

SO YOU'VE BEEN ON A SHOW: THE LIFE-CYCLE AND LABOR OF REALITY
TELEVISION CONTESTANTS

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation considers what I am calling the “life-cycle” of reality television participation. Individuals audition and participate in filming, processes which turn them into characters. These individuals then return home having become known individuals, if only to a niche audience. They then must navigate their own relationship to the program and determine how best to pursue their career and personal goals. Relationships with friends, family and employers may change due to participation. The impacts of appearing on a reality show last far beyond the filming period. I am considering the labor that contestants put into applying and appearing on the show, and the effects that participation has on their own self-image and future career and life plans. This project contextualizes format television in Canada and considers the linkages between the labor required of reality contestants and that expected in other industries. The expectations placed on reality contestants can be seen as exaggerated versions of the labor expected of all workers in the current economy. Reality television contestants have often been viewed as being exploited by the programs they appear on. This project nuances that understanding by considering how individuals make sense of their own participation. The findings are based on 49 interviews with contestants on Canadian skill and talent based reality competition programs. These interviews occurred over the phone, by video chat, and through written correspondence. The majority of respondents did not win the program they took part in. Yet, the majority of individuals mentioned that they would take part again if given the opportunity. The potential benefits of participation are not limited to winning the title and prize.

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INTRODUCTION

There has been much written on the genre of reality television. However, the participants themselves have largely been excluded from the conversation. In his book *Reality Check*, Michael Essany (2008) states that an estimated 20 million people around the globe have appeared on some form of reality TV. As his book was published in 2008, this number has only grown since then. The sheer number of individuals who have been involved in the genre highlights the importance of looking at their working conditions and the potential impacts that their participation will have on their lives. This dissertation considers the experiences that individuals have when they appear on reality television programs and the labor they perform. I am considering the labor that they put into applying and appearing on the show, and the effects that participation has on their own self-image and future career and life plans. In order to do so I will examine the “life-cycle” of reality television participants.

Once an individual decides to apply for a show, they are brought into a system that encourages them to consider themselves as a character. This reconceptualization of the self speaks to current labor trends and can have a significant impact on the life of the hopeful participant. Once selected, the individual must participate in the filming of the program. During filming, most individuals are isolated from their support systems and face long hours and potentially emotionally and physically draining working conditions. Their appearance on the program is then edited, a process over which they have little if any control. That edited representation appears on television to be viewed and interpreted by audience members. The filming experience and televised representation may have long-lasting impacts on the participant. Looking at the process as a life-cycle allows for a consideration of the various stages and how labor functions in each.

While much work has been done on the genre, those who appear on the shows have themselves often been ignored. Grindstaff (2009) has labelled reality television participants “the constituency most underrepresented in current scholarship in reality programming.” (pg 46) Salamon (2010) argues that the limited work that does exist has tended to present a “a top-down, paternalistic view” (pg 164) of both the programs and participants. Patterson (2015) notes that much of the academic literature tends to focus on analyzing specific shows, their audiences, or the power relations that structure participation rather than looking at the genre from the perspective of contestants. Quail (2015a) points out that Canada has been underrepresented in work on both format television and the reality genre. In an effort to push back against these trends, I have chosen to focus on contestants of Canadian skill and talent-based competitive reality shows. The contestants themselves are the focus of this dissertation. This project will attempt to address multiple avenues of underrepresentation as it considers participants and the Canadian context in which they operate. In doing so I will foreground the individuals who appear on television and consider their motivations for participation and the impacts it has had on their lives.

Those that have looked at reality participants have tended to do so in regards to specific populations. Patterson (2015) looks at Canadian women who have appeared on competitive reality shows. She examines the neoliberal logics that underpin much reality television and how the women tried to undermine the process of production and assert individual agency within the structures they were bound by. Grindstaff (2009) considers the program *Sorority Life* on MTV and the women who appeared on that show. She notes the tension that existed within the sorority regarding the decision to do the show and that some of the cast signed on in an intentional effort to attempt to bring positive representation to the communities they were a part of. Richie Wilcox

(2010) has an article reflecting on his participation on the first season of *Canadian Idol*. He discusses how details from his life were highlighted to play up the every-person narrative. While the information was factual, it also served to define him in specific ways that differed from how he saw himself. These articles speak to the personalized experiences of participation and the physical and emotional toll that come from it.

Patterson (2015) discusses the variety of roles that reality contestants play and their importance to how shows are understood. As she argues, “their stories as contestants circulate within broader public discourses about reality TV and its cultural impact which in turn shapes the audience’s understanding of reality TV participation in a variety of ways such as a cautionary tale or evidence of ‘fame democracy’ in action.” (pg 26) Not only do these individuals become embedded in public discourse, they themselves are also influenced by previous narratives. The majority of individuals I spoke to highlighted their previous status as viewers of either the specific program or the reality genre more broadly. These individuals went onto shows having a sense (potentially wildly inaccurate) of what they were getting into. Their own participation had been impacted by the participation of those who had come before. They themselves would then likely influence a later crop of applicants. Contestants have to be studied in the context in which they exist and their own shaping by the norms of the genre must be acknowledged.

Part of the reason in discussing participation as a life-cycle in the way is the awareness that individuals can pick up or re-start the cycle at any time. Individuals who were unsuccessful in audition efforts can try again in future seasons. Individuals who have appeared on shows may choose to appear on other programs or come back for special episodes or future seasons. Or, in acknowledgement of the transnational nature of the genre, the same show may re-broadcast or be sold internationally years after the initial run. As Patterson (2013) argues, “Reality-celebrity then

is ‘continuously temporary’ if you will; it might start to wane but can be resuscitated as the program is sold into syndication for global consumption” (pg 129). As this quote suggests, some of the decisions regarding participation may be totally outside the control of the individual participant. While they may view their participation as a single outing that has ended, sales of the show may make their participation seem new to viewers around the globe. This continual temporality means that one’s participation can rarely ever be seen as completely over.

Bonnie J. Dow has stated, “I study television because I think it’s important, because I think it could be better, and because I want people to take it seriously. I also study it because I like it.” (1996, pg xiii) I take her words as my starting point to this project. I have been a longtime fan of reality television. I have cheered for and rooted against a number of competitors who have graced my television screen (some of whom are included in this dissertation). I have also grown in my awareness of the exploitative nature of participation on these programs. Not all individuals are given the same opportunities by the programs and one can see how issues of race, class, age, sexuality and gender are often treated in ways that reinforce societal and cultural norms. Approaching the topic as both fan and scholar allows for an exploration of the ways in which contestants’ agency is constrained by their participation without falling too far into the worldview of seeing those constraints as solely exploitative. My fan positioning provides me a wider context from which to consider these participants and programs and serves as a reminder of the pleasures of the genre.

The Role of the Audience

Because my project examines a twenty-first century “economy of participation” in reality TV programming, the project engages with, but also reassesses somewhat, a twentieth-century critical discourse about media audiences and its relevance in the analysis of twenty-first century

media such as reality TV. Many scholars argue that the term ‘the audience’ is more a product of market research and scholarly work than a term that accurately reflects the individuals who watch television. Caughie (1990) mentions that TV audiences always risk being constructed as the other, turned into an object of study in an abstract manner. Of course, the audience is not an easily identifiable, homogeneous group. Rather, there exists a plurality of audiences - disparate groups who can be categorized according to their reception of media or by their social/cultural positioning (Moores, 1993). Instability surrounding the conditions and boundaries of ‘audiencehood’ is a key component (Dahlgren, 1998, Moores, 1993). Hall (1980) and Morley’s (1980) work helped to transition away from quantitative work to a version which began to qualitatively consider the audience. As James Hay states, “Cultural Studies found in ethnography a way to combine empirical and textual study while arguing that traditional audience research was too empirical and textual study too detached and disinterested in texts’ relation to popular struggles and contexts” (1996, pg 2). There is a shift towards audience ethnography that can be observed in feminist research. Academics often focused on women’s readings of popular texts (ie: McRobbie, 1982, Modleski, 1984, Radway, 1987). These works asserted the importance of the popular, taking seriously what had frequently been dismissed as fluff. The uses, pleasures and meanings found in these texts were foregrounded. Too often, however, audience studies tends to focus on either media as a text *or* as a practice instead of combining these to look at the ways audiences use the text *and* the social context (Press & Livingstone, 2006). In this project, I attempt to discuss the labor that participants perform while situating that labor in the wider economic and social moment in which these shows exist.

That individuals are not cultural dupes has been a starting point for much of the recent work on audiences. Fiske (1987, 1989a, 1989b) vigorously advocates for the notion of the ‘active

audience'. In fact, he largely abandons the term audience due to its implications of a mass, instead favoring the term reader. This switch is intended to acknowledge the social positioning of the individual and their shifting priorities. While he acknowledges the importance that ideology plays in any society, he maintains that the agency of the individual should not be underestimated. Barker and Brooks (1998) nuance this by arguing that 'active' as a term needs to be separated from the term 'resistant'. These two should not be conflated. While audience members may be engaging with the text, these actions are not necessarily counter to dominant ideology. In addition, they discuss the importance of differentiating types of activities and levels of investment. Sender (2012) cautions that all research on audiences must tread a path between textual determinism and the excesses of active audience theory.

Tincknell and Raghuram (2002) use *Big Brother* as a lens to consider how the genre challenges and reconfigures the relationship between audience and media text. While there are now multiple sites which inform viewers' understandings of a text, the fundamental relationship of power between audience members and producers remains unchanged. How one interprets the media is dependent on one's cultural positioning. Individuals occupy a number of intersecting and overlapping standpoints that can all affect one's response to a media text (Bobo, 1988, Jhally and Lewis, 1992, Skeggs and Wood, 2012). Work has been done specifically considering the audiences of reality television. Skeggs and Wood (2012) consider how both reality participants and viewers are valued and how gender and class impact those valuations. Class standing significantly affected viewers' perceptions of the genre. Middle class viewers tended to view reality television as morally bad and exploitative. Working class viewers however saw participation in the genre "as the remote but imagined possibility of a less constricted future: not as a textual ideological object but as a 'real' structure of opportunity" (pg 203). One's class

status may strongly affect both the opportunities they see in the genre and how they react to participants. Sender (2012) specifically considers individuals who watch makeover programs. She considers the process of self-reflexivity and how it is both gendered and classed.

Economic Context

One criticism of critical and ethnographic audience studies (particularly during the twentieth century) has been that they have not devoted ample attention to the role of viewers and consumers within complex and changing *modes of production*—arrangements and synergies among production, distribution, marketing-research, advertising companies and state institutions. My project examines Canadian reality TV's economy of participation--how participation operates within, generating value for, a mode of production for reality TV in Canada.

Reality television is not a stable genre. In fact, Misha Kavka (2012) argues that, “reality TV changes so quickly that flux is one of its key attributes, and hence any attempt to discuss it as a genre must incorporate its mutability rather than sidelining it as incidental to the form.” (pg 8) Following this understanding, I wish to focus on the ways in which the genre has adapted since the early 2000s, and the importance of those adaptations, in terms of production and its use of participants. Doing so will allow for a consideration of how the genre has recognized the value provided by certain participants and altered itself to better take advantage of that value. Programming strategies have changed in order to get repeated use out of individuals who have proven to be of value. Reality shows have been designed in ways to stay profitable and attempt to appeal to viewers. Along with the contestants and programs, I will also be examining the rhetoric surrounding the genre and how its cultural status is negotiated.

However, before considering the experiences of reality participants, some time must be spent laying out the economic moment we live in. The shows and production strategies that exist

are reflective of current cultural expectations surrounding personal responsibility and initiative. Competitive reality television highlights the notions of personal responsibility and that an individual has total control of their failure or success on the program. Ouellette and Hay (2008) discuss how the expectations placed on participants mirror the expectations placed on citizens in terms of personal responsibility. A 'good' citizen is one that does not rely on the state. They are an entrepreneur who makes decisions to responsibly manage their life. In her dissertation, Patterson (2013) notes that within the logic of the majority of reality TV shows, "good citizens/participants are defined by their ability or willingness to employ risk management in order to make 'correct' life decisions/choices which in turn enable self-sufficiency, taking the burden of care off the state's shoulders." (pg 9) These authors speak to the highlighting of self-sufficiency in the genre. Individuals are assumed to be in total control and any negative experience or outcome is presented as their own fault due to failures in self-discipline.

Not only is the good citizen a non-dependent one, they are also entrepreneurial and not risk-adverse. Current neoliberal understanding presents the individual as in charge of, and therefore responsible for their own life and success. As Ouellette and Hay put forth, "In a state where good government is less government, then everyone needs to be a leader rather than a dependent/onlooker" (2008, pg 190). The individual needs to be entrepreneurial in order to make things happen for them. A good individual is a proactive individual. The inverse then is also presented as true. Individuals who fail are considered at fault for this. It was their risk-adverseness (or the taking of ill-advised risk) that led to their problems. One's choices are always presented as being only influenced by the individual.

Hendershot (2009) discusses the illusion of meritocracy that competitive reality television programs provide. There is the sense that the "best" person will get the job. In this quest to find

the best however, many qualified individuals will be cast aside. For as many individuals who are able to effectively monetize their being, there are far more who cannot. Competitive reality programs frequently have only one winner. The majority of those appearing on these programs will lose. Even fewer participants will be able to convert their appearance on a show into a long-term career or wider cultural success. In order to mask this structural problem, the ideology of the neoliberal marketplace instead serves up what Beck (2000) has termed “biographic solutions to structural contradictions”. Failure or success in finding employment is presented as due to something intrinsic to the individual doing the job searching. Talent-based reality programs extend this logic. McRobbie (2004) argues that a focus on talent keeps the blame (or credit) on the individual. If they or their next project fails, it simply was not up to standard. By placing all success or blame on the individual, wider structural or societal critiques are sidestepped and ignored.

The focus on the personal brings in structural issues, but only inasmuch as these are issues to be worked around with skill and good judgement. While discussing the failed program *Welcome to the Neighborhood*, Ouellette and Hay assert that the program was fundamentally about “learning how best to manage, act upon, and instrumentalize individualism and difference, change and surprise – how best to solve problems within the rules” (177). Learning to navigate successfully within the rules is not limited to this program, but is a requirement of both competitive reality television and modern society. Of course, one must first be aware of the rules before they can use them to their advantage.

In an effort to teach individuals the rules of the reality game, some individuals have created guides and handbooks to succeeding in reality television. One such course is by *Big Brother* winner Dan Gheesling, Gheesling offers both a 4-session web course and a book entitled

How to Get on Reality TV: How a Normal Guy Got Cast on Reality TV. Courses like Gheesling's work to "teach" these rules to interested applicants by extending the logic of self-governance into privatized spheres. Getting applicants to feel empowered and in control increases the likelihood they will expend effort into creating attractive applications (and into purchasing products from the so-called experts). These can then be used by the program to create value from these characters. As Hearn claims, "Here the self is valuable only in relation to its flexibility, visibility, potential profitability, and ability to express and circulate resonant cultural meanings" (2008, pg 208). Nothing intrinsic in the individual is inherently valuable to reality television. Value comes from the assemblage of the self into a compelling character. If this branding occurs successfully and in tandem with the characterization presented by the program, the individual might be able to become a durable participant in the reality television landscape. Durability can lead to significant financial reward, increasing the attractiveness of applying. The application process is also presented as a fun way to engage with the show. This engagement is unpaid and provides value for the corporate owners.

That reality television is a business always needs to be foregrounded. While much time is spent on the real people who appear on the programs, this is largely due to the inexpensive wages that these individuals command. In discussing reality TV as a genre, Curnutt states that "its continued reliance on particular kinds of participants to make inexpensive, formulaic depictions of the real has, with time, created a workforce that appears increasingly akin to traditional media producers (e.g. actors and television personalities)" (2011, pg 1070). Curnutt, therefore argues that the second generation of reality television works to create celebrity (in a minor way) rather than the disposable cast members of the first generation. Similarly, he also posits there is a larger trend in media production that seeks to challenge the space and differences between producers

and consumers (Curnutt, 2011). He uses the example of the increasing size of the paychecks earned by the *Jersey Shore* cast members to note that participants are becoming more durable. These individuals can mitigate viewer loss as their recognition and audience appeal can increase the likelihood that individuals will watch future seasons or spin-offs. Durability increases the value for producers, but can also bring significant material reward to the participants themselves.

The Importance of Genre

While certain individuals can and do experience material rewards for their participation, the genre is still stigmatized and seen as having little cultural value. Misha Kavka (2012) points out the self-fulfilling prophecy that reality television is currently stuck in due to cultural conceptions of the genre. She writes, “Because reality television is seen as a dumbed-down media form with a low entry threshold for participants, its diminished cultural value rubs off on participants’ claim to fame, while its reputation for creating D-list celebrities confirms reality TV’s low cultural value.” (pg 145) This becomes a self-perpetuating cycle. The genre’s low cultural status creates well-known individuals who, since they have become famous through the genre, are assumed to be a lower class of celebrity. This is then viewed as reality television’s inability to create “true” celebrities. The few individuals who have “broken out” of this lower status tend to be from talent-based programs (like Kelly Clarkson or Carrie Underwood from *American Idol*) and are presented as having been able to avoid the stigma surrounding the genre due to their exceptional skill.

Mark Andrejevic (2004, 2011) and Francois Jost (2011) are concerned with the cultural perceptions of the genre and how it has been mobilized. Looking at their work will allow for a discussion surrounding the ways the genre has been used both to maintain the power of producers and networks at the expense of participants, and to attempt to use the threat of reality

television to avoid having to negotiate with individuals working on scripted shows. Mark Andrejevic's work (2004) provides insight into the changes to the wider television industry that the genre has taken advantage of and pushed forward. His later work (2011) discusses the contradictions that surround who is considered of value and worthy of financial compensation in reality programming. Rather than challenging the established order, shows tend to financially reward celebrities and those performing jobs/roles typically associated with men, while devaluing work associated with women and the domestic sphere.

Keeping the emphasis on the program rather than the participants that appear on it is key to maintaining control. If the participants become the focus, the show can lose control. Curnutt (2011) discusses *The Hills* and *The City* as examples of the ways that shows can exert control even when individuals do become more popular than anticipated. Spin-offs of specific individuals can jettison higher-paid cast members who are no longer the draw they initially were. In order to prevent loss of control, programs work to define the limits of participant intervention. Reality television demonstrates what Andrejevic (2004) has referred to as, "a commodified example of procedural authorship" (pg 49). Contestants and, occasionally, audience members shape the show. However, they can only do so through the rules crafted by the show and its producers. As viewers, we can see this through the consistency in format that a program maintains over multiple seasons. The structure of the show rarely changes. Rather it is the participants who differ. The participants, who are often former audience members, are the ones who provide the content for the show and whose labor allows each season to feel different without having to make fundamental changes to the show.

The genre has not only been used in ways that privilege producers over contestants. Rather, reality television has frequently been harnessed as a tool to threaten those in traditional

television production who are looking to improve working conditions. Andrejevic (2011) states that, in the US, those participating in contract negotiations or considering group walkouts have been threatened with expanded reliance on reality television by the network. This threat makes clear the obviously more precarious nature of employment in reality television. The genre itself has been turned into a tool that can be harnessed to potentially threaten or discipline those working in other genres that have been traditionally valued more. The prestige afforded other genres allowed the work involved in production also have a sense of heft. The threats that Andrejevic discusses play into maintaining the cultural separation of the assumed high quality of scripted programming and the low quality status of reality shows. Here workers are encouraged to maintain a distance from the genre and must actively fight to maintain their rights at the expense of the lower valued genre.

The notion of power also extends to a consideration of what kinds of labor are considered real work and deserving of compensation. On many programs, participants live together and are filmed constantly. Frequently dismissed as not being real work, much of the labor that occurs on these programs is that of daily life and household upkeep. This is the everyday labor of the domestic sphere that is frequently presented in culture as being women's work and not requiring financial compensation. Andrejevic (2011) discusses the programs *Kid Nation* and *Voyeur Dorm* in regards to this conception of work. He notes, "Those who dismissed the notion that the women or children were working implied that even the alchemy of the camera cannot turn what people might be doing anyway into productive labor (even though, clearly, both *Voyeur Dorm* and *Kid Nation* were highly contrived environments)" (pg 23). From this understanding, because this was the labor of the everyday, it was undeserving of compensation. At the same time however, the

shows themselves were making money. It is therefore less the financial compensation itself that is up for debate and rather who should be the one deserving of that income.

Francois Jost (2011) also discusses the ways in which the malleability of the genre can make it harder for contestants to be understood as deserving of compensation. There have been repeated attempts to present participation in manners that highlight the fun and potential for profit. The labor the participants are performing is downplayed or ignored, and the financial benefit that labor provides for the program and network is minimized if discussed at all. He argues that the strategy of reality television is for it to “pass for what it is not in order to take economic or other advantage of it” (2011, pg 34). Shows that fall into the genre are at once presented as a representation of a reality, a fictitious piece of entertainment, and a game in which contestants consent because it is an enriching adventure. These differing perspectives are used at various times to defend the show and its producers. This ability for the genre to frequently pass allows for an understanding of it as simultaneously a site in which individuals can become famous and wealthy while also representing trivial programming of little cultural value and not worthy of studying.

The malleability of the genre allows these defenses to be used in ways that end up privileging production at the expense of the participants. Whenever the idea of treating and paying the contestants as actors is raised, producers are quick to note that contestants are just being themselves and therefore should not be considered similar to actors who are assumed to have to work at embodying someone else. Attempts to call attention to the disparity in portrayal due to gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation end in admonishments that reality shows are understood by the public to be fake and are only silly pieces of entertainment. The prize at the end of the contest is used to justify the loss of rights that contestants face by signing the contracts

and living under productions' thumb for the duration of the taping process. They have the potential to become rich and famous and therefore are willing to face temporary hardship. These three understandings of reality shows must be considered as not natural but as a result of our understanding of genre as a “thing”. In the case of reality television, genre has continually been used to justify the exploitation of the individuals who appear on the programs.

These programs do not operate in a cultural vacuum but rather according to pre-existing practices and conventions. While examining genre theory, Lacey (2000) asserts that genre is a multi-sided term. He notes that audiences use genre to categorize a text, institutions use it to package texts, and “artists, working within an institutional context, produce a generic media text with the knowledge of the rules and conventions of that genre and with the awareness that audiences can be expected to be familiar with this knowledge.” (pg 134) Therefore, it is necessary to examine all of these factors when studying reality television. In applying genre theory to television, Mittell (2004) demonstrates that genre is only a component of a text. A single text is unable to define a genre. Rather, each text categorized as belonging to a particular genre has aspects that conform to the wider understanding, but also deviates in certain ways. An understanding of genre is dependent on intertextuality.

In her work on genre, Jane Feuer (1992) claims that there are three approaches to genre, the aesthetic, the ritual, and the ideological. The aesthetic approach is one that looks at the system of conventions of a genre as it permits artistic expression. It also includes an attempt at examining whether a work fulfills or transcends its genre. The ritual approach examines genre as a way for a culture to speak to itself. It is an interplay between the industry and audience. Finally, the ideological approach views genre in terms of its ability to serve as an instrument of control. Combining the ritual approach with the ideological is beneficial as it allows for the

discussion of a text both as a tool of control and as one of pleasure. Feuer cites Rick Altman's assertion that, "because the public doesn't want to know that it is being manipulated, the successful ritual/ideological 'fit' is almost always one that disguises Hollywood's potential for manipulation while playing up its capacity for entertainment." (1992, pg 145) The genre of reality TV, while providing entertainment, promotes the ideology of the necessity of self-commodification. This is never overtly stated, but can be seen in the reasoning provided to many of the contestants at risk of being eliminated.

Jost (2011) reminds us of the importance of categorization. He writes, "the categorization of a program is not only a theoretical question, but that it has an economic, social and philosophical impact" (pg 39). Labelling a program as a reality program rather than a documentary, for instance, does far more than change where a particular program is located in a library or streaming service. Naming a show as belonging to a specific genre immediately attaches all the cultural baggage and assumptions associated with that genre to that show. This will affect the supposed cultural status or value of the show. It also casts judgement on the participants who appear on the program. Reality television has been continually labelled as trashy, of low value and as evidence of a mass audience incapable of critical thought. Looking at the changing nature of the genre's use of participants requires considering more than the exploitative practices that are in place. As Jost (2011) reminds us, we must also consider the wider cultural context that allows the contestants to be framed in ways that undermine and ignore their labor and productive value.

Ideology can be imagined in regards to the material in the show and in an understanding of genre. According to Beebee, "what makes genre ideological is our practice of speaking of it as a 'thing' rather than as an expression of a relationship between a user and a text, a practice

similar to that identified by Marx as “commodity fetishism” (1994, pg 18). Reality television is considered to be a specific understanding with concrete boundaries into which a text either fits or does not. One seeks to control a text by placing it in a specific genre. Labeling a show as belonging to a genre shapes our understanding of said show. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) point out that sets of values, meanings and behaviors become associated with various genres. Beebee (1994) also notes that we require the “user’s guide” that genre provides and without it we simply do not know what to do with a text. Therefore, genre can be seen as an instrument of power and control. Having briefly laid out the importance of the audience, and generic and economic context, I now turn to the focus of this dissertation: contestant interviews.

The Interviews

As suggested in the prior sections of this chapter, my analysis of the economy of participation in Canadian reality TV involves a multi-pronged study of a mode of production, the *governmentalization* [or *governmentalities*] of reality TV participation (i.e., reality TV as citizenship-shaping), and the cultural economy of reality TV as media genre. In these ways, my project is focused on the forms and consequences of participation. Understanding those forms and consequences, in their regularity and variety, has led me to conduct interviews with participants, and to examine an economy of participation *up through* those interviews. For this project, I therefore have performed extensive in-depth interviews with Canadian individuals who appeared on competitive reality shows. In looking at participants, I hope to have a basis for discussion on how potential future opportunities shape one’s goals for participation. Canadian programs have far smaller audiences than their American counterparts and little reach outside the country. Because of this, Canadian participants may have different motivations for participation - potentially less of a focus on celebrity as a by-product of competing. Their post-show

experiences will also likely differ from American contestants. In her work on Canadian women who had appeared on reality television, Patterson (2015) states that she had success contacting participants through email and Facebook. I also found the majority of my interviewees through Facebook. Some others responded positively to emails sent to their personal websites. Since participants have reached a public status and many are (or were), local celebrities due to their appearances on shows, basic personal or contact information was often accessible online. Facebook was the most productive avenue though also the slowest. As I was not “friends” with them on the platform, there was the potential for my messages to be relegated to a less accessible folder. Some individuals contacted me up to fourteen months after I had sent the original message, having just seen it.

49 former contestants shared their experiences with me for this project. These individuals had participated in the following eight talent and skill based shows: *Canadian Idol* (CTV, 2003-2008), *Canada’s Next Top Model* (City TV, 2006-2007, CTV, 2009), *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria* (CBC, 2008), *MasterChef Canada* (CTV 2014-), *Over the Rainbow* (CBC, 2012), *Project Runway Canada* (Slice, 2007, Global, 2009), *So You Think You Can Dance Canada* (CTV, 2008-2011) and *Top Chef Canada* (Food Network Canada, 2011-2014). Of the individuals who participated, 27 were female and 22 were male. While I talked to more women than men, I actually had a higher percentage of male contestants from co-ed programming responding as three of the shows I considered (*Canada’s Next Top Model*, *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria*, and *Over the Rainbow*) only featured female participants. I collected data through a variety of interview methods. 27 individuals engaged in interviews over Skype, the phone, or Facebook video. These interviews ranged from thirty minutes to an hour and forty minutes with the average interview lasting fifty minutes. An additional 21 individuals answered

questions online via a Google questionnaire while a final participant requested the questionnaire be simplified so they could answer via email. These questions were long answer in form in an effort to allow individuals the space to respond and reflect. These interviews were conducted over a seven-month period. Each participant gave informed consent and had the opportunity to choose a pseudonym or remain anonymous. I use the names they have provided.

My respondents were drawn from an 'existing sample frame' as the criteria was specific. They had to have appeared on a Canadian skill or talent based competitive reality show. I also differentiated between length of participation, choosing to focus on shows that had the same group of individuals compete throughout the season (like *Canadian Idol*) rather than programs that had a different group of competitors each episode (like *Chopped Canada*). I chose to focus on extended participation because the stakes and potential rewards were much higher. Choosing to participate on this form of show required a much longer time commitment and increased the visibility of the contestants. I then conducted a web search finding the names of all men and women who had appeared on popular multi-episode skill and talent-based reality programs. Once I had created that list, I then went about searching for the contact information of those individuals. While a few had active official websites, the majority of individuals either had no official web presence or had let it lapse. This may be due to the length of time that had passed since participation, as the majority of those with active websites had appeared on more recent seasons. For those individuals without active websites, I turned to Facebook. I sent private messages introducing myself and asking for their participation. This decision brought about an extended timeframe as, depending on privacy settings, my message frequently went to folders that were checked infrequently. I received messages back from people up to 14 months after originally contacting them who had only just seen the request.

One of the issues that must be considered in performing research online is the space in which an individual is contacted and the norms associated with that space. Boyd (2008) discusses the notion of social convergence in relation to Facebook. As she explains, “Social convergence occurs when disparate social contexts are collapsed into one.” (pg 18) A Facebook profile may be used as a way to update fans/connect with friends and family. Individuals may not have anticipated being recruited to participate in my research study through this platform and may have found my initial message to be an intrusion. Patterson (2013) points out that researchers should be conscious that users may consider the space of their Facebook profile to be private and could see an unexpected message as an intrusion. In an effort to be cognizant of this, I always sent a single message privately explaining my project and my desire for them to consider participating. I never posted on an individual’s wall and never re-contacted an individual unless they reached out in some way.

Dealing with human research subjects was tricky. Reflecting on her own struggles in interviewing women who had appeared on reality shows, Patterson (2013) notes that she had multiple individuals who initially expressed interest and enthusiasm but then became non-responsive. I found this to be true in my own research. Numerous individuals responded positively to the idea of being interviewed, but then stopped responding once we moved to scheduling a time to talk. Others agreed to a time and then were not available and ignored any attempts to follow up. I also had multiple participants initially agree to an interview, ignore scheduling attempts and then re-initiate contact to see if they could participate in a less intrusive way (for example answering questions via email). I include this not to critique any individual, but to acknowledge the difficulties inherent in conducting research through interviews.

Issues of privacy were also a factor in the research process. Whenever an individual responded to my initial call, I followed up with information about privacy. I mentioned that all information would be kept solely by me and that they could choose a fake name or remain anonymous if preferred. For individuals who were willing to participate, but did not want to commit to an interview, I had created a survey using Google Surveys (see Appendix B). I used this form as it did not link back to their email addresses in any way, increasing anonymity. The first question when starting the survey asked the individual how they would like to be identified with an acknowledgement that they could provide a pseudonym or stay anonymous. For interview subjects I began each session with this disclaimer and ended by double-checking if their decision had changed. I had a few individuals begin by choosing to be identified by their name and then deciding that they would rather remain anonymous by the end after reflecting on the information we had discussed. At times, individuals were proactive in addressing security concerns. Two individuals asked to see the approval notice from the IRB. I also had one individual ask to have me write them an email stating that I was not working on behalf of the show or network they appeared on, nor would I attempt to sell or give their information to those entities or any affiliates. Most presented their decision to choose an alternate identifier or to ask further questions about confidentiality and privacy as being a safeguard due to the small and connected nature of their industry.

Patterson (2015) notes that contemporary approaches to qualitative interviewing emphasize the need for reflexivity on the part of the researcher and the formation of co-operative relationships between them and the respondent. As Gubrium and Holstein (2001) acknowledge, this is a move away from earlier understandings of the interview process, which posited the interviewee as a passive repository of knowledge that could be objectively accessed by the

researcher. In an effort to remain mindful of this and resist this understanding, I always ended interviews by asking if there were aspects of their experience that I had not covered or that they wanted to address in more detail. In her work on in-depth interviewing, Hesse-Biber (2007) discusses the importance of considering the interview process as a co-creation of meaning. While the researcher has a plan going into the meeting, they should be able to adapt to the reflections of the participant and allow them to shape the interview. For this format, researchers need to be flexible enough to get to the heart of what an interviewee is discussing rather than set on following a script. My goal in interviewing contestants was to consider how they understand their labor of participation and the impacts it has had. While I had a prepared list of questions (see Appendix A), I did not always ask them all and instead attempted to focus on the aspects of participation that each interviewee was most interested in discussing and felt were most relevant to their life. While this limited my ability to compare experiences, it allowed for a fuller discussion.

In order to allow for the responses of my interviewees to come through as accurately as possible I have chosen not to edit their responses for clarity. DeVault (2004) highlights the importance of the language an individual uses to express their reality. What is not said and the “muted” language (“Like”, “um”, etc) used is equally important as what is said. This attention may highlight the ways that experiences are difficult to articulate and this hesitancy should be honored when considering and analyzing interviews. Whenever I include direct quotes I have tried to transcribe the messiness of conversation as accurately as possible. “Muted” language is included whenever individuals engaged in it.

By interviewing individuals, I was making a concerted effort to foreground the participant as person rather than text. Turner (2010) has brought attention to the way in which

textual analysis has tended to dominate celebrity studies. Treating the celebrity as text has also foregrounded work on both the production and consumption of celebrity. Driessens (2014) argues that treating celebrities as active agents is a way to counter this trend. He posits that interviewing is a way to accomplish this as it centers the individual as person rather than text. Very rarely have celebrities been studied through individual interviews. Patterson (2015) is an exception to this trend with her work on Canadian women who have appeared in skill-based reality television programs. While Canadian reality participants may not be those traditionally associated with the term celebrity, they offer perspectives on living the process of becoming known. Unlike celebrities of a higher status who are often more difficult to access, due to gatekeepers and a plethora of competing interview requests (Driessens, 2014), reality contestants are more accessible. They are often personally managing their websites and other social media accounts and, once their season or program has ended, often have far fewer requests for interviews to manage.

Interviewing individuals who I had previously watched on television brought up challenges. Only a few respondents had appeared on shows or seasons I had not seen. Patterson (2016) discusses the difficulty in performing interviews from the standpoint of scholar-fan. Part of this comes from a desire to convey professionalism while still engaging participants. Patterson (2016) notes that she downplayed her viewing of the genre in an effort to convey that she was taking the interviews seriously and she was not just there to get gossip. My experience interviewing was different as I consciously declared my status as fan (and Canadian since I labeled myself as a student from an American school) during my initial messages to potential respondents. While Patterson (2016) did not initiate discussion of her viewing habits, I foregrounded mine. I chose to let participants know if I had seen their program and if applicable,

their season (and in a few cases I mentioned that I had been at tapings of their season). I did this in an attempt to establish rapport and to convey that I had (or did not have) a baseline of knowledge about their edit and the format of the show. While this may have undermined a sense of objectivity, I feel this helped to convey to respondents that I was “on their side” inasmuch as this project was not about mocking their experiences. I also feel that this disclosure allowed contestants to talk about specifics of their edit or season more freely as there was a sense I had some background knowledge of what they were discussing.

In an effort to foreground Hesse-Biber’s (2007) understanding of the interview process as a co-creation of meaning, I ended every interview by asking if there was any aspect of their experience that I had not covered that they wanted to share. While obviously this is not a perfect method, it did bring to light times where the participant and I had different understandings of the tone of the interview. In one case, a former contestant who wished to remain anonymous mentioned that they felt that we had spent a lot of time on the negatives of participation and what they would change. They used this question as an opportunity to highlight the personal connections they had made from doing the show and how important and positive they found that aspect of participation to be (personal interview). This was illuminating as I had not felt that the questions asked or responses provided had been overly negative. This was a useful opportunity to check in and affirm that I understood that they viewed their participation as a positive and valuable experience, and that any information provided should be understood from that perspective.

In her work on viewers of reality makeover programs, Katherine Sender (2012) notes that she uses the terms ‘audiences’ and ‘viewers’ for want of better options. The terms are problematic, but also necessary to convey meaning. By pluralizing, the hope is to convey the

lack of coherency and potentially connection between audience members. I take this notion in my own work. While I am looking at participants rather than viewers, Sender's (2012) work is an important reminder of both the problems of language and the ways that we must work within its constraints. I wish to consider the experiences of the individual contestants who were willing to share information about their experiences with me, while acknowledging that these individuals do not mirror the entire population of reality television contestants. Nor could they possibly share (or even be aware of) the entirety of their experience in the brief amount of time we conversed. While I am grateful that so many participants were willing to share their experiences with me, they are still a small portion of those who have graced television screens. Far more individuals declined or ignored my interview request than responded to it.

