

The (unsuccessful) reality television make under: Class, illegitimate femininities, and resistance in *Snog, Marry, Avoid*

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In postfeminist media culture, young women are now evaluated, regulated and exhorted to recalibrate in new ways, in new forms, especially the reality makeover program. No less seeking the transformation of its subjects, Britain's 'make under' reality television program, *Snog, Marry, Avoid*, celebrating women's 'natural beauty', focuses upon women whose gendered performance is considered a threat to normative femininity and the class distinctions with which it is intimately bound. In each episode, women are called to account for their physical, sartorial and behavioural crimes. This paper considers how the show attempts to position these young femininities as illegitimate and explores how the make under seeks to operate – often unsuccessfully – as a form of class makeover. Challenging narratives about the success of reality television in policing the bounds of 'appropriate' femininity, subjects routinely reject the judgements and sense of shame that the show seeks to instil, offering up – as this paper argues – a form of resistance that at once reinforces and troubles the program's class-based logics.

Introduction

In postfeminist media culture, young women are now evaluated, regulated and exhorted to recalibrate in new ways, in new forms, especially the reality makeover program. No less seeking the transformation of its subjects, Britain's 'make under' reality television program, *Snog, Marry, Avoid?* – featured on BBC3 – completed its sixth and final season in 2013.¹ Celebrating the virtues of women's 'natural beauty', it focuses upon women whose performance of (a certain type of) femininity is – for a variety of reasons I will explore – figured as deeply problematic, in extreme need of the kind of intervention staged within the show's narrative framework. These young women, predominantly in their late teens/early twenties, are called to account for their style, fashion and

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behavioural crimes by a voiceover dubbed POD: 'Personal Overhaul Device'. Early in each episode POD judges them, identifying the ways in which they fail at being (or rather appearing) 'naturally' feminine; they are then subject to the 'Public Analysis Test', where a number of men assess the women as to whether they should – as per the show's title – be 'snogged, married or avoided'. POD subsequently delivers her verdict, often a scathing critique of the women's appearance, after which the participants appear almost instantaneously transformed. Following their make under, participants are routinely described (and describe themselves) as 'classy' yet commonly revert to their original appearance. Building upon previous work on this program and similar reality television shows (Woods, 2012; Gerrard and Ball, 2013; McCann, 2015; Wood, 2016), this paper considers how *Snog Marry Avoid* attempts to position these young femininities as illegitimate, seen to represent a threat to normative middle class femininity that must be carefully managed, and fundamentally explores how the make under at the show's heart seeks to operate, though often unsuccessfully, primarily as a form of class makeover. As I will demonstrate, in a challenge to *Snog, Marry, Avoid's* governing logic, participants routinely reject the judgements and accompanying sense of shame that the show seeks to enact, in a number of cases either refusing to accept or to maintain the 'made under' look it provides and sanctions. That is, as this paper argues, they offer up a form of resistance that at once reinscribes *and* troubles its class-based logics, and it is in light of the latter that it can be – at least partially – recuperated in a feminist sense.

Although the program's run ended in 2013, it exemplifies a wider, ongoing trend towards re-emphasizing gendered class antagonisms especially in Britain, manifest in other reality programs such as ITV's *The Only Way is Essex*, now in its nineteenth season, and MTV's *Geordie Shore*. As Helen Wood (2016, 2) has recently argued in her analysis of the latter, such programs need to be seen in terms of a wider "ongoing 'spectacularisation' of the working class across television". In relation to the show's ongoing visibility, in Australia, where I write, *Snog, Marry, Avoid* continues to be repeated (on Channel 11), and entire episodes as well as shorter clips of individual make unders are available on YouTube and are viewed in the millions. That is, it and related sub-genres of reality television continue to be enthusiastically consumed, suggesting its persistent cultural reverberations.

Makeover television, governmentality and postfeminism

Makeover television programs – and indeed its ‘make under’ variants – promise a new self, and in this way they are consistent with the makeover logics that are central to postfeminism and indeed neoliberalism (Gill 2007; Taylor 2012). That the self can be made and remade is the premise underpinning, and the process that is staged within, makeover and life transformation television. In their analysis of reality television, drawing upon Foucauldian ideas about governmentality, Hay and Ouellette argue: ‘Life interventions circulate techniques for a government of the self that complement the value now being placed on choice, personal accountability and self-empowerment as ethics of neoliberal citizenship’ (2008, 476). In this way, they can be seen to complement postfeminism which similarly appropriates discourses around self-governance, taking charge of one’s life and working on the self as a form of empowerment for women. Like many reality programs of this ilk, *Snog, Marry, Avoid* both seeks to transform the individual, as per makeover logics, and to transform her life, as per the broader project of life intervention (Taylor 2012).

