ibid). The coexistence of competing discourses in Sondra’s narrative is exemplary of postfeminist blurring of political and ideological boundaries; that is, the critical analysis of normalized and idealized beauty standards from a feminist perspective, intermingle with the celebration and encouragement of body modification as personally liberating. While the body modification Sondra celebrates inherently relies on the same standards of beauty she critiques, within postfeminist discourse there is room for contradiction and versatility (Projansky 68).

Sarah Projansky describes postfeminist discourse as complex, adaptable, pervasive, and versatile (68). Contradiction and versatility are also central to Sondra’s description of the differences and similarities between her liposuction which she blogged about on MMH, and her breast reduction surgery, which she had in 1992 during her senior year of high school. At the beginning of her response to my question about her breast reduction, she notes that both surgeries “had a similar mental affect” in that they “both got rid of things about [her] body that [she] didn’t like” (June 10, 2010). And yet, Sondra was adamant that the procedures were different: “I do think about the procedures differently. The breast reduction was a necessity for health and mental reasons and the liposculpture was an aesthetic reason” (ibid). She stated that the breast
reduction “cause[d] the biggest change in my personality. I felt a huge weight lifted off
my shoulders” (ibid). She makes a distinction between the procedures based on a binary
of health care versus aesthetic product. However, she begins to blur the lines towards
the end of her response about her breast reduction when she describes the support she
received from her family during her liposuction: “They all knew how hard I worked out to
try and shrink my waistline with diet and exercise only to have it shrink a tiny bit” (ibid).
Here, Sondra begins to justify her decision to undergo an aesthetic procedure with a
deserved reward for hard work and physical effort to lose the weight herself. She
discursively positions herself as an entitled candidate for liposuction because she has
earned it through strict diet and exercise that did not produce the desired results of
thinness. Immediately after this statement, Sondra minimizes the difference between her
breast reduction and her liposuction: “I think to me they are similar” (ibid). This narrowing
of difference occurs within two paragraphs and is similar to makeover culture discourse,
which often blurs the boundaries between moral assumptions about medically necessary
procedures and elective cosmetic procedures. The personal narratives of makeover
television participants are exemplary of this tendency, but interviews with Canadian
women who have had breast reduction also indicate the hazy line between ‘need’ and
‘want’ that persists in makeover culture discourse (Naugler).

The moral distinctions acknowledged and then undone by Sondra, between
medically-necessary body modification and elective cosmetic procedures, are addressed
 overtly in the next blogger’s interviews; Janice is adamant that the elective cosmetic
procedures she underwent were medically-necessary, and she worked hard to make the
discursive and moral link between them in her email exchanges with me. Socially
acceptable forms of body modification such as breast reduction are naturalized if they
produce a body more in line with social expectations of female beauty and if they
alleviate physical pain. Procedures considered purely cosmetic still face lingering
judgements of frivolity and vanity; therefore, they require further justification through
appeals to mental wellbeing or by arguing for their inclusion as medically valid. Framing
liposuction as a reward for hard work that has not produced the desired results has
begun to creep into the socially-valid because of the current social panic regarding the
‘obesity epidemic.’ Sondra hints at this, through the slippage between want and need in
her description of her liposuction first as “aesthetic reason” and then as “similar” to her
medically necessary breast reduction. As I will elaborate in the next section, Janice’s
emphatic claims that her surgeries were medically necessary exemplify a “technology of
the self” that mirrors the naturalization of some elective procedures as more socially acceptable for people who uphold strict gender-sex congruity and who undergo elective procedures that are not out of the ordinary. The media buzz over the ‘obesity epidemic’ in the US has made room for the naturalization of body modification procedures such as liposuction, if they produce bodies that demonstrate the will of the state to police body sizes. Sondra’s initial differentiation of breast reduction and liposuction shifts, just as a shift has taken place in the discursive formation of fat bodies as sick and in need of change in state medical discourse and mainstream media.

5.4.2 Janice

The second interview participant, Janice, also relied on the distinctions between what she referred to as reconstructive surgeries and elective surgeries in her interview responses, and she went further by arguing passionately that people who undergo cosmetic surgery after extreme weight loss are remaking their broken bodies and restoring their lives. She repeatedly referred to ‘normalcy’ as a goal of this group of body modifiers, who she described as “misunderstood in their intentions” (February 27, 2010), while criticizing the vanity, excess and freakishness of others whom she perceived to have gone overboard with elective cosmetic surgery. Like Sondra, Janice’s interview responses reflect the contradictions inherent in postfeminist and makeover culture discourse: in particular, her ability to be highly critical of popular culture and media images, while also working incredibly hard to construct a body that meets the demands of idealized beauty norms. Janice was more overt about these contradictions in her writing, dealing with them and accepting them as such in her responses to me.

Janice answered my request through the MML message boards after my first round of interview requests to bloggers returned only two respondents. I had peppered the discussion boards with a general request to bloggers, and as a board moderator, Janice expressed interest as well as advice upon our first contact. Janice is a fifty-four year old woman, who began undergoing a complex series of cosmetic surgery procedures at age forty-nine to remove excess skin after having lost 160 lbs. She has spent close to $40,000 on her procedures, plus an additional $20,000 covered by her health insurance provider after she experienced complications because of surgery. She is Caucasian, heterosexual, upper-middle class and highly educated. Janice fits into the statistical majority of cosmetic surgery recipients. However, she adamantly refuses to be
identified as vain, materialistic, or beauty seeking (characteristics she herself associates with many people who undergo cosmetic surgery “for the wrong reasons”). Janice did not maintain a blog on MMH over the long term, although she did post a blog entry after her surgeries were complete, which she had planned to develop into a reflective blog detailing her surgical journey over the course of six years. She removed the blog shortly after posting it, for fear of jeopardizing her anonymity. She saved that blog post though, and sent it to me along with her responses to my original interview questions.

Although Janice was not a typical cosmetic surgery blogger (in that she did not maintain an active blog on MMH), she was a mainstay on the MMH discussion boards, in particular the Tummy Tuck/Abdominoplasty board. Her role as a moderator and frequent poster led to what she described as a “following,” and her presence on the boards was substantial, with over three thousand posts to her user profile. She described herself as a “diehard” who stayed active on the MMH discussion boards well after she had completed her cosmetic surgeries because she wanted to “give back” and help people (February 27, 2010; June 10, 2010). This sense of altruism was present in all three interview participants’ responses, and Janice, Sondra and Carol each mentioned that they had initially become readers of MMH forums and blogs because they were looking for support during their own procedures. However, during the course of their procedures and healing, each noted their commitment to helping others by sharing information with women interested in or pursuing similar surgeries. Janice was the longest-running contributor to MMH, while both Sondra and Carol had left MMH after they became bored with the repetition of content and their surgical journeys were behind them.

Janice’s decision to become an active member of MMH developed from her personal offline journaling, which became a participatory dialogue with other MMH users for the purposes of support during her own surgeries and healing. She then transitioned into a support role where she could “share [her] experience with others—helping them—but also satisfying [her] own needs of feeling important, valuable and respected” (ibid). The community aspect of MMH continued to be important for Janice, and she has become a committed member and moderator of discussion boards on the site. Her commitment to advocacy as well as a love of writing and a desire to feel valued and respected motivated her role as a moderator. The cultural capital that comes with the title moderator is also valuable on the MMH forums; recognition and a “following” was clearly a benefit of the role for Janice. While forum moderators are not paid for their
work, there are indications on the boards that they receive “deep discounts on anti-aging skincare and recovery products” sold through the MMH website.\footnote{Make_Me_Heal_Team. “Seeking Moderator for Breast Augmentation Message Board.” 18 May 2011, <http://www.makemeheal.com/forum/viewThread.jsp?forum=4&thread=31104>}. Without discrediting the pleasure and care in her role, Janice’s unpaid labour as a forum moderator also produces value for MMH in a similar way that fan activity on the Fox web forums produced value for Fox in creating hype for the series and gathering audiences for internal and external advertising on the site. Mark Andrejevic’s work on interactive fan labour “attempt[s] to understand and elucidate the ways in which creative activity and exploitation coexist and interpenetrate one another within the context of the emerging online economy” ("Watching Television" 25). From this perspective, it becomes clear that Janice’s labour on MMH (over three thousand posts!) worked in the service of not only the forum readers, but also of MMH. If Janice performed her duties as moderator effectively, she would create brand loyalty for forum readers and participants that might extend to purchases made on the site, site referrals, and repeat site visits. Janice’s devotion to the message boards and the pleasure she expressed in being an expert was utilized (or manipulated) by MMH for profit, similar to Tasha on the Swan forums, who repeatedly posted instructions for application procedures. While it is impossible to tell if the value Janice took from her role as forum moderator was equal in value to the profit made by MMH from her work, it is important to consider, since it demonstrates the integral role of interactive ‘audiences’ in the success of the online economy described by Andrejevic.

In Janice’s first contact with me, she suggested I should reconsider my approach for soliciting interviewees because, according to her, “there is a major distinction between cosmetic surgery and plastic or reconstructive surgery” and “differentiating between the two procedures is important” (February 26, 2010). The moral implications of this division became a recurring topic of discussion between Janice and me. Other aspects central to her interview responses were the interrelated ideas about the normal body, choice, and self-care within a neoliberal framework.

Janice described her decision to undergo cosmetic surgery, including an arm lift, tummy tuck, breast lift, and liposuction, as an attempt to “reconstruct [her] body to normal proportions” after extensive weight loss (February 27, 2010). She was emphatic
in answer to my question about whether her cosmetic surgery experience has changed her life:

Janice: “Life-changing, life-enhancing, life-SAVING – that’s how I felt after my surgeries. The improvements have been amazing – my results are outstanding – and because of the transformations I have achieved I feel like living again, as a normal human being. I feel like a woman who was given a second chance at living a normal life.”

(ibid)

The discourse of salvation and rebirth also runs throughout Janice’s unpublished blog entry. The discordance between body and inner self is foundational to her narrative, and she describes her body as disfigured and abject, something that misrepresents and betrays the person she feels she is inside. The story she constructs of her salvation has at its centre a heroic representation of her plastic surgeon, a god-like figure, who “restored [her] life, reconstructed [her] life, and saved [her] life” (ibid). The projection of this type of status and gratitude onto (male) surgeons is familiar in makeover culture, and The Swan created a similar trope through the figures of Dr. Terry Dubrow and Dr. Randal Haworth.

Janice was highly critical of mainstream media’s representation of cosmetic surgery, despite acknowledging that Extreme Makeover was a motivating force in her decision to consult with a cosmetic surgeon. After completing her surgical procedures, she reflected on the problems with makeover reality TV:

Janice: “The show really failed to accurately portray the difficult and sometimes devastating healing stages that followed plastic surgery. The infections, split incisions, hematomas, seromas, necrosis, scarring, extensive suturing, swelling, skin rashes, haemorrhaging, pulmonary embolisms, collapsed lungs, vision loss, blood transfusions, reactions to anaesthesia, and even mutilations are never portrayed on TV but are the harsh realities of this type of surgery.” (ibid)

The elaborate list Janice produced above was a way of showing me her level of knowledge in the area of cosmetic surgery complications, but it is also a realistic representation of the risks involved with any surgical procedure. The lack of visible post-
surgical complications on makeover reality TV shows (The Swan included) diminishes the risks of such procedures in makeover culture. Naming the complications in such a way, Janice demands that they be acknowledged as a part of the makeover. In the process of naming these events of bodily disorder, she challenges the stability of bodily integrity. The potential for the body to revolt against its modifications reminds us that we are not complete or stable beings (even once we have modified our bodies). Indeed, breast implants must be replaced; Botox re-injected once it has dissipated; facelifts retouched after time; that is if the body does not reject the implanted or injected product in the first place. Makeover reality TV tacitly ignores this by focusing on gender-sex congruent makeovers that produce hyperfeminine bodies, as I have demonstrated in chapter three.

Janice argued that the media’s inaccurate portrayal of cosmetic surgery on makeover reality TV, and its tendency to fetishized extreme cosmetic surgery celebrities was detrimental to “average people who just want to be and feel normal again” (ibid). This division, between cosmetic surgery freaks and ‘average people,’ remained a salient binary throughout our conversations, even when I pressed Janice about concepts of normalcy and ideal beauty standards established in the media.

She suggested that a concept of normal in relation to appearance was “relative” and based on socialization as well as media exposure. Janice defined normal as “proportion in body parts, firm skin, thick hair, small nose, big eyes, full lips, clear complexion, [and] flat stomach. In other words, normal was everything that WASN’T me, even with my armour [her excess weight] removed” (June 10, 2010). Her description of normal sounds more like conventional beauty (young, and thin, and based on a white ideal), and this too is a product of makeover culture, which raises the bar on beauty. If beauty is marketed as something that is deserved, reflective of one’s inner self, and readily available (through discounted prices or credit), then it is not surprising that the expectations of “normal” become so narrowed. Since Janice identified as abnormal, she described cosmetic surgery as “empowerment” because it brought her closer to her perception of normalcy in a way nothing else could. Janice’s feeling of betrayal after losing so much weight (her “armour”), and still feeling like a freak was alleviated through her cosmetic surgery. Notably, the appeal of normalcy and the professed desire to become “normal” is a mainstay of makeover culture discourse. One significant reason why appeals to normalcy are so popular on makeover reality TV is the opportunity for
viewer empathy. If a series can evoke viewer empathy for participants who want to fit in and find happiness, it has a better chance at a faithful long-term audience base, and can potentially outlast the shock and spectacle that may have drawn viewer curiosity to the series in the first place. Constructing cosmetic surgery and its practitioners within a morally-upright framework helps boost the public perception of the industry, which still suffers from bouts of bad press and renewed calls for tighter regulations, and lingering suspicions about the blurry line the industry straddles between medicine and consumer marketing.¹⁰⁰

Janice’s blog entry takes the moral appeal used in makeover reality TV to dramatic lengths. She structured her entry as a quest narrative, and she used themes and tropes familiar in heroic quest stories to situate her desire to resume a life of normalcy. This included references to battle, resistant forces, an upward climb, obstacles, enduring great physical pain, “seemingly insurmountable hurdles" that she had to “triumph over,” and “struggling to move forward against unrelenting forces working against [her]” (Blog post, unpublished). This seemingly contradictory combination (the use of heightened drama to reflect upon a desire to blend in, become less noticeable), is also a familiar discursive trend in makeover culture discourse. I do not discount Janice’s experience, its authenticity, or her telling of it, but it is crucial to consider the implications of the crossover between makeover culture narratives in mainstream media and in personal blogs. By framing her cosmetic surgery experience as a heroic journey, Janice deflects criticism of her procedures as vain or motivated by narcissism. Instead, Janice’s pain and hardship take centre stage, and the reader is encouraged to sympathize with her for her epic struggles towards self-love. Her “agency repertoires” are useful because they undercut accusations of vanity, which was a strategy similarly employed by women who testified in the FDA hearings against silicone breast implants in the US in 1991 and 1992 (Fraser 177).