I am focusing on individual experiences in this project. I am in no way making any claims about a single, universal, reality show experience. Indeed, the genre of reality television is uniquely situated to the telling of personal stories. Part of this, obviously, comes from the "real" people who appear on the programs as themselves. However, the genre is also far more focused on individualized experiences than communal ones. In their work looking at the genre, Stiernstedt and Jakobsson (2016) found that the individual is more visually and audibly present in reality television than in other genres on television. "Images showing only one individual make up 54% of all reality television programming, and when persons appear individually on the screen in reality television, they are furthermore often talking about themselves as individuals (or about their place in social relations and networks)." (pg 13) While each season features a cast of participants, they are presented as a collection of singular competitors. Reality television is set up as a collection of personal and unique experiences. It seems fitting that my research on the people who have appeared on it do the same.

Much current work surrounding social media and the web highlights that anyone can now become a producer of media. However, not all content or creators are valued equally. Only certain forms of production are recognized as important (Mayer, 2011). Caldwell (2009) describes the goal of production studies as complementing the top-down perspective favored by political economists with ground-up studies of social and cultural practices of worker groups. The reflexivity of the genre of reality television seems well suited to this approach. As Patterson (2013) remarks, the genre itself becomes a site for the consideration of reflexive questions concerning the research process and the formation of academic knowledge. Mayer (2011) argues that the television industry relies on the invisible labor of below-the-line workers even as it ignores or denigrates these workers, positioning them as existing separate from the creative professionals whose names are known to the larger viewing audience. While reality participants are certainly not invisible, their labor is often similarly ignored or devalued. The goal of production studies is not to discover the “authentic” reality of the industry, but to consider how an industry self-represents, self-critiques, and self-reflects (Caldwell, 2008). I wish to apply this strategy to my own work with participants. I do not assume there is a “truth” about participation that has been ignored, but that in conversing with contestants a sense of how they understand their own participation will be conveyed. This self-reflection and presentation is placed alongside wider investigations and critiques of the reality television industry.

Reality Television and Labor

Part of the promise of reality television was to give voice to so-called ordinary people. In this way, it is the viewer who is changed by access to the genre. With the changes in how participants are used by the program, this sense of access is also changing. Jost (2011) comments on how these changes have affected viewers. He argues “While reality television was based on

the promise to give her/him the floor to break away from the smooth and polished talking of experts and politicians, we are seeing a professionalization of today's candidates, which suggests that the border-line between the ordinary man and the artist-actor is becoming thinner and thinner." (2011, pg 39). Rather than giving the so-called ordinary individual access to the floor, current reality programs expect professionalization and polish from contestants. These programs are currently less about promoting ordinariness and more about putting the expectations of celebrity onto "everyday" individuals. This change in casting requires a change in conceptualization of the genre. It also, as Jost points out, further blurs the boundary between actor and reality contestant.

This notion of professionalization speaks to the ways in which laborers in this economic moment are expected to undergo training and become skilled prior to getting the job. Reality television and its norms provides insight into the logic behind trends in the current marketplace. Laurie Ouellette (2014) notes that "Just as reality television circulates the grammars of self-sufficient and enterprising citizenship, so it can be seen as a cultural technology for constituting laborers in the new economy as entrepreneurs of the self". (pg 95) Not only does the content of the programs encourage this ideology, the genre itself expects it. Notions of venture labor and micro-celebrity will provide a theoretical basis for an examination of the norms of labor associated with reality participants and the wider world of work.

Grindstaff and Murray (2015) argue that reality tv has reinvented the economy of celebrity on television. The genre has made celebrity the outcome of the production process rather than the precondition. The authors discuss the wider trends that reality TV both represents and reinforces. As they state, "There are broader cultural developments at work here, of course—the rise of therapeutic discourse, increasing levels of surveillance in everyday life, pressures

toward neoliberal entrepreneurialism, economic restructuring, and so forth.” (2015, pg 112) All of these trends are adapted and incorporated into the programs. In requiring its participants to engage with these trends, the genre has created an outlet where the viewing audience can potentially gain skills to deal with these changes. Successful contestants become templates for success, while those eliminated serve as cautionary tales. Looking at the labor required by these individuals will provide a window into the expectations that have become, or are still becoming, normalized for workers in this economic moment.

The concept of venture labor is central to the current labor market. Gina Neff (2012) defines the term as, “the investment of time, energy, human capital, and other personal resources that ordinary employees make in the companies where they work. Venture labor is the explicit expression of entrepreneurial values by nonentrepreneurs.” (pg 16) Venture labor is future focused rather than simply concerned with the wage provided. A job considered to have a future benefit for the individual is an example of this concept. Many undertake venture labor as they attempt to become established in a certain field. Internships, volunteer positions, entry-level positions, freelance work and training courses can all, at times, be seen as examples of this concept. Individuals performing venture labor is becoming more and more normalized as many companies and industries offload training and the need for experience onto potential employees. Rather than investing in workers, companies are more commonly expecting that those employees will do the investing themselves. This allows the employer the benefit of the skilled laborer without the risks or costs traditionally associated.

Participation in reality television programs should be considered an example of venture labor. For many individuals, participation on the program is meant to serve as a launching pad for a career in the media industry. Neff (2012) notes that workers must invest in training and

work on the development of social skills, but that there is no guarantee that this training will pay off. The risk and investment of time, labor and money is all placed on the employee. Not only is the show itself considered an investment in the future, the entire application process needs to be viewed in this light as well. In the application process, hopefuls must often fill out paperwork and either attend a casting call or submit a video. The hopeful is attempting to convey how they would fit into the program and portray themselves as an ideal contestant. This process takes time, effort and potential financial investment by the individual. The programs that recruit in this way, have off-loaded some of the labor of casting on to the hopefuls. There is no guarantee that an individual will make it on the show. They are performing venture labor in the hopes of a delayed personal benefit.

This dissertation seeks to explore the labor that Canadian participants on skill and talent-based reality television perform. The impacts of this labor on their lives, careers and self-image is considered. Why do individuals initially decide to go on reality programs? How does that participation occur and what are the results of that decision? Looking at the life-cycle of reality television participation will allow for a nuancing of the existing work on reality programs, their relationships to the contestants that appear on them, and how individuals manage the process of gaining and maintaining fame. In doing so, I provide a space for which individuals to discuss their experiences with and relationships to the programs in which they participated. This dissertation attempts to bring attention to individuals who many recognize, but few have followed in detail. Looking at Canadian contestants' experiences will provide necessary information about the motivations for participating and the opportunities and risks involved.

To do so, I break the life-cycle down into various stages. First, I will examine the Canadian context in which these individuals and shows exist. Looking at the star system in

Canada and how the genre of reality television is understood provides necessary context for the experiences of the individuals considered here. The audience for Canadian programming is much smaller than American versions and these shows often have a much shorter life span. While many Canadians first come to particular shows via their American or British versions, the opportunities and filming experience are often quite different. Highlighting the context in which these shows occur is necessary for any life-cycle discussion. I then consider the auditioning process and filming experience. For a number of participants, getting on the show requires repeated effort over multiple years. Many individuals were unsuccessful the first time they auditioned for their chosen program. They needed to adapt their self-presentation to ways that better suited the world of the show they were trying to get on. A lot of uncompensated labor occurs before an individual is ever cast to appear on TV. The focus in this section is on the labor of being filmed and the working conditions that these participants experience. Many are isolated and cut off from support systems during this period. They must navigate the stresses of the show while attempting to complete tasks that may determine their ability to continue on in the program. Their output and self-presentation is then edited in ways outside of their control, and broadcast across the country.

Not all individuals have the same opportunities for success on a show. The majority will be eliminated. Their experiences on and after the show will also be affected by numerous factors beyond their control. How individuals are marked as different due to race, class, gender, and sexuality is explored. This othering can have significant ramifications on how a participant is presented to and understood by the program and viewing audience. The impacts of participation are investigated. While the filming and airing of the show may take place over a brief period of time, an individual's experience with the show is much longer lasting. Many participated hoping

to pursue or further develop a career in their industry of choice. Reflecting on how they feel their life has changed allows for consideration of the job market, opportunities that arise from participation, and the process of creating and maintaining celebrity.

After examining the life-cycle of participation, I ground this dissertation historically. What is happening with reality contestants is not completely new. Rather, the contracts and working conditions facing current reality television contestants have strong similarities to those faced by actors in early Hollywood. There are clear connections to stars in terms of the lack of control over image, and to film extras in terms of the notion of disposability. Reality television has enacted a system that features much of the control that also faced early film stars but that offers little of the rewards. Looking at early Hollywood and the struggles that led to organization will allow for a consideration of the ways that current reality show participants can gain more control over their images and careers. Finally, a reflection on this dissertation itself will occur. This will allow for an exploration of how the information contestants have provided challenges or reinforces understandings of the genre.

To begin, we turn to a consideration of Canada - the True North Strong and Free:

CHAPTER 1: FORMAT TELEVISION AND THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

In order to consider the motivations, opportunities, and impacts of participation for contestants, the Canadian context must be foregrounded. Canada is underrepresented in work on both the format television industry and the genre of reality television (Quail, 2015a). Combining the work of those who have considered the Canadian industry with those who work on the issues more globally or in other national contexts will allow for a consideration of how the labor of reality contestants is impacted by the nation in which it occurs. As McElroy and Williams state, “participation in media needs to be understood as a flexible, labor-intensive process entailing promotion and protection duties that are greatly shaped by the distinct local contexts in which it takes place.” (2011, pg 190) Participants in reality television programs will necessarily be impacted by the country in which that text is filmed. Their post-show opportunities are also expanded or limited depending on the national context. Cultural context influences every aspect of the life-cycle. American programs, for example, are often broadcast internationally. Therefore their contestants become known to many more people around the globe. Canadian shows on the other hand, are often limited to national distribution, significantly limiting their ability to become known individuals - though potentially also limiting the risks of a negative portrayal. Situating these shows and individuals will provide context for the experiences and expectations of contestants.

In order to look forward we must first look back. The first format licenses were adaptations of American shows acquired by British broadcasters. This has led Chalaby (2016) to contend that the format trade is an Anglo-American invention. The emergence and growth of the understanding of television as commodity can be linked to technological, economic, social and military dominance of both the United States and Britain around 1920 (Moran, 2013). Chalaby (2016) points to the 1951 contract between Maurice Winnick and the BBC for the program

What's My Line? as the first time a broadcaster agreed to pay for the idea and package for a show rather than for a tangible item such as a script. However, while imitation of program ideas (often from the United States or United Kingdom) became a widespread practice internationally, these imitations often occurred without credit or financial compensation (Moran, 2013). While the majority of work on format television focuses on the current moment, I include this to highlight the longstanding nature of the practice. What is new however is the scope and frequency at which this is now occurring.

The growth of format television has led to a reimagining of what a program is. Oren and Shahaf (2012) consider how the format is often considered in opposition to the import/export trade model. While the latter is a completed product, the former is not tangible. It is instead a technology of cultural and economic exchange (Moran and Malbon, 2006). This demonstrates a focus on intellectual property rather than specific items to be traded and is representative of wider economic trends. Focusing on IP over products is not remotely specific to media. There are political implications that must be considered in the decision to import versus adapting; Imports have little in the way of opportunities for domestic financial spin-offs (Moran, 1998). Adaptation of formats allows for local employment and can lead to its own sales internationally. This cultural exchange is international in scope while focused on the national. Predictably, this perspective “promotes an understanding of formats as a globally distributed container for locally produced content.” (Oren and Shahaf, 2012, pg 3) While audiences have been considered in terms of how they have taken foreign content and made it nationally relevant (most famously Ang, 1985), format television is a more formalized version of that process.

The business of format television has also led to a change in the system of television production. Independent production companies now increasingly produce content (Nylund.

2016). Indies operate outside of the television channels and instead sell programs to the broadcasters. The normalization of the outsourcing of production is a defining aspect of the growth of format TV. While some have viewed this change as a positive chance for companies in smaller markets to gain more access to the global media market (ie: Oren and Shahaf, 2012), others have viewed this as yet another avenue for the strengthening of inequalities in trade of media. Chalaby (2016) for instance considers that while certain companies may have had much success in the format business, only four countries export formats more than they import, and the UK and US (between 2006-2008) exported more formats than all of the other exporters put together.

In the introduction I briefly considered the notion of the active audience (Fiske 1987, 1989a, 1989b, Jenkins 1992, 2006). Here I seek to consider the changing nature of audience studies. Hall (1980) and Morley (1980) were fundamental in transitioning to a qualitative focus in audience research. However, the majority of the early work focused on the audience as being national in scope rather than global (Brunsdon and Morley 1978, Morley 1980, Liebes and Katz 1990, Jensen 1998). Ang's (1985) account of *Dallas* viewers was one of the notable exceptions to this trend. The work of Ang (1985) was global, but still focused on the national in terms of how audiences adopted international programs and made them relevant to their own national context. In their recent work on musical talent competition shows, Esser, Jensen, Keinonen and Lemor (2016) call attention to the way the nation has structured much audience research. The majority of work on format television has had a perspective of national comparison. These authors call for a transcultural and global approach. Little work has been done from this perspective (though Moran 1998, and Klaus and O'Connor 2010 are notable exceptions). While I am focusing on the national, I hope to do so in a way that calls attention to the global. The Canadians who were

willing to speak with me for this project came to their participation through interactions and understandings (both themselves and through friends/family) of format television both in this country and internationally. While the importance of the nation should not be ignored, it must be considered as a site of meaning that exists in an international context.

Athique (2014) argues that audience researchers often fail to account for the specificity of place and how that affects reception. He calls on researchers to explicitly consider the significance of place in regards to global formats. Caughie (1990) highlights the benefits that arise from a focus on the importance of place. The continued return to the local resists the temptation of a universal theory. Difference and diversity, or at least the possibility of such, become foregrounded in this perspective. While the previous chapter considered broader notions about the importance of genre to reality television, this chapter seeks to set the stage for a more localized look at how those notions are playing out in the lives of specific individuals. This chapter works to consider Canada. How do the policies and culture impact both the format television market and how audiences understand the genre of reality television? The goal is that this chapter serve as context for the interviews that will be the focus of the remaining chapters. Participants' experiences were shaped by the country in which filming took place. How they are understood as participants is nation specific; many considered themselves in relation to their US counterparts in regards to reception and opportunities. Explicit discussions of the country and my decision to focus on Canadian contestants occurred in many of my interviews. The national cannot be separated from the personal. How the public received competitors was also shaped by cultural context. Laying out that context will allow for a more nuanced view of participation and serve as a reminder of the ways in which these experiences are time and place specific.

The business of television formats deepens media globalization. This practice adds volume and complexity to international flows of television. There is also a furthering of the transnational interdependence of television firms through the formation of a trading system that is global in scope (Chalaby, 2016). However, as Aveyard, Moran and Jensen (2016) remind us, the format trade is predominantly English. Chalaby (2016) argues that format television has led to broadcasters making programming and scheduling decisions based on the performance of shows in other territories. While broadcasters used to be nation-bound, they are now a part of the international media market. While this is undoubtedly true, the practice of broadcasters paying attention to scheduling and reception in other areas has been occurring in Canada for decades. Mainly, this is due to the rules and regulations regarding simultaneous substitution. Simultaneous substitution occurs when a cable or satellite provider temporarily replaces the signal of one TV channel with that of another channel that is showing the same program at the same time. (CRTC, “Simultaneous Substitution”). In Canada, this often occurs through replacing an American signal with a Canadian one. The Canadian signal shows Canadian ads then on the American channel. The CRTC has promoted three reasons for this practice. It is seen to 1) protect the rights of broadcasters, 2) promote local broadcasting and content creation, and 3) keep advertising dollars in the country (CRTC, “Simultaneous Substitution”). This practice means that Canadian broadcasters schedule American programming to air at the same time in Canada whenever possible. Canadian channels delay in announcing and finalizing schedules until after American television schedules have been announced in order to take best advantage of this. The Canadian television market is thus well suited to the adaptations required by the market of format television. It is simply an extension of already existing norms and practices.

Format Television as Practice

The abundance of channels and content has led to an increasingly fragmented audience. Falling audience numbers for individual shows have led to lower program budgets and a demand for more cost-efficient types of content (Nylund, 2016). Alison Hearn (2014) argues that reality television stands at the forefront of new modes of value generation. Rather than sustain viewers over seasons, effort has been placed at creating formats that can be licensed internationally and that offer opportunities to bring in products or companies into the episodes. The industry has brought about new arrangements between programs and marketers. The role of advertising has intensified as more and more television content has become branded. Along with branded content, there has also been a rise in branded formats, frequently referred to as format television. Christine Quail (2015a) defines the term when she states, “Formats—pro-gram concepts, created by a production team for the purpose of licensing internation-ally to national production firms—are standardized television shows with multiple international iterations.” (pg 186) Format television relies on delocalization (Straubhaar 2007). Programs are stripped of national signifiers to limit the likelihood of shows suffering from cultural discount. These formats can then be sold internationally. Moran (1998) notes that format television comes with its own instruction manual surrounding how it is to be produced when franchised to other markets around the world. Once stripped of national signifiers, a program can than be infused with the signifiers of the purchasing locale. Oren and Shahaf (2012) point out that format television has seen unprecedented growth in the past two decades. It is now one of the dominant modes of industrial globalization. In terms of distribution and production fees, format television has a value of several billion dollars a year (Chalaby, 2016). It is profitable and serves as a tool of risk management.

The consistency provided by format television may be a key to its success. As Ted Magder claims, “the day to day business of TV runs on habit not on hits” (2004, pg 143). Format

programming is simply an institutionalized version of this understanding. Keane and Moran (2008) compare format television to the practice of franchising. Formats can run the gamut of genres, but are typically separated into scripted and unscripted categories. How a story is engineered depends on the type of format television being considered. In the case of unscripted television, it is an engine rather than a script that propels the program (Keane & Moran, 2008). This engine is basically the set of rules that exists to create storylines. The elimination process is the classic engine of reality television (Chalaby, 2016). The frequent elimination of contestants provides a structure and crises that can be continually resolved. It drives each episode forward and allows for the creation of dramatic arcs surrounding individual contestants.

Format television anticipates and responds to an environment of increased market uncertainty (Keane & Moran, 2008). In regards to reality television, this has allowed for a reconfiguration of the filming process. Andrejevic (2004) notes that the genre itself provides a more flexible form of production. He states, “reality TV itself offers an alternative model to the industrial, high-fixed-cost model of production associated with TV since the 1950s. Rather than relying on expensive formats sold to networks at a loss that can be recouped in syndication, reality TV heralds an era of quick-hit formats that make money during their first run but have little to no value as reruns.” (pg 90) While some programs may grow to become long lasting and profitable franchises, this is an added benefit rather than the goal. With far fewer fixed-costs than scripted television, there is much less of a requirement of multiple seasons in order to recoup costs. Syndication is rarely even considered as an option for programs, so there is little focus on issues of longevity. The emphasis has instead been on capturing viewer attention for a short amount of time. Reality TV frequently airs in the summer months, challenging the normal fall to

spring scheduling of other genres. With these very different considerations, reality television programming challenges the boundaries of what is the traditional television season.

This flexibility is made possible by the poor compensation paid to those who work on and appear in reality shows. The low wages paid to participants is considered a feature of the genre rather than a flaw. Arguably more important than the low wages is the understanding of these individuals as having little intrinsic value and each being largely interchangeable. As Andrejevic (2011) points out, “It is one thing to be able to assemble an entire cast of characters for a cash prize far less than the combined salaries of actors and writers for a fictional format, and quite another to have to pay untrained performers professional-level wages for their unscripted contributions.” (pg 19). This requires an assumption that contestants have little value until their participation is assembled, by others, into storylines and cohesive plots. The fundamental idea is that ‘ordinary’ people are not deserving of the same compensation that actors are. Professionalization is seen as the key to financial reward. In maintaining this divide between acting and participating, the genre is able to continue to be profitable.

Format television must be considered in any discussion of the reality genre. These shows form the backbone of numerous broadcasting schedules worldwide. The rise of format television and the increasing access to multiple versions of the same program requires a new conceptualization of what exactly a “program” is. Many viewers are acquainted with or consume multiple variations of the same show. Format reality television is a transnational network. Quail (2015a) focuses on the Canadian viewing experience and how normalized the airing of both American and Canadian versions of a format has become. She argues that, “This is a new way of thinking about programming and viewing reality TV, where the program is inherently transnational, and consists of multiple programs, in addition to other intertexts.” (pg 192) She

argues that this requires a new way of considering the programming and viewing experience. Her work speaks directly to this need for a reconceptualization of programming and formats while also bringing to the fore the numerous ways these linkages occur. This transnationality occurs in the shows themselves and through reception and distribution. In an acknowledgement of this multinational context, I focus on Canadian participants. Doing so should allow me to consider how participants' labor and opportunities are influenced by culture and/or context.

Reality Television as (Global) Format

While format television can span a variety of genres, I am focusing on the practice in relation to reality television. Conflating format television with reality television frequently occurs (Oren and Shahaf, 2012). While I want to acknowledge the problems with this practice more generally, I am doing so due to the context in which I am writing. Quail (2015a) argues that, in the Canadian context, format television is almost synonymous with reality television. This is due to the physical proximity to the United States. CTV is one of the three major Canadian television stations. Its president of programming and sports, Phil King, has reflected on why format television is so focused on the reality genre in Canada. As mentioned in Quail's (2015a) article, he notes that scripted formats of dramas and comedies are often the most successful versions of format television. However, the key is that audiences must not have experience with the original (or a popular version). It must be new to the viewing audience. He notes that he would never dream of doing a version of an American drama or comedy. Thus, any show that has been successful in the US is no longer an option for Canadian broadcasters. Because of the prevalence of American programming on Canadian networks, it is almost impossible for a drama or comedy to be successful in the US without Canadians also being

exposed to it. Reality television does not suffer the same issues and in fact, seeing American versions often increases Canadians' desire for local ones.

The notion of competition and the format television industry are linked together. As Kavka (2012) asserts, competition both transformed the format of shows in the genre and gave it a competitive edge in the television industry. Format development and international sales have become a big business since 2000. The genre has been popular with audiences and its low-cost production makes it attractive to networks. As Magder (2004) states, "Reality TV may have captured the attention of audiences, but it also looks good on the books and balance sheets of those whose business is television" (pg 138). Programs air internationally and, more often, the formats are sold to be turned into nationalized or regionalized versions. While the sale of format television existed before, competition programs proved to be especially adaptable. The show can be stripped down to the basic competition and sold to a variety of production companies around the globe who then infuse it with local talent and flavor. This allows format television to be extremely portable across cultures (Kavka, 2012). This portability has led to increased profits for format-holders and increased reliance on these programs around the world. The name recognition of the formats also provide a potential leg up as audience members are already aware of the program, and may in fact be clamoring for a version of their own.

Understanding the importance of international versions (often US) of format television to Canadian participants is necessary to any discussion of participation. The majority of my respondents noted that they decided to try out because of their familiarity with other versions of the show. For some, it was a chance to prove their capability after having bragged to friends and family that they could totally do that. For others, it was a chance to participate in a game that had

previously excluded them. In her work on *So You Think You Can Dance Canada* Quail (2015b) discusses how participation can be seen as a form of nationalism

“One point of comparison discourse stems from the exclusion of Canadian participants from the American version. Most Canadians do not qualify as competitors, due to U.S. labor laws; most Canadian viewers are prevented from weekly voting, which is restricted to American phone lines, despite its international distribution. The CTV broadcast of the American version read, “Voting unavailable in Canada,” across the screen—a daily reminder of exclusion, alleviated when the Canadian version arrived. Here, viewer and dancer participation, rather than being seen as a form of labor commodification or exploitation, becomes a form of nationalistic pride of having arrived, in a commercial context.” (pg 480-481)

Canadians have been heavy consumers of reality programming, but have had far fewer opportunities to be active agents. Quail’s work highlights the nuance required when discussing participation in Canadian programming and that participation can be seen as an expression of national pride.

Quail’s (2015b) argument that the show coming to Canada can be seen as “having arrived” commercially is borne out in discussions with participants. Mel, a contestant on *So You Think You Can Dance Canada*, discussed the disparity in opportunities that she felt between Canada and the United States. She mentioned that she felt that a key part of growing up in Canada is this fact of being so close to the United States and yet being shut out of many of the opportunities they can be seen as having. She had been a big fan and avid viewer of the first four seasons of *So You Think You Can Dance* and discussed having wished for a show like that to exist in Canada. It made her more excited when she heard it was coming to Canada and increased her desire to try out for the show. When discussing the lag time that often exists between a show being popular in the US and being created in Canada, she presented this as a more generalized desire to be accepted and given a platform. “You’re hoping that the American show you really love is going to be successful enough that it turns into a Canadian version.” (personal interview)

This process of hoping and waiting then ties the development of the Canadian version into a sense of having “made it”.

The Canadian audience of reality programming is a loyal audience. Patterson (2013) discusses the long-standing popularity of reality television programs in Canada. She points out long-running programs (like *Survivor* and *The Amazing Race*) have maintained their viewership numbers in Canada while in America those numbers have significantly declined. This may be due the plethora of American reality programs saturating the market in the US, or it may speak to more of a Canadian loyalty to programs/the genre. Unlike their American counterparts, Canadian viewers have stuck with these programs. That American reality programming is doing better in Canada than its home country (based on viewership adjusted for population), speaks to the importance these programs have to how Canadians conceptualize reality programming and the expectations they may have for participants and participation. The continued ratings success of US programs in the country speaks to an audience that is engaged with the genre.

However loyal the audience is however, there are fears that the genre is bad for the nation. While reality television has often faced criticism of dumbing-down audiences, in Canada there are also fears around taking away space and funds for “better” fare, programming that strengthens a sense of national identity. Foster (2012) asserts,

“there are two major criticisms that cultural nationalists levy against reality television in Canada (especially against reality television on CBC-TV). The first is that reality TV displaces drama and other programming designed for “cultural uplift,” replacing it with lesser, more disposable fare. In this capacity, when focused on reality television especially, members of the cultural nationalist public tend to worry about the triumph of style over substance and reproduce entrenched fears of mass culture that once characterized widespread moralizing about the emergence and popularity of television in general...The second criticism is tied to the traditional complaint that Canadian broadcasting ought to ensure programming that is “Canadian” in content and character and which maintains and strengthens Canadian identity.” (pg 141)

As he points out, criticism of the genre displays both traditional fears about the role of televisual programming and more nationally specific fears relating to notions of scarcity. Because

Canadian programming often loses money, it mainly exists because of regulations and quotas. Thus there is more pressure on those texts that do exist to be both financially viable and culturally significant.

Canadian Programing: Nationalism and Globalization

How reality television is understood is impacted by the cultural context in which it exists. Canadian and American audiences are positioned quite differently in this regard. Wolfe (1985) has argued that “much of American television (and film) is about the American dream - the world as we wish it could be, a place in which goodness and reason prevail and things work out for the best. Much of Canadian television (and film), on the other hand is about reality - the grey world as we actually find it.” (pg 7) This is commonly presented as American fare promoting escapism while Canadian content is more depressing in its desire for realism; this dichotomy also speaks to the long-standing tradition and importance that documentary as a genre has had in Canada. Patterson (2013) notes that documentary film has always had close links to the cultural and historical formation of both the country and its national identity. Druick and Kotsopoulos (2008) note that within the Canadian cultural and regulatory context, programs that straddle the border between reality and fiction have historically thrived. Hybrid realisms have been a part of television in Canada since the medium’s inception. Understanding reality television in Canada requires an acknowledgement of the importance that documentary has had as a form to the country.

Any discussion of Canadian reality television must at least briefly address the documentary format. Documentary as both form and genre holds a prominent place in understandings of Canadian nationalism. Producers, critics, and policy makers have celebrated the genre. Hogarth (2002) states that documentary programming has been held up as “Canadian

television at its best and most important: that is, Canada's most distinguished contribution to televisual form, and television's most substantial contribution to a Canadian sense of place." (pg 4)

His assertion speaks to the way in which the nation and genre are felt to be inherently intertwined. The form and its ideals have also shaped criticism and policy discourse around television more generally. Both factual and fictional programs are judged for the purity of their reflections of the country, for the importance of the issues covered, and for the merit of the groups represented. This has led to reality television in the country to focus far more on issues of representation and diversity. It has also led to a larger acceptance of the genre. Canadian reality television is frequently posited as being more serious and of higher quality than American programming. It has largely avoided the "trashy" label that is so often applied to the genre in the US.

Nationalism is a key feature of much Canadian programming. In this way, format television is especially suited for Canada as it is all about inserting local/regional signifiers to convey a sense of place. Quail (2015b) coins the term "commercial nationalism" in regards to this understanding of national belonging. As she defines the concept, commercial nationalism is an articulation of nationalism "whereby symbols, colors, phrases, and so on are used for branding and differentiation of the nation in a commercial television format that is part of an international franchise of similar programs." (pg 476) Commercial nationalism is what differentiates versions of the same program. It is how a sense of nationalism is conveyed in both *American Idol* and *Canadian Idol*.

In considering the Canadian context, it is crucial to consider how nationalism functions as a funding strategy. Devine (2010) observes that Canadian cultural policies come about against a backdrop of a national policy of liberal multiculturalism. These policies have the stated joint

principles of diversity, openness and tolerance. Networks and programs often play-up these principles and the “Canadian-ness” of a show in order to gain access to funding for programs that are seen to promote a sense of unity and the country. The television industry is heavily subsidized by the state. This occurs through both production funds and tax incentives (Vanderburgh, 2012). Understanding the economic imperatives behind this marketing strategy is crucial to any discussion of nationalism and media. Playing up ideas of access, inclusion and visibility may serve as a way to differentiate the program from other international versions. However, reality format television is also a way for Canadian broadcasters to meet their content quotas in one of the least expensive ways. Quail (2015b) argues that in Canada, format television has essentially exploited a loophole in funding initiatives. As she posits, “Rather than rewarding original programs and organizations, formatting has allowed more dominant systems to gain favorable policy and exposure in the smaller Canadian market, which is not what those regulations had intended to accomplish.” (pg 486) Through commercial nationalism, a sense of self is located in the work of others.

Format television in Canada exploits a loophole unintentionally created by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC). Quotas currently exist for broadcasters, including a mandatory percentage of airtime that must be given to Canadian programming in primetime hours. In 1999, the commission decided to widen the definitions of both primetime and priority programming. As Druick and Kotsopoulos (2008) point out, this decision “made it possible for Canada’s broadcasters to meet their Canadian content quotas with relatively inexpensive light documentaries. These programs are either adapted from global formats...or they are simply cheaper to produce than traditional dramatic fare and trade on their cachet as representations of “real life”.” (pg 4) So in essence, there are financial rewards for

broadcasters for supporting and airing homegrown reality television. It allows these programs to qualify as priority programming which means they are attractive to broadcast as they count for 1.5x their length in terms of Canadian content (so, an hour of priority programming gives the broadcaster an hour and a half of Canadian content credit - in essence a “free” half hour of Canadian content). Reality programming thus is cheaper to produce than dramas while giving broadcasters the same funding benefits. It is therefore unsurprising that broadcasters are eager to invest in local versions of format reality television.

Part of the importance in looking at what it means to be Canadian comes from the never-ending desire to be able to answer that question. Much time and ink has been spent considering national identity and its importance to one’s place in the world. In the introduction to an edited collection of essays on Canadian culture, Garry Sherbert (2005) notes the power inherent in any claim to a singular or universal notion of Canadian identity.

“a politics of identity has been familiar to Canadians at the national level since the Second World War because of the uncertainty about our national identity. Since there has always been a plurality of cultures competing for national attention, Canada has been characterized by the lack of a single, national identity. Canada includes a number of social groups that claim the universalizing language of nationalism.....This cultural plurality means that, instead of a universal Canadian identity, the universal is now seen as a contested site of power: the power to represent a whole society or national identity.” (pg 2-3)

This lack of a universal identity coupled with a desire for one can be a motivating factor for commercial nationalism (Quail, 2015a). Format reality television may be useful in negotiating relationships to identity because of its use of superficial signifiers to present an image of unity. However, as Sherbert points out, how this unity is presented is inherently political. Many individuals are left out of this supposed universal identity.

The majority of work that exists on Canadian reality programming has centered on *Canadian Idol* (Baltruschat 2009; Beaty and Sullivan 2006; Byers 2008; de B’béri and Middlebrook 2009; Wilcox 2010). This makes sense due to its high ratings and its prominent

position as a successful version of format television. The work done on this program highlights the ways in which the concept of the nation is articulated and challenged through format television. Repeatedly, these programs overtly and covertly speak to what it means to be Canadian. Byers (2008) argues that in the case of *Idol* we see a rejection of the urban and all that entails. “In each year, urban Canadian identities, with their suggestion of specific and often less recuperated forms of racialized, ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences, and sexual orientations, were displaced from the televisual frame.” (pg 76-77) While the auditions and opening rounds of the show feature many different identities, as the show progresses there is a rejection of markers of difference. As she articulates, while racial ambiguity is acceptable (both the women that won the third and fourth seasons are biracial), more overt forms of difference are not. The rejection of the urban also sees a rejection of coded and noticeable difference.

Foregrounding the Canadian context in which these programs exist is key. Neither television texts nor cultural identities can be understood or articulated outside of the spaces in which they are produced (Byers, 2008). Explaining how Canadian reality television comes to be is crucial for understanding how participants understand themselves in relation to the program. Looking at the production and discourse surrounding the shows allows for an articulation of the context in which format reality television exists in the country. Quail (2015a) documents the abundance of American television on Canadian stations. In regards to format television, the majority of Canadian adaptations come years after the American version premiered. “Particularly acute in the Canadian case is the unbalanced, yet unsurprising, influx of American reality imports, at the expense of both Canadian adaptations to global for-mats and original Canadian programming. Both the typically lower ratings and the short-lived nature of the Canadian format

adaptations' success indicate that they live in the shadow of American television.” (pg 197) This notion of the shadow is crucial to any understanding of participation in reality programming.

This notion of the shadow plays out in a number of ways. One is the way in which others treat the country and its audience. For instance, the US box office reporting treats the Canadian market as just another American state (Beaty & Sullivan, 2010). The geographical proximity of the country to the US has meant that Canadians have been consuming American content for decades. In the 1950s, the signals of US television stations along the border were freely available to many Canadian homes (Grant & Wood, 2004). However, while industry and audience practices may view Canadians as a part of the market, copyright protections esp. Bill C-61, constantly limit access to media from the US (Pannekoek, Hemmings, and Clarke, 2010). The differing cultural understandings and acceptance of copyright protections between the two countries has led to the framing of Canada as a haven for piracy (Beaty and Sullivan, 2010). There is a tension between desiring access to US and other international media, while still maintaining space in which to carve out our own media industries and products. This fear of losing culture has long been a standby of policy decisions. In fact, “Canadian cultural policies have been traditionally marked by anxieties over cultural domination, in particular by protectionist policies intent on stopping the infiltration of foreign culture at our borders.” (Beaty & Sullivan, 2010, pg 24) This fear of not having Canadian media is also due to the economic logic of the cultural industries.

One must consider what *The Economist* has labelled as the “curious economics” (2002, pg 88) of cultural industries. The markets for cultural products behave much differently than markets for other products. Imposing trade rules designed for ordinary commodities would in fact institutionalize the imbalances that exist in the world of popular culture (Grant & Wood,

2004). Recognizing this imbalance, Canada has long considered media to be important and worthy of national protection. This has been done mainly through funding and content quotas. It is important to remember, as Tinic (2010) foregrounds, that Canadian media policy has always demonstrated a focus on domestic content regulations rather than placing quotas on imports. This has given the country a much stronger foothold in arguing that cultural products should be understood as inherently different from other goods and not be bound by restrictions faced by those other goods under free trade agreements.