As part of the therapeutic process, and the endlessly belaboured self, such programs focus upon what Nikolas Rose refers to as “the continual enterprise of self-improvement” (in Franco 2008, 471). Make under operates on the same transformative promise of the makeover – its central pedagogic purpose is to produce a new, better, and more authentic self, via the advice of ‘experts’. (Importantly, in the UK this program aired on one of the public broadcaster channels, BBC3, and it certainly appears consistent with the traditionally educative function of state-funded media.) In the case of *Snog, Marry, Avoid*, it explicitly identifies itself as waging a war against ‘fakery’, as far as women’s appearance is concerned. It seeks to make its subjects under, transforming them into so-called ‘natural’ beauties – while obscuring that this femininity is “rehearsed, practised and performed, in much the same way as the women’s pre-makeunder femininity is” (Gerrard and Ball 2013, 127; McCann 2015). Although at times featuring men, women are overwhelmingly positioned as those most in need for intervention and, as McCann notes, this is the show’s explicit ‘mission’: ‘to rid the girls of the UK of fakery’ (in McCann 2015, 241). Of course this focus on women’s bodies and psyches as the site for transformation is by no means new (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008), but in postfeminist neoliberalism it has certainly intensified, with new formats providing more spaces for the evaluation, regulation and recalibration of specific forms of troublesome

femininity.ⁱⁱ In the terms of the 'makeover paradigm' integral to postfeminist representational regimes, women are currently 'subject to a level of scrutiny and hostile surveillance which has no historical precedent' (Gill 2007, 63). This renewed focus has been seen as a deeply ideological reaction to broader shifts in the kinds of subject positions now available for women. As Estella Tincknell argues of the proliferation of makeover programs, "Perhaps it should not be surprising that the achievement of a limited social and political autonomy in the twenty-first century for (admittedly, mainly white, middle-class, Western) women has been paralleled by a renewed discursive emphasis on femininity as a pathological condition, this time recast as a relentless drive for physical perfectibility" (2011, 82). However, while critical accounts of governmentality (in terms of makeover reality shows) can be compelling, there are also clear performances of agency and resistance within the show that problematize such assumptions about its success as a form of (gendered) instruction (see Sender 2012). That is, in many ways, *Snog Marry Avoid* can be seen to complicate these pessimistic critical narratives around reality television, women and governmentality – especially as many subjects clearly perform their refusal to be so governed. In this way, a close analysis of the program elucidates how existing scholarship on gender, makeover, and reality television, needs – while remaining politically engaged and concerned with the pathologization of particular femininities – to be more nuanced, particularly in relation to the questions of resistance, agency and (the failures of) reality television-as-pedagogy (Skeggs and Wood 2012; Sender 2012). So, what does *Snog, Marry, Avoid* suggest about normative womanhood (i.e. what is it) and why is it so deeply invested in the process of helping these women to achieve it? Who are the subjects in dire need of transformation in *Snog, Marry, Avoid*? And what happens when these subjects fail to be recalibrated?

Class, makeover/under and the construction of illegitimate femininities

In *Snog, Marry, Avoid* (as in many other shows with a transformative agenda/promise), the proponents of 'fakery' are seen to embody a kind of abject femininity. Walkderdine and Ringrose have shown how the borders of what are considered legitimate forms of femininity are policed, not least via televisual spaces like the reality program. As they argue, "most make-over shows are premised on the possibility of the transformation of a specifically abject subject (working-class, wrong femininity) into something else" (2008, 236; see also Gill 2007; Negra 2009; Tincknell

2011; Woods 2012; Wood 2016). Historically, working-class women have long been seen as “as threats to the moral order who must be monitored, controlled, and reformed” (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008, 233); so it is a tradition with a long history in the West. The working class woman, especially, is routinely positioned as being incapable of effecting the right kind of transformation. As Wood and Skeggs note, “In opposition to the ethical self that can transform, tell and show its moral worth, is the self that does not know how to tell or display itself correctly and cannot claim or profess propriety” (2012, 207). That these women do not know how to display this propriety reveals much, as Wood and Skeggs have argued, about the restaging of “traditional narratives of gender and class” in the world of reality television (2012, 205). Such programs, as they and other scholars make clear, do not simply reflect assumptions about class or indeed femininity, they constitute them (Turner 2010, 52). This show seeks to aid these young women in becoming the most viable kind of feminine subject, something itself that is deeply implicated in certain assumptions about class. As is common, on this program, being ‘classy’ equates to middle class, while having ‘no class’ is figured as working class (Biressi and Nunn 2012). Moreover, central to the establishment of such assumptions are discourses of authenticity.

