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Blank Slates in Balenciaga: Functioning Marginality in *America's Next Top Model*

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Abstract

During its first ten years on television*, America's Next Top Model* (*ANTM*) established a clear standard of judging for each slate of (all-female) models competing. In its 20th season, *ANTM* introduced male models into the competition. This created space for new judging standards—to what extent would the judges expect male models to perform their race and gender conventionally? Some argued that male privilege would allow them to diverge from the previously enforced standards, but other scholars argued that both racial and gendered hegemony would prevail. This paper explores how *ANTM* judging standards change in relation to how contestants perform their race and gender. It also discusses the notion of "self-commodification," or leveraging one's marginalized identity to appeal to judges. By analyzing the judges' criticism during the season's finale, as well as the results of the competition itself, I show that male models are not exempt from the show's previous standards that prioritize both whiteness and gender conformity. They are forced to self-commodify in a way that the only white and gender-conforming finalist is not, demonstrating how the show privileges racial and gendered hegemony regardless of whether the models are male or female.

Keywords*:* Reality television, marginality, modeling, gender roles, conformity

Introduction

Three hopeful models, all dressed in extravagant runway attire, stand before Tyra Banks and her posse of judges. The tension is palpable as Tyra, the eccentric hostess of *America's Next Top Model* (*ANTM*), informs them that one model will be eliminated right before they participate in the final challenge. The eliminated models, invited back to assist in the grand finale, titter in shock at the twist. Tense music builds as the judges give their thoughts and Tyra prepares to pass down judgment. The remaining contestants, near-shaking with nervous anticipation, prepare for the decision that will determine which two of them still have a chance at the title—for them, it is a life-changing moment.

This scene, filled with the hallmarks of reality television (RTV), comes from Season 20 of *America's Next Top Model*. The twentieth "cycle," as the show refers to its seasons, premiered in 2013 and is notable for its inclusion of male models. In the preceding 19 cycles, only female-identifying models competed for the title of "America's Next Top Model." The title's benefits usually include a contract with a modeling agency, a spread in a magazine, and a cash prize.[1] Because only women had competed in the previous cycles, a hegemonic standard for what "America's Next Top Model" should be had emerged over time; this standard was usually (although not always) traditionally feminine and white.[2] The introduction of men into the competition required that the judging criteria change to accommodate men, meaning that the judges had to decide to what extent they would enforce male gender roles in addition to the female ones that had already been established. This begs the question: to what extent does the introduction of men into the competition affect *ANTM*'s judging standards? I argue that the answer is "very little." Although the male contestants are necessarily evaluated on slightly different criteria from the women, the judges still enforce a hegemonic standard that prioritizes whiteness and gender conformity. This makes the show's stage a tilted one, enforcing a largely conformist beauty standard.

Because the finalists comprise two models who present in keeping with traditional gender stereotypes and one who presents androgynously, the two finale episodes provide a general overview of how conventionally female-presenting, conventionally male-presenting, and androgynous contestants are judged in Cycle 20. In the words of Cory Hindorff, one of the three finalists, "Jourdan [Mills] is the classic beauty. Marvin [Cortes] is the youthful male. I am the androgynous male."[3] Jourdan, a 19-year-old white woman, represents conventional femininity, often the gold standard of the show's judging. Marvin, a 20-year-old Cuban man, represents conventional masculinity, a new but no less idealized notion on *ANTM.* Both Jourdan and Marvin are also heterosexual. Cory, a 22-year-old white man who self-describes as

1. *America's Next Top Model*. Season 20, Episode 14, "Finale Part 1: The Finalists Shoot Their Guess Campaign." Directed by Tony Croll, featuring Tyra Banks, Marvin Cortes, Cory Hindorff, and Jourdan Miller. Aired November 8, 2013 on The CW. https://www.netflix.com/watch/80016298?trackId=200257859.

2. Mary Thompson, ""Learn Something from This!": The problem of optional ethnicity on *America's Next Top Model*," *Feminist Media Studies* 10, no. 3 (August 2010): 335-352, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2010.493656.

3. *America's Next Top Model*. Season 20, Episode 14, "Finale Part 1."

androgynous-presenting, is *ANTM*'s first openly gay male contestant. The first two contestants are cisgender and use the accordant pronouns. Cory presently uses all pronouns, but used he/him pronouns for the duration of the show and is referred to as such here.