Bredin, Henderson and Matheson (2012) argue that the narratives of Canadian television reflect audiences' ambivalent space of being not American while also existing as unsteady imaginings of national realities in a sea of imported (often from America) content. This status is further complicated by the dominance of American programs on Canadian networks and the ease of access of American networks. This is especially true in regards to English programming. The proximity to the United States means that Canadian programming exists at the margins of this cultural superpower. In an effort to situate Canadian reality television participants and potential opportunities from participation, some background on both celebrity status and differences between Canada and the US television market is required. Whether or not there even is a star system in Canada has been debated. Czach (2012) argues that if a star system does exist in the country, it is one that has been developed and sustained through television. She points out that it has been public affairs and sports programming that has attracted the most viewers. It is unsurprising then that some of the best-known celebrity figures are those that hail from non-fiction television.

Reality contestants are often seen to be far more approachable than other television stars. McElroy and Williams (2011) have used the term 'localebrity' to discuss how fame and celebrity

functions in local and regional contexts. They define the term as, “a hybrid of the reality television celebrity and the local personality or “character” that better enables us to examine the cultural and theoretical specificity of local/national celebrity.” (pg 197) The term feels particularly suited to the discussion of Canadian reality contestants. While the authors are discussing Wales, the small viewing audience for Canadian television programming makes much of their argument applicable. McElroy and Williams (2011) consider how the visibility of both the channel the program appears on and of news coverage impacts the ability of contestants to become media celebrities.

Looking at Canadian contestants requires an investigation of their American counterparts. As Quail (2015) reminds us, even in Canada, American versions of programs tend to have more seasons and get higher ratings than their Canadian counterparts. Canadian formats are also frequently developed after audiences have been acquainted with the US version, sometimes many years later. The Canadian version is often broadcast, and sometimes even produced by, the network that aired or still airs the American program. This means that for both viewers and participants alike, knowledge of the show and its requirements often comes from having viewed the US version. This is especially true in regards to English-speaking Canadians. This means that, “The notion of the “popular” in Canadian contexts takes on varied meanings, since many Canadians’ familiarity with their own popular forms may be limited or overshadowed by their enjoyment and consumption of foreign (predominantly American) culture.” (Bredin, Henderson and Matheson, 2012, pg 12) Any attempt to consider Canadian reality contestants as laborers must take into account how the expectations surrounding that labor is largely informed by American programming. Thus, while I have only interviewed contestants on Canadian

programming, I bring in the experiences of American contestants to help to provide context and a sense of contrast where appropriate.

What Does it Mean to be Canada Famous?

Patterson (2013) argues that much of the work on reality-celebrity has not spent enough time on the cultural context in which the shows or celebrities exist. In her dissertation looking at Canadian women in reality television, she discusses the importance that opposition plays in any work on Canadian identity.

“Historically, Canadian culture has tended to define itself in an oppositional manner; it is that which is not American. Yet this notion that we have somehow maintained a ‘pure’ Canadian culture untainted by a ‘vulgar’ American one is a myth, given that most Canadians share more geographically and culturally with Americans than other Canadians (given the vastness of the country). Our shared cultural proximity with America has meant that we have been able to enjoy and consume the entertainment products produced by their cultural industries from a safe distance across the border. We can take pleasure too in knowing that while we may enjoy their cultural offerings we are somehow different or even better than them because such degraded forms of culture do not define us, as Canadians.” (pg 121)

The notion of being not-American is a common refrain in any work on what it means to be Canadian. These notions of purity and distance can be seen to play out in the understanding of what celebrity means in the country. There are distinctions and nuances in what it means to be a celebrity and that Canada famous is very different from the fame associated with Hollywood and the United States.

Work on Canadian celebrity and the star system tends to focus on television rather than film. This emphasis is reflective of the poor state of the Canadian film industry. Czach (2012) posits that, “Given the absence of domestically produced movie stars, personalities produced through television (hosts, anchors) as well as regularly seen on television (politicians, sports figures) are the closest thing English Canada has to a star system.” (pg 65) Canadian reality participants then are in a different system than their American counterparts. The industry in

Canada does not really have a star system. As Steffi, one of the contestants I interviewed, remarked, “It’s like climbing a ladder that’s on the floor. So you’re climbing a ladder but you’re not going anywhere”. (personal interview) Steffi has been able to continually work in the industry and be self-supporting from that work since her appearance on *Canadian Idol*. However, as she points out, while she has progressed in her career, that progression has not played out in the hierarchical way associated with American celebrity. The entire industry suffers from a difficulty in attracting attention.

However, the potential upside for contestants is that this lack of a star system can actually increase the visibility of those who do appear on television. While Canadian contestants both have a smaller audience and fewer opportunities, they face less of the star hierarchy than their American counterparts and thus may be more known. A couple interviewees speculated that their frequent encounters with individuals who recognized them from their programs might have been due to the much smaller contestant pool. With fewer shows and fewer seasons than US reality television, there are simply fewer contestants to remember. This may lead to increased name and facial recognition of those who have appeared on those shows (personal interviews). While the same opportunities that exist for American contestants may not be available, there may be other affordances for Canadian participants that their Southern neighbors do not get. This different system must be taken into account when discussing the labor of participants.

Television personalities, and this category can include reality television participants occupy a unique position. As Redmond (2014) suggests, these individuals are presented as being ordinary and in an attainable position. The use of their real names and realist environments is meant to brand them as both ordinary and extraordinary. In other words, they are extraordinary at presenting an image of being ordinary. James Bennett (2011) argues that television personalities

must be understood as being themselves actively involved in the promotion of a certain notion of what it means to be ordinary. They continually maintain and encourage specific identity-formations to be deemed regular. As he states, this is ideological and encompasses such aspects as national identity, gender, race and sexuality. What a culture understands as ordinary is ideological and shifts over time. The chosen participants then represent this sense of ordinariness.

Much time has been spent on the ordinariness of reality television contestants. This is both accurate and misleading at the same time. What is happening through the genre is a constant creation and reinforcement of what is considered to be normal. Sender (2012) touches on this issue when she claims that “Reality television doesn’t fictionalize ordinariness, as in the novel, it represents ordinary people - or at least unusual groups of ordinary people willing to be presented in their ordinariness to potentially vast numbers of strangers.” (pg 17) This idea of unusual groups of ordinary people helps to bring to the fore the constructed notion of the term. Skeggs and Wood (2012) remind us of the need to pay attention to the political history of the term ordinary to discuss the non-actors or non-professionals that appear on reality television. As they discuss, the term is often used to deflect associations of privilege or inequality. While I often use the term in this paper to refer to these non-actors, I wish to acknowledge its problematic nature.

Reality television contestants, especially in Canada, can be considered as niche and highly constrained by place. Looking at the concepts of micro-celebrity and “localebrity” provides a context from which to consider the fame of reality participation. Alice Marwick (2013) discusses micro-celebrities in her book *Status Update*. As she defines it, “Micro-celebrity is a state of being famous to a niche group of people, but it is also a behavior: the presentation of oneself as a celebrity regardless of who is paying attention.” (Marwick, 2013, pg 114). The term

is both representative of status and future oriented. Many reality contestants fit into this understanding. The market for many of reality programs is niche. The talent sub-genre especially is focused on the creation of celebrity. This requires that many participants adopt the presentation of celebrity in an effort to make it seem “natural” and that they belong in that world. The difference between celebrity and micro-celebrity can also be conceptualized as what Hill (2015) has labeled as the distinction between being well known or just known. In this distinction, we can see the differing cultural value between the two categories. Where celebrities are well known, their micro counterparts are simply known.

On a local scale, celebrity encounters can create a sense of community and belonging. At times, people have turned to the notion of the “personality” to differentiate levels of fame and that these individuals are fundamentally different from celebrities. In an effort to nuance notions of celebrity, McElroy and Williams (2011) have coined the term “localebrity” to explain how celebrity functions in local and regional contexts in small nations. As they define the term, “localebrities” are “figures who are known only to those within a very specific geographical national or local area.” (pg 197) Place is central to their status as known individuals. While they are focusing on participants in public broadcasting reality television in Wales, their arguments have relevance to the Canadian context. Many of the participants I spoke to discussed the ways in which individuals in their community interacted with them after their program had aired. Considering these individuals as both micro-celebrities and “localebrities” speaks to both their well-known-ness in very specific areas and to specific viewers, and their lack of access to wider infrastructures of celebrity.

Part of the importance of investigating these terms lies in how they differ from traditional celebrity. The micro-celebrity faces their own unique challenges. While they must constantly

represent themselves as a celebrity, they have few of protections or benefits afforded to “real” celebrities. Marwick’s (2013) book features an interview with Julia Allison (described as a “writer-turned-reality star”) who notes that while she faces the same scrutiny online, she lacks the resources (like bodyguards, stylists and press agents) that others of a similar level of fame, such as actresses or models, have access to. This means that even though both micro-celebrities and celebrities may face the same challenges, their reactions must be very different. It may be that being noticed is the only real benefit for the micro-celebrity. Marwick (2013) states that, “many of my informants found that their notoriety did not translate into more money; there was no equivalence between micro-celebrity status and income.” (pg 160) While many of these individuals viewed their current status as a jumping off point to wider fame or success, Marwick’s work suggests that this is unlikely to happen for the large majority.

While Marwick’s respondents were hoping for fame, the Canadian participants I spoke with revealed a host of different goals. What their interviews speak to is the necessity of widening the understanding of what makes participation a successful endeavor or not. Many individuals who did not win, or even have great filming experiences, still spoke of their participation as being valuable and something they would do again if given the chance. Personal and professional contacts and opportunities came out of participation for many of the contestants even if they did not result in fame. However, like Marwick’s argument about the micro-celebrity, many found themselves in situations that they were not fully equipped to handle. The participants faced harassment online and legal issues that celebrities would have had support in handling. The concept of the micro-celebrity will be useful in investigating the challenges that face participants once they appear on reality television.

This brief overview of the Canadian media landscape and star system is meant to provide context for understanding the experiences of, and risks and opportunities that exist for, Canadian contestants of competitive talent and skill-based reality programming. Format television has flourished due to its popularity with audiences and its status as a low-cost form of entertainment. In Canada this has allowed networks to take advantage of the popularity of American versions as a marketing strategy for their format. Format television has also allowed networks and producers to continue to take advantage of funding options that exist for ensuring Canadian content remains on the airwaves. The financial impetus for the genre's success is evident. Less evident is the reasons why individuals view participation as a worthwhile endeavor. The next section considers the motivations for participation and the mental and physical aspects of the auditioning and filming process. The work and pressures that contestants describe challenge many of the assumptions that surround participants as fame hungry and participation as a fun exercise that should be considered its own reward. In *Below the Line*, Vicki Mayer (2011) works to broaden the scope of who is considered a producer of television. As she puts forth, "labor – the structural arrangements that extract value from work – contributes to specific social formations that have historically been the basis for establishing differences between populations" (pg 17). Looking specifically at the labor performed by contestants, and their motivations for performing that labor, works to break down those differences.

In order to appear on a show, an individual must first audition. Auditioning requires time and often money. For many, this step may take multiple years. If one is initially successful, they are called to go further in the process. Often, hopefuls must travel and spend multiple days (or even weeks) in an extended try-out. This process requires mental and physical labor. As well as proving one has the skills to compete, they must also demonstrate that they fit the world of the

show. That they present themselves as attractive to producers and potentially judges. If selected for the final cast, more preparations (and money) must occur. Individuals may invest in additional training in an effort to improve their chances of success. Participants relocate for the duration of filming and must adapt to constantly having cameras (and the crew behind those cameras) on and around them. Many described the process as intentionally designed to break people. Participants are often isolated from support systems and stripped of external resources. Being a contestant requires a lot of labor, much of which many found to be unexpected or more difficult than anticipated. I explore the labor of auditioning and filming in the next section.

CHAPTER 2: THE FILMING EXPERIENCE

This chapter considers the labor that individuals perform in auditioning for and filming a competitive reality television program. Many more individuals try out for these programs than will ever make the final cast. The labor of auditioning is uncompensated. The viewing public never sees the majority of those who audition. For those selected, the majority need to relocate for the filming process. This may require one to quit their job, rearrange commitments, and mislead or omit information from the majority of their friends, family and co-workers. While filming may be compensated, the amount of money made is often dependent on how many weeks of filming a contestant remains on the show for. Filming is a labor-intensive process and often involves long days, little free time, and an isolation from traditional support systems. Many of the participants I spoke with referred to the filming experience as living in a bubble. In looking at the audition process and mental and physical aspects of filming, I wish to explore the labor required of contestants and how they understand it. Looking at the multitude of reasons for auditioning and experiences filming complicates traditional understandings of reality television participation.

Auditioning

One of the main tips given to those hoping to audition for reality programs is to imagine oneself as a character. One should portray a version of themselves that best fits with the world of the show they are trying to get on (Gheesling, 2012) The application process requires the commodification of the hopeful, but does not guarantee that anything will come from it. This relates to Fuchs' (2014) point that, "This means that *exploitation of labour takes place before the selling of commodities*. Even if a commodity is not sold, once it is produced, labour has been exploited." (Emphasis in original, pg 132). Whether or not an individual is selected to participate

in a program, the application process has already required their labor power. The program is seeking to profit off their appearance on the program. While the individual may receive some financial compensation (and one lucky participant may receive a large windfall), the program is benefitting far more from this exchange. Before the show airs, many individuals will have already had their labor exploited by the program through the casting process. Regardless of the success of the show, there is no compensation for those who audition, but fail to make the final cast.

Character creation can take a number of different shapes. Little time has been spent on the performative agency of participants who actively work to create fictionalized versions of themselves (Warner, 2015). While Gheesling (2012) discusses the process as a way to increase one's chances of being cast, and Fuchs' (2014) discusses the exploitative nature of the process, the individuals I spoke with framed it in much less intentional ways. Rather than going into the process with a "character" in mind, many found themselves playing up the aspects of themselves that were getting the most positive responses. Mark, a *Canadian Idol* contestant discussed his multi-year effort of auditioning for the show. He auditioned four years in a row, each time making it further in the process. In his fourth year, in which he made the show, he finally made it to the top 200. Here, he went to Toronto for an extended audition. His mentality at this point in the competition was less about impressing the judges and more about impressing the producers (personal interview). In an effort to do this, he took advantage of opportunities to pull attention to himself and banter with the judges.

In discussing his experience, I mentioned that his introduction packages often played up the notion of him as a small-town guy in the big city and asked if he felt he had been turned into a character at all. He mentioned that it was actually a character he had made for himself. It was

an idea that had developed in the earlier rounds of auditioning. He saw that he was getting attention for his personality and humor and that there had been repeated references to him as the small town boy making good. He felt this as a role he could fill. He was the only one from his season who could fill that role and believed it was one in which the public would be interested. As he points out, at that time he wanted to give the show everything they wanted and more (personal interview). For Mark, character creation occurred in a way that was unintentionally collaborative. It was intentional, but based on responses and feedback he was already getting. He played up aspects that the show responded to. At the same time, he repeatedly mentioned that he was not fabricating anything. He felt that he was being guided into this characterization from the show. It was something he was comfortable with and could deliver, so took steps to play up that aspect. This resulted in an image that was both 'still him' and yet very much a performance. He was active in this process, but not solely in control of it.

In her article looking specifically at *Canadian Idol*, Doris Baltruschat (2009) considers the specific steps used by the production company to ensure a sense of transformation in the contestants. One of the first steps is the emphasis on the ordinariness of the participant. Holmes (2004) discusses how the emphasis on the ordinariness of a contestant may serve as an invocation to the audience and their own fantasies of fame. Richie Wilcox (2010) wrote an article reflecting on his participation in the first season of *Canadian Idol*. He mentions that he had been working as an assistant deli manager prior to his stint on the show. However, he had also been heavily involved in the theater scene in his area and had co-founded an independent production company. This theater experience was never mentioned by the show and he was always discussed in relation to being an assistant deli manager. While he had been living in a major city for five years, on the show he was associated with the small town in which he had

been born. Contestants I spoke to frequently mentioned this emphasis on small town roots. While many were currently living in larger cities, shows repeatedly focused on their hometowns. This may be due to the notion of transformation and ordinariness that these authors mention as being a key part in the sense of transformation to celebrity. Mark's characterization of himself as small-town guy trying to make it in the big city then was ideally set up to match the goals of the program.

While participation on the programs is presented as exciting, this excitement is meant to be its own reward. Hearn (2008) notes that the programs offer little (or no) financial remuneration. The thrill of appearing on television and challenging oneself is expected to be enough for contestants. While Hearn notes this as a problematic aspect of the genre, Gheesling presents this as intrinsic to the process. He states, "Part of the casting process is waiving a lot of your individual rights. You have the choice not to sign the application, but I can't imagine that would help your chances to get cast. You need to be comfortable with putting your signature on this portion of the application with the understanding that there is not much you can do to change it" (2012, 33). Here Gheesling presents the power imbalance as just the way the game is played. Rather than using this as a space to comment on the amount of control a participant is asked to give up, Gheesling puts the pressure on that individual as something they need to be comfortable with. This document is presented as unchangeable, even though many individuals I spoke with discussed alterations that they had been able to make.

Even making the final cast does not negate the uncompensated labor that many perform prior to filming. A number of the contestants I spoke with discussed the training regimen they created for themselves prior to their participation on the show. For some, this effort occurred before even auditioning for the show. The majority of participants spent significant time and

energy on preparing after having been cast for the program, but prior to the beginning of filming. Mirrlees (2016) labels this as self-exploitation, noting the cost and hours of unpaid labor that individuals invest into their reality TV dreams. Depending on the type of competition, this labor can take a number of forms. Sometimes the preparation was physical, trying to increase stamina or to modify one's body prior to appearing on camera. Other preparations were mental. Many combined both of these aspects into their preparation. For the dancers this meant taking classes in styles they felt less prepared for. The chefs and home cooks I talked to discussed how they worked on memorizing ratios. Those on food and design programs mentioned putting themselves through mock challenges. While not all individuals prepared in this way, all those who did explicitly discussed it as work and/or training. These were not solely self-improvement exercises. The participants-to-be were clearly investing in their future. While Mirrlees (2016) focuses on the exploitative nature of this labor, the contestants viewed it in terms of labor with a future pay-off.

The resources available to individuals worked to shape how they prepared for their participation. One contestant from a cooking show had their roommate give them random ingredients from their apartment to make dishes. They created a homemade version of *Chopped* to get them thinking on their feet and trying to mentally prepare for the unknown of the challenges they would face (personal interview). Terry, a *Top Chef Canada* contestant, was running a restaurant at the time he was auditioning for the show. He used this as an opportunity to train and practice his dish creation. For a month, he created a new dish every day. While his staff were not always thrilled with this, he viewed it as practice for what he would be expected to do while competing (personal interview). His strategy also speaks to the ways in which others can labor for the potential contestant. A roommate was brought on board to assist in training.

Terry's staff were now also required to learn and prep a new dish every day. While I am focusing on the labor of participants themselves, it is important to note how that labor is in no way solely limited to them.

This requirement of curating an attractive image is one that has always existed for those desiring fame. Sean Redmond (2014) discusses the way celebrity serves as a commodity fetish. The work that has gone into presenting the ideal image is hidden and instead the celebrity is to always present an image that seems natural and authentic. This seeming authenticity is intentionally crafted but must not appear as such. As he states, "Their labour, and the labour of those involved in their manufacture, is removed from the signification chain and the production lines they are connected to. It is as if they have innate economic value; are of value in and of themselves; and that they exist in a magical state of commodity being in the world that makes invisible the alienated labour that went into making them." (Redmond, 2014, pg 53-54) What we are currently seeing is this demand being made of more and more individuals. No longer limited to celebrities, "ordinary" individuals must also present a seemingly authentic self in order to maintain employment. While the celebrity must exude a seemingly authentic aura of being extraordinary, the reality television contestant must exude an aura of ordinariness.

Television personalities, and this category can include reality television participants, occupy a unique position. As Redmond (2014) suggests, these individuals are presented as being ordinary and in an attainable position. The use of their real names and realist environments brands them as both ordinary and extraordinary. In other words, they are extraordinary at presenting an image of being ordinary. James Bennett (2011) argues that television personalities must be understood as being themselves actively involved in the promotion of a certain notion of what it means to be ordinary. They continually maintain and encourage specific identity-

formations to be deemed regular. As he states, this is ideological and encompasses such aspects as national identity, gender, race and sexuality. What a culture understands as ordinary is ideological and shifts over time. The chosen participants then represent this sense of ordinariness.

The paradox and problem of this strategic presentation of the self is that it must always appear to be “authentic”. The remodeling cannot appear to be anything less than the presentation of one's 'true self'. The constructed-ness of the image must remain hidden. The presentation of a seemingly natural ability is vital in both reality television and the wider labor market. In his self-help book on how to get on reality television, Dan Gheesling (2012) also highlights the need for hopeful contestants to come across as authentic. He cautions that coming across as overly prepared or studied can harm one's chances of being selected. It suggests that they are more concerned with playing a part rather than being themselves. Couldry (2008) explains this frequent privileging of the natural as being a byproduct of the focus on surveillance in the current labor market. Since an individual cannot be monitored continually, an employer desires workers who 'naturally' embody the desired traits.

Hopeful contestants must appear eager to be on the program, but not eager for fame. Hearn (2008) repeatedly discusses the branded self as a tool of promotionalism. This image is one that is meant to be an attractive commodity in the market of one's choosing, in this case reality television programs. Gheesling (2012) cautions that while applicants are selling themselves for material reward, this must not appear to be the motivating factor for participation on television show. Promotionalism must be considered as a tool to get one's goal rather than being the goal in itself. As he cautions in his self-help book about getting on reality programs, producers attempt to avoid putting fame-seekers on their programs due to the little value they

add to the show. This lack of value is considered to be a result of careful self-representation. Producers may be concerned that the applicant will attempt to manipulate their reactions to one's that are less “natural” and more designed to ensure camera time. This supposed lack of authenticity is assumed to make the show more difficult to produce. Thus promotionalism must be balanced by another, more attractive, motivation for application. The importance of brand management is explicit here. Those wishing to appear on reality television must market themselves as attractive candidates. They must couch their desire, if there is one, for fame and fortune in a more appealing image.

Looking at the reasons for auditioning brought a wide variety of responses and complicated the understanding that individuals just go on reality shows for fame. While this lack of discussion of the desire to be known may have come from the pressures described above, it is also worth considering that fame may be less important, or at least thought of more in terms of professional success, than frequently assumed. For some, traditional routes of movement had not worked for them. Others were doing the show at behest of bosses who wanted the publicity, even though they themselves were unsure about their participation. National pride was a frequent motivator for auditioning. Many spoke of the desire to show that Canada was “just as good” or of the desire to represent their talent while also demonstrating a commitment to the country. Along with this sense of national pride was also a sense of personal pride. A couple individuals said that they basically had to audition as they had spent a bunch of time bragging that they could totally win the show if it ever came to Canada. Now they actually had to back up their claims. This emotional component of the desire to audition played out in unexpected ways for some contestants. For example, a male *So You Think You Can Dance Canada* participant decided to try out for the show because he had seen Chelsie Hightower, a contestant on the American version,

and his crush on her pushed him to audition (personal interview). The variety of responses speak to the need for a more nuanced discussion of the risks and rewards of the genre and why individuals are willing to participate.

Who Is Participation Assumed to be For?

While competition programs often purport to make a celebrity out of an unknown, many participants have at least some industry experience or knowledge. Rob James was a contestant on the fourth season of *Canadian Idol*. Before he was an *Idol* contestant, he was one-half of the pop duo McMaster & James. The duo signed a contract with BMG/Sony records in 1999. Their first album *McMaster & James* was released and went Gold in Canada in 2000 (Wilton, 2000). Following the success of their first album, the duo was signed for the development of a second album. In an interview, Rob notes how the music industry was imploding at this time due to Napster and other entities challenging traditional models. A number of artists who had contracts found their careers stalled as companies refused to put out any new material due to worries about not recouping their investment. McMaster & James faced a similar fate. They had recorded a number of songs for the record. The label decided to both not release the record, and to not release the duo from their contract. This was a protective move on behalf of the label so that the duo could not sign with any other company. What this meant though was that McMaster and James ended up being held on contract for 2.5-3 years without releasing anything (personal interview). By that time, all momentum and name recognition was largely gone,

After this time, the two split up. McMaster moved to Toronto to pursue an independent music career and James stayed in Manitoba and attempted to build a more “traditional” life while maintaining some ties to the industry. In 2006, *Canadian Idol* announced that it would be holding auditions in his town. James noted that a number of friends and family jokingly

suggested that he should try out. He said that the underlying sentiment at the time was that he had already had his chance in the industry and should now let someone else have a chance. However, others who suggested it were not joking and pointed out that the show was not restricted to new entrants into the industry. In our interview, James mentioned that he himself was torn. He felt in some ways that he should let the idea go, but was intrigued that this could go somewhere. The auditions occurred on a weekend. After having let the first day of auditions go by, James called McMaster on the Sunday to get his opinion. He was concerned that his attempting to do the show might hurt McMaster's career in some way, or negatively affect the legacy of the group. McMaster was onboard and very encouraging. Still unsure, James called up his former manager for his thoughts on whether this could negatively influence his career. According to James, his manager former manager kindly pointed out that James did not currently have a career (personal interview). With that realization, James decided to audition with only a few hours left. He was one of the last auditions of the day and felt that he really had nothing to lose.

Rob James ended up being cast on the show and making it to 7th place in the competition. James' story challenges the assumption that individuals who appear on shows like *Idol* are trying to "cheat" the system in some way. Rather, James had followed the traditional path of the industry and had fallen victim to changing industrial trends. For him, *Idol* offered a way back into the industry. However, his route also acknowledges the stigma that surrounds reality television. Many people in his life felt he had already had his chance and that shows like *Idol* should foster new talent. The jokes around auditioning speak to this understanding. His own decision to contact his former partner prior to auditioning acknowledges the common understanding of the show as a popularity contest and not looking for a "true" musician. James

was worried that the stigma of the genre could extend to his former partner. McMaster & James had been a pop act, often considered one of the less serious genres of music, yet James was still concerned that auditioning for *Idol* would hurt the reputation of both of them as “serious” artists. His acknowledgment of some reputational risks and the decision to go for it anyway speaks to both his desire to find a way back into the industry and an acknowledgement of the structural barriers that face those looking for a career in the music industry.

The supposed amateurism of reality television contestants needs to be nuanced. While Rob faced pushback due to his experience in the industry, other contestants who were very new to their chosen industry also felt like they did not belong due to their lack of experience. In discussing the experience of constantly being around the people you were in competition with, Tamara, a participant on *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria*, stated that the situation led to her comparing herself to the other women. While at least a couple of them had industry experience, she was very new to the field. That can breed paranoia. She expressed her fears of, “What am I even doing here? Like am I just fodder to like get through a couple of rounds before they get to the good people?” (personal interview) To her, her lack of experience translated to an assumption that she did not belong. Bell (2010) notes that on *American Idol*, the show and the judges attempt to privilege certain contestants and narratives through the mocking and marginalizing of other competitors. While shows like *Idol* work to create celebrities, they must also create cannon fodder and anti-celebrities who can be used and discarded so as to make the other contenders that much more attractive and viable. Tamara’s perception of not belonging speaks to a recognition of this practice and a fear that this was the role she was being assigned to play.

While Tamara's fears were self-inflicted, this assumption of putting in one's time can be made explicit. Mark brought up the bullying and pushback he received from other contestants on his season of *Canadian Idol*. While initially there was a sense of camaraderie and friendship among the top 24 (the semi-finalists who would eventually through public voting become a top 10), this atmosphere changed once individuals started being eliminated. Mark noted that as people started being sent home, their friends left on the show would stop him and blame him for the eliminations. He faced frequent accusations of 'taking' people's spots and of being the reason that individuals had been eliminated (personal interview). Underlying these accusations was the sense that he had not put in his time in the industry like the other contestants had, therefore he did not deserve the opportunity. While the show could not and did not take a stance on the bullying he was facing, it was not unnoticed. At one point, individuals working on the show decided to subtly intervene. Some producers took Mark aside to show him a printout of the vote totals of the contestants making the finals. These totals had him as having the most public support at that time (personal interview). While he was told not to tell the other contestants, this gesture was made to counteract the narrative that he did not deserve to be on the show. The experiences of Rob, Tamara, and Mark foreground the different expectations and assumptions surrounding the terms 'ordinary' and 'amateur' and the roles that reality competition shows are assumed to play. It also brings to light that there may be different understandings of the experience participants are expected to have by viewers and by those in the industry/specific competition.

Alison Hearn's (2008) work on the branded self reminds us that while the self may be a site from which value is extracted, there is no guarantee that its owner will be the beneficiary. Without proper and continual management of one's self as brand, other interests may brand that

self differently or profit more from the brand than the individual themselves. This is especially true in the case of competitive reality television programs where the shows rely on narratives to propel the competitions forward and justify the elimination of contestants. There is also a strong power differential between contestants and the shows on which they appear. Marwick (2013) points out the fundamental tension that exists between self-branding and corporate employment. There will often be differences between what is best for the company and what is best for the individual. Yet, because of the power balance, the individual is expected to act against their best interests, potentially involuntarily, to promote the interests of the corporate entity. Thus, even the best self-branding attempts may fail if they conflict with the desires or needs of the show.

Shavar and Izzak, two contestants on *So You Think You Can Dance Canada*, both discussed how they played up the notion of themselves as troublemakers or wildcards to seem more attractive to the show and to increase their chances at being cast. Both talked about this as a recognition of the program as a show and a desire to make “good television”. However, while Shavar thought that his actions would bring attention, this attention was far greater than he had assumed. Rather than a brief highlight, the group audition episode devoted an entire segment to how much of a jerk he was being to the other dancers. He feels that while his actions helped get him on the show, they also led to the audience being negatively positioned against him and therefore limiting his time as people were unmotivated to vote for him (personal interview). Izaak was called out by the judges for being “fake” and was viewed as inauthentic (personal interview). Both went into it acknowledging the tropes of the genre and with the idea of making “good” TV and ended up facing significant pushback by the audience and judging panel (even as they were personally celebrated/ thanked by production). It was the show, rather than them, that benefited most from their actions.

At times, the acknowledgment that others can or will benefit from your labor can be more overt. Contestants discussed how on some shows, individuals were approached or otherwise encouraged to apply. There was a sense of participation as being mutually beneficial for both the programs and for those appearing. For shows like *Top Chef Canada* for example, at times restaurants rather than individuals were approached in this way. Gabriell was a contestant on *Top Chef Canada* who had recently opened up a restaurant. He discussed how his bosses were approached by the show to see if they wanted to go on, or if they wanted to send someone. While he personally did not feel ready or particularly motivated to do the show, he was willing to do it for the restaurant. To him, this was not a personally beneficial choice, but one that he was encouraged to make, and ultimately made, in the interest of the restaurant. The exposure offered by participation was seen as being worth it. His decision serves as a reminder of Marwick's (2013) point about the tensions between corporate and individual interests. However, his decision to do the show can also suggest that this tension requires more nuance. Gabriell's understanding of his motivations also serves as a useful reminder that while competing may be an individual endeavor, participation should be considered on a wider scale.

The Mental and Physical Labor of Filming

Many of the participants I talked to discussed being unprepared for the emotional and physical toll that filming the show would take. Terry, a contestant from *Top Chef Canada* noted that while the show conveyed the sense of difficulty in the challenges, it didn't convey the pressure they were under or explore the mental states of competitors.

“They show that it's hard, they show us running around, but they don't show the people with their head in their hands on the sofa fucking crying on the sofa for an hour after filming has been done. They don't show the people who go straight off set for the vodka and chug half the fucking bottle and then fall asleep, pass out so hard that they can't be woken up for the next round of filming. Uh and so we all have to have a talking to after that about how much we can drink and how much we can't drink. They don't show

people going, people sneaking to members of the crew asking for cocaine because they don't think they can stay up another 18 hour day and compete. They don't show any of that stuff. That stuff to me is the real reality show. There's people really fucking melting down and they didn't show any of that." (Personal Interview)

By showing only the labor required of contestants, and ignoring the effects of that labor, the show ignores the mental component of participation.

Chris, another *Top Chef Canada* contestant, mentioned that he felt that the sustained mental pressure was intentionally there to make better TV. He pointed out that the vast majority of individuals cast on the show are extraordinarily talented. Therefore, little drama can arise from the cooking challenges themselves. He contrasted *Top Chef Canada* to *MasterChef Canada*. *MasterChef Canada* features home cooks without professional experience. Therefore there is more of a focus on demonstrating how good the food those contestants produce is. He felt this allowed more excitement to come from contestants succeeding. *Top Chef* however starts with professionals and the assumption that everyone is already a great cook. Therefore, to him, more time needed to be spent on trying to determine if anyone would fail. He argued that the show was in fact designed to attempt to "break" contestants to encourage more exciting television (personal interview). Demonstrating talent is not seen to be enough when all contestants are assumed to be talented. Overcoming adversity is now presented as the skill that must be placed at the fore.

Chris' point speaks to an understanding that he is first and foremost a contestant on a commercial television show, and a storyline featuring suspense and dramatic tension is required. This requirement explains why a disproportionate amount of programming time focuses on the individuals who face elimination. In his work on *America's Next Top Model*, Frank H. Wallis puts forth that, "until the last reveal, the most valuable candidate to the story line was not first, but last, because she was the answer and resolution to the crisis of every episode, the climax and last element in the dramatic arc" (2010, 143). Because the eliminated contestant is the one whose

presence is most required, those in danger of filling this role have the most screen time and emphasis. The potential losers of each episode are the ones from which drama and excitement can be mined. And, if their talent is such as to make failure unlikely, the situation may be designed to bring its own challenges.

A number of individuals also talked about the pressure they felt they were under to prove themselves. This came up frequently in talking to contestants who were from underrepresented groups in the fields they were hoping to enter or progress in. Line, a contestant from *MasterChef Canada* discussed some of the pressure she felt from being an underdog in the competition. She pointed out that as a woman she was a disadvantage in a cooking competition. Men would be given the label of home chef while women would be called home cooks. While many women are cooking daily, the most well-known chefs in the world currently are men. She noted that she felt the pressure to prove that women were capable in the kitchen. She also mentioned that she was devastated when a fellow female competitor was eliminated and ended up feeling as though she was now competing for the both of them (personal interview). This sense of honoring friendships and the talents of others was yet another form of pressure she experienced during filming.

Jost (2011) points out that for many programs, participants are required to be available for the entirety of the filming period and are unable to go elsewhere or communicate with those not involved in the program without permission. For *MasterChef Canada* contestants, this meant a single 10-minute phone call a week to talk to family. Numerous *Top Chef Canada* contestants mentioned that they were required to surrender their passports, credit and debit cards for the duration of filming. They were also monitored and could not leave any building without express permission. However, as individuals pointed out, even if they did leave the filming locations there were few options as they were without identification or money. This counteracts the

proposed narrative that this is fun rather than work. As Jost (2011) asserts, these expectations placed on participants must be considered as work, understood as such since the participants are subordinate to, and required to carry out tasks by, the authority of the program. This pressure to remain contained by the program highlights the power differential between the show and the contestants. One participant on *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria* discussed the long amounts of time they spent in the studio because the show and network didn't want them to leave, even just to cross the street to get coffee. The physical containment of contestants demonstrates the power that shows have over contestants.

In the maintenance of power, unwanted autonomy must be contained and controlled (Coleman, 2010). This can be seen in the expectation that participants will just wait around until the show is ready for them. Of course, this containment only really works so long as the show has some sort of leverage, or at least assumed leverage, over those being held. Kyla talked about how on *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* she and the other contestants had the sense that they had no other option but to do what the show wanted or they would be sent home (eliminations on this show occurred through a combination of viewer voting and judges' decisions). The show had a reflection special about a year after the show ended. The women returned for the filming and were told they would need to wait in the studio for about 6 hours until they were needed. However, Kyla and the other women were not interested in waiting around. She noted that they pointed out that the show had their numbers and that they were going to a patio until they were required on set (personal interview). The former contestants were aware that the show no longer had anything to hold over them. They had already been eliminated (or, in one case, had already won). During the filming of the competition, the desire to compete and appear easy to work with led to being more willing to acquiesce to show demands. While

autonomy can be controlled by shows, it is important to consider the ways in which that power is conditional and time-sensitive.