Both host Jenny Frost (series 1-4, followed by Ellie Taylor in series 5-6) and POD accuse the women of ‘fakery’ – spray tans, cosmetically augmented breasts, hair extensions, false eyelashes, tattoos, and acrylic nails all signify this inauthenticity. What remains unsaid in the show, but what is very clear, is that the fakery consistently attributed to contestants signals much in terms of class distinction (Bourdieu 1984). Here, an opposition is constructed between an authentic/inauthentic femininity, a binary invoked along class lines (middle class/working class). Despite popular rhetoric about the demise of class distinctions and stratifications, critics such as Imogen Tyler have emphasized that there is conversely a ‘heightened class antagonism’ in contemporary Britain.ⁱⁱⁱ In terms of mainstream media, figures coded as working class like the ‘chav’, and indeed the young women on *Snog, Marry, Avoid*, “are mobilised in ways that attribute superior forms of social capital to the subject positions and social groups they are implicitly or explicitly differentiated from” (Tyler 2008, 17; see also Gerrard and Ball 2013). In this vein, ‘natural’ beauty is seen as a superior embodiment of femininity that must be emulated to achieve the class mobility that working class women are presumed to (or which the show suggests they should) desire. As Linda M. Scott reminds us, however, “we should be suspicious of any *one* group that lays claim to a ‘natural’ manner of self-presentation. Asserting the power to define

what is 'natural' is a characteristic of ideology – and therefore a symptom of dominant class interests struggling to maintain control" (2005, 13, original emphasis). However, in terms of beauty regimes and fashion, 'natural' on *Snog, Marry, Avoid* paradoxically requires much labour, thereby the show does problematize assumptions about innate or essentialist femininity (Gerrard and Ball 2013). That said, it is predicated upon a clear hierarchy of femininity, which potentially undercuts this ostensible critique of essentialism.

Not surprisingly, the subjects identified as suitable candidates for recalibration are those with bodies exhibiting this apparently working-class 'fakery' to excess (Gerrard and Ball 2013; McCann 2015). In terms of their make-up practices, POD describes the women as 'slap addicts', thereby pathologizing them, setting them up as addicts in need of (an) intervention. Nonetheless, these young women appear to revel in such fakery and take pride in the self-labour that achieving it requires. Similar to the women on *The Only Way is Essex*, "this 'excessive' brand of glamor, although coded as vulgar by middle-class taste codes, is connected with a pleasurable display of status by its practitioners, a pride in the effort it requires" (Woods 2012, 8). Girls, commonly from areas such as Liverpool or Essex with obvious accents that signal this geographical (and class) positioning, are shown to invest much time, energy, not to mention money, to become this hyper-feminine self. Such women, like those on *Geordie Shore*, "work hard to *reveal*, rather than to *conceal*, fakeness" (Wood 2016, 7, original emphasis). They trouble the idea that there is a natural, authentic femininity – they are fully aware that it is constructed, and foreground their own agency in this construction. They are already the entrepreneurial selves of postfeminism and neoliberalism that the show seeks to bring out; fashioning a self they perceive to be authentic but which the program's judges and experts wish them to disavow. But of course, we should not discount the idea that these women are performing such excessive fakery as it is what the producers of the show expect/demand. Nor, as McRobbie (2009) emphasizes, should we discount the agency of these women in subjecting themselves to the scrutiny and judgement that is the precondition of the televisual make under. They are shown engaging in the various rituals through which this femininity is actualized, with scenes of the messy application of fake tan in particular regularly coming to metonymically signify this broader feminine self-labour. (As one woman tells audiences, "I would rather give up my home than my fake tan" (2008, season 1, episode 1)).

Pathologizing the pre-made under feminine self

The explicit formula of the show is as follows: Phase 1 – Public Analysis, Phase 2 – Deep Cleanse, the actual make under and, finally, the ‘revisit’. Before these judgements and subsequent transformation, there are quotidian vignettes, depicting the women as they perform their daily beauty regime as well as in social settings. The women are shown pre-make under; these ‘before’ sequences seek to provide the grounds upon which the intervention staged by the program can be justified. Family and friends are often co-opted to substantiate the ‘she’s beautiful underneath all that make up’ rhetoric that permeates the show, as I will discuss further shortly. The show’s participants are judged for the amount of time, money, and energy they spend on ensuring that a certain type of femininity is inscribed on their bodies. They often appear as parodies of excessive femininity, especially given a number of them wear only pink and express a desire to be like Barbie. As Faye Woods (2012, 9) argues of *The Only Way is Essex*, “this femininity offers a girly bling, favoring pink and crystal and is marked by an overt construction – heavy makeup, ostentatious fake tan, hair, nails, and lashes, proudly displayed fake breasts – a femininity produced through conspicuous consumption and surgery”. Such “postfeminist glamor” is “simultaneously sexualized yet girly” (Woods 2012, 9; see also Wood 2016).

