

## **Fashioning Race for the Free Market on *America's Next Top Model***

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Although reality TV offers more representations of women and racial diversity than most other mainstream television, there are still few studies that investigate gendered racial representation in the genre. I argue that the abundance of discourses about feminine racialization on *America's Next Top Model* signals a new neoliberal rhetoric of race in popular culture in which instead of silently and superficially representing racial difference, the show's explicit discussions about race and racialized identity transformations are promoted as a valuable commodity. In particular, African American model Danielle's struggle to change her rural Southern accent is a key narrative arc on the show. Positioning feminine racialization as a lucrative flexible personal asset, the show ensures that the women of color are doubly commodified—for their eroticized physical attractiveness and for their marketable personal narratives of racial self-transformation. I contend that the racial rhetoric of *Top Model* makes race hyper-visible as a malleable commodity and confirms the neoliberal fantasy of the structural irrelevance of race and class in the US by satisfying the demand for recognizable tropes of racialized feminine beauty that only reference hardship or disadvantage as something that can be overcome through hard work.

Keywords: Race; Gender; Reality TV; *America's Next Top Model*; Neoliberalism

Throughout cycle six of *America's Next Top Model* African American contestant Danielle seemed to be a frontrunner. The judges said her pictures were consistently good, her walk was adequately fierce, her measurements were perfect, and they even complimented the sparkle in her personality. But as the cycle wore on, the judges made it clear that one thing might prevent her from winning. Host and former model [325]

Tyra Banks explained to the aspiring model from rural Arkansas: "Danielle, the judges still struggle with your speech. The winner of this competition has to be a Cover Girl model. She has to be articulate, she has to speak eloquently" (12).<sup>2</sup> On each 12-week cycle of *Top Model*, a new group of contestants are eliminated one episode at a time until one model is crowned the winner. The hit show (2003-present) drew over five million viewers for the premiere of its sixth cycle (UPN, 2006a), and helped UPN, and now the CW,<sup>3</sup> successfully attract audiences of African Americans 18-49 years old and women 18-34 years old (Downey, 2005). Though most of the models who have won the title "next top model," have become little more than B-list celebrities or average working models, audiences continue to watch the show in ever-increasing numbers. The popular show has allowed host Tyra Banks<sup>4</sup> to build on her career as one of the first African American supermodels and become a television personality by co-producing *Top Model* and her own daytime talk show (*The Tyra Banks Show*, CBS, 2005-present).

Reality TV is especially attractive to networks because of its low cost and potential for huge profits—advertising typically appears in the content of the shows as well as during the regularly scheduled commercial breaks. Product placement advertising dollars are in fact so integral to the existence of reality TV that producers routinely blur out logos appearing on screen that were not paid for by the company (Deery, 2004). From the subtle shots of Kellogg's new low-fat cereal the models eat in the morning to the products and prizes that the show promotes, *Top Model* is "advertainment" (Deery, 2004) like most other reality TV shows, and in every

episode of cycle six of *Top Model*, viewers are reminded that the winner will receive a one-hundred thousand dollar modeling contract from Cover Girl cosmetics and a spread in Elle magazine. Moreover, many modeling challenges involve creating an advertisement for a particular product, giving the models the chance to painstakingly extol the merits of these products, either while using the product or in their attempts to memorize lines for a television commercial shoot. As such, the contestants are themselves commodities in a number of ways: as models who seek to book actual jobs, and on the show, as spokespeople for products and as characters whose performances, conversations, and emotional outbursts comprise the profitable content of *Top Model*.

Characteristic of reality TV and the programming of newer networks, *Top Model* features more women (Lauzen & Dozier, 2002), more racial diversity, and more queers characters than most other programs on broadcast television. On *Top Model*, representations of straight masculinities are conspicuously absent—only one judge, British model-turned-photographer Nigel Barker fills this role, as well as some transient male models who join the contestants for the occasional photo shoot and often have little function except as props or objects of female desire. Along with Project Runway (Bravo, 2004-present), a competition reality TV program about fashion designers, *Top Model* is one of the few spaces on television for ubiquitous and racially diverse representations of queerness, at least among the male judges and fashion industry people.<sup>6</sup> The show's racial and sexual diversity is leveraged into [326] content for the show, as characters frequently and explicitly discuss—and sometimes argue about—sexual and racial identities.

I argue that the abundance of discourses about feminine racialization on *Top Model* signals a new neoliberal<sup>7</sup> rhetoric of race in popular culture in which the increased visibility of racial identities is deployed to commodify race and maintain its political invisibility. The show produces race as a superficial highly visible aspect of identity while erasing racisms and structural inequalities by glamorizing the process of moving from one racialized identity to another and promoting it as a key narrative arc on the show for a number of models. That is, like many forms of popular media, *Top Model* commodifies and sexualizes women of color, but the show also promotes the models' transformation of their racial identities through gendered neoliberal discourses of personal responsibility, choice, and flexibility as evidence of the success of post-race late capitalism. Discourses about racialization and narratives of racial transformations are a crucial part of *Top Model's* content. I argue that the women of color on the show are doubly commodified—for their eroticized physical attractiveness and for their marketable discourses about racialization and narratives of racial self-transformation. Positioning feminine racialization as a lucrative flexible personal asset creates a neoliberal racial visibility that requires a profound blindness to current and historical racial injustices. In its position as a modeling competition, and by including people of color at every level of the show's hierarchy, *Top Model* is particularly well-suited to legitimate a construction of race that uses attractive feminine bodies to promote the success and fairness of neoliberalism.