Methodology

Regarding analysis of the show itself, I will focus on the language the judges, other contestants, and photography assistants use in judging and instructing the finalists. Often, their critiques contain gendered connotations that reflect the value of gender presentation in the modeling industry and thus the standards of the show. Although most of the judges' criticisms are expressed during "panel," about a ten-minute segment of the show, compiling language used over the course of the episodes will still be useful in assessing the show's judging standards. Using other scholars in conjunction with evidence from the show itself, I will first establish Cycle 20's judging standards and how they compare to those of past seasons. The analysis will rest on the language used by the judges in the finale judging, the placement of the finalists, and trends found in the show by other scholars. In order to understand how judging trends affect the models, there is also analysis of how the contestants describe themselves in confessionals and other footage. All scholarship relates in some way to the judging standards of the show and/or gender performance on RTV.

The Mechanics of *America's Next Top Model*

Before answering the questions posed thus far, I will briefly describe the format of *ANTM*. The models all reside in one house together; one is eliminated from the competition each week and consequently leaves the house. In each episode, the remaining models complete one challenge (usually related to a marketable skill in the modeling world) and one photoshoot. The challenges and photoshoots are cut with confessionals (participants speaking alone about their feelings) from different contestants, as well as footage from the house's goings-on. From Season 19 on, contestants receive a score out of 10 points for their challenge performance, in addition to a social media score calculated by social media personality Bryanboy. Each judge also gives them a score out of 10 for the quality of their photo, making a possible 50 points. In addition to Tyra and Bryanboy, judges include "PR Maven" Kelly Cutrone and male model Rob Evans.[4] Each model receives their scores and commentary individually from the judges during "panel," for which all of the remaining models are present. Tyra then announces the list of contestants remaining in the competition. The model who receives "best photo" and the highest score has their photo displayed in the house, among other rewards.

Literature Review

Broadly, scholars agree as to what *ANTM*'s judging standards are in its first 19 seasons; however, there is tension in how these would be affected by the addition of men. Nearly all scholars concur that *ANTM* prioritizes an idealized vision of white femininity. Sarah Cefai and Maria Elena Indelicato, Justene Musin, Tracey Owens Patton and Julie Snyder-Yuly, and Mary Thompson all point to the example of contestant Tiffany in Cycle 4. Upon Tiffany (a "ghetto-fabulous" Black woman)'s elimination for failing to take the competition seriously and emulate

4. *America's Next Top Model*. Season 20, Episode 14, "Finale Part 1."

Tyra's own "rags-to-riches" narrative, Tyra berates her in an act known as the "Tyra tirade."[5] Thompson posits that this is an effect of the show's pseudo-progressive philosophy, in which ethnicity is an optional asset or detractor from a model's marketability and must be "painted" onto a white ideal rather than taken at face value.[6] Musin's, as well as Cefai and Indelicato's scholarship, is concordant with this thesis[7]—although there are different nuances in each argument, it is clear that each scholar believes that Tiffany's elimination was a result of her failure to conform to the judges' idea of a "top model." These standards include both race and gender expression. The two are inextricable from each other, given the societal idealization of specifically white femininity, and scholars agree that contestants are expected to fulfill both components of conformity in some way or another. This reinforces a power dynamic in which the judges use Thompson's concept of "optional ethnicity" to frame Musin's concept of "self-commodification" (or, branding oneself using those traits deemed as desirable).[8]

By hypothesizing that introducing men to the show would dramatically change the power dynamics, Patton and Snyder-Yuly raise a challenge to the otherwise concurrent scholarship.[9] Although they agree with other scholars that the judges use their power over the contestants in order to enforce hegemonic standards, Patton and Snyder-Yuly claim that Tyra's power would be all but upended should men be introduced to the show. Inversions of power on the show manifest in "women and marginalized men [the judges] demonizing young women, who have relatively little power."[10] Introducing men would negate contestants' marginality and therefore upend the established power dynamic.[11] Kavka claims otherwise—that performative masculinity in reality TV settings is just as entrenched in traditional societal standards of race and gender as performative femininity[12] and creates a similarly conformist environment. Although his analysis doesn't explicitly discuss *ANTM,* his analysis of reality competitions is still applicable. In Cycle 20, it seems that adding men to the competition does not cause the hegemonic judging standards to change. Rather, any marginality the male contestants might carry is valuable only as a potential asset to self-commodification. Otherwise, it is a flaw they must remedy in order to be marketable.