In these pre-make under scenes – themselves clearly staged (Gerrard and Ball 2013, 123) – they are routinely depicted at nightclubs, drinking to excess, wearing very little, flirting with men; within the parameters of the show, their behaviour is figured as tasteless, vulgar, unsophisticated, crass, and unladylike. For Amy Shields Dobson, ‘sexy’ and ‘laddish’ young femininities co-exist in the mainstream cultural imaginary (2014), and I would argue that in *Snog, Marry, Avoid* they not only co-exist they are seen to co-exist in the one body (unless they are eradicated following the make under). As Dobson argues of *Ladette to Lady*, in addition to making assumptions about appropriate feminine behaviour *Snog, Marry, Avoid* “serves effectively to normalize the kind of excesses for young women that it is the programme’s mandate to quash” (2014, 261). Perhaps this claim of ‘normalization’ may stand up but it is important to emphasize that such normalization does not preclude the class-based moral judgement of such behaviours enacted in and through the show.

While reality television can indeed be seen to “reproduce norms of

behaviour which fit well...with new demands for a sexualized female body in a postfeminist era" (Couldry 2010, 80), *Snog, Marry, Avoid* both provides the space for the performance of and troubles this sexualization, as its judgement of its make under subjects' behaviour illustrates. They often appear as overtly sexual, displayed pole dancing or with nipple tassels, and rectifying what are figured as sexual excesses is a key goal of the make under. It is a matter, then, of 'taming' these unruly, working class, girls. Of course, this trope of the hyper-sexualized working class woman is a familiar one but is complicated in a postfeminist context where such (self)sexualization is commonly figured as an act of agency. That is, they appear to engage in (and relish) the kinds of sexual subjectification that Rosalind Gill (2007) argues marks postfeminism. Within its discursive parameters, they are seen as having the freedom to 'choose' to perform this kind of sexy self as opposed to having it required of them by patriarchy in order to be visible – and viable – subjects.^{iv} Putting aside this troublesome question of 'choice', such implicitly class-based performances are judged in particular ways – not the least on reality TV.

In *Snog, Marry, Avoid*, as in other shows such as *Ten Years Younger*, women are subject to assessment by the public (which is, of course, more often than not gendered masculine). Following the introduction to their lifestyles outlined above, the (middle class) man in the street – quite literally they interview men in public, urban streetscapes – is called upon to pass judgement on the women participants. As Gerrard and Ball (2013, 123) argue, "This is an explicitly sexualised (and predominantly heterosexual) judgement, in which men are granted a casting vote over whether or not women are successful in their gender performance". Like forms of makeover television, "through these moments of public displays and assessment, the show plays out a public referendum" (Weber 2009, 710). What is most noteworthy here is how moral worth continues to be read off these (female) bodies, as it has been historically. 'Snog' is, of course, associated with casual sexual encounters and is coded as an undesirable outcome in this show, not however as undesirable as 'avoid'. Signaling as it does men's failure to validate the women, to pronounce them sexually attractive enough to warrant either a 'snog' or a longer-term commitment, the proclamation that they would prefer to 'avoid' a given woman is used to justify the transformation the show seeks to enact. However, more often than not the women reject these judgements, thereby destabilizing dominant critical narratives regarding the governmental, and indeed pedagogical, aspects of reality television. For example, in series three (2010, episode 7) the public's appraisal of

Harriet includes comments such as “she looks easy” and “trashy as hell”. But she refuses to simply accept this judgement, based as it is upon a simplistic semiotic reading of her appearance. She questions their ability to morally assess her as well as the actual judgments they make: “Who are these people?...They are clueless”. As the example of Harriet illustrates, some women on *Snog, Marry, Avoid* often do not appear upset or humiliated, itself one of the points of resistance that I argue the show enables and relies upon for its maintenance.

Moreover, *Snog, Marry, Avoid* does not seek to validate a feminine self that pre-exists it but rather to pathologize the women it features.^v If not so the subjects can feel better about themselves or more fully inhabit the ‘real’ selves that these shows purport to excavate, how does the show justify the make under? What stories does it tell about the women that make this transformation seem appropriate/necessary? How – indeed are? – they convinced of its necessity? Commonly, mothers, best friends, and boyfriends are enlisted to shore up this narrative about the women’s failure to embrace their ‘natural’ beauty (Gerrard and Ball 2013). For example, indicative of the kind of validation proffered by family and friends in each episode, Harriet’s boyfriend observes: “I always think she looks just as good without make up on, and without her hair done” (2010, series 3, episode 7). The excessive make up – what POD calls ‘slap’ – functions to obscure the participants’ inner beauty and thereby their ‘real’ selves and the inability to recognize this is figured as a personal failure that must be addressed. The women need to be brought on board regarding the validity of this process, for as Brenda Weber argues “it is a woman’s active commitment to finding and revealing her ‘true self that motivates the makeover” (2009, 131). And though they do indeed agree to participate, this is not without ambivalence – as evidenced by their interactions with POD.