In his work on *Big Brother*, Coleman (2010) argues that there are two major ways in which the program asserts control over the contestants. These are through gatekeeping access to television and stripping contestants of external resources. His argument should not be limited to that specific program. Much reality television relies on these two strategies of behavior management. Gatekeeping allows the show to determine acceptable and appropriate forms of behavior. Kyla's discussion of the ways in which she was made to feel as though she would be eliminated if she so much as went across the street for coffee speak to the ways in which this power can be coercive. The restrictions on communication, isolation from support networks and removal of access to finances that occurs on most, if not all, of the shows considered are examples of the removal of external resources. In doing this, the programs limit the ability of or likelihood for contestants to act independently. These strategies serve as risk management tools.

There can be tension when one's personal brand runs up against the norms and expectations of the show. Chris talked about his difficulty in changing his cooking style and technique to conform to the norms of competing on *Top Chef Canada*. His focus was on demonstrating technique and he was confident that his attention to detail and desire to use quality ingredients and make the majority of the food himself would give him an edge. He quickly realized however, that his aesthetic and approach were not in line with what the judges were expecting or with the timeframe provided by the show. His inability to match the norms of the competition led to his elimination from the show. As he states,

"I mean the people who do well are the people who manage it, they make some really basic thing that's tasty, right? It's not the people who show the most technique or have the most interesting flavor, the most depth or complexity, or real skill that goes into the dish, it's making something tasty. And frequently, a lot of us who are more technicians would get really frustrated in the competition for saying like 'oh yeah, that guy, he

bought canned crab and mixed it with mayo he made. What a fucking donkey'. Like I would never use canned crab ever ever ever EVER, but then ya know, they're at the top and you're at the bottom [laughs] and it's like who's right and who's wrong?...the truth is that if the point is winning, then whoever's losing is wrong." (personal interview)

Here, Chris points out that initially, he felt as though the judging was not looking at who was the "best" chef. However, as he reflects, he points out that his assumptions about the judging process were flawed. If he were to do the show again, he said that he would focus more on winning than technique. He presents this as sacrificing a bit of his integrity, but as worth it to stay competitive. His discussion also frames this as a demonstration of growth. Now that he has progressed as a chef (he now owns his own restaurant rather than working for someone else) he has learned the importance of what he dubs catering to the masses, figuring out what the guest wants and working backwards from there. His interview speaks to the tension that can exist in programs with time constraints and expectations that differ significantly from the professional norms that participants are used to. One has to adapt to stay competitive.

To win, one must successfully meet the goals of the show. However, at times there can seem to be conflict between the show itself and its stated goal. In my interviews with the women who competed on *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* I asked how they approached their performances. Were they attempting to sing the songs as themselves or as Maria? They all approached the show and this notion differently. However, each of them was trying to do what they felt would be what the show wanted and what would increase their likelihood of success on the show. One contestant mentioned their frustration regarding song selections. She noted that the vocal stylings of Maria, the role they were auditioning for, had nothing to do with the songs they were given (personal interview). However, even in acknowledging her frustration, she was quick to make clear that this was an expectation of the show and that as a competitor it was her job to adapt to those requirements. In both of these examples, the individuals consider their own difficulties in coming to terms with what the show was expecting of them. While contestants

might be personally frustrated in adjusting their initial expectations, this frustration is presented as a personal failing rather than a problem with the show. The power of the show in determining its own judging criteria remains unchallenged.

This notion of adaptability goes hand in hand with the expectation to constantly demonstrate one's value. In her work on the changing nature of labor in a digital economy, Ursula Huws (2014) posits that the idea of slowly developing a career and reputation based on past achievements seems to be dying out. Instead, individuals are required to constantly demonstrate their credentials. No one can expect to rest on their laurels. This notion plays out on reality shows as well. The majority of competitive programs feature an elimination every episode. Many of the programs, especially those focusing on artistry (like *Top Chef Canada* or *Project Runway Canada* for example) claim to only factor in the work/labor done on that episode into judging. This means that a single bad day can send a talented and respected individual home. On the programs themselves, these eliminations are often presented as "shocking". However, the idea is not shocking at all, but constantly reinforced in the labor market. The shows often use these eliminations to remind the remaining contestants that they are never safe; their position in the competition is always precarious.

Kunal appeared on *Top Chef Canada*. He was an established chef who ended up being eliminated in the second episode of his season. He discusses how difficult it was to watch the show with friends and family, knowing how quickly he was going to be eliminated. In the first episode, he was one of the four best chefs. His audition video had also been highlighted on the program. This led his friends and family to assume that he was going to be a major contender that season (personal interview). He did not want to spoil the outcome for anyone, and legally could not, so just had to wait for people to realize that he would not be a major presence on the

show. Like Huws' (2014) point, Kunal could not rest on his laurels. Even though he had a successful business and had just been acknowledged for his skill by the judges, his entry in the very next challenge was deemed unsuccessful. A single bad dish led to his exit from the program coming much earlier than he had anticipated.

Continually proving oneself is not always enough. If the program requires viewer votes, individuals must continually be willing and able to expend the time and effort required to support their chosen participant. Regionalism can be a major factor here. This also means that at times, contestants may be affected by factors beyond their control. Rob, a *Canadian Idol* contestant, discussed how he knew he would be going home when he did due to the timing of the episode. His main voting block was regional in nature- highly focused around his hometown of Winnipeg. He discussed how a long weekend in Winnipeg led to his downfall. In our interview, he noted that the performance episodes aired on Mondays, so people had to be available and willing to vote Monday evening. He discussed folkorama and that it was, at least at the time, the largest multicultural festival in Canada.

“So everybody in the city, it’s a long weekend, is either at folklorama - or, like either working at it or going to it, or they are up at the cottage, long weekend. So, and it’s literally everybody in the city. Like if I had been in Winnipeg at the time, I wouldn’t have watched the show, because there would have been, ya know there’s too much else going on. So, in talking to the executives after the voting show, actually after I got kicked off, after the results show, they were like, one in particular, a guy ... came up to me and said Rob we have no idea what happened, like your your numbers were going up week over week. We were we were anticipating possibly you know, you being in the finale. Like we were shocked that it was going in this direction and then your numbers in Winnipeg just disappeared and we looked to see if it was a technical issue and there was nothing. I was like yeah I know, I figured (personal interview).

Here, Rob points to the festival as the cause of his elimination. The regionality of the voting bases of contestants and the timing of this long weekend led to Rob not being able to get the votes he had previously been getting. The absence of his fan base on this single evening led to

his dismissal from the program. His previous success (and increasing vote totals) had no impact and could not save him.

For some, there were times when the filming process itself was a struggle. Alanna, a contestant from *Canada's Next Top Model* wrote, "I will admit at times I felt like I had had enough of being filmed. I would wake up to a camera in my face, there were mic checks and battery changes and interviews... sometimes it was overwhelming but it was part of the process and I respected that." (personal correspondence) This notion of being filmed as inescapable foregrounds the labor that contestants perform every waking moment of their time on the show. However, it must be highlighted that the filming arrangements differ from show to show. While Alanna and the other *Top Model* contestants (and those on many programs) were filmed and mic'd every moment they were awake, other programs (like *MasterChef Canada*) only shot in studio so that contestants had time free from cameras. Alanna's acknowledgement also frames the labor of filming as both occasionally bothersome, but also necessary and expected. This positions the labor of filming as something that she must navigate and figure out herself. Asking for space or a break from filming is not presented as an option. Instead, the work of being filmed is presented as a constant that a contestant must manage as a part of participating on the show.

The labor of waiting was frequently discussed as an unexpected part of the filming process. At least one contestant referred to it as torture. *Canadian Idol* and *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* competitors often had to wait around in the studio while others rehearsed. Knowing it was an elimination day and not knowing if it would be you going home made time stretch for people on a number of programs. *Top Chef Canada* contestants discussed having to sit around for between 2-4 hours between the start of judging and finding out who would be eliminated. Andrea discussed the difficulty of the waiting period between finishing cooking and

the beginning of judging. She labelled the experience as more difficult than childbirth. Just waiting in a room with the other contestants for hours. She spent the time mentally analyzing what she had done and trying to figure out how it stacked up compared to everyone else (personal interview). Another issue with waiting that came up frequently was the requirement to be ready to be “on” at any moment. Waiting often had no scheduled end, so contestants could be called to perform at any moment. This meant that there was not really a way to relax. Waiting then also consisted of always being ready.

The physical toll of the filming process varied depending on the program. Lack of sleep was a common thread throughout many of the shows considered. Late nights and early mornings were common. Carlie, a *Project Runway Canada* participant, noted that for the duration of her filming experience she was only getting 2-3 hours of sleep a night (personal correspondence). For many this led to feeling mentally drained as the competition progressed. Many dancers I contacted discussed the physical toll that the competition took on their body. Carlana stated that she spent more time in the makeup chair getting bruises covered up than getting makeup applied (personal interview). This physical toll played out on bodies differently and was influenced by age. Mel mentioned that she feels her youth allowed her body to bounce back quickly and that she is unsure if physically she could still do the show now (personal interview). The lack of sleep and the bodily toll that participation takes can lead to elimination. These physical requirements are often not stated or really even known, but one’s body must conform in order to stay competitive.

Shows may intentionally construct situations where one is always and only thinking about the competition. A *Top Chef Canada* contestant discussed how they were kept isolated in a hotel room for 24 hours prior to the start of filming. They had no access to media and were

completely alone save for a single, hour-long mental health break where someone was sent in to play Battleship with them (personal interview). This was presented as a chance to prepare and settle oneself for the upcoming competition. The long waiting periods can add to the pressure and reinforce this singular focus. A *MasterChef Canada* participant discussed how their time on the show was structured to keep them only worried about food. The show structured meal times and bathroom breaks (personal interview). These were scheduled and food was provided so that the contestants did not have to be distracted by anything and could keep focused on the challenges.

Image Management

Part of the sustained emotional labor also comes from the contestants themselves. Numerous individuals discussed the pressure they felt (often self-imposed) to present a “good” image of themselves on camera. There was a sense that the cameras were always watching and contestants had a desire to not come off badly. Sometimes this was also linked to notions of proving one’s worth or skill. Many individuals who compete on skill and talent-based desired to continue on and progress in that industry. This was often discussed through mentions of wanting to be seen as professional and to be taken seriously. In many of the interviews, individuals discussed the idea of letting go more and having more fun if they were to redo their experience. Pino, for example, mentioned that he had never been on camera prior to his experience on *MasterChef Canada*. He described himself normally as laid-back and funny. However, he wanted to convey that he was taking the competition seriously and found that he was keeping sarcastic comments and jokes that he would normally make to himself (personal interview). This fear of being seen as not being invested in the process came up frequently and led many to present themselves as more serious and reserved than they felt they usually were.

While image management was often linked to industry success, this was not always the case. For some, the desire to not embarrass or disappoint friends and family was a key motivating factor in how one behaved on camera. Heather was a contestant on *Canada's Next Top Model* and discussed the importance of online availability and permanence to self-presentation.

I was aware that I would have family members watching, and since everything seems to be available online nowadays, potentially future employers/coworkers/ friends (husband!) etc. To me that meant making sure I came across as well mannered, competent, and kind-not as catty, mean spirited or emotionally unstable (which, it seems to me, is a typical portrayal of females in reality tv). That said, I think the producers wanted me to play the ditsy blonde- which unfortunately, I do think I came across as due to my high voice and the fact that the whole process made me very nervous! (personal correspondence)

Heather's comment also brings up the notion of gender stereotypes and genre conventions. While these ideas will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, her response exemplifies the notion of participants being savvy viewers. Heather was aware of stereotypical portrayals and was making a conscious effort to not be viewed in this way. She also highlights the ways in which her edited appearance was beyond her control. Her nerves, vocal mannerisms and the decisions of the producers and program led to her potentially being read differently than she had hoped or labored for.

Along with the desire to be seen taking the show seriously and to present a 'good' image, there was the pressure to compete well. To present oneself as competent and deserving of the opportunity they had been given. Depending on one's path to participation, this could occur for a number of reasons in a number of ways. Mel, a participant on *So You Think You Can Dance Canada*, had spent the previous season of the show serving as an assistant to one of the choreographers, Blake, who was also a judge on the program. Since she had been his assistant, she felt that it was expected she was going to be good and she wanted to live up to that. He was on the judging panel and had been talking her up to the judges and producers. While she wanted

to live up to the expectation, she also did not want him to look bad and be seen as having made a bad recommendation (personal interview). In all of these examples, this image management is intentional and required constant attention by the participant. Marwick (2013) labels brand monitoring as labor that is both emotional and taxing.

This desire to remain professional in such a stressful environment meant that individuals needed to find outlets to deal with the pressures of the competition. One *Project Runway Canada* contestant talked about her strategies for dealing with frustrations in ways that would not affect the composed and professional image she wished to portray on the show. Because she and the other contestants were filmed almost constantly, Jessica found ways to take advantage of the few private moments she was allowed. The show did not record when a single individual was using the washroom, so she used this space to let out the stress and anger she was carrying. As she mentions,

“When I was in my personal time, like when I would take a shower, like ya know I would say all the things I wanted to say that I didn’t say on tv because I didn’t, I just didn’t want to have to have that experience with people. Like I don’t have that energy. And, like that was my decompression time. I would get it off my chest to myself. I would think about it and like as I washed myself it went down the drain with it and I was just like it’s cool, let’s just go to sleep and start it all over again” (personal interview)

Jessica frames this practice as self-care and as a way of working through tensions and frustrations. Her desire to remain non-confrontational with fellow contestants required alternate strategies be put in place to deal with personality clash. Finding private spaces with which to deal with the pressures of filming allowed Jessica to maintain the professional image she desired when the cameras were rolling.

The desire to maintain a professional and competent image is also affected by the size of the industry. Many of the designers, performers and chefs discussed just how small their industries were in Canada. Many went into the show knowing this and therefore being extra careful not to offend anyone. At times, this desire caused friction with the show itself. At one

point, the show told Kyla and the other members of the top 10 that they needed to spice it up and add more drama, “And we were all like alright, but this is what we do professionally, like this is what we want to do professionally so we’re not going to be divas and terrible people. When we leave this, for you know the next 2,3 months this is our life yes, but we have a lot longer after and we’re not gonna be catty and bitchy to each other because we want to work afterwards” (personal interview). Kyla acknowledges that the program is interested in making compelling television, but recognizes that the proposed way to make the show more interesting could have long-term consequences to her professional goals. Image management is constant, requires mental labor and can cause conflict with the show or another entity.

The Labor of Being Gone

One issue I had not considered prior to these interviews was the labor that went into excuses for absences. Contestants noted that they were allowed to tell a couple people that they were filming the show (usually limited to 3). These individuals were required by the show to sign non-disclosure agreements. Individuals could then discuss aspects of their experience with them. For everyone else, individuals needed to come up with reasons why they would be gone for weeks, or months, to complete filming. For those on live shows this was less of an issue, as their participation was more quickly made public. However, for those appearing on pre-taped programs, this could require some quick thinking and effort. Jessica, a *Project Runway Canada* contestant, mentioned that she had told friends that she was going to Portugal for a few weeks. Since her mom was from there, she felt it was a plausible excuse for disappearing. However, this brought about its own challenges. Being that the show was not airing for months after filming, she had to maintain this fictional trip until promotional material for the show was released. There were a few days they had off near the end of filming and she remembers spending all her

time outside, desperately trying to tan. Without a tan, she felt that no one would believe she had been out of the country (personal interview). While tanning might not be what initially comes to mind when considering labor, she had to work to get her body to match the story she had been required to fabricate.

Being gone for filming brought about its own challenges. Individuals had to prepare for being gone from their lives for anywhere to a few weeks to a few months. This could bring about a whole host of logistical issues. Absences from jobs had to be arranged (if possible), rent had to be paid, children and pets needed to be cared for, and a host of other aspects needed to be managed. Pino discussed the support system he needed to bring in regarding childcare. Once making the semifinals he was informed he would need to prepare to be away from home for 3-7 weeks. As he was a stay-at-home parent, he and his wife scrambled to plan for this absence (the reasons behind which he was unable to disclose). He and his wife made use of their network, bringing in family and friends to watch the kids. While it worked out, it “involved quite a few people and a detailed spreadsheet” (personal interview). Pino’s description makes clear the ways in which many people provide support and labor (often without knowing why) for the individuals who participate in reality programming. The ability to pack up one’s life for an extended period of time is not something that everyone can do. Many are therefore shut out of the option to compete due to issues surrounding scheduling or finances. These limitations to who can most easily appear and potentially benefit from their participation is considered in further detail in the next section.

The majority of Canadian competitive reality television films in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). All of the shows discussed required that an individual live in assigned accommodations for the duration of their time with the show. For some of the competitors, being on the show was

their first extended time away from home. Physically being gone from home could have significant mental impacts regardless of distance travelled. Pino lived in the GTA, mentioning that he was often less than a 10-minute drive away from his home during filming. Yet, he was limited to a 10-minute weekly phone call with his family (personal interview). For him, the closeness of the filming location made the separation from his family difficult. For others, it was the distance. This could especially be difficult for performers whose friends and family were nowhere near the GTA and therefore had a much harder time attending tapings and showing support through physical presence. More time is spent looking at place and regionalism in the following section.

Once filming wraps, individuals head back to the lives they had put on hold for the duration of filming. For those on live shows, they must jump right into life as a known individual and the opportunities and challenges that this brings. For individuals on pre-taped programs, this means months of secrecy from friends and family while waiting to see how they will be edited and portrayed in the show. For the majority of all these participants, this transition comes with little assistance or support from the show or network. They are largely on their own. Many attempted to use their participation to advance their careers and pursue opportunities. These desires could be drastically impacted by how long they lasted and how they came across to viewers. Portrayals and opportunities do not exist in a vacuum, but are directly influenced by the social and cultural context the shows, and the participants themselves, exist in. It is to this context and how differences were deployed and mobilized that I now turn.

CHAPTER 3: MARKED PARTICIPANTS

The previous chapter considered the labor of auditioning and filming. This chapter considers the variety of ways in which difference is mobilized and deployed in reality television. While all contestants labor, that work can be understood differently by programs and audiences. Each individual who appears on a reality show will have a different experience. Combining those experiences allows for a consideration of the ways in which individuals experience the shows and how the shows and audience members understand them as contestants. While this is always an individual experience, looking at multiple responses allows for an investigation into the roles that factors such as race, age, class, gender and language play in terms of experiences and reception. While each individual on a program signs the same (or at least a very similar) contract, they will not all be treated the same by either the show or by viewers. Often, advice surrounding making the most of a reality television experience ignores difference and assumes a default identity of a well off, straight white male. Difference can have both physical and mental components. Considering individual experiences alongside literature on commodification and self-branding will work to highlight assumed identity positions. I explore wider issues of structural inequality through the lens of individual experience.

Meaning is produced through both language and a variety of systems of representation (Hall, 1997). To be a part of the culture is to be a part of a shared conceptual and linguistic universe. Looking at how meaning is created and understood in reality television requires a discussion of these representations and the moral judgments that are inferred. The authors discussed here examine how race, class, gender and sexuality function in reality television and the ways these factors intersect with notions of commodification and self-branding. Many of these authors note how the programs in the genre all assume a universalized experience that ignores the social and cultural hierarchies that exist. Considering programs beyond the 8 I have

interviewed individuals from helps demonstrate that these issues exist throughout the genre and cannot be seen as solely the purview of a limited group of texts. Looking at how the industry, viewers and programs all negotiate (and often perpetuate) stereotypes allows this notion of a universalized experience to be called into question. Acknowledging the multiple avenues through which inequality is maintained will allow me to better discuss the ways in which participants experience participation and its effects differently.

As a genre, reality television both deploys and relies on stereotypes. While all media does this to some extent, reality television is particularly reliant to the exploitation of stereotypes (Patton & Snyder-Yuly, 2016). These stereotypes can have lasting effects on those who appear on reality programs. Part of this comes from the format and understanding of the genre. As per Beverley Skeggs (2009), “The textual production does not offer a great deal of space for ambiguity, suggesting that one of the significant features of ‘reality’ television is its condensation of moral value onto people types.” (pg 639) These moral values have strong class, gender and racial dimensions. Looking at how these factors play out on the shows and in their reception will allow for a consideration of the potential impacts on participants. While all participants sign restrictive contracts, participation affects each individual differently and not all have the same opportunities to profit off their appearances. Not all individuals are commodified (or able to commodify themselves) the same way. Examining the ways that commodification and social hierarchies play out on in the lives of individuals will provide necessary context for any discussion of the post-show lives of contestants.

In order to discuss the disparities that exist in opportunities for participants, I must address the importance of identity. Discussing the concept, Gilroy (2006) argues that it is useful for its ability to join political and cultural concerns together. In doing so he notes the importance

of culture and how culture is related to power (and how power is related to culture). He notes that cultural politics is presented as being more substantial and encompassing than simply looking at politics. As he states, “This cultural politics applies both to the increased salience of identity as a problem played out in everyday life, and to identity as it is managed and administered in the cultural industries of mass communication that have transformed understanding of the world and the place of individual possessors of identity within it.” (pg 382) I wish to maintain this focus on identity to look at how it is conceptualized and used in the realm of reality television and the impacts that those understandings and uses have on the lives of the individuals who appear on the programs. Gilroy (2006) notes that identity is not stable, but rather a chaotic and constant process. How difference is understood has impacts on people’s lives.

Approaching this topic from the lens of identity allows me to explore both the theoretical and practical implications of how individuals are affected by commodification and stereotyping. The free market is often conceptualized as apolitical. This is far from accurate. Williams and Zelizer (2005) discuss how gender, race, and class function in the current marketplace. The issue is not a failure in the market, but the society in which the market exists. As they put forth, “Markets often work *too well*: among the many things they deliver efficiently are race, gender, and class privilege.” (pg 372) Not all bodies are commodified in the same way. The hierarchies that exist in society play out upon the bodies and lives of those who participate in reality television programming.

Commodification and Self-Branding

American reality television is particularly invested in the neoliberal notion of equal opportunity for all. This would suggest that issues of class, gender, race and sexuality are invisible or ignored. However, as many of the authors considered here will argue, this focus on

meritocracy does more than ignore the issues. Rather, these inequalities become stronger through industry practices and cultural conventions. Skeggs and Wood (2012) note that in this neoliberal push towards self-governance issues of class and gender do not disappear. Rather, “they are re-enacted *through* modes of personalization and individualization...These inherited and renewed inequalities of how to make ‘the self’ as the moral individual are often ignored in subscribing to a position which only attends to the ‘nowness’ of the individualizing neo-liberal phenomenon.” (pg 31) The focus on new-ness of self-branding as a strategy threatens to do the same thing. Looking at the specific ways that inequalities are maintained through current practices will offer a pushback against this.

There has been much work done in terms of aligning work on consumerism and citizenship. In the introduction to their edited collection, Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) argue that in the United States, citizenship has historically been understood and shaped through practices of consumption. They state, “As the neoliberal moment is witness to ever-sharper delineations of the marketplace as constitutive of our political imaginaries, our identities, rights, and ideologies are evermore precisely formulated within the logics of consumption and commodification rather than in opposition to them.” (pg 8) Commodification and consumption are productive practices. Looking at the ways in which commodification has been discussed in terms of the consumer-citizen will provide a framework for considering reality television participants. These individuals, like all individuals, have become economically productive. However, the economic benefits of that productivity are not guaranteed to be theirs. Contestants labor and, depending on the show, in some cases physically create products that provide value. They make dishes, or outfits, or performance numbers that are then displayed to the multitude of individuals watching the program. While they may receive a small stipend for

this labor, it remains significantly undercompensated. Power imbalances remain that favor networks and programs over those that appear on them.

The ordinariness of reality television contestants is a much-discussed topic. This is both accurate and misleading at the same time. What is happening through the genre is a constant creation and reinforcement of what is considered to be normal. Sender (2012) touches on this issue when she claims that “Reality television doesn’t fictionalize ordinariness, as in the novel, it represents ordinary people - or at least unusual groups of ordinary people willing to be presented in their ordinariness to potentially vast numbers of strangers.” (pg 17) This idea of unusual groups of ordinary people helps to bring to the fore the constructed notion of the term. Skeggs and Wood (2012) remind us of the need to pay attention to the political history of the term ordinary to discuss the non-actors or non-professionals that appear on reality television. As they discuss, the term often deflects associations of privilege or inequality. While I use the term in this paper to refer to these non-actors, I want to acknowledge its problematic nature.

Ertman and Williams (2005) outline commodification in the preface to their edited collection. As they define it, commodification “is the term scholars use to describe the process of something becoming understood as a commodity, as well as the state of affairs once this has taken place.” (pg 1) This term therefore has both economic and cultural dimensions. Radin and Sunder (2005) discuss how these dimensions intersect. They note that those objectified by commodification often serve as the subordinated class of society. There is a real difference between self-commodification and objectification. If one loses control of their narrative, they can lose control of their image and reputation. This difference in power aligns with Sut Jhally’s work on culture. In an interview with O’Barr (2006), Jhally reminds us that the story-telling function of any culture quickly becomes specialized. Not all members have the opportunity to tell stories.

Thus, it is important to interrogate the stories that do get shared and who is telling them. As Skeggs and Wood argue, “Paradoxically reality television has found a formula for extracting profit from the people with the least person-value.” (2012, pg 7) Looking at the hierarchies and structures that exist in reality television will allow for a more nuanced discussion of the various opportunities and limitations that face participants.

The harm of commodification comes not from the act, but from the cultural and social implications of that act. As Radin and Sunder (2005) assert, “Persons are harmed when they are, in whole or in part, commodified. The harms of commodification take many forms - from dignitary to economic exploitation, from changes in people’s material lives to changes in the discourse through which their self-conception is constructed and survives.” (pg 9) This inclusion of the importance of discourse is key. How one’s life is conceptualized has profound impacts on the opportunities and support that are available to them. When one is encouraged to view themselves as a character (which is commonly suggested in guides for getting on reality programs) one can become disconnected from their sense of self. Radin and Sunder (2005) also note that the central issue in much of the current scholarship surrounding commodification is who has the power to control the commodity’s meaning. When an individual is seen as a commodity, the stakes around meaning become elevated as losing control of the brand means losing the ability to shape/tell one’s own narrative.

Branding, specifically self-branding, has shifted from a strategy to get-ahead to a requirement in the contemporary world of work. It has moved from serving as a business model to exemplifying current social and cultural relations. Banet-Weiser (2012) discusses the difference between commodification and branding. As she states, “Because a brand’s value extends beyond a tangible product, the process of branding - if successful - is different from

commodification: it is a cultural phenomenon more than an economic strategy. Commodification implies the literal transformation of things into commodities; branding is a much more deeply interrelated and diffused set of dynamics.” (pg 4) It is not enough to think of reality television contestants as commodities. Instead, it is far more useful to discuss the ways in which the idea of self-branding has been accepted and promoted as necessary. The notion of branding humans is far more complex than that of commodifying humans. Considering branding also makes it easier to see how social structures and hierarchies play out in the market.

While self-branding is presented as a practice that shows the self as a site of value, there are limits to how (or if) that value can be leveraged. Clear power imbalances exist, for example, between participants who want to appear on shows and those shows themselves. There is little recourse for hopeful participants to improve their working conditions or the specifics of their contracts. The plethora of other individuals hoping to appear on the program are used to pressure interested individuals into signing on. However, Appadurai (2005) reminds us of the constructed nature of this justification. He states, “Demand is thus neither a mechanical response to the structure and level of production nor a bottomless natural appetite. It is a complex social mechanism that mediates between short- and long-term patterns of commodity circulation. Short-term strategies of diversion might entail small shifts in demand that can gradually transform commodity flows in the long run.” (pg 41) Critically examining casting practices in regards to class, gender, race and sexuality offers the potential for changes to occur. Since individuals are considered as commodities within the genre and wider culture, examining the impact that these different aspects of identity have on market value calls into question the universalizing tone that much current literature surrounding self-branding currently employs.

What Does it Mean to be Canadian?

The first chapter considered the Canadian context in which these shows exist. This chapter examines how that context shapes how individuals are understood. In order to discuss how participants are marked or made different, some time must be spent establishing what unmarked means in the Canadian context. A lot of time is spent in Canadian television attempting to articulate national identity. Quail (2015b) discusses how nationalism and belonging often play out in discussions of what it means to be Canadian. Those who seem to deviate from this understanding in some way could face pushback from both the show and the viewing audience. In a similar vein, Bociurkiw (2011) notes that there are certain aspects of Canadian nationalism that have gained the status of truth due to repetition and affective power. These notions are superiority to the US, status as a nation of peacekeeping, and a valuing of ethnic and racial diversity. Through affect and repetition, these claims have become truths about the country and its place in the world. Byers (2008) posits that all media images are ideological. “Although these images can be contested, they are important purveyors of the discourses that construct identity, difference, and nation in Canada and legitimize and render certain identities legible, visible, and authentic while others are marginalized, if seen at all.” (pg 77) These ideas of affect and authenticity hold true for understandings of nationhood, but also play out in a smaller scale in regards to the individuals who participate in Canadian competitive reality television.

The notion of Canada being superior to the US can negatively affect participants who are tied to that country in some way. One contestant who wished to remain anonymous discussed how they realized they were going to be portrayed as a villain because they were American. They mentioned that they had told the crew that they were aware of the edit they would be getting. The first day of filming, they were asked to discuss how they felt about being an

American competing on the Canadian version of the program. The participants next to them were Jamaican and Italian and neither of them were asked a similar question. To them that was the moment when they felt that they were being set up to become a villain (personal interview).

While the notion of Canadian superiority can feel mostly theoretical, there can be real consequences for those who become associated with the United States.

Linkages to the US do not need to be as explicit as the previous example. Quail's (2015b) work discusses how certain traits come to be associated with the nation. Oftentimes Canadian identity is situated around what it is not - and often is directly contrasted with the United States. As Quail mentions, "we can see the construction of Canadianness as "non-Americanness," its cornerstones being depth, quality, talent, cuteness, sweetness, politeness, and graciousness." (pg 481) There can be consequences for those who do not perform these assumed modes of being. Line brought up the how her presentation of femininity was viewed negatively. She discussed how her edit heavily relied on her status as ex-military. She was presented as bossy and disciplined. She has received many negative messages, predominantly from women, due to her portrayal. As she states, "it's just in Canada that a strong willful woman, uh, is seen as not a good thing. Like you're a single mom, 2 kids, raising them, tough, strong, ex-military? Ooh, that's bad. Whereas Canada, they want to see the rainbows and the unicorns and the perfect, happy family, and that's who won on my season." (personal interview) She contrasts the negativity she has felt from Canadians with messages of support she has received from international viewers of the program to support her understanding of the responses she has received as being influenced by national context.

The Geography of the Nation

McElroy and Williams (2011) speak to the ability of television to grant meaning to space. As they state, television has the capacity “to make place, to mediate locations and put them ideologically on the map” (pg 188). This is especially important for places that are often ignored due to size or prestige. This is true both for Canada as a nation and for the ways in which individuals navigate their relationships with their hometowns, provinces and territories. Many of my interviewees discussed how they understood their connection to the country. Representations of diversity in Canada have tended to focus on different identity formations in busy, urban areas rather than representing a wide variety of regional identities (Beaty & Sullivan, 2010). This understanding also plays out in the industrial side of reality television. This section considers the ways in which Canada is understood via geography and how those understandings impact participation.

Regionalism is one of the key lenses through which Canadian culture has been theorized (Beaty & Sullivan, 2010). Location can have both theoretical and practical implications for one’s participation. Canada is a large country. None of the individuals I interviewed were based in the territories, but they did span the provinces. While the contestants may have been spread across the provinces, the filming locations were highly centralized. As briefly discussed in the previous chapter, the filming location influenced who was able to attend taping and provide physical support. The contestants themselves also had to navigate the difficulties that came from being far from home, or close by but contractually unable to go home. All of the shows considered in this dissertation were filmed in Ontario, with most based in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). This centralization of filming makes sense from an industry perspective. However, this does have an impact - both practically and mentally - on those competing.

Where one is from has practical implications regarding how an individual will travel to and from the filming locations. Those who are located near the GTA likely have a much easier time navigating travel plans. Tamara auditioned for *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* in Newfoundland. She made it through and was supposed to go to Toronto for the next round of cuts. However, she and the five other women who had moved on got snowed in and had to audition via camera instead. While she was successful, she noted that this created distance between her and the other contestants. She ended up in Toronto to complete the audition process 2 days later. By that time, a sense of togetherness had been established among the other hopefuls (personal interview). She and her fellow Newfoundlander became outsiders. While the weather delay was only a minor matter practically, it had major implications for her relationship with both the program and the other competitors. The group norms and sense of community formed without her.

Weather issues were of concern to many who lived outside of the filming area. Izaak mentioned how he was unable to go home after being eliminated from *So You Think You Can Dance Canada*. His parents were located in British Columbia and the nearest airport was 9 hours away. The show was worried he would not be able to make it back in time for the finale. Travel delays had previously caused him to be the only contestant to miss orientation and a bunch of promotional filming that had occurred at the beginning of the season (personal interview). The physical distance between his home and Toronto meant that Izaak could not leave post-elimination. However, his non-disclosure agreement was still in place. He could not leave Toronto nor could he really talk to anyone about the experience. His other competitors could go home and get the physical and emotional support from family that he was shut out from. Both Izaak and Tamara faced isolation due to travel distance.

Distance also affected how much planning might be required in order to participate. Many had to pay rent in advance and make arrangements surrounding the care of children and pets. Kyla lived in Toronto, not far from where *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* filmed. That program gave the participants one night a week off. She could physically stop by and check on her apartment on a weekly basis (personal interview). Her competitors who did not live in the city did not have this option. They had no option to check in on things and were reliant on those they had entrusted with responsibility, with little opportunity to even contact via phone.

For those on programs with live performances, distance could influence the support they received in the audience. According to Mel, at the first taping for her season of *So You Think You Can Dance Canada*, the joke among the dancers was that her fan club was present. She was from the area and had basically grown up in her dance studio. All of her teachers and classmates as well as friends and family showed up to the first taping (personal interview). Many participants around the GTA discussed the support from friends and family they received. While contestants from further distances had support, it could not be demonstrated in this manner and could cause feelings of isolation or loneliness. Competing on the first season, Izaak brought up how unprepared he was to feel impacted by being so far from his family. He had never been away from home before, was now several provinces away from BC, and was far away from the reasons he had initially loved to dance (personal interview). The distance was hard for him. Individuals discussed how the shows themselves worked to try to ensure everyone had fans and signs of support in the audience. However, while this showing of support was considered thoughtful on the part of the programs, this seems to not have been an adequate substitute for friends and family that were unable to attend.

Language - How Does One Sound Canadian?

Despite the fact that French and English are both official languages, all of the shows considered here aired solely in English. Contestants had to be able to communicate and perform in English in order to compete. Patterson (2013) discusses the additional pressures that face individuals who are bilingual or speak with a noticeable accent. “In addition to general communication constraints, bilingual contestants must contend with language constraints, illustrating another key way in which reality show’s strip contestants of aspects of their identity for the duration of filming, and alienating them even further from the other contestants, and even their own family and friends.” (pg 88) Her dissertation includes an anecdote from a French-speaking contestant on *Project Runway Canada* who was chastised by production for leaving a message for her friend in French during an attempted call home. Though they had always communicated in French, the English-speaking crew could not understand the call and therefore could not be assured that it did not contain sensitive information. Thus, the contestant was forced to change how she communicated with her friends and family for the duration of filming. Though these calls would never appear on the show, her ability to communicate and express herself was limited by the program.

This othering of French speakers could also occur after the fact. A French contestant who wished to remain anonymous discussed how their portrayal worked to other them on screen. They mentioned that they personally felt that their English was understandable, but the show decided to subtitle them throughout the season. They were never informed of this decision, only finding out through watching the show. They also mentioned that their voice-overs were often edited with “cheesy French music in the background” (personal interview). They noted feeling disconnected with their portrayal because of this choice. Through strategies like editing, subtitling and music choices, the programs could visibly (or audibly) mark individuals as other

(and therefore potentially less “authentically Canadian”). This understanding of French contestants as not “true” Canadians seemed to be shared by some viewers of the shows as some participants faced pushback and harassment.