It's worth noting that Patton and Snyder-Yuly do make their hypothesis based on the assumption that most of the male contestants would be white, and indeed, this assumption proves true in Cycle 20. However, they failed to account for other marginalized perspectives

5. Tracey Owens Patton and Julie Snyder-Yuly, "Roles, Rules, and Rebellions: Creating the Carnivalesque through the Judges' Behaviors on *America's Next Top Model*," *Communications Studies* 63, no. 3 (June 2012): 377, https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2012.678923.
6. Thompson, "'Learn something.'"
7. Sarah Cefai and Maria Elena Indelicato, "No Such Thing as Standard Beauty: Intersectionality and Embodied Feeling on *America's Next Top Model*," *Outskirts* 24 (May 2011), https://www.outskirts.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/volume-24/cefai.
8. Justene Musin, "Docile and disciplined: What it takes to become 'America's Next Top Model,'" *Colloquy* 26 (December 2013): 32; Cefai and Indelicato, "Standard Beauty."
9. Patton and Snyder-Yuly, "Roles, Rules, and Rebellions," 380.
10. Ibid., 377.
11. Ibid., 380.
12. Misha Kavka, "Reality TV and the Gendered Politics of Flaunting," in *Reality Gendervision: Sexuality and Gender on Transatlantic Reality Television*, ed. Brenda R. Weber (Duke University Press, March 2014), 65.

that would allow the established power dynamics to persist on *ANTM*. A case supporting their hypothesis might be made using the eliminated men who were nor marginalized and therefore not judged on it; however, I have confined myself to the cycle's last two episodes and deem the eliminated contestants irrelevant in evaluating the judging standards. The finalists are given the deepest contemplation during judging, and are evaluated on their performance throughout the show rather than a single episode.

Previous Judging Standards

In order to understand the judging standards of Cycle 20, it is imperative to define the judging standards of the preceding seasons. The *ANTM* scholars referenced in this paper—Musin, Thompson, Cefai and Indelicato, and Patton and Snyder-Yuly—broadly agree that the judging standards idealize whiteness and gender conformity. Cefai and Indelicato note that the models' success hinges on their "adherence to the standardisation [sic] of beauty that is historically white;"[13] Thompson writes that nonwhite models "must perform an approximation of whiteness in order to be successful."[14] Musin, in concurrence with the previous two scholars, writes that this is a result of the narrative of the models "making themselves a branded commodity,"[15] or self-commodification. To self-commodify is to objectify oneself in the hopes of fitting a certain "type" and becoming more employable. As such, embracing nonwhite ethnicity on the show is "a self-commodifying, branding gesture"[16] (as Thompson puts it), meant to "reinforce" the "hegemonic order"[17] and become more employable under the show's standards of modeling. Under these circumstances, models must self-commodify so "that they be unique, but only enough so that they fit within the brief."[18] As these scholars have shown, *ANTM* idealizes whiteness and traditional femininity in their judging. This forces models to commodify their differences, making themselves marketable but not so different that they alienate consumers.

Modeling & Marginality

From the start of Cycle 20, gender is at the center of proceedings. The introduction of men predicates the season's big gimmick—how will the judges respond to male model hopefuls? Could the men's performance outdo that of the women, to whom the competition had previously belonged? The opening voice over of Episode 14, the first part of the finale, reminds viewers that they are meant to be asking these questions. Within the first few minutes of the show, Tyra reminds the audience that contestant Cory has "shown he can break down barriers" with his "androgyny and chameleon-like talent."[19] Although Tyra praises Cory as "gorgeous" in the same breath, his androgyny proves to be a disadvantage he must constantly overcome in the episode's challenge. While shooting an ad campaign for Guess, a high-end clothing brand, the photographer continually asks Cory to be more masculine. Cory expresses to Jourdan and

13. Cefai and Indelicato, "Standard Beauty."
14. Thompson, "'Learn something,'" 347.
15. Musin, "Docile and disciplined," 28.
16. Thompson, "'Learn something,'" 347.
17. Patton and Snyder-Yuly, "Roles, Rules, and Rebellions," 380.
18. Musin, "Docile and disciplined," 27.
19. *America's Next Top Model*. Season 20, Episode 14, "Finale Part 1."

Marvin that he feels "like [he has] to put on something, whereas you guys— what you have to do is just be yourselves."[20] In actively projecting a more masculine image, Cory practices Musin's notion of self-commodification.

Musin describes the pressure to self-commodify, or brand oneself in a marketable way, as a result of "the same expectations and homogenising [sic] standards"[21] that are imposed upon the models. Although Musin argues that self-commodification is the ultimate expression of femininity on *ANTM* in previous seasons, it proves applicable to masculinity as well. Both Cory and Marvin are forced to self-commodify in different ways, though both do so as a result of their respective marginalized identities. Although (according to an eliminated contestant) Marvin "fits the mold a lot more than Cory does,"[22] he is still forced to use his marginality to convey a more sympathetic image. Both Cory and Marvin express their marginality in a way that makes them more attractive contestants—not necessarily because it makes them better models, but because their win would indicate progress.