While the rhetorics of racialization of many of the models on *Top Model* throughout cycle six produce this double commodification of race, Danielle's narrative illustrates it particularly well. As I am regular viewer of each cycle of *Top Model*, the prominence of the judges' insistence in cycle six that Danielle should change her African American rural Southern accent initially drew me to investigating the dynamics of racial representation in this cycle. The show commodifies the

transformation of Danielle's racialization from Southern rural African American to urban "hip hop glam" African American by making it a central narrative arc on cycle six, and celebrates the success of this makeover by choosing her as the winner of the cycle. Danielle's win demonstrates the neoliberal principles of the structural irrelevance of race, the importance of individual responsibility, the necessity for workers to become flexible to the demands of the market, and the need to continually undertake projects of individual self-improvement to attempt to succeed within the constraints of the system. The commodified and heavily promoted narrative of Danielle's shift in racialization is carried out by her adherence to these ideals, which serves to make race hyper-visible as a malleable commodity yet simultaneously invisible in terms of historical and structural social inequalities.

In order to investigate *Top Model's* constructions of race, I conduct a close textual analysis of all 13 episodes of cycle six of *Top Model*, which aired weekly from March 8, 2006 to May 26, 2006, and were available in my personal archives. I take a discursive approach to the study of media that rests on the contention Gillian Rose describes: "The efficacy of discourse often resides in the assumptions it makes about [327]

what is true, real, or natural, in the contradictions that allow it interpretive flexibility, and in what is not said" (2001, p. 158). Drawing from a range of sources, I define the discourse of the show as anything that is said on or about the show. I concentrate on how the models are racialized, gendered, and sexualized in what is said by and about them on *Top Model*, analyzing the specific terms and phrases used to assess their performance and describe their physical characteristics. *Top Model* is unique in that it is one of the few television programs that regularly and explicitly discusses race, and since modeling and fashion are primarily visual media, interpersonal dialogues about modeling on *Top Model* frequently include explicit commentary about the visual representation of gender and race. I focus exclusively on speech because competition reality TV programs are as much about what judges and contestants say as they are about the performance of contestants—*Top Model* in particular devotes considerable time to discourse about race and to interactions and arguments between the models, who share rooms and bathrooms in the same house. My focus on the commodification of the models' processes of constructing racial identities requires interrogating the models' and judges' statements that explicitly produce and negotiate racial identities. I pay attention to the form and structure of the show as well as a few particular storylines that are maintained throughout an episode or the whole cycle. Additionally, to follow up on the show's narrative of Danielle changing her accent, I investigate the *Top Model* website and its multimedia offerings, as well as a few interviews with her that appeared shortly after the television broadcast of her win.

### **The State of the Literature**

Though reality TV is increasingly popular and offers more representations of women and racial minorities than most other mainstream television, there are still few studies that investigate gendered racial representation in the genre. In linking scholarship on gendered racializations in mass media with literatures of reality TV and neoliberalism, I extend the discussion about race and reality TV that Dubrofsky (2006) and Kraszewski (2004) have prioritized. My analysis of *Top Model* demonstrates the need for studies of neoliberalism and reality TV to better account for racial representation, and the necessity of scholarship on race, gender, and popular culture to interrogate the impact of the rhetorics of neoliberalism. As I argue below, while the reality TV literature offers an analysis of neoliberalism in popular culture, and the race, gender, and media literature demonstrates how feminine racialization is eroticized and

commodified, putting these literatures in conversation, though my analysis of *Top Model*, makes clear a particularly neoliberal construction of race that valorizes and commodifies racial self-transformation. This glamorization of personal change reinforces the post-race late-capitalist rhetoric of progress that disavows historical and structural racial inequalities while depending on particular representations of race to create profitable entertaining content.

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### *Reality TV*

While some scholarship on reality TV explicitly addresses discourses of race (Orbe et al., 2001; Kraszewski, 2004; Dubrofsky, 2006), the majority of work on the genre theorizes reality TV without thoroughly interrogating racial representations. Two edited collections by Dana Heller address reality TV makeovers and personal transformations (2006; 2007), and some audience research and theoretical work on reality TV programs such as *Big Brother* theorizes the genre as a television event (Scannell, 2002; Couldry, 2002), as a experiment in governance (Palmer, 2002), or argues that part of the attraction to the genre is that it seems to make moments of authentic human reality visible (Hill, 2002; Deery, 2004). Other scholars emphasize that reality TV is a technology of neoliberalism (Ouellette 2004; Hay 2005; Ouellette & Hay, 2008), highlight the rhetorics of interactivity and surveillance (Andrejevic, 2004), or extend Deleuze's concept of the "control society" (Bratich, 2006). None of this work, however, offers a sustained analysis of how race intersects with these issues, despite the relative racial diversity of the genre of reality TV.

My analysis builds on the existing scholarship on race in reality TV, which demonstrates that racial difference is often promoted without disrupting normative whiteness or truly integrating racial diversity beyond superficial representations (Dubrofsky, 2006). Rachel Dubrofsky finds in her analysis of *The Bachelor*, "The series pretends color doesn't matter, and that everyone is eligible to win, equally," and that the show's emphasis is "on individual choice over structural determinants" (2006, p. 44). This assimilationist colorblindness (Gray, 1995, p. 85) that denies the political importance of race while superficially embracing racial difference, is also evident in *The Real World*, a popular show that offers a position of white liberalism and conceives of racism as a problem of individual opinions and not economic structures (Kraszewski, 2004, p. 183). L. S. Kim similarly points out that reality TV offers the most integrated programs in prime time but indicts them for masking continuing racial inequalities: "Americans take comfort knowing (and seeing) that in Reality TVland, if not in real life, race is of no consequence," since anyone who follows the rules can win (2004, para. 10). The literature on race and reality TV illustrates that while the genre offers unprecedented racial diversity in mainstream television, it tends to promote a post-race rhetoric that all citizens are (now) equal under the free market. As I will argue, *Top Model* participates in this, but does so even more convincingly by making particular versions of racialization, along with the process of creating these racializations, into desirable and lucrative commodities.