While Janice’s cosmetic surgery narrative established her as an empowered agent, she compares her pre-surgical self as a victim, trapped in her own body:

The outcome of losing over 160 pounds was not what I had expected. It was not glorious, triumphant, or a remarkable accomplishment. The massive weight loss produced horrendous folds of redundant skin and flab, which was not only aesthetically devastating to me but physically uncomfortable as well. My skin had not shrunken to accommodate the fat loss and I looked as if I was melting, shrivelling inside my own body in a skin suit fit for someone who weighed 320 pounds. The flaps of skin developed rashes and odors as sweat would accumulate in the hot deep folds. Parts of my body were hidden from my view for years, either concealed by the fat or camouflaged by the skin apron that was a part of my newly-developed physical composition[...]. I creatively hid this carnage that resembled unbaked pizza dough, and my family was never aware of the actual extent of my deformities. (Blog post, unpublished)

I quote this passage at length (with permission), because it evokes such a tragic sense of shame and polarization of inside and outside. The incongruity of self and body and the internalization of fat hatred is palpable. This passage also underscores the cultural fear and hatred of the abject body and its dangers: the abject exposes the unstable boundaries of the human body, which is repulsive because it reminds us of our mortality and animal nature (Kristeva 12). The re-containment of Janice’s body through surgery, the restoration of her body to order and solid boundaries, reflects the continued cultural valuation of objectivity, mind over body, and a fixed, stable identity.

Feminist and bio-ethicist Margaret Shildrick studies the experiences of women as they navigated medical institutions that systematically positioned them in passive, subjected roles: as more body than mind, as always already disorderly, as reproductive machines, as eruptive and out of control. She described a medical system that offers subjectivity and praises moral agency insofar as it results in bodily containment and order. Janice’s desire to control her leakiness, her flaps of skin that she described as resembling uncooked pizza dough, was also the desire to be treated as an autonomous subject. The appeal of the cosmetic surgery industry in Janice’s case, was that it was perhaps the only outlet within Western medical institutions where she would be addressed as a rational subject and where her incomplete, flawed, and messy self could be treated with success. At least that was the promise made to her by her cosmetic surgeon, who she described as patient, selfless, and compassionate (blog entry, unpublished).
However, upon reflection and in answer to my question about the problem of working towards a “normal” appearance, Janice admitted that cosmetic surgery was both restorative and perpetually unsatisfying. She claimed that while cosmetic surgery was “empowerment” because it provided an outlet to deal with the unexpected consequences of acute weight loss, it also led to her continued scrutiny and desire for improvement, something she described as “forever trying to go up the down escalator” (February 27, 2010). As a graphic artist, Janice acknowledged that her familiarity with the behind-the-scenes doctoring that occurs in magazine advertising should have helped her understand that the ideal body is based on an artistic and technological construct, and therefore not a logical ideal to aim for. But Janice’s career skills did not alleviate her desire to look like celebrities in magazines:

Janice: “I am a digital graphic artist and I know better than to believe that the images I see are what the models and celebrities actually look like. But I want to look like those images. They are better than normal. They are a benchmark that I want desperately to reach. For acceptance from everyone but mostly for acceptance for myself.” (ibid)

The contradiction inherent in Janice’s simultaneous sense of empowerment and failure from her surgery exemplifies the problem with postfeminist media’s attempts to frame consumerism as a liberatory act (McRobbie, Postmodernism 32); there is no end because there is always more to purchase, as a capitalist system demands. Moreover, consumer choices are never free from the context in which they are made, including class issues and gendered roles assigned to consumption (32). Janice described being sucked into a cycle of consumption that left her feeling inadequate:

Janice: “[Plastic surgery] gave me the ability to achieve what I perceived as a normal appearance. But not quite. Because every time a milestone was reached, something else looked a bit off- needing adjustment. [...] No matter how hard I tried, I was not going to look as good as those images in the magazines, and no matter what I did, the aging process would always keep setting me a few steps backwards as I tried moving forwards in my restoration.” (ibid)
Janice’s admission that she was both unsatisfied with her appearance after her surgeries and that her procedures would always be impacted by aging, are admissions that remain unspeakable in makeover reality TV, and yet it is the basis for the marketing of the beauty and diet industries that profit from makeover culture’s ubiquity. The schism this creates is painful for Janice, who recognized the impossible challenges of working towards an image of beauty that is so narrow. What we see in the above quote is another instance of the superimposing of beauty with normalcy, and as such, normalcy becomes impossible to attain once Janice is engaged in cosmetic body modification. Janice finally drew a line, deciding that her body was ‘good enough’ and that she no longer wanted to endure more surgery and the pain and potential complications it would entail. She chose, finally, to “accept the imperfections that remain” (blog entry, unpublished). Janice framed this self-acceptance as empowering, which led to her position as a mentor and advisor on MMH.

In contrast to Janice, Carol, the third and final email-interview participant in this study, took a very no-nonsense approach to her procedures, which she treated as straightforward transactions between herself and her cosmetic surgeon. Her cosmetic surgery narrative reflects another aspect of makeover culture discourse in a postfeminist and neoliberal context, in which cosmetic surgery is just another tool in a beauty arsenal that allows her to restore her physical appearance to match her sense of her inner self as a youthful, joyful and feminine woman.

5.4.3 Carol

Carol is a sixty-one year old woman from Pennsylvania, who, at age fifty-nine, decided to have a facelift including a neck lift and an upper eyelid lift. She is a Caucasian, heterosexual woman married to a man fifteen years her junior, who has recently retired from a life-long career in social welfare. She maintained a blog on MMH during her recovery period, which included seven entries beginning in 2008. By 2010, her blog had been viewed 3,347 times. Like Sondra, Carol told her friends and co-workers about her procedures, and she primarily used her MMH blog to chart the course of her day-to-day recovery. She focused on specific concerns including the after-care immediately following surgery, the persistent post-op numbness in her neck and ears, challenges in adequately covering her bruising to return to work and go out in public places, and dealing with pain and the reality that healing would take longer than she
anticipated. In contrast with Carol and Sondra’s blogs, Janice wrote her one and only blog post retrospectively, and, as a result, it was reflective and carefully crafted. Carol’s blog was more of a laundry list of concerns or daily events, recording the micro-bodily practices of recovery such as her hair-washing strategy or her sleep patterns in the immediate aftermath of her surgery. Though less stylistically constructed, Carol’s blog was self-reflective, especially as her surgery stretched behind her and her life and functionality returned to normal. At four months post-op, Carol signed off her blog and informed readers she was “moving on”:

[…] at this point the face is MINE when I look at it - YES!!!! I retired from work - have more time to spend on me & beauty routines. I feel good. My appearance matches how I feel inside. It’s fun to put on make up. I have to admit that for me, this was a great decision and I have no regrets. I feel I did it at the right time of my life. The only con left is the tight feeling under the chin (neck noose). Not bad but I know it’s there. When I’m tired I tend to get dark areas on cheeks. Can’t think of any other complaints. (Blog entry 7)

Carol repeated claims that her new appearance matched how she feels on the inside in our email conversations, in response to my question about whether cosmetic surgery had changed her life. She stated that now she felt like her inside and outside matched, that she had previously looked older than she felt, and that she liked the renewed attention she received as a result of looking younger and feeling more outgoing (August 17, 2009). However, in the same paragraph she responded that cosmetic surgery had not changed her life: “Not a life changing event that I couldn’t have lived without but makes everything just a little more fun” (ibid). Carol’s approach to cosmetic surgery, as a tool for increased happiness, and a reward for a healthy, active lifestyle, is prevalent in makeover culture industry literature and advertising, especially cosmetic surgery and cosmetics advertising (explored in chapter two).

Carol describes herself as a very healthy person; a trait that she implies is outside the norm. This distinction hints at her sense of entitlement to the reward of a youthful-looking face, since she does not suffer from ailments that another fifty-nine year old woman might. The following appears in her blog entry for the day of her facelift, as part of her breakdown of the day’s events: “Chat with the anesthetist [sic] who was amazed as usual that I had all internal organs, on no medication, don’t smoke etc.” (Blog entry 1, my italics). Later, Carol’s representation of herself as a good patient reflects another instance of neoliberal ideology; that is, her cosmetic surgery was successful
because she followed all of the after-care instructions, something that she intones is an exception rather than the norm. As I demonstrated in chapter two, the association of cosmetic surgery with good health and preventative maintenance practices is a part of a larger neoliberal framework, where the self-regulating citizen is the good citizen, and where state interference is minimized. The expectation that individuals are responsible for their health and safety is a part of a political trend towards deregulation of national social welfare systems and cuts to government programming, prevalent since the Reagan era in the USA. In the case of cosmetic surgery narratives, Carol's good health provides her with deserving candidacy for surgery, and her ability to be a good patient after the surgery secures her status as successful consumer citizen.

In her description of her encounter with her cosmetic surgeon at her one month post-operative check up, Carol positions herself in partnership with the surgeon, whose 'artistic' and surgical skills are just one part of the equation of a successful surgical procedure:

AND he gave me a hug at the reception desk and said how pleased he was with the outcome. I'm sure it's great for his 'artistic' nature when he does all that work and has a patient who follows all directions and heals well and it all comes out like it should. (Blog entry 4)

Carol's perceived partnership with her cosmetic surgeon, he as the skilled surgeon, she as the self-disciplined and careful patient, exemplifies what feminist scholars have noted concerning makeover culture's neoliberal tenets: demonstrated self-determination, self-regulation, and self-care defines moral worth. While Janice put her cosmetic surgeon up on a pedestal, as a saviour and benevolent expert, Carol took credit for her surgical success, recognizing that she had a hand in the outcome of her surgery. The credit she took in the passage above demystifies the power of the cosmetic surgeon in the traditional patient/doctor representation in makeover culture, but it also positions Carol in an agentic role despite her capitulation to beauty norms. Carol downplayed the contradiction in this positioning later in our email conversations, as she maintained a commonsense approach to her surgery.

Another thing that added to the implied agency in Carol's cosmetic surgery narrative was the emphasis on the consumer transaction between herself and her cosmetic surgeon; she noted casually: “I had the money saved and - well - what the heck” (Blog entry 1). Carol mentioned twice in her first blog post the cost of the surgery
and the payment she made in full, up-front, after the initial $600 deposit. She also noted the full price for her combined procedures, $12,875. Establishing herself as a consumer in her first blog post, Carol constructed her cosmetic surgery narrative as a financial exchange, rather than a life-saving or life-altering event. She justified the amount of money invested in her facelift by arguing that at least this type of investment showed returns, while the US financial crisis of 2008 may have prevented her from seeing any profit from her savings at all. She stated: “In a way, I'm glad I did this with my money because my savings/investments are shot with the dive the economy took and at least this money was used for something that makes me happy instead of just disappearing.” Here, the value of happiness has a price, and, in an unstable economy, investing in one's body is anything but frivolous since the volatility of the market made all savings strategies unstable. Carol's legitimization of her surgery and its costs coincides with post-feminist ideologies of personal transformation, pleasure, and choice examined in chapter two.

Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer point out that on makeover reality TV, “gender performance is, within this context, one more pleasurable commodity, one more way to celebrate the individual body” (269). Claiming to become a more authentic version of oneself through cosmetic surgery, or that one’s choices are personally motivated and disconnected from cultural contexts that affect our choices and desires, is a common trope in makeover reality TV that celebrates women’s choices to transform their bodies as empowering. Carol reproduced this type of discourse in her interview responses, explaining that: “My surgery was a good decision for me. I think I had the right reason. I didn’t expect it to please anyone but myself. I didn’t want to look 21 just better for my age. I don’t plan on having further surgery but just to age naturally from now on” (August 17, 2009). Carol’s narrative reproduces the self-pleasure model studied by Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer: the celebration of the individual in a post-feminist media culture that requires an affirmation of personal motivation rather than external coercion to justify cosmetic surgery. But Carol’s claim also returns to the interesting question of post-surgical self-acceptance that Janice achieved only after conceding that more surgery would not be in her best interest. Similarly, Carol resigns herself to aging ‘naturally’ after her facelift.

101 This quote comes from Carol’s participation in the MML message boards rather than her blog (“6 Month Pictures Posted-Woohoo.” Facelift Message Board. Make Me Heal, 1 Dec. 2008).
While it might seem pertinent to ask, “what is aging naturally, after a facelift?” a somatechnics approach urges us to consider “What is aging naturally at all?” As I explored in chapter four and in my analysis of Sondra’s classification of her two surgeries, procedures deemed medically necessary in a North American context are naturalized in such a way that bodily integrity or authenticity are not in jeopardy, while elective cosmetic surgery remains marked by accusations of inauthenticity or plasticity. Makeover culture works hard to overcome the moral standards differentiating elective cosmetic procedures from established needs-based medical procedures, by creating personal narratives of emotional trauma and need. The seeming contradiction identified by the question “What is aging naturally after a facelift?” illustrates my point; if Carol had spent her savings on a hip replacement instead of a facelift, would it warrant the same question? What if she were to have written: “I don’t plan to have more than one hip replacement, since I’m sixty-one. I don’t want to feel twenty-one, just better for my age. I think it was a good investment, since I am happy now and anyway, my money would have been lost if I had left it in stocks.” While it is not productive to base critical analysis on speculative “what if” scenarios, this hypothetical exercise sheds light on the naturalization of modification procedures deemed medically necessary. Like a facelift, a hip replacement produces a hybrid body; however, the cultural ideology that medical necessity does not complicate the subject identity or one’s bodily integrity erases the production of the hybrid and its constructedness. My goal is not to suggest that a hip replacement and a facelift are identical; clearly, there are gendered, raced, and classed ideologies attached to the facelift. Instead, I want to expose the cultural logic that erases hybridity on some bodies but not others. The question implying incongruity between ‘aging naturally’ and a facelift is itself a technology of thought that shapes how we come to understand embodied practice, or the ways that bodies come to matter. For example, in a country such as Brazil the government’s national health care system funds (some) cosmetic surgery procedures, the technology of thought or the cultural logics around need are shaped quite differently.¹⁰² The point is that ethical decisions and cultural judgments are not pure in medicine; rather, cultural beliefs weigh heavily in the

¹⁰² My intent is not to oversimplify the complexities of cosmetic surgery or the role of the state in Brazil, either. For a nuanced analysis of the state’s role in producing surgical subjects, see Alvaro Jarrin’s “The Rise of the Cosmetic Nation: Plastic Governmentality and Hybrid Medical Practices in Brazil.” Medical Anthropology: Cross-Cultural Studies in Health and Illness 31.3 (2012): 213-228.
technologies that regulate body modification, and they remain contextual, changing and economically situated.

In North American makeover culture, technologies of thought that regulate body modification separating need from desire also regulate the levels of acceptable cosmetic body modification, as I have demonstrated in chapter two, such as the trope of *National Enquirer* covers that routinely pronounce: “Plastic Surgery Shockers!” (Appendix A). The boundaries of acceptable cosmetic surgery were also drawn in Carol’s blog and interview text. Like Janice, Carol created a division between reasonable amounts of cosmetic surgery and extreme or addictive surgical behaviour. Placing herself squarely in the reasonably motivated category, Carol took up the discourse of choice and personal satisfaction to validate her decision to have surgery, denying that she was trying to look considerably younger and therefore denying the impact of cultural demands on women to look youthful.