Line, a contestant on *MasterChef Canada* discussed the online harassment she faced due to being French. She pointed out that in Canada, “there’s this big language divide, right? And I’m French. So I was getting a lot of “you shouldn’t even be on the show, you’re French”. Uh, “you don’t even know how to spell your own name, you’re stupid.” Oh yeah, haters because of my language.” (personal interview) In our interview, she stated definitively that there would never be a French winner on the show. She feels that the outcry and backlash from English Canadians would be too strong. She pointed out that she was unprepared for the pushback and she is trying to have that not happen for others. A person from Quebec reached out to her as he was training for the show and she strongly cautioned him away from pursuing that. She states, “I said you’re French, like pursue other, it’s it’s not going to, like I’m not telling you to stop your dream, you want a catering company? Open it, like don’t go the MasterChef route cause you’re really French and you’re from Quebec.” (personal interview) Here Line sets up the prospective contestant as likely to face more harassment than she did. She points out that she is an east coaster and still faced harassment for being too French. Being French and from Quebec she views as insurmountable obstacles to success on the show.

While contestants have faced additional pressures and harassment because of their language, these struggles are not shown to the viewing public. In fact, these struggles are not acknowledged at all and are, if anything actively ignored and heightened by the programs. In a similar vein to how other forms of difference have been treated on various programs, language is both highlighted and ignored. In regards to *So You Think You Can Dance Canada*, Quail (2015b)

asserts that bilingualism is discussed in a tokenized nod to diversity rather than being contextualized. As she states, “the show did highlight French Canadian language and dancers but incorporated French in more of a tokenistic nod to bilingualism and French culture, rather than with strong contextualization of Quebec’s culture and arts” (pg 483). In doing so, the political tensions are depoliticized. Rather than acknowledging how these tensions function within the province, between the province and the rest of the country, and the role of French in the country more generally, this functions as a cursory display of inclusion and diversity.

Accents and subtitles work to mark the individual as other. These cues can reinforce stereotypical, and potentially negative, views that individuals hold. Eisenclas and Tsurutani (2011) state that. “As a feature identifying a speaker’s membership of a national, ethnic or socioeconomic group, a non-mainstream accent is likely to arouse in the hearer a perception of the generalised or stereotypical characteristics that the hearer associates with that group.” (pg 217) While all of the individuals discussed here competed in English, they were all read as French-Canadians. Line points out that this reading led to her facing harassment from viewers of the show. Her accent led to her being read as both intellectually inferior and as not belonging. Time needs to be spent exploring how these audible differences impact individual’s opportunities to profit off their participation. There should also be an investigation of how shows are pushing back against, or actively participating in, the othering of individuals who have noticeable accents or for whom English is not their first language. Location and language impact how participants experience reality television and how viewers react to them. The following sections look at race, class, age, and bodies. This will further nuance the understanding of the unmarked Canadian participant as urban, English speaking and “Canadian” in traits and values.

The Invisibility of Whiteness

Hall (1995) discusses the notion of inferential racism. As he defines it, the term refers to racist representations that are naturalized and unspoken. This makes the racist premises that these representations rely on difficult to discuss or examine. This understanding is crucial to any discussion of the disparity in opportunities that reality contestants face. The literature around self-branding and many of those working in this field frequently ignores privilege and attempts to universalize the experience of white men. Alice Marwick (2013) notes that many of the more famous coaches in self-branding fields are white men who are living fairly privileged lives. These coaches (and much of the literature) universalize this experience and anything else is viewed as an aberration. This expectation of privilege carries over to discussions around social media. Being online is almost a necessity in regards to current self-branding practices. Many strategies surrounding self-branding focus on online presence and necessitate disclosing a lot of personal information. Marwick (2013) points out that this expectation does not take into account privilege. Many individuals cannot afford to be as open about their lives.

Individuals also experience different types of harassment online that can be influenced by factors like gender, race, age and sexual orientation. Thus the expectation of self-disclosure, in many ways, works to maintain existing power structures. These structures are also maintained through the ways in which race is conceptualized and used in both competitive and makeover reality television. While rarely discussed by the shows, the race of contestants has huge impacts on how they are treated by programs and their post-show opportunities.

In an article for Fusion, Molly Fitzpatrick (2016) interviews 10 black former contestants from *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*. At the time of publishing, neither program had ever had a black lead and 50% of black contestants were eliminated in the first two weeks of the program. However, since the publication of this interview, *The Bachelorette* has featured a black

female lead, Rachel Lindsay. In these interviews, the contestants reflect on their experiences with the show. These interviews speak to the way that race and racial representation inform individuals' desire to be on the show, their perception by others, and how they understand their experience. One of *The Bachelor* contestants Fitzpatrick interviewed is Marshana Ritchie who competed in season 12. While considering the pressure she felt during filming she states she didn't want to "feed into any stereotypes, but I also didn't want to come across as if I was trying to be the exception, to say, "Well, I'm not like *those* black people, I'm better." I wanted to portray myself as, "This is how most of us are." I was trying to walk a fine line between being myself and representing my family and myself well—and yes, my race, too—and not sacrifice too much." (Fitzpatrick, 2016) Her response speaks to the intentional labor that individuals perform during the filming process and the additional pressures that can exist for those from underrepresented groups.

Kristen Warner (2015) expands on the burdens faced by black women who participate on reality shows. As she states,

Thus, the burden for black women who appear on these series is dual: although they are already performing the most entertaining versions of themselves, they also have to cautiously navigate the murky and often unintentional pitfalls of stereotypes. Moreover, these black female reality TV casts are often tasked with the labor of having to disarm and acknowledge their performances as not representative of their people or racial group." (pg 135)

While Warner is speaking specifically about *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, her work can be expanded to consider competitive reality television as well. This quote speaks to the tension that Marshana mentions. She wanted to challenge or at least not feed into stereotypes. However, as she points out she also did not want to position herself as inherently different from or better than individuals who have been read in that manner. This requires labor and, as Marshana notes, sacrifice. This labor may be self-imposed, but it is additional labor that individuals from majority

groups do not need to perform. Their participation is always assumed to be representative of only them.

When discussing race and ethnicity, I must point out that I am a white woman. I am sure there is much that contestants of color did not want to, or feel comfortable, disclosing to me. I am in no way attempting to provide a definitive account of how race functions in the genre. Hesse-Biber's (2007) point that both researcher and respondent are products of the social structures and institutions of the society in which they live needs to be frequently reinforced. While I wanted to be cognizant of race and ethnicity, my privileged background likely made me blind to many of the microaggressions and additional considerations that non-white contestants faced. I attempted to provide opportunities to discuss the topic but in ways that were not always explicitly about race (as only asking contestants of color about race once again reinforces whiteness as the default identity). I asked every interviewee about any potential pressure they felt to represent themselves, their family or any community they identified with, or if they were worried their edit would play on any tropes of the genre. White contestants frequently responded no or spoke in highly individualized terms. Contestants of color were more likely to discuss racialized tropes and how they felt about or dealt with them.

Lisa, a contestant from *So You Think You Can Dance Canada* discussed how she felt her edit played on racialized tropes. Early in the interview, she brought up her displeasure with how she was edited on the show. She felt that the program was guiding viewers in how they interpreted the dancers. Later we discussed the trope of the angry black woman. She then expanded on her concerns surrounding representation. She felt that was exactly how she was edited. She was portrayed on the show as a "conceited b-" (personal interview). She discussed her anger at her edit as being intensified because this is what she does for a living. It was not just

a bad experience she could write off, but had the potential to affect her livelihood. She was active in fighting against this portrayal. She mentioned talking to the segment producer and airing her concerns. While the negativity was acknowledged, it was presented as important to ratings. Instead, she was forced to change how she answered questions so that her sentences could not be edited (personal interview). She had to be on guard and actively push back against the program. She made clear that she was not against the notion of presenting the image of herself as confident and assured. It was her lack of choice and control over her image that was the issue.

Contestants of color discussed their concerns about tokenization. In an interview with Kelsey, a contestant on the program *Over the Rainbow* (which was casting the role of Dorothy in a production of *The Wizard of Oz*), she mentioned her ongoing grappling with her casting on the show. The show featured 10 contestants, 8 of whom were white and two who were Asian. In our conversation, Kelsey states that she still is unsure if she was chosen because of her talent, or because the program did not want to have 10 white Dorothys. Both contestants of color were the first two eliminated from the show (eliminations were based on both viewer votes and the judges' decision). There seems to be a limit to the acceptance of difference. I specifically asked Kelsey about her feelings surrounding representation, being that both women of color were eliminated so quickly. As she says, "They claim they wanted this new Dorothy, something no one's ever seen before, and I really don't think that's what they really wanted. Cause I don't, like I just don't think they would have let someone who wasn't white be Dorothy." (personal interview) As she points out, the understanding of Dorothy as white seemed prevalent and was not limited to the show, but extended to the viewing audience. The national scope of the program is seen as limiting opportunities for diversity. Kelsey notes that there had recently been a

production of *The Wizard of Oz* in Toronto that had cast a black woman to play Dorothy. She uses this to point out that casting the show in a diverse manner can and does happen, but feels that this is possible due to the smaller, localized scope of that performance. With *Over the Rainbow* being broadcast across the nation (and featuring Andrew Lloyd Webber), the desire to maintain “traditional” understandings of the character was strong.

While all of the contestants of color I spoke with discussed tokenization, not all viewed it in solely negative terms. For some, it was an opportunity to celebrate difference. Mel, a contestant on *So You Think You Can Dance Canada*, discussed how participation was one of the first times that she felt marked as Asian. She noted that she had grown up in a predominantly white, Christian school and that she kind of forgot that she was Asian. Being on the show, and her later dancing career, highlighted her difference. As she stated,

“So yeah, I don’t know. it didn’t really like affect me. I think it was more empowering, like I liked it. It was, it was like ‘this is awesome’. Like, before being a dancer I don’t think I ever had to think about being Asian and stuff, which is kinda my fault. Like I, ya know, I didn’t pay that much attention to my own culture even though both my parents are full Chinese. But, it kind of made me like hone into that and be like this is what is making me different and that’s a good thing.” (personal interview)

For Mel then, tokenization reinforced her Chinese heritage which both worked to other and empower her. As she pointed out, she was the only Asian participant that season and would often be the only Asian woman in any group in which she was booked. She noted that within the dance industry, diversity often ended up being a majority of white women with an Asian woman and a black woman. Mel found power in being able to harness her difference and turned that into a branding strategy. Her difference became a selling point and a fundamental component of her brand.

Hasinoff (2008) discusses *America’s Next Top Model* and how that program approaches discussions of race. She argues that the program presents race as both malleable and as a commodity. The show uses attractive female bodies to promote the fairness and success of

neoliberalism. Any barriers to entry into the modeling industry are positioned as individual challenges that can be easily overcome through hard work and a positive attitude. Hasinoff (2008) asserts that women of color on the program are valued for their ability to present as ethnically ambiguous. Racialization is presented as a lucrative personal asset. The potential market appeal of this ambiguity is highly prized by the program. Race functions as a commodity on the program. As Hasinoff (2008) shows, through neoliberal rhetoric, the show issues the “demand that women of color represent their racial identities exclusively as superficial marketable aspects of personal pride and beauty, obscuring all other issues.” (pg 335) Where numerous shows are largely silent concerning race, *America’s Next Top Model* makes race explicit and hyper-visible. Hasinoff (2008) posits that this hypervisibility strengthens the notion of race as a malleable commodity and confirms the neoliberal understanding of race as irrelevant in the contemporary marketplace. The notion of post-racism functions to make this commodification of difference acceptable, even celebrated. By proclaiming that racism no longer exists, one is claiming that race no longer functions to oppress. Context becomes unimportant. Signifiers and the signified become detached. This allows for the assertion then that race can be reduced to material signifiers like clothing, makeup and wigs.

This idea of race as marketable also repeats hierarchies of skin tone. *America’s Next Top Model* presents mixed-race and light-skinned contestants as particularly valuable. Ralina Joseph (2009) notes that Tyra Banks frequently disciplines contestants of color who do not demonstrate fluid, post-racial, post-feminist behavior. The contestants are presented as exemplars of “girl power” who grasp and highlight the marketability of their racialized performances. While race serves as a commodity on the program, it is the contestants who can present as ethnically ambiguous that are held up as most valuable. Sender (2012) also considers how racial ambiguity

is privileged as she looks at the program *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. She asserts that attempts to consider racial and ethnic background on the show “tend to promote an urbane cosmopolitanism, representing a privileged taste culture that can sample from ethnicities across the world but is not tied to any single one.” (pg 39) Race is often presented in terms of this notion of sampling. Ambiguity allows race to be commodified and function as marker of difference without challenging the dominant power structures. Joseph (2009) notes that racial ambiguity works to only allow access to those bodies that are not considered too exotic. There are clear boundaries around how race and difference can be commodified. As the work on both of these shows demonstrates, those whose race is “too” obvious are presented as lacking and unable to leverage their assets.

The scholars considered here have discussed how programs can employ race and the limitations facing many contestants of color. Dubrofsky and Hardy (2008) also consider the issue of audience access and how it intersects with race. As they assert, “While it is true that more diversity exists on the small screen than ever before, especially with the advent of RTV, it is also true that the landscape of television centers Whiteness by featuring White-centered shows on the major networks with the most money and shows about people of color on smaller cable networks.” (pg 376) While diversity of contestants is often presented as a positive aspect of the genre, the importance of where a show is located needs to be highlighted. The network on which a show airs influences both its audience reach and wider cultural reception. For those looking to use their appearance as a springboard to other opportunities, a wider audience reach is usually helpful. That the majority of shows on major networks center whiteness is yet another way that white contestants are privileged in terms of future opportunities over contestants of color.

Diversity and difference are terms often celebrated in Canadian television. Bociurkiw (2011) notes that the valuing of ethnic and racial diversity is an aspect of Canadian nationalism that has gained the status of truth due to repetition and its affective power. However, this valuation is often superficial in nature. Programs often conceptualize diversity in ways that do not actually address the individuals who compete. In her article on *So You Think You Can Dance Canada*, Quail (2015a) discusses how the program deals with the concept. As she states, “Raced bodies do not figure into actual discussions of multiculturalism on the program, leaving “multiculturalism” and “diversity” solely in the domain of dance traditions.” (pg 485) In many of the shows considered here multiculturalism is featured in terms of the challenges or weekly tasks rather than within pool of contestants. The notion of diversity is celebrated, but actual strategies to ensure all individuals have similar chances of success have not been adopted. In this way, shows are able to celebrate the idea of diversity without actually having to make changes to foster inclusion. Social and cultural differences between are ignored in favor of focusing on superficial identifiers.

Importance of Age and Experience

Age and financial security are factors that must be considered when discussing reality television participants. Heller (2014) discusses the issues the producers ran into with the cast of the first season of *The Real L World*. Season 1 featured more mature and settled women who felt they had agency and wanted to convey a sense of propriety. Producers found the women were resistant to their vision. That, along with the low ratings of the first season, led to the decision to find an entirely new cast for the second season. This time the program chose younger, less-settled and less financially secure women. Heller (2014) notes that this conscious decision highlights the economic conditions and power relations that underwrite the genre. The women

selected for the second season were seen to be more willing to expose themselves physically and emotionally, and were more reliant on the paycheck offered by the show. These factors emphasize how financial insecurity and youth can be used by the industry to exploit those who have fewer opportunities. Radin and Sunder (2005) discuss how those objectified by commodification become a subordinated class. Heller (2014) furthers this discussion by pointing out how this subordination is intentionally sought. Precariousness functions as an attractive quality for participants as it suggests they will be less likely to object to or otherwise complicate the filming process.

This understanding played out in my own interviews. Many individuals brought up their youth and inexperience as motivating factors for immediately agreeing to do what the show asked. In discussing what they would do differently, a common response was to be more assertive. Kyla mentioned that she would be more proactive (personal interview) while Michelle regretted feeling like she toned down her personality. Michelle felt like her silliness didn't impress the producers and so she turned down her quirkiness while the cameras were on (personal correspondence). Contestants felt the precarity of their positions and attempted to alter themselves as necessary to meet what they felt were the expectations of the program. Carlie reflected on her participation on *Project Runway Canada* and wished she had been "older and wiser". She felt that she was young and naive when she did the show and that it led to her being taken advantage of in the industry as it was assumed that she had "made it" (personal correspondence). Youth is often tied to notions of naiveté and obedience.

Youth and inexperience can be used as tools of manipulation. While this is true, youth could also provide a sense of freedom. Reflecting on her participation, Steffi felt her youth made her fearless. She was 16 when she auditioned for *Canadian Idol* and had few expectations. She

and her best friend tried out as a way to mark that they now could (16 was the youngest you could be to audition). While the show was a great experience for her then and is something she would redo at that age, it is not something she would do now at her current age. She feels that she has become less bold, more self-conscious and fearful (personal interview). For Steffi, her youth encouraged spontaneity. She was less knowledgeable about the industry and just open to the experience. In this way, she found the show an opportunity to grow and to see career possibilities that she had not known existed. While youth can make individuals more open to manipulation, it also encourages participation, as one may be more willing to take risks.

Along with age, experience was another factor that could cause feelings of concern. Those who had less experience in their chosen industry had worries of not being able to compete against those who had been doing it for years. Shavar for example started dancing much later in life than the other contestants on his season. Many of his competitors had been dancing for 10 years or so while he had only started 4 years prior. He felt that he was not as prepared as everyone else was and this was always in the back of his mind (personal interview). Tamara commented that she also felt very inexperienced compared to her other *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* costars. She began comparing herself to the others who had been in the industry longer and started to get a bit paranoid (personal interview). Being less experienced led to both of these contestants feeling underqualified. It was the feeling of inexperience rather than their skill sets that caused this emotional labor and pressure.

As these examples from *The Real L World* and my interviews demonstrate, the casting process reinforces and relies on power imbalances between hopeful contestants and the programs on which they want to appear. The cast members from the first season did not perform as desired, so they were replaced with new individuals for the second season. A participant's spot is

rarely secure. While shows revolving around the lives of individuals require specific types of performance, other subgenres privilege their individual brands at the expense of those who appear on the show. Competition programs maintain imbalances by privileging the format and program over the participants. Many of the competition shows focus more heavily on the goal of finding a winner than on the contestants as individuals. This can mask the ideological function that individuals are performing through their presence on the program. Much of the focus is on “allowing” ordinary individuals into this extraordinary environment. Who is allowed into these environments (and labeled as ordinary) serves an ideological function. Stereotypes can be perpetuated or challenged. For example, Misha Kavka (2012) notes that in regard to *Survivor*, many have argued that the casting choices have resulted in stereotyping, especially in regards to race. Editing tactics have also contributed to this. While the outcome of the show is unknown, the casting process can explicitly reinforce or challenge existing stereotypes. How these programs conceptualize ordinary individuals reinforces ideological notions and influences who is able to profit off their appearance on these shows.

Class and Reality Television

Much has been made of the genre’s ability to represent “ordinary” individuals. However, according to Stiernstedt and Jakobsson (2017), both working class and upper class individuals appear twice as often in reality television as in television in general. Thus, the middle class is less visible in the genre than in the rest of the televisual landscape. This is actually more reflective of social reality than occurs in the medium generally. However, while both working and upper class individuals appear frequently in the genre, they do not have equal opportunities. In their research they have found that, “When working-class people participate on reality television, they are speaking for 30% of the time and are only visually present the rest of the

time. This should be compared with the upper class, who are speaking for 58% of the time they are present. The middle class is located between these two positions, speaking 39% of the time they are present.” (pg 12) Wealthier individuals have more time and space for their voices to be heard. This additional camera time may increase their attractiveness to viewers. It certainly increases their likelihood of being remembered by audiences. This disparity in speaking versus being seen can dramatically affect an individual’s post-show opportunities.

Many conceptualizations of the genre of reality television greatly underplay the prevalence of upper-class individuals (Stiernstedt and Jakobsson, 2017). This may be due to conscious effort on behalf of shows to make the class differences between participants less visible. Multiple contestants spoke of the ways in which other contestants were made to appear more ‘ordinary’ than they were. This could occur in terms of training, previous experience, wealth or connections. One such example came from *MasterChef Canada*. The winner of one season was presented on the show as a concrete worker. He was portrayed as a blue-collar worker who was hoping to be better able to provide for his family. However, contestants discussed how this was both true and misleading at the same time. While he did work in concrete, he actually owned the company rather than being a low-level employee. He and his family lived a fairly lavish lifestyle. While the notion of being working class was never explicitly stated by him, the show (and potentially he) very much played up the notion. This also plays into notions of national identity. Beatty and Sullivan (2010) discuss how national myths in Canada traditionally invoke images of white, working class masculinity. This depiction of the winner both emphasized ordinariness and reinforced traditional understandings of the nation.

Class can be signaled to viewers in a number of ways. A *MasterChef Canada* contestant, discussed how the clothing choices made by the show worked to downplay the financial differences that existed between the contestants. For example, they noted that two of the contestants from their season were quite well off. One traditionally dressed in high-end labels like Gucci and Versace. However, while on the show he wore much more basic button-down shirts and jeans. One of the women that season had parents that were quite successful financially. However, during filming she was dressed in sneakers and t-shirts. She was “dressed poor” while in reality her family owned a number of successful restaurants. These were not personal decisions but were choices made by the show (personal interview). All of the wardrobe decisions were made by the show. Editing decisions and clothing choices made certain participants appear to be much less wealthy than they actually were. This highlights the importance of having additional information. As a viewer, I assumed these individuals were much less well off financially than they were. This intentional obscuring of class complicates many of the assumptions surrounding who participates on these programs and financial status needs to be considered in any discussion of post-show opportunities.

Class also significantly impacts how individuals view the genre of reality television and the individuals who appear on the program. Skeggs and Wood (2012) note that their own class standing significantly impacted viewers’ perceptions of the genre. Middle class viewers tended to view reality television as morally bad and exploitative. Working class viewers however saw participation in the genre “as the remote but imagined possibility of a less constricted future: not as a textual ideological object but as a ‘real’ structure of opportunity. This says a lot about the current conjecture where being humiliated on reality television and in the media can be converted into an opportunity, as it can set in motion other media avenues...” (2012, pg 203).

The authors note that this understanding by working class viewers may be an admission of the lack of other opportunities for class advancement.

While middle class viewers were more likely to look down on participants for trying to get a reward for what they viewed as undeserving labor, working class viewers were more likely to view the genre as a legitimate chance for advancement. These findings suggest that class is vital to any consideration of why individuals participate on programs and the outcomes of that participation. The importance of class to the difference in viewers' opinions of participation in reality television speaks to the difference in opportunity afforded those depending on class. Radin and Sunder (2005) state that, "Unequal distributions of wealth make the poorest in society, with little to offer in the marketplace, more likely to commodify themselves" (pg 11). Taking this understanding along with Skeggs and Woods (2012) findings suggests that those of lower social standings are the most likely to seek out participation in reality programs and the least equipped to profit from that experience. Part of the genre's success seems to be reliant on this.

Skeggs and Wood (2012) also draw attention to the classed nature of the generation of value on reality programs. They assert that contestants are required by programs to display their own value and importance. However, they must do so "by relying upon institutionalized techniques that have been developed over time, such as telling and showing. These methods have been developed historically in relation to particular class, gender and raced interests. The conceptualization and revelation of interiority in particular was a means by which the middle class legitimated its authority and superiority." (pg 72) As the authors point out, while all contestants must constantly display their own value and importance, they cannot do so in conditions of their own choosing. The system is based upon middle class sensibilities. Thus, middle class individuals will thus be more prepared to better leverage their appearance on the

program. What is considered of value is gendered, classed, and raced, but this value stratification is largely made invisible in reality television. Skeggs and Wood (2012) argue that the genre denies the structural inequalities that exist. These inequalities leave some participants far more equipped to cope with the new conditions and opportunities that exist through participation in the genre.

Bodies

Weight and body size were topics that came up occasionally during discussions with participants. Jessica, a *Project Runway Canada* contestant mentioned how the lack of representation of plus size bodies in media made her presence in the show a much more revolutionary act than she was anticipating. Jessica discussed how people responded to her in relation to her weight. She noted that some people, especially online, were derogatory about her size. She was the only plus size contestant that season. She also pointed out that other members of the public went out of their way to express gratitude for being on the show. There were (and still are) few options to see other body types in the media landscape. As she stated,

“At that time it was just, were no plus size people on television or if they were ya know, it was like Honey Boo Boo or whatever, ya know, like mockery type things. It wasn’t like a serious person in a serious profession trying to do something. It was ya know the fat best friend who was funny on a tv show, or like Roseanne. Those were the only examples that were out there. So like I would get a lot of positive feedback where people were just like oh my god, ya know this is refreshing and this is exciting, like thank you so much. I was like, thank you for what? I’m just existing on, I’m just existing and I happen to be on television.” (personal interview)

Her point speaks to the lack of diversity in bodies seen on television. People interpreted her presence as a radical act. Even though people responded positively to her, she became a stand-in for all of the plus sized individuals who were not on television. Her presence on the show was imbued with meaning in a way that others did not have to deal with or think about.

Jessica's experience speaks to a disconnect between her own perception of her participation and how her inclusion in the season was read by others. Contestants whose bodies were othered in some way faced hurdles that were rarely discussed on programs. As mentioned in chapter 2, Mark was cast for *Canadian Idol* in his fourth season of auditioning. He mentioned how being heavier than many of the other competitors influenced his strategy. He survived the first round with the judges because one of the judges fought for him and argued he deserved a chance. That judge kept calling attention to his weight, but also kept apologizing to him for the repeated mentions. They felt that he was not being considered fairly because of his size. Once in Toronto, he noticed that the other hopefuls were gorgeous and he knew that he had to focus on his personality. For the remainder of the auditions he did everything he could to pull attention to himself (personal interview). This labor was successful. He made it on the show. And yet, it was additional labor and required strategic self-fashioning.

In the introduction to their reader on fat studies, Solovay and Rothblum (2009) discuss how fatness is framed and how the prejudices surrounding fatness impact individuals. There is a social stigma and those who are viewed as being overweight are often excluded. In a segment on weight for *This American Life*, contributor Elna Baker discussed losing 110 pounds. Her segment focused on the opportunities that she realized she had been shut out from when she was larger. "It's just such an unbalanced reward system. It took so much more kindness, hard work, and ingenuity to be a person in the world when I was fat. All this took was not eating." (Glass, 2016) Her point on the extra effort that was required of her ties into Mark's experience with auditioning. To be seen as a potential contestant he had to have a good voice and an appealing personality. As he frames it, playing up his personality allowed the judges and producers to see

him as viable despite his size. The other, “gorgeous” hopefuls did not need to put in the same amount of effort. They were already viewed as appealing.

While treated as a truth, weight is subjective and expectations surrounding appropriate size vary by industry. Natalie discussed her fears surrounding her participation in the first season of *Canada's Next Top Model*. She was not new to the industry, having modeled off and on overseas for about four years. Remaining around a size six, she had frequently been told that she needed to lose weight and eventually left the industry to focus on her health and self-esteem. She decided to audition for the program because she was interested in a career in media and thought the program could potentially serve as a launching pad (personal interview). While on the show, she was mocked due to her size by both a stylist and the host of the program. She had not gained weight between being cast and doing the show. Weight became an issue only once she was in competition for the prize. Her size was presented as a problem and was a part of the reason she was eliminated. In all of these examples, weight affects opportunities and reception. These three individuals all had to perform additional labor that other contestants (who were viewed to be a “normal” size) did not.

Reality television does not exist inside a vacuum. We must take into account social structures and the culture. Considering the way that markets intersect with the daily lives of individuals is crucial for any examination of reality television contestants. Banet-Weiser (2012) reminds us that in the United States, culture does not separate out individual experiences, everyday living and the market. Rather, culture is predicated on the strong interrelation of these factors. As she states, “As with all cultural meanings, commodities and the structure of marketing and advertising that supports them do not circulate in the same way in different spheres of life. So, while this historical moment is often defined by its homogeneity, the cultural

meanings of gender, race and socioeconomic class shape as well as limit the economization of social spheres.” (pg 25) While all those that participate in reality television are commodified, this commodification does not impact the contestants equally.

While the world that we live in is filled with structural and social hierarchies and biases. These are frequently invisible, or at least unaddressed in the majority of content on television. As Patton and Snyder-Yuly call attention to, “Televisual media (and this includes reality TV) creates a racial Xanadu - a paradise where there are no hegemonic hierarchies and all things are possible if one works hard enough to overcome personal failings not related to race, gender, or institutional and structural forms of discrimination and racism.” (2016, pg 130) How diversity is understood and used in the competition subgenre of reality television is particularly important. These programs often do not address issues of race, class, gender, age, sexuality, ability, etc. When they do, it is often to praise a less-privileged contestant for their abilities and talents. The shows themselves are presented as purely talent driven and unbiased. In considering the ways in which diversity is understood and deployed in these programs, a better sense of how this impacts the lives and opportunities of participants can be discovered.

Looking at the variety of ways individuals are marked as different has allowed for an investigation of who is assumed to be unmarked in reality television. The next chapter seeks to consider the impacts of participation. While many have attempted to capitalize on their televised appearance, others have treated their involvement as a self-contained experience. Looking at the post-show lives of contestants demonstrates that, for many, being on the show leads to a host of opportunities and challenges. Many of the issues discussed in this section heavily affect these. Not everyone has the same opportunities arise from participation or the same ability to capitalize on them. Hearing from participants reveals that what makes participation valuable is far more

personalized and complicated a question than initially expected. No matter the outcome of the experience, many were unprepared for how their lives would change due to their participation.

CHAPTER 4: IMPACTS OF PARTICIPATION

The previous chapter discussed the ways in which individuals come to be marked as different and how that difference can limit their opportunities to profit from their participation. This chapter extends these ideas and considers how participants feel their lives have or have not changed since appearing on television. For many, the actual time spent filming is quite short. Even if you make it to the finale of a competitive reality program, you have likely only spent a few weeks or months on camera to get there. However, the impact of participation does not end when the cameras stop rolling. This experience often affects relationships and career plans. In looking at the aftereffects, a nuanced view of participation emerges. There is no singular experience of being on a reality show. Through these interviews though, it becomes apparent that many individuals grapple with similar issues in understanding their participation and how their life has been altered as a result.

Before delving into the impacts of participation, I first want to spend some time on some key terms to this chapter. Looking at notions of identity, branding, and the self will allow for clarification of terms and highlight what interventions my work makes into the existing work on these topics. I separate these terms out to discuss the ways that reality television mobilizes physical bodies and turns them into signs and profitable commodities at the same time. Identity speaks to how an individual is understood by and through a program. It can be linked to the notion of the participant playing a “character” (either by choice or by necessity). Branding considers how that identity is made to be profitable. Both the show and the individual attempt to turn participation into a profitable endeavor. There can be conflict when conflicts of interest arise. Finally, the self refers to the contestant themselves; their body and mind. Although I begin this chapter by clarifying distinctions I make between these keywords, my project (and this

chapter in particular) suggests ways that they operate though one another in the economy and culture of Reality TV labor.

Identity

Part of identity is its relation to the image, to what appears on the screen. In semiotic terms, identity is the signified. It is the cultural meaning/understanding that circulates around a participant. Much of how one's identity is understood in reality television is beyond the control of the contestant. While many individuals discussed wanting to present a specific image, there was no guarantee that editors, producers, the show and/or the audience would share that interpretation. Identity is different from the self as it focuses on the larger cultural interpretation of an individual. It is the "character" and "role" rather than the individual worker who performs that character and role. However, as this chapter demonstrates, it is the individual worker that must bear the brunt of any pushback from a negative characterization. While identity may be used to make more appealing characters to root for or against in a competition, those identities are tied to real people who must live with the consequences (both positive/negative) long after the viewing public and program have moved on.

Not only is there little room for damage control with a bad edit, but being that it is the individual and their story being represented, the emotional stakes of an edit are high. The emotional attachment to one's edit makes sense as it can drastically affect how the audience reads and understands an individual. It is often the key piece in the creation of one's identity. The format and genre of the show should also be taken into consideration, especially since each format and genre carries with it certain narrative, performance, and cultural conventions. While the stress surrounding ones edit remains consistent, it plays out in different ways depending on whether the show is live or taped in advance. For shows taped in advance, contestants may have

to wait months to see how they are portrayed. On live shows, this process occurs much more quickly, but is no less stressful. As Carlana, a *So You Think You Can Dance Canada* contestant, states, “It was terrifying because you never know how things are edited. That’s, that’s what’s scary about is you’re kinda like giving forth all of you and just hoping and praying that the people who are in the editing room making these little video montages, and making you up to be this piece, person that they want you to be. It’s terrifying you know, ugh are they gonna do it right?” (personal interview) Carlana is talking here about identity formation. She is providing the program and viewers with pieces of herself, knowing that she does not control what is aired or how that “person they want you to be” will be understood by viewers. This sense of giving yourself up to the program and hoping for a good edit is emotional and can have disastrous consequences if the edit turns out differently than a participant imagined.

Separating identity and branding allows for an investigation into how a commercialized product is created (identity formation) through performance and cultural codes and conventions, and how that product is then made valuable (branding). I do not focus on this to argue that one entity or another has complete control over the process or an individual. Rather, I am using this chapter to consider the interconnectedness of the commercial and personal. Much current literature surrounding employment argues for the need to consider oneself as a brand. This chapter considers some of the implications of this understanding. By simply being on a competitive reality show, an individual’s identity is crafted and broadcast to viewers who are familiar with certain performance/cultural codes and conventions. Both the individual and their identity are monetized through the process. Mike Tucker writes that, “Everyone involved in reality programming agrees that while story, locale, and production skills are essential, characters are critical. The personalities in the camera’s eye are the main ingredients that keep

viewers tuning in” (2011, C7). Tucker’s labeling of the participants in shows as characters speaks to the commodification process that occurs in reality television. It also acknowledges the importance of the contestants themselves to a show’s profitability. Contestants both turn themselves into characters through intentional crafting/image management and are turned by the producers who create storylines and a sense of narrative cohesion from snippets of recorded footage.

Brand

A brand can be understood as a commercial identity whose value pertains to both marketing and the economy. Arvidsson (2005) asserts that brands function as managerial devices that work to order everyday life. They provide a sense of consistency. Arvidsson (2005) is looking at branding as a concept rather than at self-branding. However, much of what he discusses in the abstract applies to this consideration of the self as a brandable object. When viewing the self as brand, the individual must then be seen as both brand and brand manager. Hearn (2008) defines the branded self as, “a commodity sign; it is an entity that works and, at the same time, points to itself working, striving to embody the values of its working environment. Here we see the self as a commodity for sale in the labour market, which must generate its own rhetorically persuasive packaging, its own promotional skin, within the confines of the dominant corporate imaginary” (pg 201). As per Hearn, the branded self can be either consciously positioned as such by individuals or becomes positioned as a commodity through the context.

Identity acquires value within an economy through recognition and the development into a brand. As Hearn reminds us, this valuation does not always benefit the individual. As mentioned in chapter 2, the identities of both Shavar and Izaak were made profitable to *So You Can Think Canada* through their antics in the audition process. While both were successful at

constructing an identity that would get them on the show, the show used that identity to their own detriment. They were branded through their participation and it was the show that benefited more from their labor than they did (evidenced by production thanking them). After participating, both of these contestants had to further labor to turn their participation into something that would be personally profitable.

Individuals must be recognizable to brand themselves and thus turn their participation into something profitable. Terry, a *Top Chef Canada* contestant discussed the difficulty in conveying his “level” of fame to his family. He has some wealthy family members who own resorts in Belize. They wanted to open a restaurant there and name it Top Chef Terry. In our interview, he discussed trying to explain the recognition he had was good, but not great. While he could potentially leverage his celebrity in his hometown, it would not translate to a different country. However, people got it into their heads that since he was on TV, he must be a superstar (personal interview). Terry saw himself as a temporary, B-level Canadian star while others assumed he had now made it and was raking in money. This example is useful as it addresses that identity requires cultural relevance and points out the disconnect that can exist between reality and how one is understood. Terry knew that his *Top Chef Canada* participation would mean little to nothing to individuals in Belize. His family had a very different understanding of his valuation as a brand.