### *Neoliberalism*

Neoliberalism (Rose, 1996) has been a key concept for scholars of reality TV including Laurie Ouellette (2004, 2008) and James Hay (2005; 2008). In my use of the term I build on their approach, which highlights the cultural and discursive dimensions of the current US political climate. I locate the emergence of the US neoliberal state in the 1980s, and for this study, I stress two elements of neoliberalism:

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a) the increasing demand for flexible, part-time, non-unionized, and low-paid labor, especially performed by women, and b) the shift towards individualization and

personal responsibility and away from state-funded programs and services to address social problems and inequalities. The concept of neoliberalism speaks not only to a shift in government policies but also to the shift in mass media discourse with which such material changes correspond. Ouellette calls for a closer examination of “neoliberalism’s productive imprint on contemporary television culture and the ‘idealized’ citizen subjectivities that it circulates” (2004, p. 232), and Hay stresses that studies of neoliberal governance have neglected to account for the non-governmental spheres, that “operate separately yet interdependently through state power” (2003, p. 168), including consumer culture and television.

Rhetorics of neoliberalism become particularly visible in representations of young women, who are produced as ideal neoliberal laborers because of their presumed work ethic, flexibility, and willingness to reinvent themselves for the labor market. Anita Harris argues, “[young women] have become a focus for the construction of an ideal late modern subject who is self-making, resilient, and flexible” (2004, p. 6)—this ideal citizen, the “can-do girl”<sup>8</sup> who is successful and career-oriented, is held up as an attainable norm for all young women, while the failed subject, the “at-risk girl,” is depicted as a victim of “poor choices, insufficient effort, irresponsible families, bad neighbourhoods, and lazy communities” (2004, p. 9). The US labor market for young people, and for women in particular who are still paid less than men, is actually rather dismal—those with high school diplomas or even post-secondary degrees face underemployment in low-paying unskilled or semi-skilled insecure part-time jobs (Harris, 2004, p. 59).<sup>9</sup> Ouellette and Hay link the popularity of makeover shows to the instability of the labor market: “the self becomes more important as a flexible commodity to be molded, packaged, managed, reinvented, and sold” (2008, p. 6). Likewise, Harris stresses the importance of flexibility in the labor market with regard to the ability to change locations, keep irregular hours, switch jobs, perform a variety of tasks, and negotiate without a union (2004, p. 39). In my analysis, I extend the idea that an ideal young female neoliberal worker needs to be flexible and to continually “makeover” herself to argue that she also must be adaptable enough to re-imagine her racial identity for the market.

The smooth functioning of the neoliberal economy requires that many young women labor under exploitative conditions, despite the discourses Harris describes which maintain that all girls can find fulfillment and financial success in the workplace (2004, p. 60). Though Tyra usually warns the models in each cycle against eating disorders, drugs, and modeling scams, *Top Model* does not dwell on the unfortunate realities of modeling, providing instead a postfeminist fantasy of a meritocratic labor market that is lucrative and rewarding for the “can-do girls” who stay focused and work hard to succeed.<sup>10</sup> While the actual work of models may differ from the typical labor available to young women that Harris describes, modeling is nonetheless a type of labor undertaken primarily by young women and is short-term, unstable, part-time, non-unionized, and sometimes exploitative. Furthermore, contestants on reality TV programs provide the labor of creating characters and  
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narratives for the show with little compensation but the experience and the hope of ultimately winning. Building on Harris, I integrate her argument about girls as ideal flexible neoliberal workers with theories of gendered racialization to demonstrate the racial components of the necessary work of making one’s self into a commodity.

### *Race, Gender, and Media*

Mass media are involved in setting the parameters for how race is understood (Hall, 1981; Gray, 1995), often creating a fictional colorless world in which the ideology of

the American dream dictates that anyone can succeed with hard work, and as such promotes the idea that racial inequalities have no structural or institutional origin or solution (Jhally & Lewis, 1992). On network television, people of color are often represented in a mostly white colorblind assimilationist context in which racial difference is superficially visible but typically not discussed except in terms of individual prejudice (Gray, 1995), and despite its relative racial diversity, reality TV typically offers similar representations (Kraszewski, 2004; Dubrofsky, 2006). *Top Model* is unique in that it does not produce the same kind of colorblind world—race is not just superficially visible in an assimilationist context, but is constantly discussed and made hypervisible, though only in particular ways. Jodi Melamed points out that in popular culture, “racism constantly appears as disappearing” (2006, p. 3) while contemporary understandings of race “depoliticize the economic dimensions of the current articulation of race with capitalism and race itself as a technology of power” (Melamed, 2006, p. 20). I build on Melamed in my analysis in that I highlight how constructions of race in the particularly commodified genre of reality TV can reassert the fairness and success of neoliberal capitalism.

Representations of women, and especially women of color, are often onedimensional, stereotyped, and reduced to their erotic dimensions (Shohat & Stam, 1994). As bell hooks points out, “Black female bodies are typically seen as sexual—audiences rarely see anything else” (1996, p. 19). Susana Chavez-Silverman similarly argues that Latino/as are “visible only as stereotypes,” which are often sexualized (1997, p. 101). I extend these scholars’ work in my analysis of *Top Model*, adding the particular context of the neoliberal rhetorics of reality TV to the long-standing sexualization of women of color.

While media representations of women of color are typically sexualized, mixedrace women are considered particularly attractive as an erotic amalgam that has wide market appeal. Angharad Valdivia explains that ambiguous representations of racial difference are especially sought-after in commercial media. She points out, “Indeed, if the representation is brown but not too brown it has the potential of appealing to all, because it could be a tanned white, everything in between, and a light black” (2005a, p. 313). The new commercial appeal of mixed-race models can facilitate the continuing erasure of darker female bodies, as marketable lighter-skinned mixedrace women can be positioned to stand in for all racial differences (Beltra`n, 2005; Valdivia, 2005a). I build on these scholars to demonstrate that the special commercial appeal of the “ambiguity” of mixed-race women—which, in some contexts, is most [331] marketable if it can refer to racial difference in general but to no race in particular—encourages the creation of a “neutral” brownness that allows race to be superficially visible but politically invisible.