Carol’s consideration of aging in relation to her facelift sounds like it could be advertising copy for the latest anti-aging cream. It focuses on ‘appropriate’ maintenance of femininity, being realistic about her aging body, and appearing non-surgical: “You can’t stop getting older but you can look your best. I’m realistic about aging. I don’t want to end up looking ridiculous” (June 10, 2010). The underlying ideological framework that makes this discourse relevant and powerful in a postfeminist media culture is the continuation of paradoxical demands on women to look a certain way without physically demonstrating the work involved in the maintenance of their appearance. Hiding beauty work is a long-standing tradition in women’s beauty routines and advertising, and cosmetic surgery has been, until very recently, something of a taboo for women. Looking “ridiculous,” for Carol, is equated with celebrities whose cosmetic surgery is considered excessive because of its visibility; she names Michael Jackson and Joan Rivers as examples of people who “take it too far” (August 17, 2009). Carol does not hide her surgery from her friends and co-workers, but she is clear about the boundaries between obvious and subtle surgical cases: obvious markers of surgery are harmful and subtle (or invisible) markers are appealing.

Despite Carol’s claim to an appropriate amount of cosmetic surgery (visibility), she is also aware of what people may assume about her desire to have a facelift and associated procedures. When she informed me that her husband was considerably younger than herself, she did so in a way that implied I might connect her surgery with a
desire to look younger for (and because of) him: “I am married 23 years to current husband who is 15 years younger than me. (more follow up questions on that? LOL)” (July 23, 2010). This pointed yet lightly phrased challenge to me (the “LOL” denotes laughter), demonstrates Carol’s awareness of lingering cultural assumptions regarding women who undergo cosmetic surgery (coupled with those who date younger men). Her simultaneous acknowledgement and dismissal of the ‘cougar’ archetype in popular culture is a self-conscious nudge (“more follow up questions on that?”); this is another popular trend of postfeminist culture described by Angela McRobbie (“Notes on ‘What Not to Wear’” 258), when she claims that spectres of political correctness are undone by contemporary postfeminist media in a knowing irony. That is, those who get the joke, or in this case, the potentially ‘taboo’ nature of Carol’s actions and choices, are able to deny the underlying power structures at work in the joke because media-savvy viewers are aware of the irony required to read the media text (259). The self-referentiality diffuses whatever discrimination is utilized in the media text (i.e. the television series’ Family Guy and The Office are good examples of what McRobbie describes; their use of racism, sexism, ageism, and other politically incorrect ‘isms’ are the basis of their ironic, knowing humour). Similarly, Carol’s statement about her husband and my presumed response connotes that her facelift is not motivated by her attempts to maintain a youthful appearance for her younger husband, because she is aware that that is how it will be read: as McRobbie concludes, “objection is pre-empted with irony” (259), and replaced with certainty about her individualized choice.

There were moments of frustration that emerged in Carol’s blog, despite the lightness of tone. In her second blog entry, she writes about being depressed with the speed of her healing, something Sondra also wrote about:

Here I am at 3 weeks - I've been thru the depression. Held out pretty well until last Friday when I realized this healing was going to take a heck of a lot longer than my mind could wrap around. Yes, I read how long it took everyone BUT I was going to be different. The doctor said 2 weeks and 2 weeks it was going to be! HA HA HA HA Also was just tired of staying home, wearing chin strap, sleeping on wedge pillow, washing, cleaning, creaming, showering, washing hair and doing it over and over and over again. My neck is stiff, there's still bruises, I can't feel my neck, cheeks and ears. There's still a small place behind my ears that won't heal. AND I go back to work on 6/23 - a mere 5 days away. So I got bummed out. However, hubby took me out to dinner on Saturday night - our first dinner out since 'THE OPERATION' and it was totally wonderful. (Blog entry 2)
Similar to Sondra’s amelioration of her pain and frustration in her blog posts, Carol tempers her negativity and ends her post with a description of her date out with her husband and positive self talk that is optimistic and forward-looking. She states: “I think I’m going to be very pleased with the results after everything calms down so I have to keep focusing on that and not the NOW so much. Just ride it through” (Blog entry 2). The tendency to balance complaints with positive remarks about the future is a prevalent discursive trend on makeover reality TV, where contestants channel negativity, complaint, or resistance to change into the journey towards transformation. If a contestant cannot come out of the experience demonstrating positivity, she is marked with moral weakness through elimination. By adhering to a balanced cosmetic surgery narrative, Carol and Sondra developed personas that would be morally acceptable because they refrained from being too whiny, pessimistic, or ungrateful.

This is not to suggest that cosmetic surgery blogs are free from demonstrations of negativity, anger, or frustration. On the contrary, MMH blogs and message boards were rife with the cosmetic surgery narratives of people who had poor outcomes. However, the interview respondents I communicated with all produced a makeover culture discourse that maintained a positive outlook despite complex experiences of pain, frustration, and limited mobility. In doing so, they created public personas that were in keeping with the most acceptable and celebrated representations of patients on makeover reality TV; their stories framed their experiences as successful, because they were able to endure and then come out of the pain of the surgeries.

When I asked Carol why she blogged about her cosmetic surgery experience, she responded in similar ways to Sondra and Janice. She wanted to help people who were going through similar experiences and because her own research on MMH had been so useful during her own pre-operative preparation and healing:

Carol: “I got so much information and support from the make me heal site before, during and after my surgery that I wanted to also share my experience for others. To give back. [...] Everyone tells the whole story and doesn’t sugar coat the healing process like the doctors do.” (August 17, 2009)

Carol was emphatic about the authenticity of the information she found on the MMH blogs and discussion boards, which she felt she could not access elsewhere (August 17,
2009; July 23, 2010). She was sceptical of cosmetic surgeons’ websites and testimonials, and recognized that they were selling a product and might highlight the best outcomes while diminishing the potential risks or problems associated with procedures (August 17, 2009). She pointed out that cosmetic surgery is “WAY more invasive and serious than doctors tell you. I think if they told you the truth – that you look and feel like crap for a month or more, no one would have it” (ibid). In contrast, the MMH discussion boards and blogs provided access to “the good, the bad, and the ugly as told by real people” (ibid). Her pre-operative research included pouring over years of discussion boards and blogs on MMH, and when her cosmetic surgery experience was complete, she stayed on MMH answering questions and sharing her experience with others for about a year. Carol created a blog to chart the progress of her healing, but admitted that she preferred the discussion boards and did not believe that her blog was read by anyone (even though the site counter indicated that her blog had received over three thousand visits): “I certainly didn’t follow anyones [sic] [blog]. I updated mine about 5 times maybe but didn’t seem important” (July 23, 2010). In Carol’s experience at least, the interactivity of the online discussions was more valuable for her preparation and subsequent support for others on their surgical journeys.

Like Sondra, Carol eventually lost interest in MMH when it was no longer useful or informative for her, and when she found the questions of others becoming repetitive. Both lost interest in the online community when their procedures were complete, and both admit they no longer visit MMH despite its incredible usefulness before, during, and immediately after their procedures. This coincides with Janice’s observation that the MMH community turns over about every six months, except for the few ‘die-hards’ like herself who stay on as moderators or mentors. Even Janice’s commitment to MMH had diminished by our final email exchange: “Well, I’m beginning to get a bit disenchanted. I don’t feel as useful as I once was. I doubt there are any more surgeries in my future, so my own personal need for support is waning” (June 16, 2010).103 That each of the interviewees had expressed a shift away from MMH suggests that there is a finite period around one’s identification as a surgical subject, at least discursively and in relation to other surgical subjects in a public online space. Each of the interviewees felt compelled

103 Also interesting to note, as of this project’s completion (July 2012), Janice’s online profile at MMH is no longer available, suggesting that she has removed it and is no longer contributing to MMH (at least under her former username). Carol has not logged in to MMH since 2009 and Sondra since 2008, though their profiles are still accessible on MMH.
to share their surgical stories as a way to pay back the online community that they had found such support in during their own research, preparation and healing from surgery, but at some point the active role they took either reading, blogging or responding on MMH became less compelling for them. Sondra’s commitment to MMH blogging emerged from a desire to educate and represent African American patients, based on her perception that “[t]here are not many black people that have plastic surgery that share their experience” (August 17, 2009). Sondra was motivated to record her experience because of the noted absence of black people’s stories in makeover culture. Yet, “once the changes slowed down [her] interest waived” (June 10, 2010). Janice and Carol’s preference for the discussion boards rather than the blogs on MMH did not prevent them from also losing interest or a sense of belonging once they were no longer in the thick of their surgical transformations.

5.5 Conclusions

I suspect that Janice, Carol and Sondra’s movement away from the MMH space reflects a larger transience inherent in makeover culture: once people have achieved their completed transformation, they move on. Yet, this assumes that people complete their body modifications and then do not undertake new ones. The beauty, diet, and self-help industries that support makeover culture work hard to ensure that makeover culture subjects are positioned as consumers (and that consumers are positioned as in need of a makeover), and regularly conjure new products, procedures, and target markets. But it seems that for the three interviewees I communicated with, there was a clear movement into and then out of the discursive spaces of online support within makeover culture. A larger study of the temporal trends in online discussion boards of cosmetic surgery recipients would be valuable, in order to more carefully consider the meanings of moving through these spaces and the ways that makeover culture subject identities are appropriated and then (possibly) released.

Despite the differences between Janice, Sondra and Carol, they each reproduced postfeminist and neoliberal discourses in their blogs and email interview responses to me, including discourses of choice, self-regulation, and agency. Their self-representations in public online spaces mimicked some of the most pervasive elements of makeover culture. They all claimed that cosmetic surgery was a choice they had made for themselves, and they all distanced themselves from examples of cosmetic surgery
freaks or addicts, claiming that their cosmetic surgery was natural looking, restorative, or conducted following long-term attempts at healthy living (including weight loss, exercise, and healthy eating habits). When it was all over, each of the participants stated that their procedures had made their lives better or had helped their outer selves more accurately reflect the way they felt inside. This kind of individualized choice discourse has been criticized by feminist scholars who argue that it distorts and dilutes feminist politics into personal lifestyle choices bereft of impactful, socially-progressive change. It is also criticized for falling prey to binary notions of self and body, and the notion that the body ought to reflect moral and sexual worth, disproportionately more so for women than men. Yet, as the email interview participants demonstrated, their surgeries are about more than individual choices, and an analysis of their writing focusing on the agency/victim dichotomy limits how one interprets their narratives.

Importantly, alongside their appropriated makeover culture discourse, Janice, Sondra and Carol also demonstrated their critical skills as navigators of the cultural waters we find ourselves in at the outset of the twenty-first century in North America. Each was sceptical of makeover reality TV or media representations of cosmetic surgery that downplayed risk or celebrated only certain types of beauty (young, slim, white, and hypersexual). They rejected the limits imposed on women’s bodies by media and advertising, and they distinguished themselves from people they perceived to be doing too much bodywork. In doing so, Sondra, Janice and Carol constructed cosmetic surgery narratives that were, to return to Sarah Projansky’s description of postfeminist discourse, complex, adaptable, pervasive, and versatile (68). Even if the interview participants styled their narratives and answers according to what they thought I wanted to hear based on what they knew of me or assumed about me (i.e. Women’s Studies major, researcher, non-surgical woman, white and middle class, educated), the fact remains that they formed their stories in particular ways using the tropes of postfeminism and neoliberalism familiar to them from a ubiquitous makeover culture. However, they were each also critical of the sites that produced said tropes. Moreover, their willingness to engage with the complexities of their surgeries, the perception and judgments about their surgeries, and the telling of surgical stories (both good and bad) in an online dialogue, presents a much more complex picture than those created by wholesale critics of either cosmetic surgery or makeover reality TV. What the interviews and blogs of the three participants show is that these women navigate postfeminist ideology carefully and not without scepticism of its implications.
Another way their blogs and interviews demonstrate something other than individualism, is through their shared commitment to information sharing and online communities. Sondra, Janice and Carol went online to find reliable information and a community of supporters to help them learn about their procedures and then heal from them. Each began using MMH to document and navigate their own surgeries, but they found that the information sharing between readers was important for others, and their blogs or roles on the discussion boards moved their surgical experiences into shared events as opposed to singularly individualistic experiences. While the online relationships fostered on MMH may have been short term, they were nonetheless essential for Sondra, Janice and Carol’s surgical journeys. Each was adamant that MMH made their procedures more successful by making them more informed, and each noted that they wanted to help others by sharing their own stories and knowledge. In this way, the cosmetic surgery bloggers I interviewed demonstrated that amidst adherence to makeover culture discourse that adopts ideologies counter to traditional feminist politics, their cosmetic surgery narratives also strengthened ties between women and encouraged others to become more perceptive, knowledgeable consumers of cosmetic surgery products.

But it is not enough to imagine the community space of MMH as a salve for some of the more ugly aspects of makeover culture, such as the violence of makeover culture imagery and discourse (explored in chapters two and three), or the complete omission of risks associated with invasive surgical and non-surgical procedures in makeover culture marketing and media. If we return to the role of unpaid labour in interactive media, the work of educating surgical patients that is downloaded onto other post-surgical patients themselves within a neoliberal system of privatized, for-profit health care is not free of political implication. Again, we find ourselves back at the unpaid labour of women who provide support, advice, and information that current governments have backed away from in neoliberal shifts dismantling social services, including heath care services. Working in the interest of the public good, the MMH bloggers are evidence of the patchwork recreation of a safety net for patients, chipped away at by deregulation and privatization. Cosmetic surgery has always been an outsider in medicine because of its association with immorality or vanity, and because of its directly commercial for-profit model. But the complications that can and do arise are medical issues that are often dealt with in places other than the clinics that perform cosmetic procedures. An analysis of the blogger interviews suggests that despite the individualism inherent in makeover
culture, the community aspect of online spaces for information sharing and support may be a result of widespread neoliberal practices that demand individualism in our day-to-day lives. Bloggers produced technologies of the self that operate in the service of a system that continues to offload responsibilities onto individual citizens. The bloggers show the inseparability of feminist models of support and neoliberalism in North American mass media products and perhaps, experience, and are evidence of intertwining community-minded practices and neoliberalism.