My project in general and this chapter in particular underscore that branding in Reality TV’s economy involves personal initiation (i.e., self-branding), even as the “self-brander” is not in complete control of that enterprise. Self-branding involves navigating the cultural conventions that figure into a producer’s initial choice, subsequent shaping, and editing of a participant. As Palmer notes, “Brands represent solutions to our culture's uncertainties. The individual we see

submitting to the processes of branding on screen is a model for the ideal self acquiescing to the entreaties of a culture fixated on the potential of change” (2011, pg 134). Promoting the idea of the self as brand is beneficial for capitalism as it helps to mask structural problems and instead turn them into personal problems. As is evident from examples later in this chapter, the tension between the expectation to brand oneself (to be enterprising) and the expectation to conform to a variety of production values and performance codes is one of the pressure-points (the “stress”) that this chapter examines.

The Self

While I am using identity and brand to consider commercialization of individuals, I position the self as the body and mind inhabited by the individual. The self is both physical and mental. The self must labor during participation, as has been discussed in chapter 2. As Hearn’s (2008) point above makes clear, the self can be branded and that branding can provide value, but that value is not guaranteed to go to the individual whose body is creating that value. The last chapter began to break down the ways that various bodies are valued. Race, age, gender, class, language, and ability are just some of the ways that bodies are differentiated. These differentiations have practical, economic considerations for how individuals are understood (their identity), and how they can mobilize their participation into something of value for themselves. Bodies also must also participate in filming. That process can lead to temporary or lasting bodily and mental concerns.

As the self is one’s body and mind, it must be cared for continually examined and maintained, (to borrow Foucault’s term, “cared for”) by the worker. The extreme working conditions discussed in chapter 2 can lead to break down. This break down may be subtle or overt. It may also be immediate, as in the case of sickness, or not become visible for some time.

While the chapter on filming looked at some of the immediate aspects of breakdown, this chapter considers the longer lasting impacts of participation on the self. Care of the self is often presented as solely the responsibility of the individual - particularly the worker operating as an enterpriser. As this chapter considers, contestants can question this assumption. As was discussed in the introduction, the malleability of how the genre is understood can make it difficult for participants to be seen as deserving of compensation. Their labor is frequently downplayed and the financial benefit their work to networks and programs are rarely discussed (Jost, 2011). This chapter considers the ways that malleability also influences expectations surrounding support and care. Because one's connection with the show is often viewed as limited to the duration of filming, there is little support or protection available for those who face personal, professional, or legal difficulties that can be linked back to the program. Contestants discussed unwanted public attention, being taken advantage of professionally and mental health issues as just some of the consequences from their having taken part in reality television. Looking at how one's self is protected or left vulnerable from participation is understudied in regards to the genre.

The self is also different from one's identity, though at times there may be overlap. A worker must continually evaluate one's identity and brand—they must maintain it, keep it healthy, improve it, and watch over it. The worker is, in this sense and as Foucault might point out, always “at work” on oneself. Although this care of the self is somewhat individualized and solitary, it also occurs through a competitive process. One must watch other competitors and navigate the production and performance “rules of the [competitive] game.” Occasionally interviewees discussed the tension in differentiating, even for themselves, the difference between themselves and how they were understood. Some worked to draw boundaries to help themselves

and fans differentiate between the two. Tamara talked with me about her changing social media presence after *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* She noted that she created a fan page on Facebook that was separate from her personal page. She thought having a fan page would provide a bit of a professional disconnect and that she could then choose how much of herself to give to people. While on the show, she had given forth a lot of herself. Having this fan page going forward gave her the option to choose and take back some control (personal interview). For Tamara then, she viewed her self as distinct from her identity. While she was eager and open to connect with fans, she did not want people all over the country having access to all of her personal information. This is just one example of the ways that caring for the self can also have an outward focus.

So?

This chapter, then, seeks to consider how participation in reality television impacts the individual. An identity (of which they may be a co-creator) is crafted and broadcast to an audience who may share that understanding or who may view the contestant quite differently. Identity can also be considered as the celebrity persona of a contestant; who the viewers and the show assume them to be. The show initially brands the individual, using them as a character in their program. During filming the self labors and may suffer physical or mental complications. After filming has ended, the individual often attempts to brand themselves/manage branding so as to make participation profitable and personally valuable. Through all of these stages, the self of the contestant is both separated from and impacted by both identity and brand. While one's brand and identity may live only on screens and in people's minds, the self of a contestant must exist in the world. One's sense of who they are often changes depending on how others understand them and how the filming process goes.

Those wishing to appear on reality television must market themselves as attractive candidates. They must couch their desire, if there is one, for fame and fortune in a more appealing image. Reality television participants have another hurdle to overcome when it comes to image management. They do not have control over the editing process and have little recourse if the program presents them in a way that differs from the image they hoped to present. Deligiaouri and Popovic (2010) highlight how little control a participant has over their televised image. They state, “It is a game where the winner’s destiny is decided by the results of the audience ratings, the charisma of the player, the adequacy of his or her strategy according to a specific society’s standards reflected in phone and online votes, all of which are pre-determined by the edited TV images.” (pg 80) While I disagree with total lack of agency they assume a participant to have, their statement speaks to the layers of structure that limit the control an individual has over their image. Reality contestants are heavily reliant on a good, or in some cases a particularly villainous, edit for any hopes of future media opportunities. If their portrayal is one they are unhappy with, they have few options for damage control.

Hearn (2008) notes that when one works on the 'branded self' they create a detachable narrative or image that is for sale and circulates cultural meanings. This detached persona is both the contestant and yet not at the same time. This self is positioned by either context, use or intention “as a site for the extraction of value” (199). All of these positionings occur, often simultaneously, in competitive reality television programming. Being that the contestants are in a competition, they are immediately pitted against each other in terms of individual merit. The television programs also use these participants to sell the show and retain audiences each week. Finally, enterprising competitors attempt to sell themselves to the judges and/or public, intentionally casting themselves as desirable commodities. While the contestants may attempt to

intentionally craft themselves as attractive brands, the context of the competition and the use of these individuals as characters in a commercial television program necessitate this. Value comes from the participant and their image. While the show may be profiting as much or more than the contestant from their participation, they are not assuming the risks that can come from a bad portrayal.

While there has been attention paid to those who get bad edits and the damage that can have, it is less common to discuss those who have fairly non-existent edits. It can be disappointing to find out that you were not viewed as a key figure. In talking to a *MasterChef Canada* contestant, they brought up their frustration with how little they appeared in the show. They pointed out that all contestants have to give up a lot in order to film the program, so it is annoying to barely see yourself. They felt as though they had given good and entertaining interviews. They mentioned that the camera person and interviewer were often laughing, so they felt that they were giving “good” material (personal interview). Even though this contestant made it far in the season, the program did not view them as a major component of the show. The lack of an edit means that participation may be much less valuable for an individual as their exposure and name recognition will be limited.

While the self may be a site from which value is extracted, there is no guarantee that its owner will be the beneficiary. Without proper and continual management of one's self as brand, other interests may brand that self differently or profit more from the brand than the individual profits. This is especially true in the case of competitive reality television programs where the shows rely on narratives to propel the competitions forward and justify the elimination of contestants. As Ted Matthews notes, a brand is “judged and assessed a value by everyone it touches...these perceptions of value may, or may not, be what you want them to be...your Brand

isn't really yours. You don't own it – all the people thinking about you do” (2007, pg 21). While Matthews is speaking about corporate branding, his assertion is just as valid in regards to self-branding. Through the editing process of the majority of reality programs, much of the taped footage is left out of the final program. While a competitor on the program may attempt to construct an appealing persona, the producers of the show and the audience are in the end free to interpret one’s identity and brand as they choose.

The Potential Stigma of Participation

In each of the interviews I conducted, I asked individuals if there had been any drawbacks or negatives that had resulted from their participation. The notion of participation being stigmatized was often brought up as a result. The most notable discussion of this came from Ryan, the winner of the first season of *Canadian Idol*. He discussed his win as being a double-edged sword. “On one hand I was making platinum records, having number hits across the country but the music was shit. I grew tired of portraying the Idol winner...Trying to be taken seriously in the years after was difficult..After years of writing and recording with Low Level Flight.I was able to have success overseas partly public does not associate my name with Canadian Idol.” (personal correspondence) Ryan’s win led to an album. He later formed the band Low Level Flight. As he mentions, though the band performed alternative rock, he was still associated with *Canadian Idol* and often not taken seriously. He was able to find success in geographic locations where he was not primarily known for his association with the show. While his participation was not necessarily stigmatized, it did create a specific image of him and his music.

While the few individuals who have managed to achieve some modicum of celebrity and media success from their appearance have received much attention, the majority of participants return to their lives. Little attention is paid to these individuals, who may face struggles resulting from their participation. Mirrlees (2016) discusses how hard it can be for individuals to remake their image if they are unhappy with their portrayal. A negative or unflattering portrayal by a program can leave a participant scrambling in their career. Individuals have been fired from their jobs or have had difficulty obtaining employment based on their televised appearances. The need to make money and support oneself can then leave few options for participants. Per Mirrlees, “Ridiculed by publics, frowned upon by scripted TV casting agents and desperate to make ends meet, reality-TV’s “dispensable celebrities” chase low-paid appearance gigs at shopping malls, sporting events, conferences, nightclubs, resorts and colleges, often in violation of their “participation agreement” with TV studios” (2016, pg 199). Thus, at times individuals are pressured to become the character that a program has created for them in order to gain a paycheck.

In his interview with Fusion’s Molly Fitzpatrick (2016), Kupah James discussed the emotional and personal consequences he faced from his time on *The Bachelorette*. James appeared on season 11 and was eliminated after drunkenly and angrily confronting Kaitlyn Bristowe, that season’s leading lady. As he states,

“It was hard in the beginning. When I got back home, I had to call a lot of my loved ones and apologize. I didn’t sound like this seven months ago. I was in a really dark place. The show really kind of turned me upside-down because my reputation is most of my life—I’m in entertainment, I mentor kids, and I came off like the complete opposite of the role model that I am back home. The show moves on, but I’m still with this memory forever. That’s tough, sometimes. But overall, I’ve got great friends, a great family. It wasn’t always as easy as it is now to talk about it, but you live and you learn and you grow. Whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

James’ assertion that the show moves on but he must remain to deal with his actions and portrayal, speaks to ways that participants can run into the power imbalance that exists between

them and the show. While programs often tout and bring back their success stories, those individuals who are less successful are on their own to navigate their post-show life.

Essany (2008) notes that participation itself can carry a stigma regardless of an individual's portrayal. The status of having been on a reality program can mark the individual as frivolous or not serious. This labelling can turn off employers. This notion of the potential stigma of participation came up in interactions with contestants. When asked if there had been any negative repercussions from their participation, Rachel, a *Canada's Next Top Model* contestant responded by noting,

“I'm not sure I would call it a drawback, but I am currently studying to become a medical doctor. I have wondered whether my previous modelling career or participation in the show will pose some awkward professional problems in the future (e.g. if my patients google me). Because of this I have considered changing my last name after I qualify (although I haven't made a final decision on this yet).” (personal correspondence)

Rachel's response highlights that stigma or backlash can be assumed, even if it has not been actually demonstrated. Her response speaks to fears of how others may read her as less serious or professional due to connections with modelling and reality television.

Often, discussions around the stigma associated with the genre centered on ideas of personal fears and worry rather than concrete examples of discrimination. As a *Canadian Idol* contestant remarked,

I sometimes felt like there was a stigma attached to being on a reality show. Like you have to prove yourself more because people looked down on it because it wasn't an "authentic" way of approaching the business. Once I realized that was all in my head though, I was fine. I can't control or know how people perceive me, so I let it go. And I was happy with the work that I did on and after the show. (personal correspondence)

While Rachel poses her fears as potential, this participant frames the stigma as totally in their own head. Here, the fear of stigma is the problem rather than any actual negative event occurring. However, while this assumption may be true for this individual, it cannot be assumed to be true for all that have competed in the genre.

This desire to present the stigma of reality television as an unfounded fear can challenge the lived experiences of others who have come to public consciousness through the genre. Lo Bosworth is potentially best known for her participation in the reality programs *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills*. In an interview with Jada Yuan for *Cosmopolitan*, she discussed the stigma of reality television and how she has worked to make a name for herself in the industry. In response to a question about having to potentially escape typecasting due to her status as reality star she states,

“A couple years ago, it was worse. Now I've done enough in my career and put enough content out into the universe that the people who know me and follow me understand who I am and value my voice. I will say, though, that I think that there is an incredible stigma surrounding people who have participated in reality programming and it's totally unnecessary. I mean, now you have Mark Wahlberg on reality TV. So it's hard to pass judgment on people in that position anymore without being fairly hypocritical about it. I highly doubt that Mark Wahlberg is, like, some dumb "bitch" who has no self-worth just because he's participated in a particular type of television programming. But they would think that about somebody who is on *The Bachelor*, for example.” (Yuan, 2015)

Bosworth's statement highlights the gendered nature of this stigma and the celebrity hierarchy that exists.

The hierarchy that is present in Bosworth's response between Mark Wahlberg's participation in the genre compared to a *The Bachelor* contestant plays out both in status and in financial gain. While the majority of individuals who participate on reality programs are poorly compensated, the same does not often hold true for celebrities. When celebrities are filmed for reality programs, the same everyday labor that is devalued when performed by ordinary individuals is transformed into a legitimated value-generating activity. Andrejevic (2011) highlights this incongruity when he states, “What the comparison between celebrity and “amateur” reality TV highlights is how the balance of power determines who benefits from the value-generating activity of being watched.” (pg 24) This statement challenges the idea that the value in reality programming comes from the assembly process. In both categories of

programming it is the activities of the participants being filmed that serves as the content for the show. This content is then packaged and sold to a network. Yet, despite the similarities, it is only the participants considered celebrities who are viewed as deserving of the profits of that activity.

The potential stigma of reality television is both gendered and professionalized. Ordinary individuals receive less compensation than celebrities and women are taken less seriously than men are. Of course, this is not limited to the genre, or even to television. Connor, Gill and Taylor (2015) discuss the ways in which gendered patterns of exclusion exist within the cultural and creative industries. While creativity and creative labor are usually presented as open to all, the industries are rife with inequality. The pat notion that everyone is creative is highlighted while the structural barriers to entry and progression are ignored. The conception of an artist or creator is male. Furthermore, professional or elite forms of creative practices are dominated by men while women carry out the domestic version. As discussed in the previous chapter, these patterns are compounded by issues of race and ethnicity, class, and ability. Those who are least valued in the industry are most likely to be stigmatized by their participation.

Participation and Self-Branding

Self-branding is seen currently as an essential strategy and has become firmly instilled into business culture. Ellcessor (2014) seconds this understanding, arguing that the management of the celebrity self closely resembles the work that new media laborers must perform in their own self-management. Of course, imagining one's self as brand requires constant maintenance. The brand requires continual monitoring to ensure that all actions and decisions are working to reinforce the image of the brand. Marwick (2013) states, "This brand monitoring becomes a form of labor that can be both emotional and taxing. It requires continually imagining oneself through the eyes of others, creating a "dual gaze" of internalized surveillance." (pg 191) As one can

probably guess, this labor is unrewarded. Brand monitoring is not only self-directed. This practice also requires a constant check on what friends and family are posting online. Marwick (2013) notes the significant time and energy that this practice requires as well as the tension between loved ones that can occur if others are not conscious of or willing to focus on ideal branding.

Ellessor (2014) notes that the requirements of online celebrity personas are similar to the managing of the self required by laborers in new media. Both groups are required to produce and maintain a cohesive self that shows off values that their chosen field prioritizes. Work has become more project-based than institution-based, and therefore far more contract-based. This represents an increasingly causalized and individualized framing of labor. She explicitly links those in the entertainment industry to those working in technology fields through the importance of public impression management. She posits, “Whether strategically promoting the “self” or offering strategic back-stage revelations of that “self”, the celebrity as new media worker is engaged in impression management on a grand scale. The construction of a star text, or persona, is therefore an amplified form of the regular impression management work done in daily life.” (pg 197) The labor required by both groups features simply a difference in scale.

Attempting to Profit from Participation

While reality contestants have the opportunity to profit off their appearance on the program, this opportunity is far more limited than is advertised. While the shows may focus on the creation of celebrity, it must always be in such a way that benefits the program, even at the expense of the contestants themselves. Turner (2014) argues that the creation of celebrity is thoroughly incorporated into the foundation of many reality television programs. Because of this, any potential conflict between the best interests of the contestant and the program has already

been addressed by the structure of the show. He argues, “As a result, these celebrities are especially dependent upon the programme that made them visible in the first place as they have virtually no other platform from which to address their audience.” (pg 59) The lack of access is vital to maintaining this power relation. Since the contestant is only known within the world of the show, they must play by the rules of that show. Failure to do so can result in backlash or, potentially more devastating, simply being ignored. Many participants find that without the context of the program, the public loses interest. Thus, they must maintain positive relationships with the show to increase their potential career and fame. They must consistently demonstrate themselves to be beneficial to their parent company in order to continue to get screen time or promotional opportunities.

There appears to be an “opportunity window” after participation where an individual is most able to use their appearance as a springboard to gain media recognition and industry access. However, many contestants are not poised to take advantage either because they are unaware of it or do not have the resources. Tyler, a *Canadian Idol* contestant discusses the difference in viewer perception versus the actual issues involved with attempting to capitalize on the show in pursuit of a music career. When asked about potential drawbacks leading from being on the show he states,

“I don't think I would call them drawbacks - but one thing I struggled with after the show was that I didn't have a band prepared or a manager, and overall I was still fairly unaware of how the music business operates. I think the perception that people who watch the show get, is that after the show the competitors are ready to hit the road and perform. For me that wasn't the case because I wasn't prepared for the influx of offers that were coming in. I had to spend a lot of time looking for band members and working with different managers before I found a good fit and things began to run a little smoother.” (personal correspondence)

Tyler points out that he was still fairly new to the business and did not have the infrastructure in place to take advantage of the increased opportunities that came his way after the show.

Navigating one's relationship with the show can be emotional. As previously discussed, a tension exists between wanting to capitalize on one's recognition without being recognized solely in relation to the program. There can also be pressure to remain connected to the show. Individuals who choose to distance themselves may face pushback. Carlana discussed her decision to immediately apply for a US visa after doing the show. As she remarked,

“I think that reality shows kind of want you to, to like feel some connection to them. Like the second you're eliminated from the show you're rushed backstage to interviews and everyone's like “What's next for you Carlana?” and I was like, I'm moving to LA. And they want you to say, I don't know what I'm going to do, the show is everything, and blah blah blah. You just gotta realize it's not. Nothing's ever everything...So I was just like cool, it's time for me to go. I've made my mark, see ya. And that's, ya know, it was the best catapult I could have ever asked for.” (personal interview)

Carlana here presents her participation on the show in practical terms. While she repeatedly mentions her appreciation for the show, she also stresses that she viewed it as a way to showcase her talent and tell her story. She has maintained relationships with numerous contestants and choreographers. While she has maintained connections to individuals from the show, she has not made efforts to maintain connections to the program as an entity.

While Carlana distances herself from the show immediately, others discuss navigating post-show relations with the program. For many, the power differential is clear. Richie discussed his experiences with one of the production companies. After being eliminated, he felt as though he was left on his own by the show. “I was totally dropped. Like see you later, we don't need you anymore. Until we need you. Until we need you to come do the finale, or” (personal interview) Richie expanded on this by mentioning how one of the production companies contacted him a few times in the years after his participation. He participated in a television spot and served as a judge for a media event. While the first few times he agreed to participate in events, he felt like he was being used and it made him uncomfortable. Eventually he started

backing away from these opportunities when he was called. He felt like he was being used by production whenever they needed him, but that there was not a reciprocal relationship.

This realization of being on your own unless affiliation is useful for the show can be difficult for participants. In her dissertation, Patterson (2013) includes an excerpt from her interview with Suzie, a contestant on a music program.

“You know there should be some kind of training or at least one hour, one little seminar when you get involved in this, of like this is what to expect. Number one, you are not going to get any help. You're gonna get eliminated from the show and that's it. That's all the help you're gonna get which is zero. Don't expect any producer to call you afterward. Don't expect any kind of record label to be set up, or whatever your show is. Don't expect a thing and you need to do it all for yourself after, you don't know that. They don't teach you that, and I was very resentful of all the production people because they had tons of um contacts and I was naive enough to think there was something there waiting for me, and there wasn't, and all of us had that, definitely all of us had that.” (pg 133)

Suzie speaks to the ways in which the shows oversell the opportunities that can result from participation. Her disillusionment with the process is echoed in Turner's (2010b) work interviewing contestants from Australia and New Zealand. Like Suzie, his respondents had gone into the process expecting a career outcome and found they were only offered opportunities that would benefit the franchise. In terms of career prospects, they were on their own.

This sense of being on your own has both mental and practical components. The resources they have access to will affect how a reality contestant reacts to any situation or opportunity. As discussed in chapter 1, the micro-celebrity faces their own unique challenges. While they must constantly represent themselves as a celebrity, they have few of protections or benefits afforded to “real” celebrities (Marwick, 2013). Reality contestants fit into this definition. There is much less of a system of support for reality contestants than for actors and actresses. They are unlikely to have or be able to afford security, stylists or agents. This means that they cannot react to issues the same way that other types celebrities would. Though both micro-celebrities and celebrities may face the same challenges, their reactions must be very different.

The micro-celebrity is more isolated and must be more self-reliant. Multiple participants I interviewed faced harassment online and legal issues that celebrities would have had support in handling.

These legal issues can range from minor to potentially life threatening. One of the women I interviewed discussed how she was stalked after her season aired. She stated that he believed that she was in love with him even though the two had never met or spoke. She discussed how he broke into her home, her bank accounts, and her social media. She received very little support from the program she had appeared on initially. It was not until he threatened the show itself that they got involved and assisted the investigation (personal interview). Her stalker eventually threatened the show that unless he was given an introduction to the contestant something would happen to both the show and to her. The show and the police both became involved and the individual is currently in jail. While she ended up receiving legal support, for the majority of the experience she was on her own. This was not a situation that she had any training for or information in handling.

By participating in a reality television program, her name and face were broadcast to viewers across the country. It was likely through participation that her stalker became aware of her existence. In addition, it was this notoriety that was used in an attempt to silence her. In our conversation, she mentioned that the defense lawyers brought up her name recognition. Of all the contestants on her season, she had been one of, if not the, most-covered individual. Allegedly, they threatened to contact a number of media outlets should she decide to press charges (personal interview). The underlying assumption was that her status as a well-known individual would attract media attention, and that attention would be unwanted on her part. She also noted that after she told him to go ahead and that she was willing to deal with the media attention if it made

other women more comfortable with the notion of coming forward, he backed down and his client plead guilty. This experience was not one she was prepared for and had to face most of the process with little assistance. She was expected to be able to navigate the system on her own.

Grindstaff and Murray (2015) argue that reality TV has reinvented the economy of celebrity on television. The genre has made celebrity the outcome of the production process rather than the precondition. The authors discuss the wider trends that reality TV both represents and reinforces. As they state, “There are broader cultural developments at work here, of course—the rise of therapeutic discourse, increasing levels of surveillance in everyday life, pressures toward neoliberal entrepreneurialism, economic restructuring, and so forth.” (2015, pg 112) All of these trends are adapted and incorporated into the programs. In requiring its participants to engage with these trends, the genre has created an outlet where the viewing audience can potentially gain skills to deal with these changes. Successful contestants can be used as templates for success, while those eliminated can serve as cautionary tales. Looking at the labor required by these individuals will provide a window into the expectations that have become, or are still becoming, normalized for workers in the current economy.

Pino, a contestant on *MasterChef Canada* discussed how his financial security afforded him opportunities to develop himself as a brand. Prior to doing the show, he had been a stay-at-home dad and his wife was the breadwinner for the family. His daughters were getting older and he was starting to have more free time. Because of this, he had the time to slowly grow a brand and take opportunities that may take time to develop and pay off. He has become a cooking instructor at numerous Loblaws locations. He has been doing shows for the Shopping Channel. After approaching the company that provides the knives for the show, he has become an authorized dealer. There is also a YouTube channel where he does cooking videos with his mom

(personal interview). Unlike many of his competitors who have gone for more traditional career paths in the food industry, Pino has attempted to build a brand through numerous avenues simultaneously. This route is precarious and slow. His wife's income allows him to pursue this. In our discussion, he states that he is positive that it is his wife's financial support that has brought him to where he is now. Had he needed to bring in a full-time income right away, his career path would look far different and he would not be able to stay in food the same way. He still doesn't think that he could rely on his current endeavors for enough income to maintain a career at the moment. It is because of his family's current financial security that he can approach branding in this way.

This is in no way limited to Pino's individual experience. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) discuss the precarity that surrounds creative careers and how this inherently favors those who have other sources of income they can easily access. The importance of economic stability was a key theme of many interviews. Having a safety net greatly reduced the stakes of participation for individuals. Kunal, a *Top Chef Canada* contestant, discussed how his financial and job security helped to lessen the blow of losing. Kunal was eliminated on the second episode of his season. While upset about being out of the competition so early, he noted that knowing he was going back to his restaurant mitigated this. While losing was a blow to his ego, he had a successful career to return to. He compared his loss against others who had quit jobs to be able to appear on the show. For him, being established allowed him to go on the show. He would only pursue the opportunity if he already had a stable career or if he had nothing to lose (personal interview). The dichotomy he brings up is important and speaks to the precarity inherent in many creative careers.

Participation as Springboard vs Milking it

It is hard to lose publicly. Part of it is also the feeling of letting down those that have been supporting you. There can also be internal pressure to prove yourself worthy of the support you have been given. Janna was the runner-up in the CBC reality show *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* While she ended up as the alternate for the lead role, she discussed how participation in the show and the support she received ended up having lasting effects mentally. She ended up in some ways feeling that she needed to continually prove her worth to her fans.

As Janna notes,

“Like, they supported me for so long and so hard and then if I don’t get in a Broadway show or if I don’t get another big show in Toronto are they going to be disappointed in me? Or, the fact that I’m now changing careers, or that I took time off to have a baby, I just like get worried about what people are going to think of that. And I know I shouldn’t, but when you have people who have supported you doing one thing it’s like oh, no I’m not doing that anymore, and then I feel bad [laughs]. I feel like they’re gonna judge me.”
(personal interview)

While talking with her she notes that this pressure is entirely internal. No one has ever approached her to complain, but she still grapples with this.

This notion of needing to prove one has worth was highly internalized and often tied up in notions of being deserving of opportunities. While Janna was the only individual who discussed the notion of proving her worth to fans, many of my interviewees discussed the tension between using their appearance on the show to their benefit and being defined by their participation. This often was discussed in terms of the concept of “milking” one’s participation. Individuals struggled to find a comfortable balance between leveraging their appearance on the program and feeling that they were overly relying on the program rather than their own talent and skill. Numerous conversations revolved around explicitly acknowledging one’s appreciation of the show and that it was a positive experience. These proclamations also often led to statements of one’s training, ability, or next steps. In this way, effort was made to present the

show as a platform that could lead to bigger opportunities - opportunities that the individual was qualified for and ready to take on. This framing may also speak to the stigma that is assumed to surround the genre.

Talking to individuals about their experience in becoming known individuals allows for a needed additional perspective on the process of the production of celebrity. While the programs are designed to “create” stars, these individuals may not personally experience this as a fundamental shift. Richie Wilcox (2010) was a participant on the first season of *Canadian Idol* who made the top 11. He has written an article reflecting on his *Canadian Idol* experience. He discusses the difficulty in feeling like the same person, but having people react to him very differently. As he states, “Although an individual's public transformation is a key factor in creating the *Idol* image, the end product relies more heavily on the public's changing perception of, rather than on any actual changes in, the individual.” (pg 35-36) What is changing, at least in this instance, is the visibility of the individual. In our conversation, he mentioned that he felt like the same person throughout the competition. What changed was not his ability, but how others responded to him (personal interview). While his self remained stable, his identity drastically changed. Through interviews with those who have gone through the process, the celebrity can be understood more as agent rather than text.

Part of this disconnect may come from the format of the show. *Canadian Idol*, and half of the programs I considered (*How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria*, *Over the Rainbow*, and *So You Think You Can Dance Canada*), were live competition shows. The other programs I considered (*Canada's Next Top Model*, *MasterChef Canada*, *Project Runway Canada*, and *Top Chef Canada*) were taped ahead of time and then broadcast after the competition had ended. This notion of liveness meant that while contestants were going through the day-to-day filming

process, how the public was perceiving them may have changed. In an interview with Natasha Patterson (2013), Suzie, a Canadian contestant on an international program discusses the disconnect

“...the reason why that messed us up so badly is because with Survivor, you go into it, you have your experience and then, you can watch it with the rest of the world and you can sort of see yourself become a celebrity or become whatever it is for you. This way, I went into that show, you know, singing still but I didn't have a manager, I didn't have a lawyer, I didn't have a team behind me, I didn't you know, that's just one aspect. I was just Suzie from Toronto, that's another aspect. You leave these shows and you're famous and you didn't get to watch it happen so it, it messes you up. Like you're ejected into the world and people can recognize you and you don't even, you feel like the same, the humility, the humble thing inside, it like, it didn't register for me which actually affected I think, all of us but it affected a lot of my choices too. Cuz if I had really known to what capacity I was known out there and what I could've done, perfect example, I could've gone to any producer, at least in North America and said, “I just got off this show, do you wanna work with me?” I could've hustled way more and I would've gotten anything I wanted but I didn't 'get it' inside. It's really interesting. “ (pg 132)

As Suzie argues, for contestants on live competition shows, there can be a sense of disconnect from the process of becoming a known individual. Without a clear sense of how their public persona has changed, the contestants are limited in their ability to take advantage of their increased visibility and the opportunity window that participation offers.

Looking at both live and pre-taped programs allows for a discussion of the ways in which format can affect the branding process. In regards to pre-taped shows, like *MasterChef Canada* for example, the show shoots months before it airs. This means the producers already have all of the footage and know which contestant will win and how each placed. They can therefore more easily create storylines and characters as the outcome is fixed and there is little narrative room in which to challenge these decisions. The live structure of shows like *Canadian Idol* is different. While the audition weeks are pre-recorded, the competition for those selected as finalists (semi-finalists in some seasons) plays out in real time. This allows both participants and the audience to challenge or refute narratives set forth by the program. This can require the judges or producers

to be more overt in attempting to promote certain contestants and campaign for the elimination of others.

The stakes of a negative portrayal can be high. In an op-ed for *The New York Times* Virginia Heffernan compares reality contestants to game show contestants. While both groups are more likely to lose than win, the stakes are much higher for those on reality television. “But, like game-show contestants, most reality participants lose. And on reality shows, they lose *what they came in with* - their marriages, their families, their cultural capital, their professional reputations, their actual money and in some cases their freedom. (More than one “Real Housewives” husband has landed in jail.)” (2011) While Heffernan’s quote feels hyperbolic, the underlying sentiment rings true. Participants I spoke with discussed the anger they and others had surrounding their edit. Lisa from *So You Think You Can Dance Canada*, noted that it was hard to deal with being edited negatively because it was so personal for her. She pointed out that even though she could recognize that certain choices were being made in the goal of making compelling TV, because dance was her career and what she had invested most of her life in, she got angry. It was not a skill that she was using to get on television; it was an endeavor that she was now showcasing to the public. (personal interview) The time and effort that individuals who participated in skill and talent-based shows invested into their career/passion heightened the stakes of negative portrayals.

The imbalance in power over portrayals and the lack of recourse regarding a negative edit also led to anger in individuals. During my interview with Terry from *Top Chef Canada*, he spoke about the fallout a fellow contestant faced from misleading editing. One of the male contestants was presented as sleeping with one of the female contestants during filming. He was engaged and after the season aired, his fiancé broke up with him. While he had mentioned his

desire to sue the show to Terry and his regret at participating, both of them were aware that there was not any recourse available. Terry noted his own anger at this portrayal for a couple of reasons. He stated that this event never happened, nor was there any relationship at all between the two. He pointed out that the desire to make a compelling story had real-life impacts on the participants. The unfairness also seemed to bother him as he noted his frustration with this editing choice as another male contestant who was married did have an affair over the course of the season, but it was never shown or even alluded to. (personal interview). While many contestants had discussed the potential of a negative portrayal, all seemed to have an expectation that while their actions or words could be misinterpreted, the show would not outright fabricate situations or portrayals.

Mental Health and Participation

It is important to consider how the physical and emotional labor that occurs during filming is processed by contestants. While assumed to be a self-contained experience, the emotional side of participation can take a backseat initially to the physical work being done. In her dissertation, Patterson (2013) discusses the responses of her interviewees in relation to processing their experiences. She writes,

“As many women noted, due to the nonstop ‘go, go, go’ mentality of the reality competition format, there was not much time for self-reflection during filming. Instead, many of these insights could only be garnered and processed post-filming. This lack of self-time seemed to contribute to contestants making some poor and questionable decisions, in addition to dealing with the physical, emotional and psychological ravages of reality-competing.” (pg 74)

This time compression limits the opportunities for contestants to consider the emotional aspects of filming. This also means that contestants may experience emotional responses to their participation after the fact. Jessica discussed how watching the show when it was airing brought up many emotions for her. She mentioned that a lot resurfaced for her while viewing episodes.

For her, there was so much going on during filming that she didn't have time to deal with the emotional parts of the experience. She was too busy trying to complete the practical parts of the competition (personal interview). It was through the process of watching the show that she became emotional about the whole experience. Jessica's response and Patterson's (2013) findings serve as reminders that while the physical labor of filming has a fixed time frame, the same is not true for the emotional labor.

On January 25th, 2017 as a part of Bell Let's Talk Day, one *MasterChef Canada* participant decided to join the conversation surrounding mental health. (Bell, a Canadian telecommunications giant, devotes one day a year to promoting a conversation around mental health and donating funds based on users interactions with the service or use of specific hashtags) On their public Facebook wall the participant posted "After my stint with MasterChef Canada was diagnosed with #PTSD as well as #depression and #anxiety disorder. Reality TV is edited (I was naive) and the haters and internet trolls as well as stalkers were not in my this is going to happen to me list yes I have trouble dealing with these problems and yes I am going to talk about them I am not ashamed and asked for help !! Do the same :)" This was the first public disclosure this contestant had made about their diagnosis.

While this post was the most public, mental health was a frequent topic of conversation in the interviews. In our correspondence, one *Top Chef* participant mentioned that the competitors from their season all experienced some form of PTSD after their season aired. Others discussed the challenges that they and their fellow participants faced after filming. Individuals were unable to return to work or took leaves of absence from their jobs (personal interviews). While mental health was a common conversation topic, it was not something the programs themselves addressed. Line brought up her military experience to discuss possible changes to how shows

deal with eliminations. The military debriefed her. She was informed of what she might experience and what might happen. She was also given resources to reach out to. She pointed out that it was because of this previous debriefing that she was able to recognize the signs of depression she was exhibiting after her elimination and was able to seek help (personal interview). She was firm in her belief that programs need to better prepare contestants both mentally and psychologically. While some contestants did discuss meeting with therapists or psychiatrists, this practice was limited and seemed more focused on protecting the program legally than supporting the individual.

While the shows have not provided support after filming, many contestants discussed informal networks of support that have emerged from the participants themselves. Individuals discussed a sense of responsibility to others in the franchise. Line mentioned reaching out to a season 3 contestant after their elimination. They had had a fairly negative edit, so she wanted to connect and provide support and advice. She noted that this support can also be sought for. The spouse of a participant contacted her on a later season. The individual was suffering from depression and had been unable to cook since their elimination (personal interview). The spouse was reaching out to other contestants to get advice and potential assistance. I include this to foreground both the importance of personal connections and the additional labor that individuals have taken on. A sense of community has been fostered. This community though has been created because of a need that has not been adequately addressed by the programs themselves.

Location, Location, Location

Context and location can limit opportunities. Quail (2015a) discusses the short-lived nature of the success of Canadian format adaptations. There are often significantly fewer seasons of a Canadian format than there are of its American counterpart. This shortened life span of the

show can significantly limit the opportunities that exists for participants. Curnutt (2011) notes that recent reality television has focused on developing ordinary individuals into durable forms of labor. This trend is due to the difficulty in finding contestants who are both able to successfully perform the skills required by the program and to be engaging on camera or provoke reactions from the audience. Shows are frequently incorporating participants who have previously appeared on the program or on another reality show. This trend serves as an acknowledgement of the value that certain contestants can provide to a franchise. However, because Canadian formats are much shorter lasting, this process is not really occurring in the country.