### ***Top Model’s Neoliberal Rhetorics of Race***

In the textual analysis of *Top Model* that follows, I demonstrate (1) how successful top models are positioned as ideal neoliberal citizens, (2) how racialization is neoliberalized—both commodified and made to appear structurally irrelevant and, (3) how the narrative of Danielle changing her accent, which the judges hope will shift her racialization from Black rural Southerner to the more marketable urban “hip hop glam,” positions her as a model “can-do girl” and reflects a neoliberal rhetoric of race and class.

### *Legitimizing Neoliberalism: All a Top Model Needs is Her Bootstraps*

The discourses of self-help and empowerment evident in reality TV are part of the

popular media expression and cultural dimension of neoliberalism (Ouellette, 2004; Ouellette & Hay, 2008) and are particularly visible on *Top Model*. The show typically favors giving the prize to a model who has overcome some personal challenge and has demonstrated strong determination to win. Rewarding the strong work ethic of the neoliberal “can-do girl” (Harris, 2004), *Top Model* constructs a world of personal agency and fair competition, echoing and reinforcing the fiction of a merit-based labor market. To establish that they can take responsibility for themselves (Ouellette, 2004) the models must prove that they have taken advantage of the instruction they are given in runway walking, acting, makeup application, public relations, and personal style. In most episodes, they are first taught one of these skills by an industry professional, and in the weekly challenge they must demonstrate they have learned these skills and worked hard to transform themselves into proper models. The show puts the models through bizarre ordeals, including doing a bikini photo shoot in a freezer, hanging upside down for long periods of time, and walking the runway with live bejewelled cockroaches as accessories. These absurd challenges both provide sensationalism akin to *Fear Factor*,<sup>11</sup> and construct modeling as hard work. Tyra and the judges frequently chastise models who are physically attractive but have not put sufficient effort into mastering how to provide the right facial expressions, pose well, or walk on the correct way on the runway. The demonstration of effort and hardship, both physical and emotional, is a key component of the show, as one fan recap blog demonstrates in its running “crying count” for each cycle—models cried 68 times in cycle six (Juzwiak, 2006). The models’ enthusiasm for hard work and adaptability to bizarre conditions underscores their commitment to the show’s rules and demonstrates their willingness to trust in the fairness of the outcome of the competition and the larger economic system it reflects.

Danielle is a model citizen in the microcosm of capitalism that *Top Model* constructs. The more hardship a contestant can overcome through hard work, the [332] better she demonstrates the neoliberal principle that anyone can succeed. Danielle’s “sympathetic back story” (Kim, 2004) is that she grew up with a single mother suffering from rheumatoid arthritis, and she makes vague but repeated references to her life of “hard knocks.” *Top Model*’s depiction of Danielle’s resolve to work to change her accent serves an important function, illustrating her work ethic, personal responsibility, and flexibility to the labor market. In the second-to-last episode of the cycle, she says to the camera in a confessional, “It’s kinda hard for me to break the accent, but I’m trying my best” (12). Similarly, in the last episode, right before the judges make their final decision between Danielle and runner-up Joanie, Danielle says tearfully, expressing gratitude (Kim, 2004) to the show:

Thank you for you all not giving up on me. I know my speech is not perfect, my communication is not perfect, but I’m willing to work on that, like I’m willing to hire people to get tapes, to do whatever I have to do to correct that. (13)

Her willingness to work hard and transform herself qualifies her, as Hay might argue, as an ideal self-governing citizen (2005), or as Harris might say, as a “can-do girl” (2004). As such, *Top Model* proves that for the winner, racial, class, and regional background are not structural constraints but are merely the source of an unmarketable accent that she can overcome with hard work.

### **Marketing Racialization: All American vs. Urban Glam**

I extend the literature that demonstrates how whiteness is produced as the privileged default and norm (Dyer, 1997; Lipsitz, 1998) to argue that while *Top Model* does produce whiteness as a norm by calling it “all American” and associating it with relatively modest female sexuality, the show’s particular context of commodification demonstrates that all feminine racializations, including whiteness, can be shaped into

valuable commodities. Like the characters in a film Mary Beltrán describes who move easily between urban racial groups and participate in a racialized consumer culture, the models on *Top Model* are situated as “simultaneously able to embrace and transcend race” (Beltrán, 2005, p. 57). *Top Model* imagines race in a uniquely neoliberal way—it transcends race by denying institutional racism and embraces race by transforming racial difference and the process of imagining racial difference into lucrative marketable commodities.

*Top Model* capitalizes on its racial diversity to promote itself to a wide audience. Beltrán argues that the increasing prevalence of multiracial casts and actors in Hollywood is a political-economic trend, “reflect[ing] contemporary shifts in U.S. ethnic demographics and ethnic identity, while subtly reinforcing notions of white centrism” (2005, p. 50). On UPN’s *Cover Girl Model Talk* (2006b), an internet talk show which recaps the broadcast series and includes call-in interviews with judges and contestants, one caller wonders, given that *Top Model* has shown, “A black sister can be beautiful,” if the show would continue to promote diversity by crowning a plus size or older (“26 or 27 years old”) *Top Model* (UPN, 2006b). The hosts respond to her concerns by repeating that the show does indeed feature racial diversity and [333] pointing to a magazine featuring most of the contestants from cycle six with the exclamation, “We have all colors here! Every color in the rainbow!” (UPN, 2006b). Journalists similarly tout the show’s racial diversity without examining how the show actually represents race:

TV doesn’t get much more diverse than [*Top Model*] . . . Each weekly episode is testimony to Tyra’s conviction that beauty comes in a rainbow of colors, a multitude of body sizes and all kinds of hair textures. Since the show’s inception, there have been two white winners, one biracial and two African American. (Armstrong, 2006)

While her claim about the show’s diversity is correct, it requires a few clarifications: the few plus-size models that appear on the show are in fact usually eliminated early in the competition and the African American contestants almost always get long straight hair weaves (though a few get very short hair) for their mandatory makeovers.