In the brief conclusion that follows, I will work to tie these many strings together, commenting on the overall project and its impact on studies of makeover culture from a somatechnics perspective. I will return to a question of hybridity and bodily integrity in makeover culture, the violence exposed by trauma talk and the confessional, and the work of makeover culture in shoring up the stable body despite images and discourses that expose it. What the MMH blogs and blogger interviews bring into focus through their concentration on the micro-bodily practices of surgical recovery (producing the postsurgical self in their writing), is perhaps the most important thing we can learn from makeover culture. That is, while the transformation highlighted through the surgical makeover is readily scrutinized in media, it is reflective of a much larger truth of human existence: all humans are engaged in embodied transformation that is ongoing and never complete--we are all on a steady path, aging our way to death. This reality is what creates the discomfort and resistance to the makeover in media, as it exposes the instability of the body in the world. Of course, this carefully managed stability is available to a relative few. Upending the privileged stability (of largely white, middle class viewers/critics) minimizes the divide between those who may already know that stability-bodily or otherwise--is only a fiction (such as trans persons, visible minorities, people with disabilities, people living in poverty) and reminds us that “bodily being is always already technologized, and technologies are always already enfleshed” (Sullivan, “Somatechnologies” 2009).
6: CONCLUSION

During the final stages of revising this project, I was fortunate to stumble upon an episode of the daytime talk show *The Dr. Oz Show* (Harpo Productions 2012), the weekday series that began as an occasional health information segment of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. The episode featured the cast of *The Real Housewives of Orange County* talking about their cosmetic surgery procedures and experiences. Dr. Terry Dubrow, the surgeon featured on Fox’s *The Swan*, made an appearance as both the husband of one of the ‘real’ housewives, Heather, and a consulting cosmetic surgeon on the episode (in which he injects Botox into his wife’s face on screen). The celebrity status afforded to Dubrow and his wife as a result of his role on *The Swan* and his subsequent popularity as a surgeon affords Dubrow a highly-privileged and authoritative voice within makeover culture. What he says in this episode about cosmetic surgery, then, is noteworthy:

... to have plastic surgery I think the advantages have to greatly outweigh the risks of complications, and they’re significant. And I think that’s one of the things that we’ve done, and I’m particularly guilty of that in my career, I did *The Swan*, right? I did a huge plastic surgery makeover show for several seasons where we sort of made plastic surgery look like it was getting your nails done, and it isn’t! It is surgery. When you put breast implants in someone, there’s a one hundred per cent chance that they’re going to have another breast implant surgery before they’re done with breast implants. One hundred per cent chance! And a fifty-eight per cent chance that it’s going to happen because of complications of breast implant surgery. Shocking, right? (*The Dr. Oz Show*, “The Real Housewives Tell all on their Plastic Surgery”)

This brief comment demonstrates a marked shift from fairytale makeover story that Dubrow helped construct on *The Swan*, towards a makeover story that includes some consideration of risks and an acknowledgement that the effects of cosmetic surgery are impermanent. Moreover, Dubrow’s comment suggests that once one participates in cosmetic surgery, one is always a surgical subject and there is no such thing as post-surgery in makeover culture. This hints at the instability of not only cosmetic surgery upon the body, but of the body itself as a stable, fixed entity that, once ‘corrected’ through body modification, will remain as such. What is “shocking” about Dubrow’s statement, then? Not simply that surgeries to increase breast size must be
repeated in order to maintain the look of a larger, firm breast and to address the possible complications from the surgery itself. Instead, Dubrow’s comment gets at the deeper issue that makeover culture works so hard to deny: the implant is not a naturalized part of the body. Bodily integrity remains elusive after breast augmentation because the implant does not fold into the fabric of the self in the same way that other forms of body modification are permitted to do. Social distinctions designate some surgical procedures as neutral and thus not a threat to, but a restorative act of, bodily wholeness.

Cosmetic surgery remains outside of this neutral space, partly because procedures are often repeated, but also because the elective nature of cosmetic surgery continues to raise questions about the authenticity of body modifiers in spite of makeover culture’s work to justify procedures based on emotional need. It is the continued debate about “need” and its discursive framing that I find so interesting. Landing on one side or other of the debate is not my intent; rather, unravelling the debate to find the ideological elements keeping it afloat is what interests me the most. My project advances the study of makeover culture by incorporating new research sites that have not formerly been analyzed together with textual analysis of makeover reality TV. Bringing together the micro and macro-structures at work in makeover culture by studying The Swan web forums and cosmetic surgery bloggers alongside television and other mainstream texts has given me the opportunity to compare assumptions about audiences and makeover culture participants with the stories and experiences of people closely engaged with makeover culture’s discourses.

Nikki Sullivan’s work figures prominently in this project and has motivated my position at the intersections of feminist debates about body modification. The “Aha!” moments I have experienced when reading Sullivan’s work on self-demand or elective amputation, cosmetic surgery, intersex surgery, ‘FGM’ and vaginal cosmetic surgery have sparked my desire to study makeover culture in a way that does not take as fact that elective (or any) body modification is ‘bad’ for women (from a feminist perspective), but rather, that the categories of good and bad, the moral distinctions between types of procedures (as either elective or medically-necessary, subcultural or normative, appropriate or unnecessary), must be interrogated in and of themselves. Sullivan’s work reminds us that we ought to approach a study of embodiment with the goal to “retain rather than resolve the alleged tension between compartmentalising and totally merging modes and practices of corporeality.” She thinks we ought to explore “...its productive
potential in terms of *the ethical work such a tension might enable if it is allowed-to-be* (Sullivan, "Transsomatechnics" 275). The tension Sullivan speaks of is exactly that which I have tried to tease out in my analysis of a grouping of makeover culture discourses—on reality TV, in web forum discussions, and with cosmetic surgery bloggers. I think there is vast potential within mainstream body modification culture and discourse to trouble the ideological norms that shape how bodies come to matter.

*The Swan*, as an example of makeover reality TV, presents the makeover as a solution to experiences of abuse, bullying, and “ordinary ugliness” (Essig 10), whereby the transformation of the body is a corrective to internal ills. Neoliberal and postfeminist discourses produce hyperfeminine characters and storylines as a way to erase or ignore the potential threat of somatic instability raised by the visible body literally opened up on screen. Witnessing the opened and transformed body remains ontologically threatening. The sense of the whole/complete body (separate from the technologies of transformation), comes undone when we watch a piece of silicone put inside a face or breast, or when fat is removed from the body into a canister alongside a patient’s hospital bed during liposuction. The potential for these moments of hybrid visibility in makeover culture cannot be ignored, because they provide the space to begin a mainstream, public conversation about the ethics around bodywork, whose bodied are valued, whose are made invisible in media, and why certain forms of body modification remain at the edges of public acceptability. Most importantly, the exposure of bodily hybridity in makeover culture; through the visible surgeries and recovery periods, the transformed bodies, and the resistant contestants, creates an opportunity to investigate what it means to be a part of postsurgical culture, where we are all engaged in relationships with technologies of thought, techniques, and technological apparatus in one way or another.

I have explored the violence of makeover culture in a few ways throughout this project: namely, by describing the restricted boundaries that position participants as either inside makeover culture (and accepted) or outside makeover culture (and erased). I have also studied the ways that the physical injury to the body during normative body modification is framed as a necessary step in the process towards self-betterment. Producing the injured and bruised female body on television and using a narrative that establishes that pain and trauma as essential, naturalizes the female body-in-pain for beauty. This pain and trauma is exploited by the television networks because even if the
participants get their services ‘free,’ they ‘pay’ through personal exposure, surveillance, strict rules, and intensive scrutiny. The violence of makeover culture is also produced in reality TV narratives when the contestants are framed as victims who can only become empowered, self-defined, agentic women through access to a makeover. Makeover culture demands trauma talk and a confessional narrative, which creates a subordinate position for the participants from the start.

The hyperbolic trauma talk and confessional narratives of the Swan web forums highlight the violence of makeover culture on the body and in the discourses that make transformation possible. The epistemology of makeover culture is visible in the stories of pain that lead to justified body modification, but the forum participants go to such extremes in their stories of trauma that they expose the work of makeover reality TV in constituting the body as whole and authentic through cosmetic surgery, diet and exercise. The hybrid body exposed on makeover reality TV cannot be contained in the web forums despite makeover culture’s best efforts to do so within its textual borders. This hybridity is unleashed in the blogs and blogger interviews, most notably in the bloggers’ concentration on micro-bodily practices, and the technologies of the self that detail the minutia of healing and recovery (and infection, discomfort, etc.). These narratives complicate the presumption of bodily integrity that is still at the centre of human subjectivity writ large.

One of the goals of this project was to shed light on the constructedness of all body modifiers; not to discredit the bodywork, or people’s perceived need for bodywork, but to point out the ways that modification is culturally, ethically delineated. This has direct implications on patient care and access to resources, not to mention the culture of secrecy that has only begun to lift in makeover culture, where the process of women’s beauty work is still largely silenced. But ethical questions remain, of course. Makeover culture constructs consumer need in a for-profit model by preying on women’s insecurities. I do not want to suggest that this system is innocent or free from the spectre of patriarchy. Makeover culture maintains women’s inequalities by trying to convince us that our time and money should be spent on moulding our bodies in the image of a narrow beauty and heterosexual desirability. Further, these are connected to success and power in a way that makes it difficult to opt out. Participation in makeover culture may make individual women feel good, free, or empowered, but this does not advance women’s equality in the political sense, nor does it challenge the systems of power that
maintain white, male, heteronormative hegemony. It is also available to relative few women, thus the benefits some women may experience through normative body modification are not equally accessible to all. Makeover culture entrenches a definition of women in media that is exclusive and inflected with ethnocentrism, ageism, classism and sexism.

However, this framework leaves no room for the millions of people who undergo cosmetic surgery to be anything but ‘cultural dupes,’ and it is a position I have worked to avoid. I do not want to come back to the victim/agent argument, because I think it remains unproductive—in both universalizing and individualizing ‘the patient.’ Instead, I have concentrated on studying the in-between spaces of makeover culture, where hybrid bodies emerge from the text in moments that challenge the makeover narratives available in popular culture. I have unpacked accusations of inauthenticity of makeover culture subjects by recognizing that we are all ‘fake’ insomuch as our lives are intertwined with the technologies/techné/techniques of culture.

At the root of makeover culture are neoliberal and postfeminist sentiments of entitlement, empowerment, and self-determination (for a select few). It is a culture that encourages individualized pleasure seeking and self-fulfilment. This seems directly at odds with a feminist politics, and returns to the postfeminist ambivalence identified by Tasker and Negra. Wading in to the issue brings up two unpleasant concerns for contemporary feminism as it relates to makeover culture. First, while makeover culture may seem at odds with a feminist politics, it is also a cultural product of feminism’s entrenchment in western capitalist society (a hybrid creature itself). We must recognize ‘our’ complicity in the construction of makeover culture. Nancy Fraser’s exploration of second wave feminism’s role in American neoliberalism reminds us that “the cultural changes jump-started by the second wave [that are] salutary in themselves, have served to legitimate a structural transformation of capitalist society that runs directly counter to a feminist vision of a just society” (Fraser 99). Second wave feminism has had a direct impact on the production of makeover culture, and in the self-help movement more broadly. A sustained analysis of makeover culture must recognize many women’s complicity and feminism’s role in its construction. The great number of women involved in the production of The Swan is one example of the complicated nature of any analysis of makeover culture texts.
Second, the individualized element of makeover culture undermines its feminist potential for a collective politics by producing inward-looking participants. Jon Dovey explains:

...in Foucauldian terms we are witnessing the evolution of a new ‘regime of truth’ based upon the foregrounding of individual subjective experience at the expense of more general truth claims. Changes in TV form towards the subjective rather than the objective, toward reflexivity rather than transparency, and toward a ‘theatre of intimacy,’ reflect not only the political economy of global mass media but also important developments in relationships between identity and culture. (26)

Dovey argues that the proliferation of reality TV produces an individualized confession narrative that acts “as part of our right to selfhood” (109). The confession narrative as “open discourse” (107) was certainly visible on The Swan and within the network-hosted web forums, and, to a greater extent, in the blogger posts and email interview responses. The “theatre of intimacy” (109) produced in makeover culture’s online spaces is both highly focused on the individual, and as we see with the blogs, created for others as a frame of reference in their own individual journeys. While this individualized ethos makes it difficult to imagine makeover culture as a space for feminist political action, there is considerable ethico-political value in studying makeover culture and individualized experiences because of what we can learn when we look closely at mechanisms of power in people’s daily lives.

Somatechnics encourages micro-level analysis because it recognizes the value in studying the reproduction of systems of power in the daily lives of individuals. Thus, while it may seem that makeover culture offers no potential for collective feminist political action, it does provide ample evidence of the politically inflected struggles of everyday life in the process of navigating the waters of makeover culture. Steve Bailey considers the way that individuals interact with media to produce subjectivity or identity. He states: “the self becomes a meaningful entity (literally) not interpellated by a symbolic order in the Althusserian fashion but constituted by the engagement of a subject with a set of socially-provided symbolic resources” (212). In Bailey’s formulation, “the subject and the media become interlocked in a process of self-construction and discursive production” (212). What I found most illuminating in the cosmetic surgery blogger interviews was the ways that media helped facilitate the bloggers as surgical subjects as much as their physical transformations did. Bloggers both used and undermined the discourse of makeover culture made popular by television media and advertising. A large-scale
research project with cosmetic surgery bloggers would be useful in determining the extent to which mainstream media and the cosmetic surgery bloggers shape the discourse and the culture simultaneously. My small-scale findings provide early indications that they are integral to one another and to the fostering of makeover culture in a technologized media landscape.

Using a theoretical framework based on the developing field of somatechnics, I offer a new approach to the study of makeover culture. I have concentrated on the constitutive nature of makeover culture to construct meaning around embodied transformation. In taking this approach (and working to avoid the agency/victim debate), I add to the developing body of work in makeover culture. I concentrate on the ways that makeover culture exposes the hybridity of the modified body (and the threat to conceptions of bodily integrity and wholeness), but buries this hybridity through adherence to strict gender codes. I have argued that makeover culture names and recuperates ‘flawed’ bodies, which diverts attention from the blurriness of body/machine and natural/artificial exposed through makeover culture. This is why mainstream makeover culture does not celebrate subcultural or non-normative forms of body modification, even though these forms are present and thriving in our culture. The refusal to present subcultural body modifiers among makeover culture stories reflects the perceived threat that is closer to the surface or more clearly exposed by those who modify their bodies in ways that draw attention to the transformation rather than away from it. The pretence towards a seamless merging of the ‘inner self’ with one’s appearance in makeover culture discourages viewers/participants from exploring their intimate relationships to technologies/technologies of thought, and the larger ethical questions around selfhood that they raise.

Ellen Riordan, in her explanation of a feminist political economy, addresses the multi-layered concerns I have tried to address in this project through a somatechnics approach, recognizing that macro- and micro-level issues are interrelated. She states: “[i]n addition to offering a critique of macrolevel social structures, feminist political economy stresses the importance of understanding issues of identity, subjectivity, pleasure, consumption, as well as visible and invisible labor in the context of women’s daily lives” (349). Thus, looking at specific bloggers and their stories is important in the context of a larger study of makeover culture, because this work extends the broader analysis of media texts and cultural trends. Graham Murdock’s call for a mixed methods
approach to cultural analysis recognized the need to address both micro and macro processes of makeover culture, especially since ‘fieldwork’ has been complicated by the expansion of the research ‘site’ as a result of globalization and technological innovation (189). Kim Christian Schroeder similarly argues for the value of small scale research: “rather than working for large-scale generalizability, qualitative research can work to create ‘maps’ or ‘charts of local areas with high explanatory power’ (Schroeder 54). I think that much media-based work could benefit from research questions that approach an area from several angles; this does not assume that mixed methods will solves methodological problems, or cover the ‘whole’ topic (as though that were possible), but rather it forces a researcher and the reader towards a fuller or more nuanced analysis. This requires interdisciplinarity and time; time to learn new research methods, time to collate data, time to connect the dots. This type of work is worth doing, and support needs to be available to scholars who do interdisciplinary work in the area of makeover culture.