While Curnutt's (2011) work focuses on the use value that durable participants provide for shows, there is also a need to consider the ways in which this trend can be beneficial for participants. Bringing back and re-purposing former contestants gives them increased visibility and chances to make more money. Because Canadian programs typically have fewer seasons, these contestants are less able to take advantage of the durable participant trend than their counterparts south of the border are. Shavar, a *So You Think You Can Dance Canada* contestant, discussed wanting to come back to the program, but not having the opportunity to do so. Shavar competed on the third season of the show. He discussed how he tried to stay involved with the show after he was eliminated. He noted that just being on the show was never the end game. Rather he was interested in getting more involved with choreography. An objective for him was to move from being a participant to coming back to the program as a choreographer. In an effort to make that happen, he mentioned the specific steps he took,

“After the show was done, like I was one of the dancers that was like always trying to be involved in things. So like next season's auditions came up? I went to the auditions and sat in the seats and watched for like, ya know I tried to go to as many tapings as I could, cause like I don't know, in some areas those, like some of the people that were involved in the show were like talking to me at that point....yeah I tried to really be involved in, in

it. If it was something that was ongoing within Canada, by now I would have found some way somehow to be on the team of people...” (personal interview)

These steps were conscious efforts to remain involved with the show and to position him as an individual who could be considered if there were opportunities to return to the franchise in some form.

The labor Shavar put into maintaining a presence within the show was uncompensated and ultimately unsuccessful in allowing his goal of returning to choreograph future routines. There were only four seasons of the show. Had it remained on the air, the steps that he had taken may have proven to be more fruitful. Several American *So You Think You Can Dance* contestants have returned to the show after the season in which they initially competed. The long-running nature of the show has encouraged this. There have been 14 seasons of the show. Season 7 was the first to more formally welcome back past competitors. This season featured a top 11 instead of the traditional 20. These individuals were all new contestants. Once they were selected for the top 11, they performed each week with “all-stars” (individuals who had appeared on previous seasons of the show). Along with serving as all-star dancers, many former contestants have also returned as choreographers or in less formal roles as special guests for an episode or two. Travis Wall from season 2 is likely the most famous example of individuals who have returned to the franchise, with 2 Emmy nominations and 1 Emmy award for Outstanding Choreography. Travis first returned as a choreographer on the show in season 5, 3 seasons after he had initially been a contestant. The potential for reality-celebrity is impacted by structural constraints that are outside contestants’ control (Patterson, 2013). Because the US franchise was successful and long lasting, these opportunities existed for American contestants. While both American and Canadian contestants had the opportunity to compete on their national versions of the franchise, the opportunities to remain attached to the franchise after their season were vastly different.

After their participation on the show ended, many participants struggled with whether to stay in Canada or attempt to break into the market in the United States. This was especially true for individuals who were on more performance-based programs. Kim, a *SYTYCDC* participant, noted that having been on the show ended up being valuable when applying for an American work visa (personal correspondence). Carlena, another *SYTYCDC* participant expanded on how valuable participation was for her application. She pointed out that making the top-20 allowed her skill to be quantified. She could state that the show had labelled her as one of the 20 best dancers in the country. Because of this, she became a far more attractive candidate for a work visa. (personal interview) Without participating, her ability was less quantifiable and far more nebulous, decreasing the likelihood of being approved for US work. Just having the label of participant gave more credence to their skills. In this way, participation was useful in allowing future career mobility.

However, as Kim clarified, while participation was useful to the visa process, it was not all that helpful in terms of gaining employment in the US. “I moved to Los Angeles shortly after my appearance on the show so I wouldn't say it had a huge impact on my career afterwards. Moving to LA meant starting back at zero. It definitely gave me that much more experience dance wise and on a live stage but, as a credit, it doesn't mean much in the professional world.” (personal correspondence) Her comment speaks to the limited usefulness that participation can provide. While the show was helpful in getting her to Los Angeles, it was not able to get her recognition in the United States. Kim's experience also speaks to the ways in which opportunities are highly dependent on visibility and location. While many Canadian participants and viewers were watching the American versions of the programs, American audiences were likely to be unaware that the Canadian version even existed.

It's Not Just About the Contestant

As Kim and Carlena discuss, reality television participation can provide a sense of legitimacy to a talent or career one has been pursuing. Appearing on the show can convey “proof” of talent to a wide audience. This can drastically affect how individuals relate to and understand the contestant. While the support can be surprising and appreciated when it comes from strangers and acquaintances, it can be more emotionally fraught when it comes to friends and family. Theresa, a *Canadian Idol* contestant, brought up the variety of feelings she experienced in response to the reactions of friends and family seeing her on tv. She wrote, “It was really strange. And without sounding ungrateful because I truly was grateful, but music had been something that I had been chasing for years at this point and it really felt hard at first when people started to all of a sudden believe in me. Especially my close family.” (personal correspondence) For her family, it appears the show provided a sense of legitimacy to Theresa’s desire to pursue music. Her talent became quantifiable as she was selected for the show and as she progressed through the competition. As she points out, she was both grateful for their support and in some ways hurt that it took her participation in *Idol* for her career choice to be validated.

For others, this validation was more personal. For Mel, being a part of *So You Think You Can Dance Canada* was the first time she realized that she could have a career in the industry. She had been competing since she was 12 but had not viewed dance as a viable career prospect. It felt unstable. Participation on the show was seen as temporary and she assumed that she would be returning to school the following semester. After the show she had the tour and so postponed school another semester. After the tour, she had jobs booked. It was at this point that the realization that she could make a career out of this became clear (personal interview). Lisa, another *So You Think You Can Dance Canada* contestant expanded on this realization. She remarked that the show itself worked to convey this sense of opportunity. She teaches dance in

Toronto and felt that before the show premiered, her students did not really feel there was a career in dance. The show itself served to make visible various pathways to jobs in the industry. She has found that more of her students are sticking with the arts, suggesting it is now being viewed as a potential avenue for success (personal interview). Competition programs can provide legitimacy to individuals and to careers.

Along with validation, participation could re-spark an interest in an industry. When talking with *Top Chef Canada* contestants, Todd Perrin's name repeatedly came up as someone who had achieved significant recognition and success since his participation in the first season. In our conversation, Todd revealed that professional success had not been on his mind when deciding to do the show. In fact, he had been transitioning out of the industry. When he decided to audition for the show he was a stay-at-home father/husband and was working a bit at a bed & breakfast. While recapping his experience with the show Todd stated that it was "not too dramatic to say that it basically changed my life completely" (personal interview). He views the show as having pushed him back into the industry when he had been working his way out of it. He had 10 years of experience working in the industry but had lost his passion for cooking. Participating on *Top Chef Canada* reignited that passion and gave him a reason to get back into the field. After the show he bought a building, renovated it and has owned and operated his restaurant there ever since. While much of the discourse around reality competition shows focuses on "breaking into" an industry, Todd serves as a reminder that contestants enter these shows with a variety of experiences.

The changing nature of family relationships based on participation was notion that came up frequently. For many contestants participation could serve as a way of making their passion and career choice legitimate to friends and family. Shavar mentioned that being part of a

Caribbean family, dancing was both expected and assumed to be a hobby. His participation in *So You Think You Can Dance Canada* validated his dancing. His dad had always been supportive, but became invested in the show and his success after seeing the first episode (personal interview). Mel's parents had always gone to her yearly recitals, but she had never invited them to see her compete. They came to almost every show and so got to see her perform on a weekly basis for about 3 months. Her talent and passion for dancing became clearer to them as they were exposed to it (personal interview). For both Shavar and Mel, the show provided a space for their family to become invested in their passion. It made visible what had previously been largely verbal.

Romantic relationships were affected by participation. As previously mentioned, one *Top Chef Canada* contestant was reportedly dumped by their fiancé because of their edit. While this was the most unexpected break-up that came up, it was far from the only one that came about due to participation. Rob talked about how his girlfriend was against his participation in *Canadian Idol*. Their relationship was rocky at the time and he knew that deciding to do the show would also be a decision to end the relationship (personal interview). For others, the decision to break up came later in the process. A participant discussed how their time on the show was a factor that led to their divorce. They noted that they had gone on the show when they had been fairly miserable in their life. Participation offered the space with which to run away for a bit. In returning home after the show, they made changes in their life, including initiating divorce. As they stated in our conversation, "my life's dramatically changed, but in ways that I never thought that it was going to more so. Like my career hasn't changed, like I'm still doing what I did before I went on the show, you know, I still run my own business, so in that respect it didn't change. But in the respect that like I divorced my [spouse], I like ya know? So in the way

of my personal life, it dramatically changed.” (personal interview) Participation can affect relationships in ways rarely considered before deciding to do the show.

Of course, relationships can also be strengthened, and even begin, through participation. Two marriages have resulted from a single contestant’s *Canadian Idol* experience. In our interview, Richie mentioned how he met his now husband. His husband had been watching the show and thought he looked cute in his audition. Later, he saw Richie at a bar and decided to introduce himself. (personal interview) This example highlights the ways in which reality contestants are seen as far more approachable than others working on television. Richie also brought up that his sister met her husband because of the show. She had attended a taping of one of the earlier rounds. Friends and family had to watch in a room in the basement of the studio. There she met a friend of another contestant who was also from the east coast. Since that meeting, they have gotten married and have two children. (personal interview) These two marriages bring up ideas concerning the approachability of reality contestants and serve as a reminder that these individuals are not the only ones affected by their time on the show. Friends and family are also impacted by the contestant’s decision to participate.

However positive or negative the experience may have been, Marwick’s (2013) argument about micro-celebrity reminds us that reality participants have unique challenges. While they must constantly represent themselves as a celebrity, they have few of protections or benefits afforded to “real” celebrities. Many found themselves in situations that they were not fully equipped to handle. The participants faced harassment online and legal issues that celebrities would have had support in handling. One female contestant dealt with a stalker who was convinced they were meant to be together. The show declined to get involved or offer assistance. It was only once the individual started threatening the program as well (blaming the show for

failing to make introductions) that the contestant received any legal support. This example speaks to the dangers that are rarely considered or reported on in regards to participation.

This chapter has considered how contestants' lives are affected by their participation in reality programming. This chapter demonstrates that there is no singular reality TV experience. However, many contestants have faced similar issues because of their participation. All individuals became, at least for a period of time, known individuals. Though the filming process was quite short for most participants, the impacts can be long lasting. Before looking at where we might go from here, I consider where we have been. The next section examines how reality celebrity differs from more traditional forms of celebrity. Many of the challenges faced by participants result from the understanding of their labor as unskilled and replaceable. Looking at how individuals like actors and extras alike gained protections in the past gives us a framework to consider possibilities for reality participants.

CHAPTER 5: REALITY TV'S NEW ECONOMY OF STARDOM

The previous chapters considered the life-cycle of reality television participation.

Looking at the process as a life-cycle allows for a consideration of the various stages and how labor functions in each. It can also allow for an investigation of commodification. Not all bodies are commodified in the same way. Certain individuals have more opportunities to profit off their participation than others do. Upon deciding to apply for a show, individuals are brought into a system that encourages them to consider themselves as a character. This expectation speaks to a reconceptualization of the self that lines up with current labor trends surrounding self-branding. If selected, the individual then participates in the filming process. This can take anywhere from a few days to a few months. During this time individuals will face long hours, have little contact with their families and support systems, and may face emotionally and physically draining working conditions. They have little to no control over how their appearance on the show is edited or how they are presented to viewers. That edited representation appears on television to be viewed and interpreted by audience members. Their efforts are judged, either solely in the show, or alongside audience votes. They themselves are also judged. A positive or negative edit can affect public support, which can have both long and short-term effects. The impacts of both the filming process and their portrayal can extend far beyond the lifetime of the show.

In Chapter 1, I looked specifically at how reality television and celebrity functions in Canada. This chapter considers the specific ways that labor functions in regards to media production. There is an absence of collective workers' organizations in creative cultural industries. This absence results from and in turn reinforces the precarity and informality of work in these fields (Conor, Gill and Taylor, 2015). People in short-term and/or informal employment are less likely to form collective organizations. Yet, without these organizations, there is less protection from those same employment practices. Looking at the history of the studio system

allows for a consideration about what is new about the challenges facing reality participants and what history suggests about how labor protection in the entertainment system has developed. As this chapter will show, professional organizations and trade unions have played important roles in conferring legitimacy to occupations in the media industry.

Arvidsson (2005) highlights the way that media's ties to artistry distance its practices from the wider working world. There is a sense of disconnect between a "regular" worker and someone working in media, He reminds us that, "life within the media is also life within capital" (Arvidsson, 2005, pg 13). Reality television as a genre should also be understood in this manner. As many scholars have discussed, the genre was spawned out of a desire to reduce costs and to rely less on actors. Reality television's popularity among networks has much to do with its low production costs. Not only are the programs more cost efficient, their existence becomes as a tool to manage costs in scripted television. Andrejevic (2011) notes that networks have strategically used the threat of expanded reliance on reality programming to prevent or discourage those in scripted television from taking action to improve their working conditions or seek higher wages. The genre itself is often utilized as a scare tactic against writers and actors looking for higher wages.

The production system of reality television has been engineered to bypass unionized workers. This is one of the ways that the genre stands at the forefront of new modes of value generation (Hearn, 2014). Ross (2014) considers the poor working conditions of both the individuals that appear on the program and those that work on the shows. Neither group can unionize. This had led to a system that prioritizes flexibility in workers, offers little compensation or security, and expects long hours. Precarity allows for absolute surplus-value production. As Fuchs (2014) states, "one works long hours that under conditions of highly

unionized and organized labour could look differently and the social costs are outsourced to the individuals. The total wage and investment costs (including the costs for contract labour) of those who make high profits are therefore minimized, which increases the rate of exploitation and profits.” (pg 227) This formulation requires workers to invest a lot of time into their labor and frequently face insecure living conditions. It is the fear of precarity by those in charge that has led to the off-loading of risk onto workers. Neilsen and Rossiter (2005) point out that capital has always attempted to manage this risk through the control of labor. What we are seeing is nothing new, but a ramping up of trends that have already been in place.

Bridging Amateurism & Celebrity Through Reality TV

I want to take a brief detour back to talking about the history of the genre for a moment. In the introduction and chapter 1, I considered the way that format television served as an economic and cultural strategy. Here I consider how changes within the industry impact how participants are understood. As those chapters highlighted, participants are often presented in ways that undervalue the labor they are performing. However, this conceptualization has not remained stable. Misha Kavka (2012) lays out what she considers the three generations of reality TV. Tracing this history demonstrates the changing assumptions about the role of “ordinary” people in the genre

Kavka (2012) discusses the first-generation of reality programming as occurring from 1989-1999. Much of the appeal of reality television in this period, like those to follow, was its cheap production costs. Kavka (2012) points out that producers took advantage of the spread of camcorders and the public’s growing interest in found footage to create cost effective shows. These tended to center around hosts providing introductions and explanations to submitted videos or surveillance camera footage. She notes that in the United States, deregulation under the

Reagan administration allowed for the entrance of more challengers to network television. Druick (2016) discusses the policy changes in Canada that occurred during this period. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect January 1, 1994. One year later the CRTC granted licenses to 25 new cable stations. These two major changes signaled a shift towards an export-oriented industry and a promotion of industrialization of Canadian television. In both countries, this more competitive marketplace also led to declining advertising revenue individually, as each channel competed for the same limited resources. This meant that production costs were rising and maintaining viewers was becoming more challenging. As a response to this, producers were on the lookout for cheaper programming alternatives.

Discussing what she has termed the second generation of reality TV, occurring from 1999-2005, Kavka (2012) notes that the main difference from first generation programming is the focus on both competition and constant surveillance. Rather than being filmed occasionally, individuals in these programs faced comprehensive surveillance. At the same time, game shows had been experiencing a resurgence in popularity in the late 1990s with programs like *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* getting millions of viewers. Reality programs like *Big Brother* kept the competitive aspects of game shows, but also incorporated the day-to-day activities of the contestants into the content of the show. Kavka points out that this generation of programming has also been referred to as gamedocs by academics in reference to their similarities in purpose to game shows. The main difference between the two lies in gamedocs' simulated landscapes of social reality. While the game show has a clearly defined boundary, the gamedoc blurs the lines between game and reality.

The second-generation of reality television also expanded the notion of competition. Not all of the shows in this generation were game-based. As the genre expanded to include obstacles

that people encounter in social life, the driving force of the shows moved from strictly competition to the broader notion of challenge. Shows were using this idea of challenge to focus on ideas surrounding dating, self-presentation and child rearing. Kavka (2012) defines challenge as, “a term which can equally mean an oppositional encounter, a test of one’s abilities, or a stimulating task with a set goal.” (pg 112) This definition broadens the scope of the genre. While there are certainly a number of Canadian reality shows that fall into this understanding, they are outside of the scope of my dissertation.

While the second generation of reality television focused on competition and personal growth, the third generation focuses on the celebrity-making apparatus. This generation is less of a format shift and more of a change in focus. Kavka (2012) defines this generation as being from 2002 to the present. As she discusses, fame was a by-product of participation in first-generation reality television. This by-product then became increasingly a part of the casting process and the format itself in the second-generation. The third-generation puts the focus on the process which turns these individuals into household names. In talent competitions, individuals are presented as being plucked out of obscurity while in less talent-based programming there is frequently the occurrence of the unlikely sensation. For programs featuring those already established as celebrities, the formats can work to extend the shelf-life of their fame or provide a glimpse into their daily lives for shows set in the realm of the home. For all of these configurations, “The result is that reality television now self-consciously functions as part of the celebrity-making apparatus, interacting with other media forms and entertainment industries to produce and promote fame.” (Kavka, 2012, pg 146) Instead of the by-product of earlier iterations, fame itself is now the focus.

Fame as a concept is even more prominent than the participants hoping to grab the label of celebrity for themselves. For as contestants cycle in and out of these shows, the show remains centered on the process of making people famous. Yet, the desire for fame is detrimental to one's hopes of being cast. Hopeful contestants are encouraged to downplay their desire for fame and focus on the experience or personal benefit (Gheesling, 2012). While participation in these programs can be seen as play, this play is serious. The cash prize - if there is one - is never promoted as the main goal or reason for participation by either the program or the participant. While the money may be the reason for participation, it is not presented as such. Rather the money is presented in a way that lines up with the ideology of the program.

The interventionist focus of the programs so prevalent in second-generation offerings has not disappeared. The focus of the intervention has simply shifted. While second-generation programs looked to alter the personal lives of the participants, the new generation is focusing outward. These shows are still using the material of the lives of the participants, but the intervention is occurring in the economics of celebrity culture (Kavka, 2012). What is also occurring in this iteration of programming is the shunning of ordinary people being ordinary. This generation of shows focus on the creation and maintenance of celebrity. Kavka (2012) argues that in this generation, reality television has become a viable career option for celebrities. From this perspective, we can look at shows like *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* as being firmly in the third-generation. The show's purpose is to extend the shelf life of the family's fame and notoriety. Instead of programs only serving as a springboard to potential fame, these shows have now become instrumental in sustaining media celebrity.

In many ways, this turn towards re-purposing celebrities can be seen as a push back against what Curnutt (2011) refers to as durable contestants (as discussed in the previous

chapter). Programs in the third-generation of reality television are frequently including or focusing on celebrity participants. In some ways, celebrity involvement in reality programming represents the best of both worlds for networks. As known individuals, celebrities have established brands or fans that are interested in their lives, which increases the likelihood of viewers. There is also the assumption that these individuals are more comfortable in front of the camera. This decreases the likelihood that the participant will require significant editing help to be useful for the show. Finally, the genre is still cheaper to produce even if the star can command a high salary. Production costs can remain low. Celebrity involvement can lessen the uncertainty and risk that can come with relying on unknown and untested “regular” individuals. This limits the opportunities that “ordinary” individuals have to even appear on shows in the first place, let alone become durable participants. The industry is adapting to going back to using professionals, though those of a lower celebrity status, in order to avoid having to pay non-actors salaries typically associated with professionals.

Precarity and Self-Branding

As previously mentioned, an estimated 20 million people have appeared on some form of reality TV (Essany, 2008). The sheer number of individuals who have been involved in the genre highlights the importance of looking at their working conditions and the potential impacts that their participation will have on their lives. At the same time, this number can also be used to discount that need. Looking at the history of extras in movies, Clark (1995) notes that the great number of individuals wanting to work in film worked to depress wages and encourage exploitative labor conditions while at the same time that figure conveyed the notion that nothing was the matter since so many people wanted to be involved. This logic is also at play in regards to the lack of protection for reality contestants. In his book on reality television and surveillance,

Mark Andrejevic (2004) reprints a quote from an unnamed TV executive quoted in the *New York Times* in 2001. The executive, discussing his confidence in beating lawsuits from contestants states, “These people are not represented by any unions - they have very little power, and there are literally thousands of people behind them waiting for their 15 minutes.” (pg 11) The large number of those hoping for their shot in the industry harms those in the bottom rungs of the industry hierarchy. The executive here is acknowledging the huge power imbalance that exists and how the lack of union representation leaves participants more open to exploitation. As will be discussed throughout this chapter, on-screen talent has frequently proven difficult to mobilize collectively.

The understanding of precarity as enabling the production of complete surplus value is vital for considering the casting process in reality television. The overwhelming number of applicants, and the shortage of available spots, works to give the programs far more power than the hopefuls do. As more and more of the labor of the application process is unloaded onto the individual, the programs are then able to expend far less effort in finding potential cast members. Rather, they are able to select from an already assembled assortment of individuals. There will be far more completed application packets than spaces for candidates. These packets have value for the programs and cost them nothing. Casting then has the opportunity to go through these applications and find the ones they feel will be most beneficial to the show. Not only can hopefuls in no way guarantee their acceptance, but the plethora of interested candidates also harms their chances of more equitable compensation.

While becoming known is itself highly dependent on luck, the notion of precarity ensures that even once an individual achieves the status of micro-celebrity they must continually labor to maintain relevance. Once known, one’s image becomes their greatest asset. This requires much

emotional and potentially physical labor on behalf of the individual. This can be viewed as an example of brand management. Understanding the self as a brand can cause conflict between the individual and their employer. As Marwick (2013) discusses, what is best for the company is not always what is best for the self-brand. Sometimes, the interest of one party can stand in direct opposition to the other. This tension represents the fundamental flaw with the normalization of self-branding in business culture. The expectation is on employees to self-brand, but only in a way that provides benefits for the parent company. Whenever these two interests might come in conflict, for the sake of their job the employee is the one expected to stand down. The company desires the benefits of the branding that employees undertake but not the drawbacks. Their power over the employee means that they can do this in the majority of situations. The power differentials in self-branding are rarely discussed, but have a tremendous impact on which individuals are the most able to take advantage of the practice.

A few scholars have taken up the concern over labor. Tiffany (2006) noted that reality show participants fall into a legal gray area somewhere between employee of the studio and an independent contractor. Jennifer Blair (2011) argues that contestants meet the legal definition of employees and should be treated as such. Blair also mentions that producers frequently state that contestants freely choose to participate in the shows and use the signing of the contract as proof. However, this ignores the actual practices, which rush these individuals through the criteria and overwhelmingly focus on the excitement and positives of the experience while downplaying the rights they are signing away. She states, “While reality show producers want to protect themselves from potential litigation, it is questionable whether producers make sure contestants fully understand the implications of not only the contracts they sign, but also the consequences of appearing as reality show contestants” (2011, pg 18). The contract is used as a tool to both block

the program from litigation and to present the contestant as naïve and an individual who was trying to exploit the system to get the benefits while ignoring the ramifications. This can lead many contestants to feel manipulated and disillusioned. Thus, the unequal power relationship between producer and participant remains.

Current cultural understanding presents the individual as in charge of, and thus responsible for their own life and success. As Ouellette and Hay put forth, “In a state where good government is less government, then everyone needs to be a leader rather than a dependent/onlooker” (2008, pg 190). The individual needs to be entrepreneurial in order to make things happen for them. Reality television participants exemplify this requirement. Like the contemporary employee, reality participants face increased expectations and little compensation. They must create and maintain an appealing image of themselves in order to secure opportunities. They are also expected to use that image to promote their employer, even when their interests and those of the company differ. The employer has off-loaded much of the risk onto the employee while maintaining control of much of the potential for profit. Fame or future success from participation in a reality television program is precarious and unlikely. Yet, many individuals continue to take on the risk for the chance of future reward. Reality contestants are the ultimate examples of venture labor and entrepreneurialism. Looking at their labor and how they function within the industry provides a chance to consider the ways in which labor is conceptualized and how these understandings are playing out in the wider labor market.

The Legacy of Stage and Film Stardom in the Economy of Reality TV

Looking at current reality celebrity requires that one look back to consider previous versions of media celebrity. Staiger (1991) discusses the precursors to the Hollywood star system

and, in doing so, pays particular attention to the stage. The star system has been operational in stage theater since 1820. Prior to this, theaters had employed a stock system where permanent groups of players were associated with particular theaters. The lead roles often rotated among these players, depending on the plays performed. After the star system was introduced, this practice was drastically changed. Bernheim (1932) lays out how the industry was forced to adapt. He points out that local stock players were devalued. They were demoted to supporting roles and required to take a pay cut. These savings were then used by theaters to pay for visiting “stars” who would come to play the lead in productions. He notes that, ironically, while this system has since been picked up by the motion picture industry, it has actually gone back to being far less common in theater. Bernheim (1932) argues that the syndication of the theater business occurred around 1896. At this time, three separate agencies formed a theater syndicate. This syndicate asserted monopoly control through contracts that demanded exclusive use of its services. This contract was required of both entertainers and theaters. Studios for the film industry later adapted this system.

This transfer of monopoly control to film did not come naturally nor was it even, potentially, desired. Motion pictures did not immediately adapt this system. deCordova (2001) argues that the pictures had existed for more than a decade before anything resembling the star system appeared. Woods (1919) backs this up and notes that the star system was not the only option or even the favored one. In fact, he points out that initially, many studios and manufacturers were actively trying to avoid the troubles that the star system had caused theater managers. Specifically, the high salaries for star players. This was attempted by concealing the names of the individuals appearing in the films. However, the public was not satisfied by this method. Woods (1919) in fact credits public curiosity for the creation of the star system in film.

In response to the manufacturer's decision not to provide names, the public gave nicknames to their favorite actors. Through this method, they could then demand through public pressure and box office success, those individuals they wanted to see on-screen. While this is but one of several competing explanations for the star system's appearance in Hollywood, it does reinforce that this system was not a natural transition from stage to screen and in fact, was resisted by many in the industry.

deCordova (2001) lays out many of the practical reasons that manufacturers were against the focus on particular actors and actresses for their films. He specifically discusses Biograph as a company. Its policy had been to keep the names of its actors private. He references an article in *Moving Picture World* that came out at the time that Biograph moved away from this practice. The article claimed that this policy had been due to Biograph's desire to have the audience associate a film with the company it came from rather than with an individual. Though deCordova is focusing on Biograph, it was not alone in this endeavor. Davis (1993) notes that, in the early days of silent film, it was common for studio heads not to advertise the names of those on screen. They were concerned that fame would bring about pressure for increased salaries. deCordova (2001) argues that this strategy allowed for more control of the product (in this case, the film). By focusing all of their efforts on gaining brand recognition, manufacturers could both contain costs and achieve a high level of control over the film. This control would be significantly weakened if they had to focus on acquiring, promoting, and maintaining a collection of players the public found desirable.

The studio system was a form of industrial organization that allowed a few major studios to become very profitable while maintaining control over production. As Balio (1987) discusses, those in the creative positions had little say in decisions surrounding what appeared on the

screens. While some of the creative talent may have been rewarded with large salaries and fame for their labor, the primary beneficiaries of the extensive profit were the major studios. One of the main ways this profit discrepancy functioned was through the studio's repeated use of a few major stars. The star system represents a clear hierarchy in Hollywood. Clark (1995) explores how the system was extremely profitable to studios. The privilege granted to the few at the top worked to maintain a system of aspiration. He notes that,

“Stars represented the smallest group because they were so costly but due to their use in regulating the industry's profit and drawing audiences into theaters they were also extremely profitable to the studios. Character actors and bit players made up a somewhat larger group since they could be used repeatedly in films at lower wages than stars. Screen extras represented the largest group, sometimes estimated as high as 90 percent of the acting profession. Extras could be paid minimal wages, and their chances of repeated use by a studio often depended on their willingness to work below current wage standards and outside established labor guidelines.” (pg 19)

The pyramid structure of this aspirational system allows for the extreme profitability of the top tier. Studios could afford to pay the top names high wages because they were small in number compared to the number of actors available. They also functioned ideologically for the rest of those in the profession as they served as aspiration. The luxuries that awaited those that made it big helped to make okay the poor working conditions that the majority of those on screen experienced.

Much academic focus has been on the stars at the top of the pyramid. This, according to Clark (1995), represents an ideological complicity with capitalist power relations. In an effort to challenge this focus, I am using this attention to consider the impact on those further down in the labor chain. Using the work that others have done on the star system and the eventual labor organization of Hollywood, I examine how the system played the most expendable and least expendable off each other. This examination will allow for a consideration of the similarities between the situation for early Hollywood players and those currently working in reality television. Many connections can be drawn between the labor conditions of those in the studio

system and current reality show contestants. Restrictive contracts, difficulty in organizing, and extreme disparity in power relations were major features of the star system and are currently negatively affecting the working conditions of those appearing in reality programming.

Once the star system had been established in Hollywood, studios were forced to engage in posturing that would allow them the benefit of the star's labor without the risks that could result if the public turned against that individual. The star scandals of the early 1920s forced the studios into damage control mode in an effort to win back public favor. Anderson (2011) labels 1922 as a turning point in the nature of stardom and its interaction with the industry. He considers the morality clause that regularly appeared in actor's contracts starting in 1922. These clauses rendered the terms of employment with the studio void if an individual was involved in a public controversy that could be seen as compromising their reputation. While presented by the studios as a tool to regulate the industry, the morality clause worked to offload responsibility of management onto the performers themselves. Morin (1960) highlights that the morals clause was meant to scare performers into good behavior, as it required only that a performer be charged with immoral behavior for it to take effect. If any such charge appeared in a newspaper, the individual's contract could be immediately voided. Not only did the studio present the star as being totally responsible for their image, they offered no recourse for those incorrectly "charged". It is clear that this move was less about attempting to alter the lifestyle of those in the industry and more about protecting the studio from potential backlash.

The morals clause was not the only effort undertaken by the studios to protect their image. There is also clear shift in how the industry promoted the stars that occurred in this year. According to Anderson (2011), "No longer was the star easily represented as a member of some extended corporate family. Instead, after the early scandals, more emphasis was likely to be

placed on the contractual nature of the star's employment." (pg 31) Once again, we see a distancing occurring. Taken together we can see the studios' awareness that negative public sentiment surrounding the industry could lead to increased governmental or legal scrutiny. In an attempt to maintain control they implemented specific policies so as to place much of the responsibility for image management onto the stars/ The industry was quick to undergo public relations campaigning to both continue to profit off of the labor of the stars while offloading the risk of public backlash onto them. The morality clause and a positioning of the star as a temporary employee at the studio created distance between the company and the performer. These tools worked as brand protection for the major studios.

Looking briefly at the transition as stars moved from film to television allows me to address how changes in media and norms led stars to consider other ways of monetizing their image. Doty (1990) considers how television was seen as offering vaudeville, radio, and nightclub personalities a second chance at mass audience, audiovisual stardom. Only film had provided this opportunity previously. Most radio and vaudeville performers involved in early television had made film appearances, but had not moved beyond co-star or supporting actor. Many of these individuals achieved television stardom conservatively, by reproducing their personalities in a new medium. However, others like Lucille Ball, had a more difficult time as their previous success has depended on multiple images or characters (Doty, 1990). Andrews (1985) argues that Ball and Arnaz had difficulty in getting support for their initial pitch: a bandleader and actress who perform together. It was only after advertising executive Milton H. Biow suggested he might be able to find a sponsor if the characters were revised to be more relatable to everyday people that the show began to gain traction. The notion of relatability in this case was seen as necessary in order to get on the air. This example speaks to the ways that

television celebrity has depended far more on a sense of connection between stars and audiences than that of other media.

What “ordinary” and “relatable” looks like in terms of celebrity changes over time. Looking at boy bands on television is a useful way of considering this. By the 1960s, Stahl (2002) argues, representations of the construction process of fame were frequent and normalized in film. Music, however, was still to some degree dependent on naturalized stars. *The Monkees* was a clear break with this tradition. The focus was on the supposed ordinariness of each of the four members. When auditioning for the group, the show did not consider actors or experienced music groups. The goal was not on ordinariness, but the appearance of ordinariness; each of the Monkees had prior performance and music experience. Stahl (2002) considers the linkages between *The Monkees* and *Making the Band*'s O-Town. In the initial audition episodes of *Making the Band*, it is clear that the program is looking for individuals who can embody the conventions of boy band. Both programs speak to the importance of appearing authentic to one's surroundings. The Monkees and O-Town were both created groups looking for “regular” people, however what was expected of them was different. Whereas the legitimacy of *The Monkees* was assumed, O-Town's is presented as a work in progress. The members are fighting for legitimacy. Stahl's (2002) work serves as a reminder that the importance on ordinariness that I considered in chapter 3 is in no way limited to the current moment in reality TV.

Gamson (1994) suggests that, in twentieth century America, there were two stories of Hollywood celebrity. One was that of an individual whose stardom was based in their undeniable talent. The other was that of an “ordinary” person who is fashioned into a celebrity by industry experts. It is this second story that challenges the legitimacy of the celebrity. For it posits that, except for a lucky break, the star is in no way different from the “ordinary” public. Per Gamson

(1994), the public then becomes the final discoverer. Through public legitimation, an individual enters into the world of celebrity. Many current reality programs share (and expand) this understanding. In fact, in shows like *Canadian Idol* where audience votes determine who remains in, and ultimately wins, the competition takes the public's opinion as the whole basis of the program. It is not the celebration or creation of celebrity that is unique to reality television. Rather we are seeing the notion of the star being adapted for new systems of production.

Reality TV's "Reinvention" of Celebrity and Stardom for a New Mode of Production

Debora Halbert (2003) asserts that, "Reality television has created a new group of celebrities who do not own their public image and cannot independently control its use." (pg 42) While her point about the lack of ownership and control is valid, the presentation of this as a new phenomenon is not. Rather, the contracts and working conditions facing current reality television contestants have strong similarities to those faced by actors in early Hollywood. This chapter draws out those similarities in an effort to contextualize the issues faced by reality television participants. Looking at the conditions those working in that time period faced, and the efforts to alter those conditions, offers a window to the potential evolution of our understanding of those appearing in reality television. There are clear connections to stars in terms of the lack of control over image, and to film extras in terms of the notion of disposability. Reality television has enacted a system that features much of the control that also faced early film stars but that offers little of the rewards. Looking at early Hollywood and the struggles that led to organization will allow for a consideration of the ways that current reality show participants can gain more control over their images and careers.

It is this desire for control and brand recognition that is at the forefront of much reality television, especially competitive programs. Hearn (2009) posits that the central job of a reality

program is to promote itself. The programs' values, narratives, strategies of representation and corporate structure must be elevated before all else. The privileging of the program over the contestants leads to a necessary exploitation of those participants. While the characters may be what keeps viewers tuning in, it is the format that reigns supreme. The revolving door of contestants speaks to this. The contestants change each season, but the overarching goal and structure of the programs does not. As Palmer states, "a brand's survival value is played out in the reactions of participants. When the latter behave in unpredictable ways, they go beyond the control of brand managers, which is the unspoken role adopted by producers. The business of maintaining the brand identity that will distinguish their show from others becomes a matter of professional survival" (2011, pg 135). Reality programs want to be more prominent to the public than the individuals that appear in those programs. Just as Biograph wanted the public to focus on the company rather than the stars, so too do reality programs want to be more prominent to the public than the individuals that appear in those programs. Managing the participants in reality television programs works to maintain the consistency of the brand of the program. That reality television has had so much success in this maintenance for so long speaks to the effectiveness of the strategy. Part of the way this occurs is through demonstrating the chance participants have to profit from their appearance on the show, so long as they play by the rules.