In the remainder of this section, I look more closely at how race and gender function on the show to demonstrate that *Top Model* a) defines non-white racialization as exotic and sexualized against All-American whiteness, while commodifying both, b) relies on marketable gendered racially essentialist stereotypes, and c) demands that the models of color construct racial identities they can sell in the modeling industry and as characters on *Top Model*.

#### *All-American whiteness*

*Top Model* offers the valuable commodity of superficial racial diversity while centering whiteness as the default unmarked race for US citizens. While models of color are praised for their exotic look, blonde-haired white models are referred to as “all-American.” Kathy, a white woman from rural North Carolina, remarks in the first episode that she resembles supermodel Christy Brinkley because “she’s blond, she’s blue-eyed, [she’s the] all-American girl” (1). Similarly, the judges classify blonde white model Joanie as a “classic beauty” and as “all-American” (13). In the third episode, in which all of the models get makeovers, fashion industry expert and *Top Model* modeling coach Mr. Jay explains each woman’s new look. White Joanie is told that her new look will be “all-American.” He tells Leslie, who the judges had earlier called “exotic” (1): “You’re a Latina stunner baby, [your hair is] gonna be thicker and more luscious” and describes her look as “urban glam” (3). Mr.

Jay explains to African American Danielle that she will have a “Spanish wave” in her new hair weave, that she later refers to as having a “Latina twist” (9), and he tells her that her look will be “hip hop glam” (3). While the beauty of the models of color is tied to their race and connected to tropes of marketable urban edginess, the white models’ race goes unmentioned since they are presumably of the “all-American” race. *Top Model* similarly positions whiteness as the norm in a later episode involving an improv comedy challenge in which the models are required to make up a rap verse. White Joanie rhymes, “I got a volleyball diva, a hot Latina, and two African queens [on my team]” (6), identifying her white teammate Sara by her interest and ability in sport, but referring to the three women of color in terms of their race. In the same episode, Tyra comments on white Brooke’s photo for the week: “I like the face, it [334] looks like your name is LaBrooke, it’s very ethnic and sexy,” and judge and former model Twiggy adds with a smile, “very raunchy” (6). Thus the judges consider “ethnicity”—they mean “non-whiteness”—inherently attractive and interesting, and their comments indicate that they value non-white racialization for its association with excessive sexuality. On *Top Model*, the beauty and attractiveness of the women of color—or even the white models who can appear “ethnic”—is often described in reference to their racialization, their exotic look, or their urban vibe, while whiteness is simply described as “classic” and “American.” While particular versions of whiteness are produced as the default norm, specific forms of non-white racializations are equally, if not more, prized for their potential market appeal.

#### *Gendered racial essentialism*

In its production of racialization as a commodity, *Top Model* consistently relies on gendered racially essentialist tropes. Referring to a familiar racial stereotype, Mr. Jay demonstrates his conviction that African Americans are particularly skilled in dancing during a photo shoot for shoes requiring the models to dance on camera. He is surprised that white Joanie is good at dancing, exclaiming, “White girl can dance!” (7), while he berates the African American models for their lack of skill. He says to Furonda, “If you do not bring it, your black sisters are going to shame you in the streets” (7), and says to Danielle, “please do the black girls proud” (7). Though Danielle is skeptical about her dancing ability, insisting, “they call me a white girl back home,” Mr. Jay is satisfied with her performance, and he comments to her, “You were lying to me, you’re like [in a meek voice] ‘uh-uh, I just got a little white girl thing in me’” (7). Mr. Jay is also disappointed in Latina model Leslie’s bad dancing, exclaiming, “I thought she was going to be a sex kitten,” while he is unsurprised when any of the white models dance poorly. The judges later criticize Leslie’s photo for looking too much like she is salsa dancing (7), a dubious claim since Leslie never refers to any familiarity with that style of dance, but one that fits into the homogenizing racial logic of *Top Model*. In associating women of color with sexuality and dancing, *Top Model* demonstrates its commitment to marketing specific racializations: while whiteness is produced as the default norm and model of appropriate behavior, women of color are expected, in this case, to provide a superior performance of their supposedly natural sexual expressiveness for the camera.

Nigerian American Nenna’s attractiveness is described in terms of a marketable trope of feminine African nationality, as she is often called an “African queen” (3)—a comment that produces Africa as a politically backward continent of monarchies. Tyra also comments in the first episode, discussing Nenna’s market appeal as African: “The fashion industry is obsessed with girls from Africa.” Tyra then imitates an African English accent and makes a joke referring to the 1988 Eddie Murphy film, *Coming to America* (1). Nenna is frequently associated with homogenizing stereotypes

about Africa: During a photo shoot, Mr. Jay is disappointed with Nenna and insists to her, “I need to see a little bit of that African fire” (4), evoking elemental associations with Africa. Similarly, in another episode, Tyra associates Nenna with nature and mysticism, admiring that “she has such a spirit and a natural way about her” (3). These comments about Nenna construct and reinforce a stereotyped African femininity as a valuable marketable commodity. As such, *Top Model* demonstrates [335] the demand for easily recognizable tropes of classed and racialized femininity that can be packaged for mass consumption.