In a confessional, Cory says that he would "feel like [he] let [his] community down"[23] if he did not win. Marvin, also in a confessional, says "I'm Hispanic, and we all come to this country to get an opportunity."[24] Each is clearly aware of the barrier their marginality poses to success in the modeling industry. However, both Marvin and Cory leverage their marginality as proof of progress should they win, making them more attractive to the fans (who contributed to scores in Cycle 20). Perhaps subconsciously, the two prove Thompson's claim that "neoliberalism has appropriated and commodified multiculturalism."[25] In choosing to show confessional footage that speaks to why their wins would be momentous, the show treats Cory's queerness and Martin's ethnicity as brownie points that speak to its façade of progress.

However, neither contestant manages to convert this valuation of marginality into a win. Jourdan, the only female finalist, triumphs by a mere two points over Marvin in the final challenge. At around six feet tall, Jourdan is slim, with pale skin, blue eyes, and hair dyed blonde over the course of the competition. Tyra introduces her at the start of Episode 14 as a "classic beauty" who has "morphed from country girl to high-fashion siren."[26] Already, it's clear that her Eurocentrically attractive features make her "classic—" Jourdan has no extra hurdles to leap over as Cory and Marvin do. During the challenge, the same photographer who instructed Cory to "give masculinity" says that Jourdan "has everything it takes to be the ultimate 'Guess Girl.'"[27] She exemplifies what Cefai and Indelicato define as the gold standard of *ANTM*—"the execution of a confident but soft, exotic but not too ethnic, flexible, hard-working but always smiling persona."[28]

20. Ibid.
21. Musin, "Docile and disciplined," 38.
22. *America's Next Top Model*. Season 20, Episode 14, "Finale Part 1."
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Thompson, "'Learn something,'" 340.
26. *America's Next Top Model*. Season 20, Episode 14, "Finale Part 1."
27. Ibid.
28. Cefai and Indelicato, "Standard Beauty."

Of course, it's possible that Jourdan is simply a good model. She won the most "best photos" out of any of the contestants, and consistently scored well.[29] However, the standards by which she is judged reward white femininity. Kavka writes that numerous RTV shows propagate "a rigorous code of feminine visibility formatted by a social script."[30] *ANTM* is no different—look only to Musin, who writes that "discipline imparts docility"[31] on the show, or Thompson, who notes that it adopts a "masquerade" that "assumes a highly traditional, submissive form of femininity."[32] Jourdan, who social media consultant Bryanboy describes as looking like a "pin-up girl,"[33] embodies this standard—regardless of her modeling skills, her conventional attractiveness gives her a leg up.

Particularly telling is a discussion among the judges during the final deliberation. At this point in the show, Cory has been eliminated, and the judges are trying to decide if Marvin or Jourdan will become America's Next Top Model.

> TYRA: Does Jourdan look specific enough?
>
> BRYANBOY: She looks expensive. She looks like a beautiful canvas. You can transform her into anything.
>
> TYRA: But there's not a signature. You know what I'm saying? Like, Rob [Evans]'s face is Rob's face. He has a stamp and this thing that stamps in your brain and you know it's him.
>
> KELLY: But if she worked with the right makeup artists and the right photographers and she allowed her experiences to come out, that girl could kill it in a shot.[34]

According to Thompson, "*ANTM* has privileged the unmarked white body for the idealized role of 'blank palette.'"[35] The above commentary, coupled with Jourdan's victory, proves this to be true in Cycle 20 (despite the addition of men). Although Tyra expresses concern that she might be too generic, Jourdan's conventionality in both race and gender performance make her a blank slate—something altogether more desirable on the show than Cory or Marvin's more unique appearances.

The Consistent Carnivalesque

This disproves Patton and Snyder-Yuly's hypothesis that adding men to *ANTM* would destroy the power dynamic of the panel.[36] According to their analysis, the show's structure

29. *America's Next Top Model*. Season 20, Episode 14, "Finale Part 1."
30. Kavka, "Gendered Politics of Flaunting," 59.
31. Musin, "Docile and disciplined," 29.
32. Thompson, "'Learn something,'" 338.
33. *America's Next Top Model*. Season 20, Episode 14, "Finale Part 1."
34. *America's Next Top Model*. Season 20, Episode 15, "Finale Part 2: The Guy or Girl Who Becomes America's Next Top Model." Directed by Tony Croll, featuring Tyra Banks, Marvin Cortes, Cory Hindorff, and Jourdan Miller. Aired November 15, 2013 on The CW. https://www.netflix.com/watch/80016299?trackId=200257858.
35. Thompson, "'Learn something,'" 344.
36. Patton and Snyder-Yuly, "Roles, Rules, and Rebellions," 380.