Keeping up with the “transience of media phenomena” (Seiter 135) can be a challenge for researchers involved the study of makeover culture. The tenuous relevance and accessibility of high-churn media texts such as The Swan or the Make Me Heal blogs means that time becomes an enemy when trying to stay fresh and current in the academic publishing and labour market. Ellen Seiter argues that media studies departments need to develop patience for the work of their researchers to unfold (despite a high-pressure atmosphere of “publish or perish”). This is an especially tall order in an academic atmosphere of budgetary constraints and the increased reliance on short-term contract faculty. As I begin to think about extending this project into new areas of research, I am drawn towards the complex puzzle of production and manufacturing of makeover culture ‘stuff’: the material culture of the cosmetic surgery industry, the labour and global movement of things that (be)come into bodies.

Future research into makeover culture needs to complement the work undertaken in textual representation and audience research, of which there is a growing contingent. Looking forward, I am interested in extending this project to investigate the manufacturing sector of makeover culture and the labour practices used in the production of cosmetic surgery implants and devices. Somatechnics foregrounds the interconnectedness of soma and techné, and up until now, the production of cosmetic surgery products such as breast implants, cosmetic dermal fillers, and other devices
have not yet been studied from a somatechnics angle (or any other angle, as far as I can tell from introductory research). If, as Sullivan posits, “bodily being is always already technologized, and technologies are always already enfleshed” (“Somatechnologies” 2009), we must begin to actively study the ways that technologies are enfleshed within makeover culture industries. Some questions for consideration to begin such research include: how do signs of human labour emerge in the production of cosmetic surgery products used in and on the body? How are technologies of thought, political bodies, and material bodies a part of the processes of making the products consumed within makeover culture? What are the somatic and technological/technical relationships in motion as pharmaceutical companies develop the tools of cosmetic surgery? What role does global trade have in the development of makeover culture products and procedures? Basically, I want to begin a systematic interrogation of makeover culture products, asking: who makes it, where does it come from, where does it go and what does this reflect about labour, global trade, and the interrelationships between bodies and technologies? These questions and future research directions also begin to address some of the limitations of this project and much of the contemporary work on makeover culture so far, which tend to create borders around North America, with a particular focus on American or western cultural texts. This is a false boundary that ignores the global marketplace of which makeover culture is a part. A globalized economy and a growing international market in cosmetic surgery tourism force the questions I have raised to move outside of the North American context.  

My intentions are to bring what I have learned in this project towards a new series of questions about hybridity in makeover culture, starting from the largely invisible places of the crafting (the techné) of makeover culture products.

In imagining the potential of hybridity in makeover culture, I do not intend to infuse it with an imaginary power, particularly at the level of the individual, because this can lead down the road of victim/agency binary that I have previously denounced as unproductive. I also do not want to politicize individuals who feed into a conformity machine. Rather, throughout this dissertation I have worked to isolate and expose the potential moments of hybridity as they relate to body modification in makeover culture. I

104 An international team of scholars is presently taking on this work in the study *Sun, Sea, Sand and Silicone: Aesthetic surgery tourism*, which studies British, Australian, Chinese and Japanese cosmetic surgery tourists at destinations including Thailand, Korea, Malaysia and Poland (see M. Jones et al. “Bikinis and Bandages”).
have done this to promote careful thought about those things we (are encouraged to) take for granted as true or real about embodiment and the naturalized binaries that maintain inequalities. Donna Haraway’s cyborg creature is an inspiring image in the movement towards an ethico-political position within makeover culture. The human/machine hybrid represents resistance to domination, transgression of boundaries, and the possibility for political and social change (154). Haraway’s conception of the cyborg demands a deconstruction of essentialism and binaries, and especially the power differentials created out of them. Her definition does not rest on biological or technological determinism, but considers the cyborg a destroyer of grand narratives. This opens the door to exploring new ways of understanding embodiment that are more inclusive and diverse, with new pathways for exploring lived experience. My goal is not simply a theoretical exercise in resistance; instead, I think that by recognizing the ideological work done within makeover culture to recuperate stable categories of identity, gender, and bodily integrity, we can see where they falter and are at their weakest. This provides the footholds necessary to the kinds of interrogations of culture that create substantive change and allegiances among diverse groups.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDICES
Appendix A: “Plastic Surgery Shockers” National Enquirer Covers
Appendix B: Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation Google Image Search Results, 14 Oct. 2011


Atlanta Center for Aesthetic Vaginal Surgery, Atlanta, Georgia, <http://www.lvratlanta.com/>
Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation Institute of O.C. Women, Fountain Valley, California,

Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation Institute of Michigan, Southfield, Michigan,
<http://www.drberenholz.com/>

First Glance Aesthetic Centre, Winnipeg, Manitoba,  
<http://www.thefirstglance.ca/pages/lvr.asp>
Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation Institute of Providence, RI., <www.lvrprovidence.com>

South Florida Institute for Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation,
<http://www.lvrsouthflorida.com/services.html>

**Appendix C: The Swan Forum Codes and Code List**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.A</td>
<td>Mention of cosmetic surgery in thread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.B</td>
<td>No mention of cosmetic surgery in thread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.A</td>
<td>Mention of The Swan in thread (cast, program, procedures, application, casting calls, press, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.B</td>
<td>No mention of The Swan in thread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.A</td>
<td>Identifying as female to situate one's opinion of the thread topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.B</td>
<td>Identifying as male to situate one's opinion of the thread topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.C</td>
<td>Identifying as trans to situate one's opinion of the thread topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.D</td>
<td>Identifying as black to situate one's opinion of the thread topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.E</td>
<td>Identifying as white to situate one's opinion of the thread topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.F</td>
<td>Identifying as Latina/o to situate one's opinion of the thread topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.G</td>
<td>Identifying as overweight to situate one's opinion of the thread topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.H</td>
<td>Identifying as underweight to situate one's opinion of the thread topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.I</td>
<td>Identifying as heterosexual to situate one's opinion of the thread topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.J</td>
<td>Identifying as homosexual to situate one's opinion of the thread topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.K</td>
<td>Identifying as American to situate one's opinion of the thread topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.L</td>
<td>Identifying as another nationality to situate one's opinion of the thread topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.M</td>
<td>Identifying as someone who has suffered b/c of their appearance to situate one's opinion of the thread topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.N</td>
<td>Identifying as someone who has suffered b/c of abuse, trauma or accident to situate one's opinion of the thread topic</td>
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<td>---</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.O</td>
<td>Not providing identifying information in order to situate one's opinion of the thread topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.P</td>
<td>Providing 'other' types of identifying information in order to situate one's opinion of the thread topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.Q</td>
<td>Identifying as a mother to situate one's opinion of the thread topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.A</td>
<td>Claiming knowledge of The Swan through a personal past or present relationship with a contestant or Swan team member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.B</td>
<td>Identifying as a fan of The Swan, and/or a regular viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.C</td>
<td>Someone who has attended a casting call, who intends to attend a casting call, or who has submitted an application to be a contestant on the show.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.D</td>
<td>Someone who claims no knowledge of The Swan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Any discussion of the web forum, netiquette, flaming, trolls, bullying, site moderation, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.A</td>
<td>Discussion of race or racism in thread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.B</td>
<td>No discussion of race or racism in thread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.A</td>
<td>Discussion of gender, sexism or beauty standards in thread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.B</td>
<td>No discussion of gender, sexism or beauty standards in thread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Inquiring about how to become a contestant on The Swan (requests for application, info about casting calls, callbacks, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Commentary on reality TV and/or &quot;society&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D: *The Swan* Season One Casting Call Press Release

FOX seeking female ‘ugly ducklings’ for new ‘The Swan’ reality makeover series

October 10, 2003

FremantleMedia NA, the producers of *The Swan*, will be searching for their real life "ugly ducklings" through both live casting calls in twelve cities as well as videotaped submissions via its Web site: www.swancasting.com. Additional information may also be obtained by calling 1-866-4SWAN TV (1-866-479-2688).

Female contestants between the ages of 22 and 38 will be chosen based on the compelling nature of their stories. Episodes will be shot in early 2004, culminating in the presentation of each contestant’s makeover -- and subsequent achievements -- in a beauty pageant before a live audience. The best among them will be crowned "The Swan."

While accepting taped submissions from around the country (deadline: November 1), the show will also travel to the following cities for live auditions:

October 18: Atlanta, GA
Columbus, OH
New York, NY
Phoenix, AZ

October 22: Chicago, IL
Las Vegas, NV
Nashville, TN
Philadelphia, PA

October 26: Dallas, TX
Los Angeles, CA
Minneapolis, MN
Seattle, WA

For additional information, log on to www.swancasting.com or call 1-866-4SWAN TV (1-866-479-2688).

Appendix E: Make Me Heal Blogger Request

Dear Make Me Heal readers and bloggers,

My name is Beth Pentney and I am a PhD student at Simon Fraser University. I am conducting research for my PhD thesis in the Department of Women’s Studies. My research topic is cosmetic surgery and makeover culture, and the ways that cosmetic surgery has become more accessible and acceptable within the last decade. The purpose of my research is to determine how ideas about choice and freedom inform people’s decisions to have cosmetic surgery and related procedures.

If you have a Make Me Heal blog, where you have shared (or are in the process of sharing) your experience through a cosmetic surgery procedure, I would like to invite you to answer 11 questions about your blog, your decision to undergo surgery, and your perception of cosmetic surgery in media and popular culture. Your answers can be included in the body of an email to me, which I will copy and paste into Microsoft Office Suite and store on a CD in a locked cabinet in my home. The questions should take no more than 30 minutes to complete. I intend to use the answers you provide in my analysis of cosmetic surgery and blogging, in a chapter of my thesis. I will keep your answers anonymous in my research findings by changing your name, your screen name, and the name of your blog.

If you agree to answer the interview questions and email them back to me, please be assured that you can withdraw your answers at any time, for any reason. I do not believe that there is any risk to participants of this study. Potential benefits of participating in the interview include the opportunity to reflect on your experience as a blogger and as someone who has undergone cosmetic surgery. Your answers will become part of a study that aims to look closely at cosmetic surgery and further the scholarly conversation about cosmetic surgery trends.

I encourage you to contact me with any questions and for the results of the research I conduct, at the address below. You can also direct concerns or complaints to Dr Hal Weinberg, Director of the Office of Research at hal_weinberg@sfu.ca or 778-782-6593. I appreciate your time and your participation in answering the interview questions. Please indicate whether I may contact you in the future to discuss your responses further (for clarification or expansion).

Sincerely,

Beth Pentney
PhD Candidate, Department of Gender, Sexuality & Women’s Studies
Simon Fraser University
8888 University Drive Burnaby BC
V5A 1S6
Canada
The Interview Questions

Your completion of this online interview and submission to me by email indicates your consent to participate in the research study. If at any time you wish to withdraw your consent, please email bpentney@sfu.ca. Please note that your answers will be stored in Microsoft Office Suite on a CD in a locked cabinet in my home for 5 years, after which time, the CD will be shredded. While email transmission of information cannot guarantee confidentiality, I will be sure to change all names, blog names, and screen names in my research findings. This means that I will not disclose any identifying information about you in my thesis. I am not intending to use any photos from Makemeheal.com blogs in my research findings, therefore your appearance will also remain confidential in my thesis.

Please answer all questions in the body of an email to me, Beth Pentney, at bpentney@sfu.ca. This online interview should take no more than 30 minutes to complete. Answer each question to the best of your ability, and as completely as you can. I would appreciate it if you would write at least 1 paragraph for each answer, but more is also encouraged.

1. Can you please provide demographic information about yourself, including your age, gender, ethnicity or nationality, education level, occupation, family status, height and weight.

2. Can you describe how you came to your decision to undergo cosmetic surgery?

3. How did you weigh the potential benefits of cosmetic surgery against the potential risks of cosmetic surgery?

4. Has your experience of cosmetic surgery changed your life? If so, how?

5. Why did you decide to write a blog about your decision to undergo cosmetic surgery? If you do not write a blog, why do you participate in the web forums on MMH?

6. What has it been like to write down your experiences, or share your experiences with fellow forum contributors?

7. Do you think cosmetic surgery has become more or less acceptable than it was 10 years ago? Why or why not?

8. What do you think about shows like Extreme Makeover and The Swan?

9. In your opinion, what kind of positive or negative images exist in relation to cosmetic surgery?

10. Would you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not? What does the word mean to you?

11. Is there anything that you would like to add about your experience of cosmetic surgery or the way you think that cosmetic surgery is portrayed in the media?
Appendix F: Email Interviews with Bloggers: The original email exchanges

SONDRA

Email exchange 1: September 17, 2009

Hi, I have answered your questions from the email you sent on Makemeheal.com

1. Can you describe how you came to your decision to undergo cosmetic surgery? I have been working out and watching what I ate diligently for over a year. I had hired personal trainers kept to a strict diet of 1600 calories did 50 minutes of cardio 3 to 4 days a week. I had lost about 20 pounds. Got off meds, built abdomen and upper body strength. The fat on my stomach got smaller but was still very noticeable. I mean I was doing 300 plus crunches 4 times a week! I heard about lyposculpture and did my research on it and decided to do it.

2. How did you weigh the potential benefits of cosmetic surgery against the potential risks of cosmetic surgery? The best part about lyposculpture was that you are awake and aware of what was going on. So for me the risk factor went down a tremendous amount since it was only doing right under the skin fat and not going beyond the muscle. I am also in pretty good health and plus I had a breast reduction surgery back 1992.

3. Has your experience of cosmetic surgery changed your life? If so, how? Yes it has with lyposculpture. I have a more noticeable waist line. I actually have hips now. My pants and tops fit so much better. The biggest life changing took place when I had breast reduction surgery back in 1992. It was a huge weight off my shoulders literally and figuratively. It boasted my self confidence and enabled me to pursue my dreams.

4. Why did you decide to write a blog about your decision to undergo cosmetic surgery? I wrote a blog about lyposculpture because I wanted to let everyone know about my positive experience. I wanted to educate other black people by sharing what went on and showing my results. There are not many black people that have plastic surgery that share their experience. I found out people from Africa fat is denser and harder to get rid of than other ethnic groups.

5. What has it been like to write down your experience? At first it was a little weird to share my life with strangers but then I got a hang of it and the more people were reading it and asking questions the more I got into it.