The need for unionization, or at least better protections, can be seen through Turner's (2010b) interviews with Australian and New Zealand reality contestants. He notes that many of the individuals he spoke with had stories about being, "grossly misled about their career prospects before the show was produced, caricatured while the show was on the air, and offered only those opportunities which would promote the franchise or the network after the show was completed. While the contestants I talked to had gone into the experience seeking a career

outcome and not merely celebrity, that career outcome was not delivered.” (pg 36) From this excerpt, it becomes clear that the opportunities these shows are claiming to offer are very different from the actual opportunities that result. Part of the issue is the low cultural value assigned to those who participate in reality shows. They are considered disposable and easily replaceable. This can lead to these individuals being exploited by the industry and having little public or legal recourse.

The low cultural value associated with participants is specific to, though not exclusive to, the genre of reality television. Those working in scripted programs are seen to be more legitimate in their labor and more worthy of legal and public support around working conditions. This discrepancy has links back to the difference in status afforded to the star versus the starlet. Morin (1960) differentiates between the star and the starlet. The starlet “would like to imitate the star’s comportment, but she is obliged to do the reverse: whereas the star flees her admirers, the starlet must look for hers, even create them; whereas the star reveals her soul, the starlet must exhibit her body, offering it as a sacrifice on the altar guarded by the film merchants.” (pg 44) While this description seems extreme, this differentiation is present in the current television landscape between actors in scripted shows and reality television participants. Those on reality shows are expected to bare their souls and to accept an extreme level of intrusion into their lives. The expectations placed on both categories of performers may be the same, but the reality contestant has little of the industry support or tools that the actor does.

Not only is the cultural status of the two categorizations of employees different, but the exclusivity of the rank of star works to reinforce that separation. Clark (1995) considers some of the major factors that helped maintain such unequal power distribution between actors and the studios.

“The fragmented state of the acting profession gave studio heads the power to bind actors into a passive community of workers. A constant pool of unemployed and underemployed workers (mostly extras) made it possible for studios to reduce labor dissension. The promise of moving up in the star system hierarchy kept hopefuls in line, while the fear of plummeting to the bottom was used to keep employed actors from challenging their employers and complaining about exploitative labor practices. Though actors were indispensable to the production of the commodity form, cooperation with studio policy was thus a precondition of achieving a livable salary and job security.” (pg 20)

The major issue noted by Clark in this selection is the plethora of individuals eager to get into the industry. As demonstrated, these individuals could then be used, at least in the abstract, as bargaining chips by the studios. The same system of control plays out today in regards to reality contestants. It is their desire for fame, opportunity, or money that encourages them to appear on programs. Because of the number of interested individuals, programs are able to reduce labor disputes by refusing to negotiate on terms of employment. The potentials offered by the program encourage individuals to participate, while the sheer volume of potential participants means the significant power disparity remains between participants and program. This disparity is explicitly reinforced through the terms of the contracts that participants must sign.

There are parallels that can be drawn between the contractual obligations of reality contestants as similar to the limitations placed on actors and actresses in Hollywood during the studio system era. These individuals' images and careers were rarely of their own making and required submission to studio desires. Walker states that, “the star system in the 1930s gradually took on the reality, if not the appearance, of a star serfdom. Glamour was its camouflage and fame its dazzling illusion. But behind the grandeur of being a movie star in these years lay all the gradations of servitude” (1970, pg 240). As Carman (2008) discusses, the Hollywood moguls had complete control over the careers of their stars. This was largely done through the long term option contract. This gave the studio the star's exclusive services for seven years and the right to exploit the star's image during this time. Balio (1993) notes that the option contract allowed the

studio to review an actor or actress' progress and decide whether to pick up the contract again or to drop the star. The star could not decide to drop the studio. These contracts also gave the studio complete control over the roles the star would appear in, the public appearances they would make, the star's image and likeness in publicity and advertising, and even the rights to change the name of the star at their discretion.

In both early Hollywood and current reality television there is a lack of control over an individual's own representation. In Davis' (1993) book on Hollywood's studio system, he asserts that "A young player was expected to project what the studio considered an appropriate image, often at the expense of personal identity. In many cases a newcomer's real name was stripped away and replaced by a name the studio thought would command attention on a marquee." (pg 90) The studio was largely seen as responsible for creating the image for young stars and also took credit for their success. Davis (1993) looks at the considerable expense that studio's spent on developing young talent. Young contract players had extensive apprenticeship programs, funded by the studio, that focused on both the craft of making movies and how they were to conduct themselves. Since the studio was so closely associated with its performers it was heavily invested in having those individuals represent the studio favorably. Or, as Davis (1993) quotes MGM contract player Jean Porter, "The studio owned you and they wanted their property in great shape" (pg 88). This notion of ownership can be seen currently when discussing the rights and treatment of reality contestants.

Halbert (2003) discusses the tension between contestants and production teams in regards to ownership of the created persona. She notes that this persona that is broadcast is a creation of the editors and public relations workers. Thus, the individuals who participate in the show can be viewed as "raw materials" which are then used by CBS and the show to construct characters.

Since these corporate parties invested the labor in the character creation, they are the ones to own the results of that work. While focusing specifically on *Survivor*, Halbert's (2003) work makes clear the multiple layers of control that reality programs have over the individuals that appear on them. The contract that contestants are required to sign is one of the major tools of maintaining this disparity. For, as she discusses, the individual does not just appear on the program, but instead must live out the program.

“This contract signifies the power of the television studio to construct reality on television and control the reality of its products. CBS has the power to narrate the life of its contestants in any manner it chooses. In fact, the contract makes it impossible for a contestant to offer an alternative narrative of their life or their behavior on the show. All communication by the contestant to the outside world must be mediated through CBS. Any future media related success by a contestant is granted by CBS. Thus, contract controls reality, both the realities portrayed on television and the lived experience of the show's participants.” (pg 51)

This control over reality is vital. For not only must individuals submit to the reality of the world of the program during filming, the way they are portrayed can impact their life post-participation.

Giving up control of their narrative may have drastic consequences for an individual.

At the heart of many discussions around the control that reality participants have is the importance and legality of the contracts they must sign. Clark's (1995) work on early contracts offers the chance to compare them to those signed by reality contestants. He asserts that a typical contract gave the studio the exclusive rights to determine who would be able to use the actor's image in regards to promotional, advertising or commercial purposes. The studio had the exclusive right to, “photograph and/or otherwise produce, reproduce, transmit, exhibit, distribute, and exploit in connection with [a] photoplay any and all of the artist's acts, poses, plays and appearances of any and all kinds...With very few exceptions, actors had no right to their images and no control over how their images were exploited, divided, or transferred.” (pg 23- 24) The image was not seen to belong to the individual, but to the studio. The same notions are present in the contracts for current reality programs. An excerpt from the *American Idol* contract states the

program has “ the unconditional right throughout the universe in perpetuity to use, simulate or portray...my name, likeness (whether photographic or otherwise), voice, singing voice, personality, personal identification or personal experiences, my life story, biographical data, incidents, situations and events which heretofore occurred or hereafter occur” (pg 1). In both cases the control over one’s image and its use does not belong to the individual, but to corporate interests. The lack of control is similar, but the potential benefits are much less likely for those currently bound by these documents.

The desire of the studios and networks to control the individuals working for them makes sense. As Halbert (2003) points out, assertion of ownership over the public image of an individual is a logical step for media companies that already own the other aspects of the production process. With current media companies once again becoming increasingly entangled, more opportunities for vertical integration occur. This increases the desire of a company to control all aspects of the process, including the talent that appear on the program. Hearn notes that the structures of control “give lie to the claim that reality television is democratizing the industry by bringing real people into the fold. While the free labor of participants is necessary, these shows work to maintain the exclusivity of the industry and suggest that access to it may rest not on talent but on tolerance for humiliation” (Hearn, 2009 pg 176). Limiting this legal understanding to reality contestants speaks to the importance that genre currently plays in determining how one should be legally compensated for their labor.

The hierarchy that exists between those appearing in scripted shows and those appearing in reality programs is similar to the one that existed in early Hollywood. Reality television participants have little cultural status compared to the so-viewed “legitimate” actors and actresses appearing in scripted programs. Reality programs are viewed as having little to no

cultural value. Essany (2008) states that, “To be honest, a lot of folks, including numerous heads of studios and major production companies, berate the reality genre as a malicious, trivial, and altogether worthless entity that taints its producers and participants by association alone.” (pg 191) While individuals may hope to make the switch between genres, many find that they have established a reputation from being in reality television that makes the rest of the industry view them as undesirable. There is a definite sense of guilt by association. Rather than a stepping-stone, the genre often serves as an ending point. Eassany (2008) notes with some irony that the aspersions cast on reality tv by those working in scripted television are similar to those the film industry used to cast on those working in television.

Genre also serves a managerial and legal purpose for television programs and networks. One of the biggest differences between the rights afforded actors and actresses in scripted television and those on reality programs is in regards to the rights over their image. Halbert (2003) focuses on the ownership of one’s rights and likeness. Celebrities retain the rights to their names and likenesses. What they are contracting away, during employment, is a portion of their persona to a third party. Halbert (2003) explains, “While they may become associated with a fictional character owned by someone else, their contracts would not preclude them from entering into other agreements dealing with other portions of their persona. The celebrity retains rights over their “core” or “nonfictional” image and merges this image with other images when engaged in new performances.” (pg 42) Of course, this can become difficult when the role the individual is playing has many similarities to their “actual” selves. Halbert (2003) specifically highlights Jerry Seinfeld as a hybrid individual whose persona contains both him as an individual and his character from *Seinfeld*. Examples such as this one highlight the difficulty in determining

whether works displaying Jerry Seinfeld, for example, exploit the persona of the individual or the character.

Celebrity, Courts, and Contracts

The difficulty in differentiating the character from the individual is both easier and more difficult in reality television. Legally, at least as defined by the standard contract, the character is considered to belong to the program. Since the individual is considered to have no ownership of their character, all of their future publicity must go through, if not be initiated by, the program. Legally, this differentiation matters little as control is assumed to be in the hands of the show. The difficulty comes from both an ethical and philosophical standpoint. Since the character the participant is playing is themselves, questions about the viability of owning another person's image are raised. While the contracts currently grant legal ownership to the programs, there is a chance that these claims could be overturned in court. Barnett (2015) reminds us that the enforceability of contracts is never absolute. Rather, it should be understood in continuous terms focusing on the probability of the outcome. The more seriously an individual is taken, the more likely that both the public and the legal system will consider their claims of unfair treatment. The de Havilland case in the early 40s offers a reminder of the how the legal system can be used to alter working conditions, and the personal cost that can come from challenging industry norms.

The case of Olivia de Havilland's legal fight for control over her career demonstrates that contracts are never absolute and the importance of the legal system in molding industry standards. Davis (1993) notes that after her well-regarded role in *Gone With the Wind*, Warner Bros. assigned her a number of mediocre scripts. She rebelled and was placed on suspension. While on suspension, actors and actresses were banned from working for anyone else and the time of the suspension was added onto their contracts. de Havilland had been suspended six

times, significantly extending the length of her contract. de Havilland took her case to the Supreme Court of California to dispute the legality of this added time. Davis (1993) states, “Hearings dragged on for months, while an angry Jack Warner blacklisted the actress with every studio in Hollywood. For three years she was absent from the screen. Then in March 1944, the court handed down the landmark de Havilland decision, whereby actors were released from serving out time added to their contracts through suspensions.” (pg 112) This victory gave those acting in films significantly more power. While they could still be suspended without pay, the length of their contracts could not be altered. This made studios far more willing to negotiate as their power move had been effectively eliminated.

The de Havilland decision had a dramatic impact on the industry and forced studios to alter their management practices. Gaines (1991) looks at the ways the studios had previously relied on suspensions to manage costs. She argues that miscasting was frequently used to encourage if not force individuals to take the suspension. Jack Warner was considered to be particularly skilled at, and fond of, this tactic. Gaines (1991) explains that, “Warner would assign a high-salaried actor an unsuitable role, and when the actor refused it, the producer would suspend the actor without pay, thus cutting his own costs.” (pg 152) Since suspension only lengthened the contract, there was no penalty to the studio. The de Havilland verdict in 1944 all the sudden imposed a significant penalty on the studios for engaging in this practice. While costs could still be managed in this way, the studio was having to decide between the individual or the savings. This ruling also established the right of refusal for actors and actresses. Schatz (1997) contends that this ruling gave actors and actresses the right to sit out specific films or, if they so chose, the duration of their contract.

The verdict had a profound impact on the industry and gave stars more autonomy. However, certain individuals had already had the freedom of working without restrictive contracts. Carman (2008) focuses on three actresses, Carole Lombard, Barbara Stanwyck and Miriam Hopkins. These women had all achieved active negotiations with the studios nearly a decade before the de Havilland verdict was handed down. Lombard and Hopkins both negotiated for percentages of their films' profits nearly twenty years before this arrangement became standard industry practice. Thus, while the importance of a legal victory cannot be overstated, it must be acknowledged that not all in Hollywood had been under the restrictive demands of the long term contract. Professional independence cannot be traced back to this ruling. What the court case did was to expand the number of individuals that could have more of an active role in shaping their careers.

In many ways, reality television participants have strong linkages to film extras working in early Hollywood. These individuals were often the least protected and most expendable. Often unions themselves wanted little to do with these workers, focusing instead on the bigger players. It wasn't until late 1933 that any union had attempted to meaningfully engage with extras and bit players. Segrave (2009) includes a statement from Kenneth Thomson, the secretary of SAG, that took place on October 26, 1933. The guild announced that extras and bit players would be taken into the union in its fight against the new salary control features of the proposed code put forth by the studios. "For the first time in motion picture history...there are no class distinctions and no castes among the players. The star and extra will work together to solve their mutual problems." (pg 135) The realization that these individuals could both need protections and also provide the numbers to potentially influence negotiations was late coming. Their addition was beneficial to SAG and further helped it to gain and maintain its primacy.

Of course, this sentiment of all being equal in the union was not actually borne out in practice. Segrave (2009) describes how a class system was quickly put in place. SAG was split into junior and senior branches. These branch designations were determined by how much a player made. Only members in the senior branch could vote on business and proposals, though all members were expected to abide by their decisions. Thus, the extras and bit players, relegated to the junior branch due to their small income, had no real say in guild business. The “caste” system derided by Thomson was in fact a key part of how the guild operated. The idea of all working together was really more all doing the bidding of the more powerful few. It becomes very clear that these individuals were brought into the guild out of necessity. In this case, the ability to provide numbers support against the proposed salary control measures. Once the extras were ensconced in the guild however, their presence did lead to their poor working conditions becoming a priority.

The treatment of extras was one that SAG and other groups did eventually focus on heavily. There are many horror stories of the poor treatment of film extras. As Clark (1995) highlights, in 1935 SAG was so distressed over the working conditions and treatment of extras that its magazine ran a feature titled “Are Extras People?” With a growing number of extras and day players as members, SAG saw a chance to cater to this market. These individuals were also potentially the most easily taken care of as small changes (in regards to pay and notification of work) could make big differences for these employees. Of course, the work done by SAG at the time was far more publicity oriented than representing true change. It took time before the studios accepted and acknowledged SAG as a bargaining organization. There was a gap between the creation of the guild and the industry’s recognition of its status. Gaines (1991) states that it was not until 1937 that Louis B Mayer recognized SAG as the official bargaining agent for

actors. This recognition came due to governmental pressure in the form of the previously discussed Wagner Act.

Better Living Through Reality TV? - The Precarious Enterprise of the Reality TV Celebrity

The restrictive rules placed on young actors and actresses seem to echo many of the aspects of the current contracts required for participation on competitive reality programs. It also presents the current contracts as open to change. Studios no longer have this kind of control over film stars. The studio system has been dismantled. The system had largely been eroded by the late forties. However, it had not disappeared completely and many in the 1950s returned to a version of that system. Hollywood as an industry has always worked to adapt in order to stay profitable and powerful. Barnett (2015) looks at the new systems that have been put in place. He notes that what we see now is a disaggregated system of studios, agencies and production companies. This system has also led to changes in the types of arrangements that become standard for the industry. There is currently a fluid mix of both hard- and soft-contracting practices at play in Hollywood. The large studios have remained profitable and have adapted to these new standards of business. Looking at how producers and craft personnel were treated post-studio system allow for an acknowledgement of the flexibility of Hollywood. The industry continues to adapt to maintain its profitability.

The desire for a cheap workforce that can be easily managed is at the center of capitalism. What we can see from an examination of the studio system and current reality television is how the latter is attempting to learn from the former. Reality television participants have a low cultural status, which makes them unappealing to organizations. These individuals are currently barred from SAG-AFTRA. In this sense, they have similar status to extras or day

players in early Hollywood. They can be considered near or at the bottom of the pyramid. Many seek a career in the industry and hope that their participation on reality programs could be a stepping-stone to wider fame and acclaim. Like the stars discussed in this chapter, participants have to give up much freedom and do so through the use of contracts. Unlike those stars though, participants are afforded few to no perks from their acceptance of these restrictive terms. History seems to show that little change will be made from within the industry itself. Legal and governmental influences were essential in giving actors and actresses the freedom to fight for increased control over their careers. Without the creation of a culture of support, it seems that reality television participants will likely continue to struggle on their own as the industry continues to profit off of their labor.

This chapter has painted a fairly bleak image of the rights and protections afforded to reality television participants. Labor organization and legal and governmental influences were all required in order for stars and extras to gain more control over their careers. These seem less likely to occur for today's participants. For one, their individual participation is often quite short. And, like the extras of Hollywood they are viewed as easily replaceable. And yet, during my interviews with participants, the majority framed their experience as positive and worthwhile. Most implied they would do it again if given the chance. This suggests that looking at participation solely in economic and legal terms misses the larger picture of the experience of appearing on reality television. While it may be exploitative, the goal for many was never the show itself, but the opportunities in other industries it could provide. The experience is seen as valuable even if the individual does not launch a career from it. In the conclusion I summarize the findings from this dissertation and lay out possible new avenues of research.

CONCLUSION: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

This dissertation has considered the life-cycle of reality television participation and the Canadian context in which it has occurred. On deciding to apply for a show, one is brought into a system that encourages them to consider themselves as a character. This reconceptualization of the self can have a significant impact on the life of the hopeful participant. Some individuals will make it to the next round, and an even smaller group will be selected as the “official” cast of the season. Once selected, they participate in the filming of the program. During filming, most are isolated from their support systems and face long hours and potentially emotionally and physically draining working conditions. Their appearance is edited, a process over which they have little to no control. That edited representation appears on television to be viewed and interpreted by audience members. A positive or negative edit can impact public support which can have both long and short term effects. The impacts of both the filming process and their portrayal can extend far beyond the lifetime of the show.

Looking at the process as a life-cycle allows for a consideration of the various stages and how labor functions in each. It also speaks to the ways in which individuals can stall at or repeat stages, and the lack of a clear ending. Hopefuls may try out for multiple seasons before being chosen. Once selected, participants must prepare mentally and emotionally for the filming process. This might involve making plans for childcare, bills, job absences and a multitude of other concerns. During filming, participants had to consider image management, performance, and the maintenance of relationships. Once they had returned home, some needed to prepare for the airing of their program. Others were thrust back into their old lives, but were now viewed as a celebrity. Participants had to attempt to mobilize their participation to turn it into something personally or professionally useful. Considering the process as a life-cycle also calls attention to

the lack of a clear end point to participation. Individuals can intentionally come back through future participation or unintentionally through re-broadcasting or international licensing.

The image of the life-cycle is also useful for considering participation more broadly. Individuals come to a program with an expectation of what will be expected of them. Deligiaouri and Popovic (2010) point out that those who participate in reality programs are educated within a TV culture. This makes individuals subconsciously well trained in knowing what the audience and program demand from them. The shows themselves put forth this perspective and it is adopted and used strategically by participants. Contestants may also have a sense of the risk and rewards of participation that is based on the experiences of those from earlier seasons or similar shows. For many Canadians, those seasons or shows are likely to be American. Those that have already appeared influence those who may be thinking about trying out. This influence should be considered to be transnational in nature.

Framing participation as a life-cycle also embraces the lack of clarity surrounding when participation ends. The filming experience may have a concrete timeline, but the programs themselves and their impacts may not. As Ryan, the winner of the first season of *Canadian Idol*, stated, “It's been over 12 years since Idol, and not a day goes by that it doesn't come up in one way or another. I am proud of what I did but at the same time I have moved on.” (personal correspondence) His comment speaks to both the long lasting effects of participation, and how participants are often viewed as static entities. Their association with the show is a constant even as their own relationship to that association changes. His participation is both something that he has left behind and something that he deals with every day.

I have heavily relied on participants' reflections of their experiences in this project. van den Scott, Forstie and Balasubramanian (2015) coin the term “eulogy work” to discuss the

emotional labour that contestants perform to frame their participation on the show during their elimination. The term “encompasses the conception and framing of self within the show at the moment of symbolic death, a contestant’s exit, a moment of transition and loss.” (pg 418) This process allows for both reputation management and the sense making of one’s participation. Contestants must quickly and publicly perform losing. This dissertation could thus be understood as being post-eulogy, or as extending the scope of this work. In the interviews, individuals worked to contextualize the show and how it fit into their lives. From this perspective, they eulogized their participation. The show is now considered and framed within their lives. The majority of my respondents said that they would participate again if given the opportunity. This concluding chapter works to consider how participation is framed and the significance of that framing.

In talking to and hearing from a number of participants, I have learned that there is no easy way to summarize the experience or the relation between participant and program. The experience, like life in general, is nuanced and complicated. Salamon (2010) has pointed out that the majority of the work that exists on reality contestants tends to provide a paternalistic take on the contestants and the exploitation they can face. I myself was guilty of this mindset. I came to this dissertation assuming that I would hear far more horror stories and disappointments about participating in the genre. Through these interviews I have gained a more nuanced view and realized that it is not always helpful to focus on whether something is exploitative or not. Or at least, the conversation should not end there. The majority of individuals who responded to me said they would participate again if given the opportunity. Focusing on exploitation ignores the pleasures and opportunities that the genre can offer.

While I do not want to discount the very real power imbalances that exist for contestants, it is also important to highlight how individuals navigate and make sense of their experiences. In discussing this difficulty, Steffi states

“I feel like people really look down on reality tv, sometimes for good reason, but I think there’s a common misconception that it’s all a hoax, it’s all bad and people are getting used and abused, but my experience really wasn’t like that. I couldn’t have been more surrounded by, the people who were making the show, cared so deeply about making the show great, and cared so deeply about us being comfortable and feeling supported that it was, ya know? To me, I would never be able to say anything negative about it” (personal interview)

Steffi’s response highlights the people who appear on and work in the genre. She frames her participation as a member of a group rather than an experience that left her isolated.

This sense of being part of a community came up multiple times in interviews with *Canadian Idol* contestants. Tyler expressed similar ideas to Steffi. In regards to whether or not there was any aspect about the show that he hadn’t expected, he responded,

one of the things I was probably most surprised about was how involved the crew members of the show are. Not only in the production and everything involved with the show itself, but on a personal level with the competitors. The people involved in this show - from the camera and sound guys, band members, to the production assistants, producers, hair and make-up people, wardrobe crew, and everyone in between - they were some of the best people I have ever met and I was constantly blown away by how invested in us they were and how close we all became as friends throughout the season. (personal correspondence)

Tyler’s response acknowledges the number of people working on the show and the strength of the relationships that are developed. He calls attention to the bonds that were formed. Theresa also discusses the importance of the crew and how those individuals are often ignored. She states, “The crew was amazing. Lifelong friends. It’s hard to portray the relationships made on reality TV. Everyone always asks if I still talk to any of the contestants... but those were not the strongest relationships. The ones we had with the crew and producers were incredible. I am grateful to have those people in my memories.” (personal correspondence) Here, Theresa points out that for her, the bonds with the crew were strong, but rarely considered by viewers. All three

of these contestants call attention to the number of people that work on reality programs and their importance to how the participants understand their own experience.

Shows each have their own atmosphere and norms. While the previous contestants discussed the sense of community on *Canadian Idol*, those on other shows reported much different experiences. Contestants on *Top Chef Canada* stated that crew members did not interact with them and were in fact told not to even look at the contestants. It would be announced whenever contestants needed to move around the studio and all crew in that area tended to physically turn their bodies away from participants as they passed (personal interviews). While contestants discussed friendships among the cast, forming bonds with crew members never came up. On other programs, relations with the crew changed over the filming process. A *Canada's Next Top Model* contestant disclosed that the cast had frequent conversations with the camera crew. Apparently at some point the producers felt the relationship was too friendly and directed the camera crew not to speak to the participants in a social manner anymore as it was creating too much unusable footage (personal correspondence). The variety of experiences with crew members serves as a reminder that each reality program functions differently and the studio environment can drastically impact a participant's filming experience.

Along with the norms of the show affecting one's filming experience, the time period in which filming took place may also have had an impact. Numerous contestants who had participated at least 5 years ago mentioned how today's reality television seemed different. Alanna remarked that she felt that the genre had drastically changed since she was a participant on *Canada's Next Top Model*. Discussing the differences, "I felt like the crew/producers, although trying to make an interesting show, kept us safe and I didnt feel like I was a pawn in a game to make me look bad or make me look crazy like shows do now. I feel like TV is always

looking for a villain or extreme drama, which don't get me wrong, I love to watch... but thank god I missed that!” (personal correspondence) Alanna presents her positive experience with the show as being due in part to how the genre was understood at the time. She distances herself from the “pawn” label that she associates with current programming.

As chapter 3 demonstrated, programs can reinforce many stereotypes and barriers to entry for those who are considered different in some way. Reality television relies on stereotypes and that can limit opportunities and reinforce hierarchies. These very real systems of discrimination need to be acknowledged in any discussion of participation and opportunities that can arise. And yet, time should also be spent considering how these programs can also be used to promote change. For example, both Lisa and Shavar discussed how *So You Think You Can Dance Canada* served as a platform for the promotion of male dancers. For Lisa, the program worked to challenge the conflation between male dancers and homosexuality. Dancing was not pegged to sexuality. It also served as a platform to showcase the technical skills and styles of dance and to complicate the understanding of men being celebrated for only “urban” styles of dance (personal interview). Shavar highlighted the industry as very focused on women. The majority of jobs involve dancing for female performers, and that typically means that women are chosen for those jobs. The show was one of the few opportunities for men (personal interview). In different ways, they both saw the show as expanding the cultural associations around masculinity and dance.

The gender parity in many of the co-ed programs considered here reveals how structures can work to challenge rather than reinforce the status quo. While there may still be issues surrounding representation, the format of a program can serve to increase access for marginalized groups. *So You Think You Can Dance Canada* cast an equal number of men and

women each season, which served to increase the visibility of the male dancers. While stereotypes persist and can be reinforced by programs, the fairly equitable gender split in the casting of co-ed programs could be seen as challenging trends in industries that were typically gendered. Shavar and Lisa speak to the gender split in dance. Many of the chefs and home cooks mentioned their industry was male dominated. Shows like *So You Think You Can Dance Canada*, *MasterChef Canada* and *Top Chef Canada*, at least in terms of casting, can be seen as opportunities to challenge the heavily gendered nature of those industries.

While many spoke about the opportunities they had pursued post-filming, viewing the show as venture labor (Neff, 2012) - work that could open up doors in the industry for them later - some presented the experience itself as the opportunity. Numerous contestants spoke of the experience of watching themselves on television as a chance to see how they present themselves to the world. Alanna, a contestant on *Canada's Next Top Model* spoke of the benefit of both having a chance to see her self-presentation and of having participated in the show. As she wrote,

“The show had so many positive impacts on my life.... especially afterwards. I felt like I was given this gift of seeing myself as I am. To watch yourself on tv, not acting, just being yourself if actually a really odd experience and very almost sobering haha because you look at yourself and go ... is that really me?? do I walk like that? do I laugh like that? haha I just felt that it gave me my voice and this fearlessness. I applied for the show never in a million years thinking I would be chosen, and I ended up being runner up. This risk that I took for myself allowed me to become so open to trying new things, and going for what I want. Anything I have ever wanted or dreamt of I have gone after. I developed this, you can do anything attitude. Because why not me? why couldn't I be on CNTM? Why couldn't I become a nurse or a doctor ? and I really attribute this to being on the show and I have always been thankful for that.” (personal correspondence)

For Alanna, it was the confidence and motivation provided by the show, rather than any modelling opportunities that could result, that was the most valuable.

Heather, a *Canada's Next Top Model* competitor speaks to the ways in which her own relationship to her participation changed over time. In regards to watching her season, she

remarked that it was strange to see the footage and not a pleasant experience. “At the time it came out, I was very uncomfortable watching the show. I didn't like how I was portrayed, I didn't like how I looked on film- I was very insecure. Now that I've seen it years later, I can enjoy it a bit- it's fun to watch and remember. I don't judge myself quite so harshly now; I can see that I was just young and a little naive about the whole process.” (personal correspondence) Heather's reflection serves as a reminder of the importance of time to the understanding of one's experience. As time passed, Heather was able to view her participation as pleasurable in a way she hadn't previously.

The notion of the passage of time changing one's experience was in the background of many of the interviews. Richie compared his participation on *Canadian Idol* to a tattoo. It's a time in his life. He remarked that he didn't mind being associated with the show because he has taken his work into his own hands (personal interview). For both Heather and Richie, time has impacted how they understand their own experiences. In Heather's case time created distance and allowed her to judge her younger self less harshly. For Richie, time has given him space in which to explore and create artistically. He actively worked to flesh out his identity - especially online. He was recently reminded by someone that he should update his entry on Wikipedia. For him that served as a reminder of the need to actively shape his own identity rather than let others do so for him (personal interview). Without his own engagement, things like *Canadian Idol* could come to define him to others. These responses point out that where a contestant is in the life-cycle will impact how they understand their participation. It also suggests that more recent participants may have very different understandings of their experience than those who competed some time ago.

The idea of participation as now being something fun to reflect on was common among those whose participation occurred some time ago. Richie was teaching at a Canadian University when we talked. He mentioned that in the first week of class every semester he tells his students about his *Canadian Idol* participation. He knows that his students will find it amusing and will google him after (personal interview). Kelsey laughed about her participation in *Over the Rainbow* being a way for her friends to embarrass her at parties. More seriously, she pointed out that she was in a program with a lot of musical theater people and so they would occasionally watch her old performances online (personal interview). This was a bonding activity and was presented as enjoyable. These examples consider participation as something light and fun to be shared.

While I have discussed the ways that individuals felt pressure to represent themselves on camera, it should be pointed out that this pressure does not end with filming. One *Canadian Idol* contestant mentioned that they felt more pressure once they returned home. They felt they were constantly under a spotlight (personal correspondence). This response speaks to the pressures that come from becoming a known individual. Being known from reality television tended to convey an intimacy that other forms of celebrity did not. Carlie reflected on the reactions she received from the public in regards to her *Project Runway Canada* experience. “Intense reactions. People loving and hating very passionately without reason...because you enter their household via the TV every week, they think they know you.” (personal correspondence) Carlie speaks to the ways in which she and other contestants are often viewed as “known” entities by individuals they will likely never meet. Terry discussed an encounter with a viewer at a grocery store. A woman had shouted his name and grabbed his arm. Startled by this attention from a stranger he had glared at her. To him, it was clear to her at that moment that she had grabbed a

stranger (personal interview). Until that interaction the woman had felt that she “knew” Terry because of his *Top Chef Canada* participation. In that moment she realized that this relationship was one-sided. While she was aware of him, he did not know her. Participants become known individuals and that can create unfounded expectations regarding their behavior.

There are clear limitations to my study. While far more individuals were willing to participate than I initially expected, they are still a minority in terms of all contestants that have competed on Canadian skill and talent based competition programs. There are many other stories that I did not hear. I also only spoke with those who were successfully cast on a season. Those who were still trying out, who had tried out previously and stopped, or had made the semi-finals were not included. Noting those limitations, I never thought I would uncover a universal truth about participation. Rather, this dissertation has provided a sampling of the various ways individuals understand and make sense of their time on television. Work on the genre has frequently excluded Canada, contestants, and interviewing as a method of investigating celebrity. My dissertation demonstrates that these areas are ripe for further exploration.

This dissertation has worked to consider the lived experiences of those who participate in reality television programs. I have focused solely on Canadian skill and talent based competition programs. In the future I would like to begin to interview contestants on American programs to see how their experiences have differed from the Canadians I talked to. This will allow for an investigation into cultural norms surrounding the genre and the difference that location makes. The American star system is vastly different from its Canadian counterpart as it is both more visible and hierarchical. There are more opportunities for American contestants, but they also face more of a stigma from their participation. I will also look at the impact that they type of show has on an individual’s experience. Interviewing individuals from more personality-based

programs (both competitive and noncompetitive) will allow me to consider how they attempt to mobilize their participation. A more nuanced view of the labor that contestants perform will emerge from this work. This will also tie into the work others have done on the importance of self-branding.

While much attention has been placed on the few individuals who have managed to achieve some modicum of celebrity and media success from their appearance (the Carly Rae Jepsens and Jacob Hoggards), the majority of participants return to their lives. Little attention is paid to these individuals, who may face struggles resulting from their participation or who may view their appearance as successful even though they didn't win. Through speaking with those who have appeared on reality television programs, a more nuanced view of the risks and rewards of participation can occur. These Canadian contestants are impacted by the shows and contestants who have come before and, in turn, help to shape a sense of opportunities and understandings for those who have yet to compete. Looking at their experiences complicate and challenge many of the assumptions that are taken as "truth" about the genre.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

This is the list of questions that I used to guide my interviews. While all of the interviews covered these topics, conversations often went in other areas as I attempted to let my respondents steer the conversation.

What made you want to try out for and participate on the show?

Did you have a strategy going in to the application process? Was there a particular image of yourself you were trying to convey?

Was there anything you had to change/do/postpone in your life in order to appear on the show?

Did you feel pressure to behave a certain way or present a specific image of yourself in front of the cameras?

What was the hardest part of the filming process?

Was there anything about the filming process or doing the show that you hadn't expected?

Did you watch the show at all?

How did it feel to see yourself on the show?

Did you feel any disconnect between your experience and your portrayal?

Was there anything about how you were portrayed that you would have changed?

How did friends and family react to seeing you on tv?

Was there reaction from the public?

Have you been recognized because of your participation?

Have there been personal or professional opportunities that have developed due to your participation?

How do you feel being on the show has impacted your life?

Looking back, is there anything you would change about your participation on the show?

APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONS

For those who were interested in participating but did not want to, or could not, do an interview I emailed this Google Forms survey:

Reality Participant Questionnaire

All questions are optional. Please choose not to answer any question that you view as non-applicable or that you simply don't want to.

Section 1

- 1) How would you like to be identified? (You may choose a pseudonym if you'd prefer)
- 2) What show did you participate in?
- 3) What place did you make it to in the competition?
- 4) How long ago did your participation occur
 - Within the last 5 years
 - More than 5 years ago but less than 10 years ago
 - More than 10 years ago
- 5) What gender do you identify as?
- 6) What made you want to try out for and participate on the program?
- 7) Did you have a strategy going in to the application process? Was there a particular image of yourself you were trying to convey?
- 8) Was there anything you had to change/do/postpone in your life in order to appear on the show?
- 9) Did you feel any pressure to behave a certain way or present a specific image of yourself in front of the cameras? (either personally, from the show, or from a community you were a part of)
- 10) What was the hardest part of the filming process for you?
- 11) Was there anything about the filming process or doing the show that you hadn't expected?
- 12) Had you watched any previous seasons (if applicable) or international versions?
- 13) If so, do you feel that that helped or was beneficial in any way?
- 14) Did you watch the show the season you were on?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Occasionally

Section 2: Watching Yourself

- 1) How did it feel to see yourself on the show?
- 2) Did you feel any disconnect between your experience and your portrayal?
- 3) Was there anything about how you were portrayed that you would have changed?

Section 3: After the Show

- 1) How did friends and family react to seeing you on tv?
- 2) Was there reaction from the public?
- 3) Have you been recognized because of your participation on the show?
- 4) Have there been opportunities (either personally or professionally) provided to you due to your participation?
- 5) Have there been any drawbacks or negatives (either personally or professionally) due to your participation?
- 6) How do you feel that appearing on the show has impacted your career?
- 7) How do you feel that appearing on the show has impacted your life?
- 8) Looking back is there anything you would change about your participation on the show?
- 9) Is there anything else you would like to add about your participation or the impacts it has had?