exemplifies the carnivalesque—the subversion of conventional structures. Because the judges are marginalized (Tyra is a Black woman, Bryanboy a gay Filipino man, Rob a Black man), "they are seen as individuals who typically have less power in U.S. society."[37] By using their judging power to reward white femininity, as with Jourdan, they both "challenge the hegemonic order and… reinforce it."[38] Although Patton and Snyder-Yuly prove correct in describing the show's carnivalesque subversion of power, their claim that the judges "would not be successful in challenging the patriarchal normative standard"[39] in the presence of male models is incorrect. Although Cory and Marvin, as men, have a type of privilege that Tyra does not, she is still able to exert gender and racial conformity upon them in the same way as the female contestants. Because both are marginalized in some way, they lack the "power… automatically granted [to white men] by U.S. society"[40] that Patton and Snyder-Yuly insist would dismantle Tyra's power. Conformity is still framed as something to which the male contestants should aspire.

In the panel preceding Cory's elimination, Rob says that he "finally" looks "more masculine in this picture," citing the appearance of masculinity—and straightness—as something Cory has been "working toward."[41] Kelly says that he "looks like a straight guy,"[42] indicating that he has surpassed the barrier of his sexuality. Where Cory receives praise for looking more masculine, Marvin is rewarded for looking "sensual, soft, and really elegant."[43] Although these are not the most conventionally masculine of traits, Marvin performs a basic level of gender conformity that Cory does not and can lean into the softness the judges urge Cory to suppress. Cory's queerness means he is required to over-perform masculinity and heterosexuality in order to conform to the show's hegemonic judging standards. His failure to consistently do so predicates his elimination, demonstrating how his marginality negates his privilege in the show's context.

Marvin, however, faces the conundrum of "optional ethnicity." In the final deliberation, Tyra states that Marvin "can speak to a lot of different audiences" and is "everybody's brother"[44] due to what she perceives as his racial ambiguity. Thompson states that "ethnicity is commodified as a style or fashion accessory that should be turned on and off… as it affords the individual model 'cultural capital.'"[45] It seems as if Marvin's racial ambiguity would be an advantage in this case—he has the option, as Tyra puts it, of appealing to many different ethnic groups depending on how they perceive him. However, what Tyra perceives as his racial ambiguity does not exclude him from the "double-bind of ethnic identity" that Thompson identifies, in which models are encouraged to perform their ethnicity when marketable but punished when they appear "too ethnic." [46] Although Marvin is willing to "opt in" to his

37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., 381.
41. *America's Next Top Model*. Season 20, Episode 15, "Finale Part 2."
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Thompson, "'Learn something,'" 342.
46. Ibid., 343.

ethnicity, it still prevents him from becoming the "blank palette" that *ANTM* prioritizes. Viewers and employers "want an aspirational image," says Bryanboy, "and Jourdan represents that."[47] Marvin, despite his gender conformity, cannot compare to Jourdan. She has what he does not—complete conventionality in both race and gender performance. This is what makes her "aspirational," according to Bryanboy, and eventually warrants her victory. The show's commitment to prioritizing hegemonic standards that Patton and Snyder-Yuly and other scholars agree upon outweighs the privilege that maleness affords.

Conclusion

Despite the male privilege that some of Cycle 20's contestants carry, the judges maintain the carnivalesque subversion of structure that allows them to enforce hegemonic standards. This means that homogeneity—the appearance of whiteness, conformity—is something for prospective Top Models to aspire to. It seems that, in adding male models to the competition roster, *ANTM* did not break any conventions in the previously established standards for what a Top Model should look like. Rather, it created a new but similarly conformist standard to which men were expected to adhere.

What, then, is the solution to the persistent problem Patton and Snyder-Yuly identify? Even in the presence of men, with their presumed privilege, *ANTM*'s judges enforce judging standards that idealize whiteness and gender conformity while simultaneously commodifying marginality. The two concepts contradict one another. Models should strive to fit the hegemonic mold of whiteness and gender conformity, but also use any marginality they have in a marketable fashion. This reflects a greater problem in RTV of tokenizing marginality—but one that *ANTM* may be helping to solve. In seasons 21-24 of *ANTM*, 75% of the winners have been marginalized in some way. Although this doesn't indicate a complete removal of the show's previous hegemonic standards, it indicates a serious potential for change. The questions we are left with are: How do we change beauty standards on a larger level? Can RTV shows break free of the hegemonic standards they hold dear and become a vehicle for societal change?

47. *America's Next Top Model*. Season 20, Episode 15, "Finale Part 2."

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