Challenging the ‘expertise’ and middle class judgements of ‘POD’

All lifestyle television, and shows with a transformative agenda especially, rely upon the authority of experts. In some cases there are plastic surgeons, life coaches, counsellors, fashion designers etc. On *Snog, Marry, Avoid*, however, this role is reserved for what is meant to be a machine: the ‘Personal Overhaul Device’, or ‘POD’ as she is affectionately dubbed. In particular, the voice of POD is integral to setting up the class dynamic underpinning the show. As Gerrard and Ball (2013, 124) argue, “Gendered by a mechanical female voice-over, POD unsurprisingly has a

distinctly posh English accent in comparison to the contestants, thereby bolstering the conflation of good taste with class location". POD is a "a clumsy illusion of objectivity and superiority" (Gerrard and Ball 2013, 128), but it is also significant that the voice of this disembodied judge is a woman's; Alison Winch's work on postfeminism and 'girlfriend culture' is apposite here. As she argues, unlike the sisterhood of feminism's second-wave, "Girlfriend culture does not develop female connections in order to defy patriarchal systems. On the contrary, it celebrates women networking in the service of the postfeminist lifestyle industries which sell the allure of girliness, particularly through the mechanics of makeover" (Winch 2011, 360). This need not imply an entirely sympathetic attitude, however, "Expert friendship veers between bitchiness and identification, and this combination is highly emotive and punishing" (Winch 2011, 360). This aptly describes the way POD attempts to convince the women that they are in dire need of transformation, with some sympathy, while also harshly condemning the type of femininity they currently embody. She is often brutal in her critique of the women's sartorial style (or, as she perceives it, lack thereof) – judgements that are patently class-based.

In terms of the way the show functions as an attempt at class makeover, Sherman's comments regarding *What not to Wear* are relevant here: "In the logic of the show, everyone is potentially middle-class if they just 'dress the part'" (2011, 58). To dress 'respectable' is to *be* respectable, and thereby – in the makeover genre's governing therapeutic discourse – lead to not just to a better self but a better life more broadly. Working class women, in particular, are no strangers to such therapeutic interventions and efforts to manage (and correct) their behaviour (Skeggs 2004). Although her pronouncements are often delivered in tongue in cheek fashion, POD, attempts to make these young women internalize a middle class gaze. While self-labour is glorified in postfeminism and neoliberalism (Gill 2007; Taylor 2012), these women are coded as performing the 'wrong' kinds of self-labour. Not only must women 'do' femininity they must do it *right*; that is, certain femininities are privileged, valued, and promoted over others (Gerrard and Ball 2013). Like in much life intervention television, they are encouraged to unlearn these (class) specific ways of doing femininity. As Redden and Brown argue, "The norms of taste validated are largely middle-class, meaning that the 'inclusion' of large numbers of working-class citizens in the mediated public of television is on the condition that their existing behaviour, dispositions and tastes are publicly rejected" (2010, 238). Although this may indeed be the case in *Snog, Marry, Avoid*, and public rejection in the form of several 'avoid' verdicts may occur, the women themselves are

less inclined to accept these evaluations and concomitantly are less inclined to accept the condemnation of their own ways of inhabiting and performing femininity. As one make under subject unapologetically tells the host, "I suppose it could be seen as trashy but I like trashy" (2009, Gemma, series 1, episode 1). Such defenses are common on the show. The women's interactions with POD often reveal an attempt to resist the way their femininity is being coded as inappropriate or illegitimate. Routinely, they argue with POD as she finds fault with their hair, makeup, dress etc. As Sophie Reade (2010, series 3, episode 9) suggests: "I'm not going down easily, I'm going to put up a fight". Similarly, in the same series Harriet tells POD: "You're awful, I really don't like you", telling her she is talking "rubbish". Throughout the make under process, Harriet talks back to POD, "You're so bitchy, I should just punch you" (2010, series 3, episode 7). These acts of resistance, rebellion against the authority represented by POD and the valuing regimes that seek to position them as illegitimate subjects, reveal women's pleasure in the cultural competencies required to become this certain type of feminine subject. And while there remains the sense that POD, the host, the judgemental public, and family and friends know better, these efforts to remain 'true' to themselves cannot be easily discounted. That said, despite such acts of agency, they will – consistent with the show's overall logic – be 'made under' (but for how long?).