#### *Lucrative racial identities*

Gina’s struggles to articulate her racial identity form a major subplot of the first episode, demonstrating *Top Model*’s neoliberal rhetorics of racialization that demand that women of color represent their racial identities exclusively as superficial marketable aspects of personal pride and beauty, obscuring all other issues. During Gina’s preliminary interview with the judging panel, the self-identified Korean American model says that she would like to see more Asian models, and later adds that she avoids dating Asian guys: “they’re a lot shorter than I am,” she explains (1). The judges are disappointed in her, and tell her she is contradicting herself and undermining her “Asian pride” (1). Later in the episode, the models participate in a mock interview challenge and one of the judges asks Gina, “How does being an Asian woman factor into your determination to win this competition?” Gina is confused and replies, “Uh, I don’t know how to answer that question” (1), rather than giving the answer the judges expect of her, that she is proud to represent her race. When questioned further by the judges, she says, “I don’t really know who I am. I’m having an identity crisis” (1), referring to her negotiations between American and Korean identity. Jade exacerbates Gina’s problems as she later accuses Gina, “You have some insecurity about your race” and tells her, “To be in this competition, you gotta know who you are” (1). The show demands that Gina “knows who she is” so she can embrace her racialization as something she can proudly sell, as there is no room for uncertainty about one’s racial identity in the modeling industry—the judges chastise Gina for her lack of self-confidence and she is eliminated in episode 4. A model of color cannot have a negative or ambivalent relationship to her racialization, as that undermines the happily superficial neoliberal version of race that *Top Model* needs to promote. Models of color must present themselves as uncomplicated recognizable tropes of racialized feminine beauty, marketing themselves as having overcome any lingering negative effects of the social context of race in the US, “identity crises” included.

While representations of women of color are often sexualized, the mixed-race or light-skinned models of color on *Top Model* are held up as particularly valuable in the modeling industry because of their ability to adapt to the market’s demands and leverage their ambiguity to appeal to a wide audience. Jade refers to her ability to present herself to clients as an “exotic, biracial butterfly” and tells the judges that one of her strengths is that she can book jobs intended for a number of differently racialized models: “I can transform myself in to all types of ethnic backgrounds” (9). Similarly, Latina model Leslie uses her race as a selling point in an initial interview with the judges, as she explains, “I could bring a lot of diversity, a lot of versatility, because I can pass for Latina, I can pass for Asian, I can pass for black” (1). Jade and Leslie are able to embrace their ambiguous racialization and construct it as a particularly valuable commodity for the modeling industry and as content for the show. The show even tries to imagine African American Danielle as multiracial, at least symbolically, as her makeover hairstyle is not described as simply long and wavy, but as having a particularly racialized “Spanish wave” (3). The double commodification of [336]

models of color on *Top Model* with “ambiguously brown” skin is that both their superficial racialized attractiveness and their articulation of their market-oriented identity of “neutral brownness” are commodities that can be promoted and sold by the show.

I move now to the final section, a close analysis of how the discourses of Danielle’s racialization—in particular her accent—support my argument that *Top Model*’s commodified tropes and narratives of racialization and racial self-transformation legitimate a post-civil rights neoliberal rhetoric of race.

### **Normalizing Whiteness and Class Privilege: Top Models Can’t Have African American Southern Accents**

The Standard American English (SAE) accent, known as the “Midwestern” or “newscaster” accent, is often constructed as the unmarked category of speech against which other US English dialects are judged as incorrect or inappropriate (Lippi-Green, 1997; Baugh, 2000; Filmer, 2003). While indeed many white Americans do not speak SAE, and many African Americans do speak SAE, the accent is a privileged invisible norm that is articulated to whiteness and to middle- and upper-class status. In this section, I argue that Danielle’s accent, which arises from the combination of her racial, class, and regional background, is understood in a particularly neoliberal way: The show promotes and glamorizes the process of Danielle changing her accent—through personal effort and hard work—to fit the market’s expectations for Black femininity, producing feminine racialization as a flexible commodity and ensuring that the interconnected race and class dimensions of her accent are largely negated.

#### *Flexibility and personal growth*

*Top Model* assumes that Danielle’s accent is a flaw that must be fixed, upholding a neoliberal logic of self-improvement and flexibility to the labor market but contradicting the work of many linguists and critical race theorists who argue that for some African Americans who speak non-SAE dialects, speech can be important to identity and community formation (Lippi-Green, 1997; Baugh, 2000; Filmer, 2003). Danielle’s struggle to change her accent is represented on the show and in mainstream news media in ways that negate political and structural meanings and erase race and class prejudice from the discussion. In most of the representations of Danielle changing her accent, the significance of such a shift is understood through the neoliberal trope of self-improvement—it is depicted as one of a number of essentially equivalent obstacles for her to overcome. A journalist explains, “Danielle’s biggest hurdles on the show [were] suffering through dehydration and food poisoning, oral surgery to close a gap [between her front teeth] and the constant reminder of her Southern accent” (Holt, 2006). Each of these obstacles is represented on the show as a personal problem with a personal solution. Instead of acknowledging the racism and classism behind the assumption that Danielle needs to speak SAE to succeed, *Top Model* insists that the problem is a personal issue and that her accent is easily fixable.

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The show depoliticizes dialect by insisting that changing an accent is a simple matter of “turning it off and on.” Tyra states on the judging panel, “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with [an accent] as long as you know how to turn it off. I don’t think she knows how to turn it off” (9). That is, markers of race, class, and region are only acceptable if they can be shaped to fit the demands of the modeling industry, and erased—“turned off”—at will. In most post-win interviews, journalists enquire how Danielle felt about the judges’ criticisms of her speech. In her public-relations-coached

answers, she puts a positive spin on the issue: In a CBS News interview, she explains, “I’m from the South and I will never change who I am, I will never deny my roots, but I realize that to be in this industry, you have to know when to turn it on and turn it off, you know, so it’s all about compromise” (CBS, 2006). Similarly, a journalist writing in an Arkansas newspaper enquires, “Is the Southern accent gone forever? ‘No, it’s not gone forever,’ Evans said, speaking quite distinctly. ‘I turn it off when I’m talking to people. I only turn it on when I’m around family’” (Storey, 2006). As such, newspapers and talk shows translating *Top Model*’s version of the story into a compelling news hook further commodify Danielle’s process of adopting SAE.