6. Do you think cosmetic surgery has become more or less acceptable than it was 10 years ago? Why or why not? Plastic surgery has gotten more acceptable. People are trying to beat the aging clock and achieve life long dreams of smaller
waistlines and bigger boobs. A lot of female celebrities have gotten breast implants. Television and magazines shows this on a constant basis and people want to look like that and need some help if they don’t have it naturally.

7. What do you think about shows like Extreme Makeover and The Swan? More power to the people that got that opportunity. I think it’s important to love yourself. And if you think getting your flaws fixed will help that than do it. You have to have a sense of reality in that once you get this makeover, your life pretty much might change and you have to work mentally on how you are going to handle this. I look at my plastic surgery as an enhancement of who I am.

8. In your opinion, what kind of positive or negative images exist in relation to cosmetic surgery? Well I would say what the media portrays as beauty. The thin frame, large boobs and small waistlines are all over magazine covers. I can see how that can wreak havoc on a woman’s self esteem. I have learned over the years to accept some things about my body. I will never be a size five or be called dainty by any means.

9. Would you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not? What does the word mean to you? Yes I do consider myself a feminist. I believe a woman has the right to make her own decisions in life. The word to me means women being equal to men in tangible things. Having same rights such as voting, owning land, owning businesses and etc. I have learn that this doesn’t apply so well emotionally. I don’t mean women being abused or demeaned by their husband but more as their being a balance. You have to have a ying and yang to achieve that balance.

10. Is there anything that you would like to add about your experience of cosmetic surgery or the way you think that cosmetic surgery is portrayed in the media? I am all for plastic surgery that is used to enhance who you are rather than define it. If I had a teenage daughter that had the same issue I had with extremely large breast that basically held her captive from life. I would definitely encourage her to have a reduction. On the flip side if she wanted implants I would encourage her to wait until she is in her 20’s before she decides to get them. But due to family history, probably won’t have that conversation! (LOL)

Email exchange 2: June 10, 2010

Hi Sondra,

I hope you remember our email conversation from a year ago! I have been working on other chapters of my thesis and have only now gotten to beginning the chapter in which your blog and answers will become a part. I had a couple of follow up questions that I was hoping you might be able to answer for me.

First, I was wondering about the cost of your procedure and whether you saved up for it or got a loan or used credit to cover the costs associated with the procedure and your travel and hotel. I ask because it has become quite common for people to finance cosmetic surgery through clinics or other lenders including banks and insurance providers, and I was wondering how you paid for
yours and how you came to your decision about the way you paid for your procedure.

MY ANSWER: The cost was about $10,000.00 I paid about $2,000 up front and financed the rest. It took about a year to save that up. I saw the great results my friend had gotten while I was visiting, so I decided to do it. A roundtrip plane ticket cost about $400.00. I have a friend that lives out there so I stayed with them. I only stayed for 5 days and spent about $200.00 on food. Airport parking was about $75.00.

Also, I was wondering if you could talk a bit more about your breast reduction procedure. How was it different from or similar to your liposculpture? Did you think about the procedures differently? Was it covered through insurance? I ask because in Canada breast reduction surgery is often covered by national health care if it is deemed a medically necessary procedure. So, it is often described as reconstructive rather than cosmetic, and there are certain assumptions about the differences between cosmetic and reconstructive surgery, as a result. I was wondering if you could tell me a bit about your experience and whether you sensed a difference in the types of procedures you have had, a difference in other people's perspectives about your procedures (like surgeons, or your family and friends), or whether you see them as more similar than different.

MY ANSWER: Well both surgeries had a similar mental affect on me. They both got rid of things about my body that I didn't like. If I had to choose only one of the surgeries to have I would definitely pick the breast reduction. It cause the biggest change in my personality. I felt a huge weight lifted off my shoulders. I do think about the procedures differently. The breast reduction was a neccessity for health and mental reasons and the liposculpture was an aesthetic reason. I tried to get breast reduction surgery done at age 14 but they told me I was too young. I finally got tired of being unhappy and found a surgeon from the phone book. I got lucky I just picked him out a list of names. My mother's insurance and my grandmother's insurance covered all cost except $100 in blood work. The procedure ran about $7500.00 back in 1992. I had it done my senior year of high school while I was on Christmas vacation 2 days before the new year. I was out of school for 6 weeks. When I got back to school, everybody said I looked different but no one mentioned it. Everyone in my family was very encouraging about it. I felt freer. I didn't have any negative feedback about the liposculpture, people were very curious about it. I even showed them my scars and the bruising and swelling. They all knew how hard I worked out to try to shrink my waistline with diet and exercise to only have it shrink a tiny bit.

I think to me they are similar. I have had guys tell me I shouldn't have had the breast reduction and I should have dealt with it and worked on me emotionally and mental. I totally disagree. By having that particular surgery it vastly improved how I felt emotionally and mentally.

Have you considered having any other cosmetic work done? Are you still happy with the results of your liposculpture?
MY ANSWER: Yes I am considering have my upper arms done. Thinking of doing vela shape or Verona laser. I am still happy with my results, I just don’t like the extra skin. I am prone to carry excess water and sometimes it looks like I didn’t even have the liposculpture and other days it’s very noticeable. It is so true about the fat going other places in the body. I had gain weight in my forearms and my butt got huge! I have lost some of the weight I gained after liposculpture (that was all my own fault. Got carried away thinking the fat won’t come back.) My friends joke that the fat they took from my stomach went straight to my butt!

Finally, I was wondering if you still maintain contact and interest in the Make Me Heal website/discussion boards/blogs, now that your surgery is a couple of years behind you. If so, what keeps you coming back? If not, when and why did you stop visiting the site?

MY ANSWER: I do not maintain contact on my blog at make me heal. I stop visiting the website like a year ago. I had lost interest in it. It was fun while I was changing but once the changes slowed down my interest waived. It's crazy, I sometimes have itching still on my stomach.

I really appreciate your help, and I thank you for your time!

Sincerely,
Beth Pentney
PhD student, Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, BC
Canada

Email exchange 3: July 12, 2010
Reply July 15, 2010

Hi Sondra,

I hope this email finds you well. I was hoping you might be able to respond to a few last questions I have for you about your blog, the Make Me Heal discussion boards, and your decision to answer my original request. I had a lot of trouble recruiting participants and I'm trying to figure out what went wrong, and what went right. I was wondering if you could tell me why you decided to respond to my original email, and whether you've been asked to participate in surveys or questionnaires on Make Me Heal in the past. Do you have any idea why people might be disinclined to answer my questions?

I must admit I was a bit sketchy about replying cause you can never tell if it's a spam letter or not. But I took a chance. Maybe that's their reason. I like to be helpful.

Also, you mentioned in your previous reply to me that you no longer visit Make
Me Heal. I was wondering if your time on the forums and using the blog resulted in any long or short term friendships with people using the site? Did you become friends with anyone as a result of using the site? And if so, did your relationship(s) move beyond discussion of your procedures?

While I was on there I was emailing a few people regularly but nothing passed the site.

I ask because it seems that there is quite a community established on the discussion boards. People seem so kind and encouraging towards one another, and I wonder if the support people find during their pre- and post-surgery experiences carries over into their "regular" lives as well. On the other extreme, it seems like a community prone to "trolls" and mean-spirited responses. Did you ever encounter negative comments on your blog posts, or did you ever encounter trolls on the discussion boards? If so, how were they dealt with?

No I never received negative response on my blog.

Finally, I get the impression that there is a lot of crossover between the Make Me Heal discussion boards and blogs. I had originally thought that I would only look at blogs, but the interview participants I have spoken with all seem to talk about the blogs and discussion boards as one thing, in a way. I was wondering what your perspective of the blogs and discussion boards is/was, based on your time on Make me Heal. Do they overlap? Did you see yourself writing your blog posts for the same people who you interacted with on the discussion boards?

I think it was helpful to read both the blogs and the discussion boards. The blogs was a bit more personal.

And lastly, I was hoping you might help me fill in some of your demographic information...education level, occupation, and family status if you don't mind. Your information will stay confidential, of course, but I ask because I am trying to determine if there are any similarities between the women I have been interviewing.

Bachelors degree, single no kids, entertainment/costumes.

thanks again Sondra, I appreciate your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Beth
I would be pleased to share my thoughts on this. After over a year I feel I made a really good decision to have this done. Good luck with your project.

1. Can you describe how you came to your decision to undergo cosmetic surgery?

Directly from my blog:

For quite some time I had been thinking about an eye lift due to my eyelids drooping down on eyelashes. As I researched this procedure I became confident that it is a common surgery and would be fine. However, the more I stared at my face in the mirror the more I saw the jowls and saggy neck line also. At age 59 I felt OK about my appearance but gee, if just I could look like I do when I wrap my hair in a towel and everything is pulled just a little tighter. More months of thinking and on-line reading about the possible problems. Finally asked my dermatologist for someone to do just the eyes. Referred to Dr. Timothy Greco in Bala Cynwyd. It was a while before the first appointment and by the time I went in I had decided to go for the full facelift. I had the money saved and - well - what the heck.

I was impressed with the office and staff and the doctor was kind and caring. No one pushed me for more work that I asked about and in fact when I asked if he recommended anything else he said what I wanted was what he would have suggested. We would do a facelift, neck lift and the upper eyes. He took bunches of photos and used photo shop to show me on the computer what the outcome would be. It was awesome. He said he tried to be conservative on the computer. He thought I would have very good results. I paid the deposit of $600 and was given the total cost of $12,875. My preop with him was scheduled for May 5th and I needed to see my family doctor for a health exam prior to the surgery. They also gave me a facial care kit to start using which contained a wash, toner, bleach and retinal product. Also a mini-peal to use after.

At the PreOp appt more pictures were taken and I received a packet with all post op information, Rx for pain, antibiotics and an anti-nausea pill. Also all cleaning materials, Anica for swelling and a folder with lots of information about the two procedures. I paid the remaining cost - 100% up front. He again assured me that I would have very good results. Nurses and doctor all gave me plenty of opportunity to ask questions or state concerns.

2. How did you weigh the potential benefits of cosmetic surgery against the potential risks of cosmetic surgery? I did a lot of reading on-line. I didn't really trust the doctor sites for information on the outcome and I didn't trust all those before and after pictures posted on doctor sites either. I figured they would only use the best of the best and downplay the rest. When I found the Make me heal site it was perfect. This was the good, the bad and the ugly as told by real people who had various procedures done. I read everything going back to entries and photos over a year to get a wide range of experiences. I also googled my doctor to see if there was anything negative posted
about him. I spent some time thinking about how I would feel looking different as I figured there might be some mental issues also. I talked with husband and friends and made a decision not to hide the surgery from people at work and close friends. I didn't want to deal with the lies. And if someone asks, I tell them yes AND I don't lie about my age. Just me I guess. So, I got a lot of comments from people and of course stories about people they knew.

3. Has your experience of cosmetic surgery changed your life? If so, how? It has made me like the image I see in the mirror and also in photos. I feel that my exterior now matches my mental image of myself. I didn't feel as old as I looked and now I feel I match. (does that make sense?). I think I am feeling more outgoing and it's fun to have men flirt with me again. An ego booster for sure. BUT.....as far as changing my life I have to say no. Not a life changing event that I couldn't have lived without but makes everything just a little more fun. Maybe part of that is the little "secret" I have when someone new meets me and comments how great I look at 61. LOL.

4. Why did you decide to write a blog about your decision to undergo cosmetic surgery? I got so much information and support from the make me heal site before, during and after my surgery, that I wanted to also share my experience for others. To give back. It also helps to ease your mind when you see something odd or have a strange feeling and you find that everyone else went thru this at the same time you are. Everyone tells the whole story and doesn't sugar coat the healing process like the doctors do.

5. What has it been like to write down your experience? I like writing. Always have. The main reason of writing my blog on Make me Heal was to share the story with others who were thinking of the surgery and show step by step how it was for me. This may help others to decide to either go ahead and do it OR say no way, this is not for me. Being able to look back on the healing process was also good for me to see the progress I was making. I also took pictures every week to see the changes happeing as I healed. This was good when I was feeling I would never feel normal..

6. Do you think cosmetic surgery has become more or less acceptable than it was 10 years ago? Why or why not? I think it is WAY more acceptable. Because it is in the news, talked about, TV shows and the internet it is way more visable so you realize how many people are having proceedures done. You can see the difference it makes. The internet gives you lots of information you could not have obtained 10 years ago. I also think the surgery itself has progressed and the skills that doctors have now are giving better and more consistant results.

7. What do you think about shows like Extreme Makeover and The Swan? I don't watch much TV but I have watched a couple of these shows and enjoyed seeing the joy on the faces of the people who had life changing results. Again, shows like these inspire people to look into proceedures for themselves.

8. In your opinion, what kind of positive or negative images exist in relation to cosmetic surgery? I have found there are lots of both. I have encountered women who asked me Why I would do this to myself but most get dreamy eyed and talk about what they would love to have done (eye lift, nose, neck etc) if they could work up the nerve or if they had
the money. Positive images for cosmetic surgery are looking young forever and that just
isn't going to happen. It is easy to think it is a solution for all your problems but it's not.
Negative images abound with botched surgery and the people who take it too far - think
Michael Jackson and Joan Rivers. There are also too many hack doctors and choosing
the right doctor is SO important. I shudder hearing people talk about the cheapest
doctor to do this or that. Not a place to cut corners on money in my opinion.

9. Would you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not? What does the word mean
to you? I'm not into labels and don't really get into political crap so the word feminist
doesn't have meaning to me. I've always believed I could do anything I wanted and I
was raised that way. Men and women do have roles in our society and some are
necessary but the borders should be blurred so you can choose based on ability. I
wouldn't want to be denied something due to my sex alone.

10. Is there anything that you would like to add about your experience of cosmetic
surgery or the way you think that cosmetic surgery is portrayed in the media?
Since "media" includes such a huge range these days, there is no one way that cosmetic
surgery is being portrayed. You can find pros and cons every where. One reason to not
believe everything you read because it changes on an hourly basis. Use your mind and
make your own decisions using common sense - it's the only way to survive in the world.
My surgery was a good decision for me. I think I had the right reason. I didn't expect it to
please anyone but myself. I didn't want to look 21 just better for my age. I don't plan on
having further surgery but just to age naturally from now on. Cosmetic surgery is WAY
more invasive and serious than the doctors tell you. I think if they told you the truth -
that you would look and feel like crap for a month or more, no one would have it. Yes it's
worth it in the end. I think fear holds back a lot of people from doing a lot in life - from
meeting new people, going new places, experiencing new things and cosmetic surgery
is just one more thing to fear. Feel the fear DO IT ANYWAY!

Beth, if you have any more questions for me or need me to clarify any thing, please
contact me.
Carol

Email exchange 2: June 10, 2010

Hello Carol,

I hope you remember our conversation from about a year ago! I have been working on
2 other chapters of my thesis and am now getting to the chapter in which your blog and
subsequent thoughts on your surgery and blogging will be a part. I had a couple of follow
up questions for you, if you are still interested and willing to be a part of my research.