Refusing shame: "I'm happy the way I am – just try and change me"

Importantly, in rejecting the show's judgements, contestants deploy postfeminist rhetoric, emphasizing agency and feeling about good themselves, which should not/cannot be discounted. Some women refuse to be positioned as subjects who should or must feel shame vis a viz their outward appearance and the ostensibly immoral behaviour with which it is associated. That is, I argue, they contest the show's governing narrative and "formulaic script of self-loathing" (Gerrard and Ball 2013, 128). In this respect, resisting women are often cheeky and self-assured in their interactions with POD, exhibiting none of the self-hatred commonly displayed by participants on makeover shows. This self-confident resistance is a significant point that needs to be addressed, especially as it contradicts the way women are often positioned in makeover television (including on *Snog, Marry, Avoid* itself). As Tincknell contends, "It is simply in order to enhance their fragile self-esteem and improve their social confidence, that these women must undergo such procedures,

according to the discursive framing of the makeover show" (2011, 84). Similarly, Marwick (2010) has shown that narratives of low self-esteem are often mapped onto and sometimes articulated by contestants themselves in order to establish the need for and justify the extreme intervention of the makeover. Contra these observations, the women featured on *Snog, Marry, Avoid* seem completely unhindered by the sense of lack or deficiency which Marwick argues are mobilized by contestants on programs like *The Swan*. Likewise, they do not exhibit the "fragile self-esteem" or a lack of "social confidence" that Tincknell identifies in those featured on *Ten Years Younger* (2011). The women are, conversely, confident, sassy, and proud, not just of the way they look but of the way they behave. Overwhelmingly, *Snog, Marry, Avoid* women need – unlike women on these other makeover shows – to be *convinced* that they are in some way defective and, even though submitting to the make under, many go into it remaining doubtful that any such (in this case, sartorial, and, by association, behavioural) intervention is necessary. While Frith, Raisborough and Klein (2014, 169) argue that makeover television seeks to enact a move "from body-shame to body-pride", *Snog, Marry, Avoid*, I would argue, seeks to follow the opposite trajectory; that is, from 'body-pride' to 'body-shame', and (when they reject the new middle class femininity that the show seeks to inscribe on them) back to 'body-pride'.

These resistant women express contentment with their appearance and seem happy *as they are* (arguably not the best targets for reality television transformation), and in this way can be seen to exceed the hegemonic femininities valorized in the format (Woods 2012; McCann 2015; Wood 2016). As Verena suggests, "POD, I'm happy the way I am – just try and change me" (2009, season 2, episode 5). Affirmations such as those endorsed by myriad self-help books directed towards women abound in this program, as the women often openly assert that they love themselves and, especially, the way they look. So, in contrast to Gerrard and Ball's (2013, 123) suggestion that the program successfully, albeit "(un)easily", incorporates feminist critiques of beauty labour, by its recourse to a rhetoric of 'natural', unlaboured beauty, I would argue that it is through these candidates' efforts to refuse to internalize these troublesome gendered and classed judgements that a form of feminism appears to be operative. Moreover, as Hannah McCann (2015, 246) has recently argued, the excessive, overt performances of this pre-made under femininity – "challeng[ing] the boundaries of what is appropriate, in terms of class, intelligibility and sexuality" – can themselves be read as a destabilization of hegemonic femininity, effectively queering and making visible other ways of doing gender.

Importantly, on *Snog, Marry, Avoid*, the labour of the actual make under is rendered invisible, obscuring the work that the appearance of 'natural' femininity, like the purportedly 'unnatural' version, requires (McCann 2015, 247). As Gerrard and Ball note, "In the end, thanks to the power of television editing, the camera scans down the contestants' bodies, head to toe, showing the before-and-after transformation from fakery to natural beauty" (2013, 125). However, post make under, they express surprise, and even shock, at the way their bodies now bear markers of a different class, and it is often reluctantly they agree that their new made under selves represent an improvement upon their own, chosen means of performing femininity. Some of these women, then, push back against what Weber calls the "affective domination" (2009, 30) of makeover experts. As she argues, these moments of resistance create vital narrative tension within the shows (Weber 2009). For example, in an episode of season 5, which centres on women from Essex (where there is seen to be a "fakery overload"), Adele refuses to accept the newly made under self that POD attempts to foist upon her (2012, episode 6). Following her make under, Adele – a self-professed "princess of fantasy fashion" – suggests: "My message to POD would be: you certainly haven't won this one and this is what I think of this [removing her hair tie and teasing up her flattened hair]...oh yeah, big hair definitely wins". And as the host returns to see if she has maintained the made under look she confesses to "absolutely hating" what POD had done to her, suggesting it has made her go even "more mad", reverting to her preferred corsets and PVC skirts and dresses while dying her hair a hyper bright shade of red. As the host, Jenny Frost, puts it, Adele effectively 'sticks two fingers up at POD'. In a similar vein, Alison tells Frost in her post transformation interview that she thoroughly enjoyed the make under, and wishes to thank POD for the experience, but ultimately concludes 'it made me realize I don't want to be anything other than what I am' (2009, season 2, episode 5). Here, as is common, Alison invokes an authentic self that the make under has attempted to obscure from view and retrieving it is figured as an empowering gesture. There is a tension here then – the show purports to evacuate the 'real' self through the make under while these women emphasize that it is only through the *refusal* of the show's sanctioned ways of being and appearing that they are able to be 'true' to their inner selves.