### *Class and blackness*

The differentiation between the foreigner and the internal minority in perceived class status has been well illustrated in the Latina/o Studies literature (ie. Da’vila, 2001; Valdivia, 2005a,b). Valdivia, for example, argues that the image of Nuyorican Jennifer Lopez is articulated to working class status and excessive sexuality, while Spanish Pene’lope Cruz is associated with upper class style and opulence (2005b). Likewise, the discourses about accents on *Top Model* illustrate that accent influences perceived class status in the US—particular foreign African accents are perceived as higher class while Southern and rural accents are associated with lower class position.

Danielle’s accent is not a problem for the judges because it generally evokes blackness, but because it seems to reflect a particular construction of Southern rural working class African Americanness that they deem unmarketable for a *Top Model*. In contrast, Danielle’s fellow contestant Nigerian American Nenna is never criticized for her Nigerian accent. The judges perceive Nenna as prideful and snobby, the near opposite of lower class or common, as Tyra praises her for having “strong pride” and for “stand[ing] like a strong African woman” (1). The judges’ aforementioned references to Nenna as an “African queen” or an “African princess” with a “regal presence” (1) place her at the peak of the imagined African social hierarchy. After an interviewing challenge, a newspaper columnist calls Nenna a snob and later judge Miss J agrees, imitating an African English accent to explain, “It’s probably that when you speak like that, you know, you speak with attitude: I’m an African queen and I know better” (9). Thus Nenna’s accent makes her sound snobby while Danielle’s makes her sound lower class.

African American Furonda’s accent, which lacks the rural working class Southern drawl of Danielle’s speech, is never mentioned or criticized on *Top Model*, further demonstrating that the show is interested in promoting particularly neoliberal forms of race that erase rather than highlight class inequalities. The judges refer to Danielle [338] critically as “country” (9) and “ghetto” (11)—the former referring to her as a rural Southerner and the latter as an impoverished inner-city black urban resident. Presumably the main point in the superficially conflicting labels country and ghetto is their mutual opposition to white and middle class and the impossibility of successfully marketing any trope of African American identity explicitly associated with poverty. The “hip hop glam” (3) label for Danielle’s makeover draws on hip hop as an African American identity associated with wealth and urban trendiness while mitigating assumptions about the genre’s subordinate roles for women with the reference to the high class status of glamour. While *Top Model* is unable to conceive of profiting from a model with an African American rural working class Southern identity, the show eagerly promotes the narrative of the transformation of such a model into an urban, edgy, hip hop glam woman, which is a more recognizable trope of African American

feminine beauty.

### *Class and whiteness*

In purportedly training contestants for success in the modeling industry, *Top Model* teaches them how to present a “blank canvas” for clients that is in fact a performance that reflects elements of unmarked upper class whiteness demonstrated by speech, posture, attitude, personal grooming, and style. This “blank canvas” demands that models of color embrace the superficial elements of their racialization while erasing any markers of class disadvantage, such as a working class rural Southern accent. As such, Tyra explains to Danielle in the middle of the cycle that her accent is not marketable: “You have to really study the other girls who have the newscaster accent, just the normal accent where no matter what city you’re in it’s pretty much the standard accent. It’s extremely important in doing a commercial” (6). Instead of calling SAE “normal” and “standard” it might be more productive to refer to it as the “privileged” accent, but in this case Tyra is unable or unwilling to critique normative whiteness or to use her celebrity status to challenge the classism and racism of the fashion industry. Instead the judges complain that Danielle’s accent must be fixed, citing their inability to understand her and making references to her purported lack of mastery of eloquence and articulation. Though, mixed-race New Yorker Jade speaks with poor grammar and often makes up words such as “dwlve,” “withhandle,” “releasement,” and “considerating,” (10) none of the judges ever mention that it is a problem. Tyra explains to Danielle, “The winner of this competition . . . has to be articulate, she has to speak eloquently” (12), while Nigel comments in his British accent, “Danielle is almost impossible to understand when she speaks” and demands that she “just speak a little clearer” (11). Though Tyra insists that “accents are beautiful because they show the world where we come from” (12), she repeatedly mocks Danielle’s speech in the judging room, imitating her accent for comic emphasis. In one incident, Tyra tells Danielle in an exaggerated Southern accent, “Danielle, now, you need to get it together now, you need to talk a little better now, ‘cause you ain’t gonna get no [Cover Girl] commercial talkin’ like that” (6). By mocking Danielle’s accent and telling her that her speech is wrong rather than different, *Top Model* perpetuates the privilege of SAE as an unmarked norm.

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Kathy, a blonde model with a Southern white working-class rural accent, is mocked for her inability to adequately conform to middle class norms: Throughout her only episode before she is eliminated, Kathy is referred to affectionately as a “happy hillbilly” (1) who had never been on a plane or gone to a dance club, and is scolded by the judges for both her accent and her bad posture. While the judges have a clear bias against all working class Southern accents, the construction of Kathy and Danielle’s accents are differently racialized. Despite her shortcomings, Kathy retains the position of white Americanness, as she calls herself “All-American” and Tyra says she is “a pretty girl from the hometown” (1)—for Danielle, not even flawless SAE pronunciation would earn her the label “All-American.” The problem with Danielle’s accent is not that it marks her simply as “Southern” or “African American,” since some African and African American accents are acceptable, such as Nenna’s and Furonda’s, and some Southern accents, such as Kathy’s, are still considered “All-American,” but that it indicates a particular regional racialized class position that the judges deem unmarketable. While *Top Model* does briefly critique Kathy’s accent, cycle six centers on Danielle—only she, through the process of changing her racialization, can demonstrate a post-race neoliberal logic in which race is both hidden from sight and made into a highly visible narrative commodity.