First, in your response you talked about paying the costs of the surgeries in full, up front.
I'm not sure if you are aware of this, but there has been an increasing trend in financing
through clinics and other lending institutions for cosmetic surgery. It is becoming more
rare to pay in full- can you share with me a bit about your decision to pay in full, up front?
Is it something you saved for purposefully for a period of time? Is there a reason you
decided not to pay through credit or a loan? Again, I ask because it has become so
common to finance cosmetic surgery procedures through some form of payment plan,
either through a lender or the clinic itself.

Also, now that it has been a couple of years since you had your procedures and wrote your blog, do you still use the Make Me heal website and discussion boards? If so, how often and for what purpose? I have another respondent who, in coming to MMH for her own research purposes, has become a moderator and mentor of sorts. I was wondering how active you are in the online community and whether you still maintain contact with this group.

Have you considered more surgery or other types of procedures? In your previous response to me you noted that you were now prepared to age naturally. Is there anything else you would like to have done? Are you still satisfied with the results of your procedures? Do you do anything differently now that you have had surgery (i.e. skin care regimes, staying out of the sun, etc.?)

Finally, I can no longer access your blog on MMH. The site says it is preparing to delete the blog along with others. I was hoping to use respondents' blogs and answers in my thesis chapter and I am afraid that without your blog entries, my work will not be as thorough as it could be. I was wondering if you have saved your blog entries, and if you would be willing to share them with me if you do have copies of them.

I hope this finds you well and I look forward to hearing from you. If you have any questions about my work please don't hesitate to ask.

all the best,
Beth Pentney
Phd student, Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, BC
Canada

Reply: June 10, 2010

Hi Beth,
I am willing to answer your questions.
- I did pay with a credit card (for frequent flyer miles) but I had the money so paid it off at the end of the month to avoid finance charges. Why pay 15 to 20% more? I don't think I would have financed it. That's not how I manage my money. I don't buy things I can't afford.
- I no longer go to the forum. Most of the questions are the same and no one bothers to read all that went before them. Got tired of saying the same thing over and over again. I'm not a plastic surgery junkie and this was my one and only procedure.
- No, nothing else I would have done in the future unless my eye lids sag again, I would do that again in a heart beat if needed. I'm VERY satisfied with the work done. My dermatologist had to use a magnifying glass to see the scars. He was fantastic!
- I was already staying out of sun due to skin cancer. My only skin care is wash face with a cream cleanser, moisturize and sun block. Nothing different from before except I was using regular Dove before to wash and now I use a face product.
- I hope you kept copies of the blog from before. I didn't add to them and no, did not keep copies of what I wrote. Sorry.
I still love my look now. It's been a couple years and I am pleased by what I see in the mirror, no cringing. You can't stop getting older but you can look your best. I'm realistic about aging. I don't want to end up looking ridiculous.

Good luck with your paper and if there's anything else I can answer I'll be happy to do so.

Carol

**Email exchange 3: July 12, 2010**

Hello Carol,

I hope this email finds you well. I was hoping you might be able to respond to a few last questions I have for you about your blog, the Make Me Heal discussion boards, and your decision to answer my original request. I had a lot of trouble recruiting participants and I'm trying to figure out what went wrong, and what went right. I was wondering if you could tell me why you decided to respond to my original email, and whether you've been asked to participate in surveys or questionnaires on Make Me Heal in the past. Do you have any idea why people might be disinclined to answer my questions?

Also, you mentioned in your previous reply to me that you no longer visit Make Me Heal. I was wondering if your time on the forums and using the blog resulted in any long or short term friendships with people using the site? Did you become friends with anyone as a result of using the site? And if so, did your relationship(s) move beyond discussion of your procedures? I ask because it seems that there is quite a community established on the discussion boards. People seem so kind and encouraging towards one another, and I wonder if the support people find during their pre- and post-surgery experiences carries over into their "regular" lives as well. On the other extreme, it seems like a community prone to "trolls" and mean-spirited responses. Did you ever encounter negative comments on your blog posts, or did you ever encounter trolls on the discussion boards? If so, how were they dealt with?

Finally, I get the impression that there is a lot of crossover between the Make Me Heal discussion boards and blogs. I had originally thought that I would only look at blogs, but the interview participants I have spoken with all seem to talk about the blogs and discussion boards as one thing, in a way. I was wondering what your perspective of the blogs and discussion boards is/was, based on your time on Make me Heal. Do they overlap? Did you see yourself writing your blog posts for the same people who you interacted with on the discussion boards?

And lastly, I was hoping you might help me fill in some of your demographic information...education level, occupation, and family status if you don't mind. Your information will stay confidential, of course, but I ask because I am trying to determine if there are any similarities between the women I have been interviewing.

thanks again, Carol, and I look forward to hearing from you,

Sincerely,
Beth
Reply: July 23, 2010

Sorry I am such a long time in answering your letter. I was ill and then away. I'm fine now - flu or something. Here's my responses to your questions. Please feel free to ask more if I left anything out or this caused more questions to pop into your mind.

I decided to answer your email because you seem sincere about your research and wanted to know why people do what they do. AND I have the time to talk to strangers AND I often talk to strangers via facebook games. I think most people do not want to talk to anyone about plastic surgery unless they have had it done because there is a lot of negative comments made. I am not one of them. I didn't hide my procedures from most friends and I let everyone at work know it was being done so I wouldn't have to hide anything or lie when I went back to work. So I answered your email because I am convinced you can't be blackmailed if you just come out with all the dirt to begin with yourself. Its all so much less gossip worthy when it's all out in the open.

No, no other surveys on make me heal.

I had short term conversations with a few people but no, nothing lasting and nothing now. Once you get over all the surgery, recovery and amazing results, the comments get old. Yes, I did spend the money, yes, it was a big deal, yes, it hurt, yes, I love it, yes it was worth it and no, I don't plan anything more. Over and over. That forum was a life saver. So much information about what it would be like from REAL people. I had a great doctor but if I listened to him I would have freaked out afterwards when my head was all wrapped in bandages with drain tubes hanging out. But having read the forum I knew exactly what to expect and how many days it really took to heal. Sure there are some exceptions but the majority followed a certain pattern. Also was good to know what could go wrong and the symptoms. I posted so that others could see my experiences too as it helped me so much. Also the photos at difference stages helped to see how your face would change and the final results.

I experiences lots of good people on the boards - I had no problems with anyone being negative or spam etc.

I rarely looked at the blogs. I did all my reading on the forum. I posted my story for others but didn't receive any comments so figured no one looked at it. I certainly didn't follow anyones. I updated mine about 5 times maybe but didn't seem important.

2 years of college. I was a supervisor for the state welfare office - worked there for 30 years. Retired 2 years ago - about 3 months after I had the surgery (wanted to use up some of the sick leave before I left :-). I am married 23 years to current husband who is 15 years younger than me. (more follow up questions on that? LOL)
Email exchange 1: Feb 26, 2010

Hi Beth - I saw your postings on MMH and at first had to validate your permission to conduct this research on these discussion boards. Normally, MMH notifies moderators of such requests so that we don't inadvertently delete your entries.

I would like to answer your questions and assist with your research, but I feel that there is very valuable information missing from your questions. Demographics - age - sex - occupation - level of education - family status - height and weight, for example. I've always wondered about that info among our posters. We participate anonymously yet there are so many similarities among us, or so I think.

Also, there is a major distinction between cosmetic surgery and plastic or reconstructive surgery. Many of the people I have met on this forum are exploring plastic surgery that is reconstructive in nature. Motivating factors, therefore, can be quite different. Differentiating between the two procedures is important.

I do not currently maintain a blog but I did start one, and after one day deleted the entry after I realized that my anonymity was more important to me than publicizing my experiences on a blog. The entry I deleted focused on my decision to stop having further surgeries. I decided that I was finished pursuing plastic surgery and could finally live with myself. If you are interested, I will share that with you.

If you would like for me to answer the questions you posted, I'd be happy to do that. But I can't share an ongoing blog. However, over the past 7 years I've kept a journal of my weight loss and plastic surgery experiences, including photo and video documentation. I did that for myself but eventually felt that my writing could help others, which led me to this forum. Though never published, I have countless files of my collected thoughts and experiences and perhaps some day will compile into a book. Some day.

On MMH I have over 3000 posts. If you search through my username and especially my earliest posts, you can gain great insight into my motivating factors and experiences with these surgeries. In the TT forum I have compiled two lists - one is a Plastic Surgery Patient's Pledge and the other is a Guide for the Caregiver. These paint very realistic pictures.

Let me know if you want me to continue and respond to your questions.

Regards,
Janice

Email Exchange 2: Feb 27 2010

Hi Beth - I have attached my responses in a pdf file. I hope this will help in your research. I am passionate about the work I do at MMH and feel that many who pursue plastic surgery are misunderstood in their intentions. If you have any other questions, please feel free to email me.

Take care,
Janice
1. Can you describe how you came to your decision to undergo cosmetic surgery?
My issues were both medical and cosmetic. My decision to embark on a surgical journey was a result of losing 160 pounds – half my body weight – and having to deal with pounds of redundant skin and loss of muscle tone. I had been a morbidly obese adult for over 20 years and when I finally was successful in losing the excess weight I was more devastated than I could have imagined. When I was losing the weight I didn’t foresee that there would be “no pot of gold at the end of my rainbow,” that I would achieve a new and toned body and resume my life as if I had never carried that enormous amount of weight. I realized that if I was to be ultimately successful and maintain that massive weight loss, I would need to reconstruct my body to normal proportions.

2. How did you weigh the potential benefits of cosmetic surgery against the potential risks of cosmetic surgery?
I asked myself one question. “Could I live with my body the way it was for the rest of my life – or was I willing to take the chance and endure the possible risks of surgery to achieve my goal?” For me, the answer was easy - no doubts, no reservations, and even afterward, no regrets.

3. Has your experience of cosmetic surgery changed your life? If so, how?
Life-changing, life-enhancing, life-SAVING – that’s how I felt after my surgeries. The improvements have been amazing – my results are outstanding – and because of the transformations I have achieved I feel like living again, as a normal human being. I feel like a woman who was given a second chance at living a normal life.

4. Why did you decide to write a blog about your decision to undergo cosmetic surgery?
I began my journal at the end of my weight loss journey, before I had decided on having the surgeries. My mother had just passed away, and I realized that the lessons I learned from her were deep inside my head and it was up to me to teach my daughter. I also knew that I had valuable experiences to share as well, but also wanted to measure my progress and recognize the achievements that I made along the way. So I started to write, about everything. But I didn’t want to share online in a blog. My plans for my writings were strictly for me and my daughter – and granddaughter-to-be.

Then I encountered the MMH forums while I was healing from my first reconstructive surgery. I read (we call it, lurked) for a while, then signed on after my second surgery. Initially I participated for my own support and to satisfy my own needs, then I realized that I was better-suited as a source of support to others. This was also self-serving as now I could share my experiences with others – helping them – but also satisfy my own needs of feeling important, valuable, and respected. So my focus shifted, from my personal writing to the sharing of information and providing support and assistance to other posters.

I did start a blog on MMH when I had decided that my journey in plastic surgery was over, but I was afraid that at some point I’d cross the line from anonymous to recognizable. So I took my entry down (I copied that post to the bottom of this document).

5. What has it been like to write down your experience?
It’s therapeutic to write down experiences. It helps me to see how far I have progressed in my journey, how close I am to achieving my goal, and how realistic I need to be in my expectations.
6. Do you think cosmetic surgery has become more or less acceptable than it was 10 years ago? Why or why not?

I think that depends. Many people feel that cosmetic surgery is done only because people are vain. That’s an issue that I have. Many surgeries are done to restore normalcy, they are reconstructive in nature and may also improve function (such as removing 10 pounds of hanging, redundant skin).

Body image is also a perception. What I may deem as normal may not be interpreted as normal for someone else. I have concerns about people who try to achieve perfection when I believe perfection doesn’t exist (Cindy Jackson, for example). Breast enhancement to correct tubular deformity is to restore normalcy, but to increase breast size from a C cup to a DD cup is puzzling to me. And know of the possible complications and issues that can arise from that procedure is even more perplexing. I think cosmetic surgery is given a bad name by the people who overdo procedures or who cannot come to a resolution with their own body appearance. Those are the ones who fall into the category of the less acceptable. But if more people understood about the reconstructive nature of some cosmetic surgeries, then perhaps more people would be acceptable of its function.

7. What do you think about shows like Extreme Makeover and The Swan?

I watched Extreme Makeover before I had any of my surgeries. The show actually gave me the courage to phone a plastic surgeon and start my reconstruction. But, after having had my surgeries, I realized that having so many procedures at once was extremely dangerous and should not be encouraged or promoted. The show really failed to accurately portray the difficult and sometimes devastating healing stages that followed plastic surgery. The infections, split incisions, hematomas, seromas, necrosis, scarring, extensive suturing, swelling, skin rashes, hemorrhaging, pulmonary embolisms, collapsed lungs, vision loss, blood transfusions, reactions to anesthesia, and even mutilations are never portrayed on TV but are the harsh realities of this type of surgery.

8. In your opinion, what kind of positive or negative images exist in relation to cosmetic surgery?


Negative images – seeking cosmetic surgery for vanity’s sake – enhancing what other see as normal or normal progressing of aging.

9. Would you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not? What does the word mean to you?

Sure – in one sense I believe that women are often considered second-class to men. Especially when it comes to cosmetic surgery. Many women achieve sub-standard, if not devastating results and hide their post-surgical deformities from view. No one knows that they have been to…. a dentist who can perform tummy tucks merely by because he attended a weekend seminar on the procedure and can add that service to his practice. The women who may be mutilated never come forward because they are embarrassed that they went for the procedure in the first place then had the horrendous results. If this happened more often to men, we’d know about it. So I guess that I feel somewhat like a feminist in that regard.
10. Is there anything that you would like to add about your experience of cosmetic surgery or the way you think that cosmetic surgery is portrayed in the media?
I don't think cosmetic surgery is accurately portrayed in the media. It's not just movie stars that get this done, but average people who just want to be and feel normal again. It's an expensive undertaking (I've spent well over $40,000 so far, and with complications my insurance has covered about $60,000). But I did it to feel normal again, reconstructed, restored.

Please provide demographic information about yourself, including your age, gender, ethnicity or nationality, education level, occupation, family status, height and weight.
Female – 54 years old (first surgery was at 49), Caucasian American, Post Graduate education, Professional Educator, Married with 2 grown children and one grandchild, 5'5" and 170 pounds.

My blog entry:

That Final Step

Always trying to go up the down-escalator, that's my challenge, that's my task, that's my never-ending quest. I doubt that I will ever reach the top... the closer I get the quicker I drop back down and must try all over again. Each and every forward step requires more and more effort on my part and is continually met with increased resistance from outside forces. As I strive to focus on my ultimate goal, I vacillate between seeing clearly and struggling adequately to merely make my way through efforts that become foggy and undefined. Where am I going? What will I even realize if I do get there? Are my expectations reasonable or is it all a delusion?