Likewise, in the case of Harriet mentioned earlier, she tells POD post makeover – when middle class-ness appears written on her body – that she is unhappy as she now looks 'plain'. When she is deemed seventy per cent marriage-worthy and thirty per cent snog-worthy (within the terms

of the show, a vast improvement on the previous judgement), she suggests “the public don’t know anything”. She explicitly rejects the way she has been evaluated – by both POD and the public. Following the make under, deploying rhetoric of self-acceptance commonly associated with girl power style discourses, Harriet responds: “It’s a lovely look but it’s not me...I love my look. I think I look great”. She turns the show’s rhetoric of unearthing an inner self that has been hidden beneath the makeup against itself, as she says “it’s not *me*”. Her post makeover self, she tells POD, “sucks”. She remains steadfast in her refusal to maintain this transformed self, and counteracts POD’s/Frost’s rhetoric of fakery with assertions about the authenticity of her chosen way of performing femininity. But, the show also frames her as somewhat of a lost cause, illustrating the immutability of the class distinctions it invokes and indeed helps to construct.

In his study of *What Not To Wear*, Martin Roberts suggests that reality makeover television programs are interested in “seeing how resistant the subject will be, with the most entertaining shows being those in which the subject proves most recalcitrant” (2007, 236). Here, then, such resistance is by no means transgressive but simply makes for good television, and is indeed built into the sub-genre’s formula. That said, as I have argued, often in *Snog, Marry, Avoid*, subjects remain unconvinced of the viability of the new selves they are being asked to adopt. As Katherine Sender (2012, 162) notes, “successful makeovers” are those in which candidates “learn to see themselves, as if from the outside, through the eyes of the experts”. Accordingly, a number of the *Snog, Marry, Avoid* make unders can be deemed unsuccessful; however, such “failures work to ‘reinforc[e] the value of the frequent successes” (Sender 2012, 159).

What happens, then, when the program’s subjects willfully resist the ethical self that the program attempt to bring into being? Does this simply shore up the class antagonisms that the show claims to be merely reflecting (as opposed to help constitute) or does it/can it destabilize them? As Turner argues, drawing upon Skeggs’ work, “those who are offered up as examples of the bad self in these formats...are also, at the same time, inclined to ‘fight back’ against that representation” (2010, 51). This resistance, which is undoubtedly visible on *Snog, Marry, Avoid*, cannot be discounted. Such bad selves, as Turner notes, are “unrepentantly performed on these shows” (2010, 51), while the pleasure generated by these representations of ‘undesirable behaviour’ can itself function to undermine the system of judgement embedded in these shows (51). As he concludes, “What can happen then – and clearly so often does

– is the valorization or even celebration of precisely those behaviours or identities that are excessive, grotesque, offensive or out of control” (52). But how do we know what the effects of this program may be, in terms of circumscribing behaviour beyond its bounds? Is it the case that viewers “willingly adopt the instruction, consumer appeals and modes of self-monitoring modeled in these texts?” (Sender 2012, 9). Do viewers make the same judgements as POD? Do they see themselves as the subjects in need of a make under and follow the transformative strategies it advocates? We cannot simply presume that “women audiences unthinkingly absorb and reproduce what they see on screen”, something of course that feminists have problematized for decades (Sender 2012, 46).

As this recent work by Sender (2012) and Skeggs and Wood (2012) has shown, audience engagements and investments in this type of show are more complicated than textual analysis alone can reveal, especially given the “complex affective mechanisms in class boundary work” (Raisborough, Frith and Klein 2012, 251). This article, focused as it is on reading the show itself, cannot hope to answer questions about how *Snog, Marry, Avoid* and its assumptions are taken up and/or rejected by diverse, active audiences. It can, however, point to the need for further empirical work that augments the sort of analysis proffered here, particularly in terms of how audiences interpret (and perhaps even relish or celebrate) the moments of resistance identified in this paper.