### **Conclusion**

While the increasing number of images of women of color on television is encouraging, it is crucial to understand how the links between racial representation and neoliberalism might contribute to the production of new racisms. In this analysis, I find that on *Top Model*, superficial racial diversity offers the illusion that racial inequalities have already been resolved, advancing a dangerous depoliticization of race. Even more troubling, this erasure is tied to a project of normalizing and legitimating neoliberalism through cultural tropes and narratives. Danielle's win and the commodification of her accent-changing narrative functions to reaffirm the neoliberal dictum that hard work easily negates structural disadvantages of race or class background. *Top Model* instructs the models that only in suffering through absurd modeling challenges—akin to how absurdly difficult it is to succeed in the neoliberal labor market—can they hope to win. A model neoliberal citizen must not only succeed at hanging upside down or crawling through mud, she must do so with a smile and with complete faith that the competition (and neoliberal capitalism) is fair. Danielle is the ideal neoliberal citizen: she proves the facility of overcoming class and race disadvantages; she takes responsibility for herself; she works hard and happily endures hardship; and she demonstrates her flexibility in her willingness to take on whatever racial identity the modeling industry demands.

The narrative of Danielle changing her accent is a neoliberal fairytale of race in late-capitalism: The combination of her strong work ethic with her readiness to alter her racialization provides valuable content for the show, which requires marketable superficial representations of race. The success of Danielle's transformation confirms the neoliberal fantasy of the structural irrelevance of race and class in the US by

[340] satisfying the demand for recognizable tropes of racialized feminine beauty that only reference hardship or disadvantage as something that can be overcome. The judges ensure that Danielle's accent, an overt marker of working class Southern blackness, is eliminated in favor of a more market-friendly African American identity built on tropes of hip hop and urban cool. This narrative of Danielle's accent also demonstrates to a viewing public that those who cannot or do not learn SAE are themselves to blame for not assimilating or succeeding in the professional world. It advances the neoliberal assimilationist position that institutional and structural change is unnecessary and celebrates rather than laments the fact that the only way to succeed is to work hard to conform to existing norms.

The models of color are perceived as inherently sexy because of their race, a construction of sexualized racialization that serves both to center whiteness as normative and unmarked and to reduce women of color to a presumably innate marketable sex appeal. By demonstrating that they can transcend race (in terms of structural inequality) yet be flexible enough to embrace it (in the terms the modeling industry demands) these women offer a particularly neoliberal interpretation of the meaning of non-white racialization in the US. As one might expect, the racialization of all the women on *Top Model* is constructed and sold as a commodity—the white models are produced as “classic” and “all-American” while the women of color are “exotic” or “urban.” However, as I demonstrate, the women of color on *Top Model* are doubly commodified: the show also capitalizes on the process of inventing and producing their racialization, celebrating their struggles to transcend their racialized class and regional background and embrace the particular aspects of their non-white racialization that the market deems attractive. On *Top Model*, women of color are ideal neoliberal citizens in that their racialization is produced as flexible and easily manipulated so they can sell another commodity along with their physical features—their narratives of transformation disavow racial inequalities and serve as model

neoliberal stories of race with immense market appeal.

## Notes

[1] *Top Model* calls its seasons cycles and often airs two cycles per year.

[2] I cite episodes of cycle six (Mok, Banks, & Dominici, 2006) by their episode number only throughout the text.

[3] Cycle six of *Top Model* was broadcast on UPN. Since then, UPN has merged with the WB to form The CW, whose flagship and most-watched show *Top Model* officially launched the new network with the premiere of cycle seven in September 2006.

[4] I refer to Tyra Banks' character as a television personality as Tyra throughout the paper. Likewise, I refer to all the characters on *Top Model* by their names on the show, which are generally first names or nicknames.

[5] While the term "queer" is contested and resists a single or uncomplicated definition (Duggan, 1992; Berlant & Warner, 1995; Halberstam, 2005), I use it here to refer to nonheteronormative sexual or gender identities including gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and transsexual.

[6] Throughout the past eight cycles of the show to date, a few models have identified as lesbian or bisexual, but in contrast to the normalized queerness of many of *Top Model*'s men, the show either sensationalizes or completely ignores the sexuality of queer women—Kim's lesbianism was a major subplot of cycle seven, while Leslie's bisexuality was never mentioned on the air in cycle six (Kregloe, 2006).

[7] I use the term neoliberalism to refer to the social and economic policies of Western postindustrial late capitalism prioritizing corporate interests over social programs, and to the rhetorical and cultural formations such politics produce.

[8] Marnina Gonick (2006) offers a similar framework, positing that the constructions of girls through tropes of girl power and reviving ophelia position girls in relation to neoliberalism. Erica Burman also finds that in educational discourses, "the sentimentalized (girl) child has come to represent a new neo-liberal subject," which obscures the need for structural education reform (2005, p. 351).

[9] Harris' analysis covers the West more broadly, including the US, the UK, Australia, and Canada, but I limit the scope of my argument in this paper to the US.

[10] *Top Model* itself is an exemplar of neoliberal capitalism: (a) the show's "story producers" were fired after attempting to unionize in Fall 2006 during cycle 7 production (Benson, 2006), and (b) the show is an international franchise—it has sold its concept and formula for local reproduction in almost 20 countries including Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Hungary, Nigeria, Russia, Slovakia, and Spain.

[11] On this reality TV show (NBC, 2001-2006), teams or couples compete to perform stunts like eating bugs or tightrope walking.

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