The outcome of losing over 160 pounds was not what I had expected. It was not a glorious, triumphant, or a remarkable accomplishment. The massive weight loss produced horrendous folds of redundant skin and flab, which was not only aesthetically devastating to me but physically uncomfortable as well. My skin had not shrunken to accommodate the fat loss and I looked as if I was melting, shriveling inside my own body in a skin suit fit for someone who weighed 320 pounds. The flaps of skin developed rashes and odors as sweat would accumulate in the hot, deep folds. Parts of my body were hidden from my view for years, either concealed by the fat or camouflaged by the skin apron that was a part of my newly-developed physical composition. Each morning as I entered the shower and at night before going to bed, I struggled to control my emotions as I lifted and shifted these areas. I creatively hid this carnage that resembled unbaked pizza dough, and my family was never aware of the actual extent of my deformities. This existence was all too painful for me to tolerate for the rest of my life. If any hope for continued weight loss success existed, it existed in the hands of a skillful plastic surgeon.

In August of 2005 my life began to change and turn around. I met the plastic surgeon who would begin to laboriously reconstruct my body through a number of extensive surgeries. He would tap into his many years of knowledge and expertise and cut, dissect, suction, excise, repair, suture, lift, dress, treat, and ultimately resurrect the person who was inside of me, hidden by the hideousness of the remnants of massive weight loss.
Through the many procedures: bilateral brachioplasty, extended abdominoplasty, scar revisions and repairs, mastopexy, and lipectomy, as well as a two non-related operations, my surgeon remained kind, compassionate, and always accessible. He treated me respectfully and never made me feel as if my needs were trivial. He listened, answered my questions, and exhibited great patience, offering his time whenever I felt I had unresolved concerns or if I needed further explanation of a particular surgery or outcome.

In my work as a board moderator on the plastic surgery forums, I viewed hundreds, if not thousands, of before and after photographs of post operative patients, some with shocking complications and many with less than satisfactory outcomes. I viewed these images with sadness and empathy, and on numerous occasions would share some images and stories with him. My doctor would give thought to my concerns, selflessly giving of his time and knowledge not only to respond to me, but also to assist with information for me to pass along. As my knowledge of reconstructive surgery increased, I viewed my doctor with even more pride and respect and recognized him as an outstanding surgeon in his field. I realized that I was indeed very fortunate, that my extraordinary results were not linked to me, but to my surgeon, who is far more skilled and exceptional than I believe he recognizes.

In the past 6 years of my life I accepted many challenges, overcame many obstacles, and endured great physical pain. I suffered through many weeks of physical and emotional torment that took place before and after each surgery. As I look back at the seemingly insurmountable hurdles that I had to triumph over, with each and every experience I became more human, stronger, increasingly self-assured, and confident. My doctor helped me to feel human again, like an attractive woman for the first time in my life. He restored my life, reconstructed my life, and saved my life.

I’m tired. I’m worn out. I cannot fathom enduring another round of surgeries, more recovery periods, pain and discomfort, or possible complications and healing issues. So I’ve resolved that my reconstruction is complete, that I can live with me as I am, that I can accept the imperfections that remain. I can proudly hold up my head and blend into the crowd. No longer do I hang my head in shame and desperation, hoping that people won’t notice me as long as I don’t make eye contact with them. I will take the gift that my surgeon has given me, the gift of a normal body, and care for it, respect it, and appreciate it. I only have one more step to take to reach the top of that escalator. I’m ready to step off.

This blog will become my vehicle for sharing my story, my experiences, and my knowledge with others. I hope to influence, motivate, support, and challenge those who may embark down the same path. The metaphor of going up the down escalator is also the working title of my book. Throughout the past 7 years I have recorded phases of my journey, documented the challenges, obstacles, and hurdles that I had to overcome. I will choose chapters from this book, including helpful suggestions for reaching goals, to include in this blog. Some chapters detail my specific surgeries and others relate stories of similar experiences. All tie in to the concept of struggling to move forward against unrelenting forces working against me. Ultimately, every experience, every challenge, has contributed to the person I am today. I now have new journeys to begin.

**Email Exchange 3: June 10, 2010**
Dear Janice,

I hope this email finds you well. I have spent the last few months working on another chapter of my thesis and am now getting into the chapter in which the MMH blogs and blogger responses will be a part. I had a couple of follow up questions for you if you have some time.

In your previous responses, you referred to the desire to feel normal as a significant motivating factor in your own and other people's decisions to undergo cosmetic and/or reconstructive surgery. I was wondering if you could explore this some more - restoring or achieving a sense of normalcy. One of the things I struggle with when thinking about whether cosmetic surgery can be empowering is that it helps maintain a standard of beauty or normalcy to which so few people can meet, and that rather than working towards wider acceptance of definitions of "normal" or "beautiful," we work to emulate a pre-existing image. I don't think that it is the responsibility of those people who undergo cosmetic surgery to become martyrs for the cause of self-acceptance, and I can understand that it would be desirable to eliminate experiences of ostracism, criticism, and discrimination through surgery, but I do wonder about our individual ability to resist media images and cultural practices (such as beauty pageants) that have a long history of sexism, racism, ageism, ableism, fat-hatred, etc. I was wondering if you could share your thoughts on this (what has become a complicated conundrum for me).

(RESPONSE) Normal is relative - relative to each individual and through the looking glass beholden to them. It's an image developed through nurturing and maturing, influenced by parents, family, friends, media, celebrity, and illusion. I don't think a true "normal" exists. Unless you qualify normal in humans as having two arms, two legs, one nose, etc. What was normal for someone like me, who struggled with morbid obesity for many years, which was perhaps a way of hiding from reality, of wearing an outer coating, a shell of protection? To get rid of that shell and be left with disfiguring remnants of a past existence, left my idea of "normal" so way out of reach. What did I think was normal? Proportion in body parts, firm skin, thick hair, small nose, big eyes, full lips, clear complexion, flat stomach. In other words, normal was everything that WASN'T me, even with my armor removed.

So for someone like me, plastic surgery was empowerment, it gave me the ability to achieve what I perceived as a normal appearance. But not quite. Because every time a milestone was reached, something else looked a bit off - needing adjustment. I was forever trying to go up the down-escalator. No matter how hard I tried, I was not going to look as good as those images in the magazines, and no matter what I did, the aging process would always keep setting me a few steps backwards as I tried moving forward in my restoration.

Reading magazines - beauty variety - is not a good idea for someone like me who tries to achieve that normalcy. I am a digital graphic artist and I know better than to believe that the images I see are what the models and celebrities actually look like. But I want to look like those images. They are better than normal. They are a benchmark that I want desperately to reach. For acceptance from everyone but mostly for acceptance from myself.

There was a study done on babies and if they could perceive what we considered beautiful (symmetry). Infants were shown photos of faces, and some faces were more
beautiful (symmetrical) than others. I'll bet you are familiar with this project: http://www.jyi.org/volumes/volume6/issue6/features/feng.html

Also, I was wondering if you had any insight into my project and its abysmal failure to recruit respondents. Since you know the group far better than I do, I hope you might be able to shed some light on the lack of responses to my requests. I can see that over 2000 people viewed my discussion topic on the boards in which I posted, but I only ever heard from you.

(ANSWER) I guess a more apt question would be - why was I the only one to respond, rather than why they didn't? What makes me different from the 2000 people who didn't respond? I am a writer. I have composed countless entries in a journal of my experiences. I work on the boards not only to support and encourage the new members, but to compose, create, and contribute to the vast collective knowledge contained in the forum. It's a passion for me.

My guess is that others are not as passionate at the writing process as I am. Or perhaps they are afraid of losing the anonymity they possess on the forum? I'd bet that with some encouragement some of the gals who experienced the massive weight loss as I have would contribute to your study. I also think we are of a different group than the others who pursue plastic surgery. There are many degrees of need - from correcting major deformities, completing reconstruction, seeking enhancement, or sadly, enduring mutilation.

I also think that many of our anonymous posters are afraid of you and your intentions. They see you as an outsider looking in to a private group who share a common need. They are cautious. I don't have any suggestions to offer that can help, but let me give it some thought.

Do you think my questions were uninspiring?

(ANSWER) No - that's your perception but I think that when a reader views one question as non-applicable - she dismisses the rest.

Do you think that the group is suspicious of researchers?

(ANSWER) Suspicious - yes - but not because of researchers. We've had intruders, we call them trolls. People that like to make trouble. Sometimes I've had to deal with some pretty nasty stuff. Don't ask.

Do you think they have been asked one too many times to participate in a survey?

(ANSWER) It does come up often, but I don't think it's the case because members come and go often and it's never the same group after 6 months. If you stay on the boards for 6 months, that's pretty long. Most tend to lurk before their surgeries, gather information, perhaps join and post at surgery time, and stick around during healing. Once healing is over, they are gone. Support is no longer needed. A few die hards, like myself, stick around to give back.

Do you think that the academic/ethics jargon preceding the questions turned people off?
I think that unless you have conducted a research study the terminology can be overwhelming. If there isn't an initial "catch phrase" or "selling point" then it doesn't matter what the rest of the text is about.

It was all necessary preamble that I couldn't eliminate; in fact it had to come first according to my ethics committee, but I do wonder if it makes people wary of my intentions. Anyway, all things I am considering as I being this chapter--any insight would be appreciated.

I can relate....

My committee did suggest that I attempt to solicit more responses using my contact with you, since you are a moderator and may be able to suggest particular individuals who may be interested and willing to answer my questions. If you think you may be able to recommend me to a couple of forum participants and/or bloggers I would be happy to send along my letter and questions to you, but if you don't feel comfortable doing so, of if you feel it would compromise your role as moderator, then I totally understand.

I have a few that I will ask. Send along your letter again and I'll see what I can do. Coming from me that may help. I realized lately that I have a following - posters hoping I'll respond to them, or following my older posts. Now THAT is empowering!

Thanks again for your insight and considered response to my previous questions. I really appreciate your help and participation. I know that it will make my work stronger.

My pleasure,
Regards,
Janice

Email Exchange 4: June 11, 2010

Hi Janice,
Thanks so much for agreeing to send along my project to a few people and for your candid remarks. I have been so focused on those 2000 non-respondents that it was refreshing to think about it from the other side- why you responded out of all the others. I am attaching my questions and letter of intent in a word document, and also pasting it at the bottom of this email. I appreciate your help, Beth

Response: June 11, 2010
Ok. I pleaded with my moderator colleagues in a post in our private forum. Let's see what happens next. Take care
J
Hi Janice

Thanks for sending my info off to the group again. Hopefully it will be effective in gaining some more respondents. I had two more questions for you if you don't mind.

First, what do you think about the fact that the majority of cosmetic surgery patients and Makemeheal forum and blog contributors are female? I see a few forums that are more male-focused (depending on the procedure), but it appears that women make up the vast majority. A lot of the research that I have read argues that women are culturally indoctrinated and socialized into caring more about body image and beauty because sexual currency has historically been the seat of female power. I'm oversimplifying things to some extent, but I do find this stream of argument problematic, because it assumes that women are being fooled into something they wouldn't want, if only they knew better. I wonder if you have any thoughts on the gendered divisions on the site. (Stats do indicate that men are becoming more active in elective cosmetic procedures - though the marketing is different, appealing to their masculinity in ways that are very different than the marketing for women for similar procedures.)

I think women like the sense of community and camaraderie that's developed in the online venue. Most who end up at MMH are there while doing research for information or for support. Think about the difference between the sexes, because men already know it all and they are not known to be sensitive. I say that in jest but I think there is merit to that thought. Like asking for directions, or approval on looks. Or pride in a beer belly???? I'll never understand men for that! Women are primed from the get-go to care about their looks. Baby clothes, frilly girl dresses, makeup, hairstyles, curves, long eyelashes. It's a cultural thing that permeates through all cultures in various ways. Just the different topics or forums indicate that even women view favorable attributes differently. You've got the BA forum in which gals who want big, firm breasts communicate. Then the BR forum where the opposite is true and gals who complain of natural big breasts are looking to be B cups. I'll never understand the Butt forum where they all want more junk in their trunks. The TT forum seems to attract them all - commonly wanting flat stomach and abs - includes the few males who come in to post. I rarely, if ever, view posts on other forums, outside of the ones in which I have personal experience. I think women worry more about attracting men than men worry about attracting women. Here's an interesting concept...my best friend is a gay man. We go to the gym together to work out. He tells me that most of the good looking, muscular men at our gym are also gay. He told me to think about it - they are also trying to attract men so they are working on themselves in the best way they know how and possibly also in a way to still fit into society. I'd venture to guess, that the men who do come on to our site, might be gay as well. And that's an entire study of its own - isn't it?

Second, you mentioned trolls in your previous email. And also said not to ask. But I'm going to ask - can you tell me a bit about the problems you have encountered with trolls as a moderator on the site? I ask because I wrote a chapter for my thesis on discussion boards for fan communities of The Swan and in my research I found scores of really negative and troll-like comments, but interestingly, there was often a strong and collaborative response from the group, who would 'out' the troll and then reassert their position within the forums. They did use a moderator for help with banning and such, but they also quite often took it upon themselves to shut down negative, argumentative, or
inauthentic posts. If you would be willing, I would be interested to hear about the types of
behaviour your trolls engaged in and how it was dealt with on MMH.

Trolls show themselves in various ways. Some join in, make a few harsh, nasty, or
derogatory comments and never return. I ban someone like that right away and rarely
have problems with them coming back. I can ban by IP address, so if they aren't
computer savvy they won't understand why they can't reregister and create a new user.
The Internet is so big, they move on. Others come in disguised as genuine posters. We
had one who claimed to be a BA patient, kept her posts going about her procedure, her
healing, etc. She was a regular and didn't create any suspicions. Then she started
writing about a pregnancy, having triplets, all the problems she encountered. Posters
would offer support, and many would respond to her messages with genuine concern.
She created a following. Well, I can't go into any more details, but it was discovered that
many of her followers were her own posts in different identities - all had the same IP
address. I am not able to share the specifics, but know that a lot of members felt duped
by her. Other trolls permeate the photo albums. They don't communicate on the forums
and only leave rude comments in an album. We don't have the technical ability to delete
those insults and I wish MMH would take of the feature allowing comments under
photos. Other trolls came on board and posted links to raunchy web sites. Easy to get
rid of those. And oh yes, the troops do rally together when one is discovered and they
do come to the defense of each other if needed. I read a lot of blogs and discussion
boards and I think that people are very free to say what they want when the reader
doesn't know who you are. I am far more eloquent in my writings than I am in oral
communication. Disagreements happen on the boards, but as long as they aren't
insulting to each other or harassing, I let that go. Hey, free speech.

Well, I'm beginning to get a bit disenchanted. I don't feel as useful as I once was. I
doubt there are any more surgeries in my future, so my own personal need for support is
waning. Please, send me any questions you like. I've always enjoyed writing and it's
making me feel useful in another way.
Best wishes,
Janice

Thanks again Janice, and if you tire of my questions don't hesitate to let me know. I am
not trying to bug you so if you feel pestered I am totally willing to back off.

best,
Beth