Conclusion: The failure of transformation

After their make unders, the women are once again subject to the public analysis test. Not surprisingly, their new ‘respectable’ selves are now overwhelmingly judged to be marriage-worthy. No longer described as ‘scary’, the threat that they posed – in terms of sexuality and class – has been neutralized (if temporarily) by these acts of bodily resignification. Bound up in these proclamations about whether they would ‘snog, marry, or avoid’, are obviously certain assumptions about class. Unsurprisingly, marry is deployed when the women are seen to be ‘classy’ – which itself signifies a kind of middle class feminine respectability. If she is respectable, she is deemed a worthy matrimonial subject. Conversely, the ‘avoid’ verdict reinscribes the notion that these women are not publicly valued, and that their moral worth is very much written on their bodies. The good feminine subject, the show implies, is one that is most definitely not “out of control” or “excessive” (Skeggs 2005, 50), especially in regard

to overt expressions of sexuality. The show presumes that a shift in their outward appearance will mean that they relinquish these apparently immoral (implicitly working class) behaviours. In the *Snog, Marry, Avoid* make unders, and as Skeggs has remarked in another context, “the visually excessive and working-class woman is turned into the subtle and discreet middle-class woman” (2005, 298) – but often not for long.

As I have shown, following these post make under reassessments the program’s host returns to see if the ‘natural’ femininity is being maintained; such revisits are common in the makeover genre of reality television, and they signal that the onus is upon the transformed subject to remain so: “The fact that many makeover shows have ‘revisits’ where presenter-experts surprise past participants to see just how they are ‘getting on’ with their ‘new look’ testifies to the expectation that ongoing labours are necessary” (Raisborough 2011, 51). However, when the host returns to see if they have maintained their more natural look, often the women have failed to recalibrate, reverting to their false lashes, fake tans and hair extensions, illustrating the spectacular failure of the show’s efforts at transformation (McCann 2015).

As the revisits to Adele, Hannah, and Alison, amongst others, attest, in this program the contestants regularly fail to endorse these new forms of labour and the gendered ways of being which it seeks to privilege. Significantly, though, the women themselves frame this act of agency as a form of resistance, couching it in the rhetoric of reclamation; that is, by refusing the make under, they suggest they are reclaiming their ‘real’ selves, the selves that were judged (by certain class standards) and found to be severely wanting. Rather than accepting the devaluation of the femininity they work so hard upon, they reassert its value as something that affords them pleasure, self-confidence, and authentic self-expression; perhaps we can say its participants rupture the show’s governing logic which seeks to value an impossibly ‘natural’ femininity over their own obviously performed femininities.^{vi} That said, it also works to shore up the class assumptions upon which the show is predicated; these resistant women cannot be transformed, thereby their working class-ness is figured as immutable. It is arguably in the producers’ interests, therefore, (and those that edit the program) to enable and foreground these pockets of resistance. Failure to be made under effectively fixes the subject in her class location, and the overarching narrative of the program remains intact. These unruly feminine subjects, coded as vulgar, excessive, and inauthentic, are still deemed to be in

need of evaluation, intervention, and transformation – even if the success of the make under cannot be guaranteed.

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ⁱ The 'make under' is consistent with the logics of the reality television make over, the former requiring as much labour as the latter to make participants un-become a certain kind of feminine self.

ⁱⁱ There are also those representing various subcultures such as Goths but the program sanctions their unsuccessful transformations in a way that women's unsuccessful performances are not. There are, too, occasional men featured on the show, but overwhelmingly it is women who are seen requiring the skills to bring out this more 'natural' self.

ⁱⁱⁱ The assumptions made in much British reality television regarding class as something that can and must be overcome by a makeover, be it cosmetically or in terms lifestyle, have also been identified in American makeover television. As Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer argue, 'The selection of working-class subjects contributes to the seemingly inexhaustible ideology of the American dream, where those of a lower socio-economic class can succeed at becoming middle-class subjects' (2006, 266). See also Brenda Weber's important study, *Makeover Television* (2009).

^{iv} Of course, such postfeminist rhetoric of 'choice' is in itself loaded and has been unpacked by a number of feminist cultural critics, including Gill 2007, Negra 2009 & McRobbie 2009.

^v That this femininity is situated as abject is no more evident than when they (are made to, through the gentle chiding of POD) remove their makeup. In each episode, the women are depicted with a makeup remover wipe, openly cringing as they use it, and they are asked to turn the wipe – stained black and brown from the eye makeup and foundation – towards the camera. The filthy wipe symbolizes the dirt with which working class women have traditionally been associated (Walkerdine, 2011), so this very public act of becoming *clean* is the first step in becoming middle class or, at the very least, un-becoming working class.

^{vi} For an analysis of why these women 'maintain the attachment to particular feminine styles, even as they are derided and marked as 'inappropriate', unintelligible and lower in status', see McCann (2015, 245).