Media as Nexus of Practice:  
Remaking Identities in *What Not to Wear*  

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Abstract

In this conceptual piece, we examine media as a nexus of a traditional schooling pedagogy and performance pedagogy to make visible how their overlapping elements produce media’s pervasive educative force but also to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of using media in educational contexts. Nexus analysis examines a fashion makeover television program—*What Not to Wear*—as an embodied lesson that produces identity revision but also disjunctures and slippages that enable critical responses and productive remakings. WNTW is a dramatization of remediation of one woman’s (portrayed) lived practices and clothing choices which are read on her body as personal expression of fashion trends. These globalized lessons with body texts require new ways of reading and responding that allow learners/viewers to see the power relations that construct particular identity performances as errors and cultural practices and ethnicities as unacceptable. Two scenes from the WNTW program illustrate

1) how the symbolic and material violence in identity revision in corrective pedagogies was exaggerated and made visible through combination with embodying and dramatizing performance pedagogies

2) how performance pedagogies reacted to corrective remedial and disciplinary practices and prompted improvisation, fluidity, and playful proliferation of identities as critical productive response
Through global networks and round-the-clock broadcasting, media reach audiences around the world through popular television programs, films, video games, consumer products, and advertising (Appadurai, 1996; Maira & Soep, 2005; Rantane, 2004). In response to the pervasive presence of media texts, teachers are urged to enliven school curricula by making room for and making use of students’ popular media knowledge and passions. We see at least two takes on the role of media education in schools: a critical pedagogy framing of media that addresses hegemony and power in relation to the material effects of media representation (Giroux & McClaren, 1994; Macedo & Gounari, 2005; Macedo & Steinberg, 2007; McLaren, 1995; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007) and a post-structural feminist stance that considers dispersed power, agentic action on the part of consumer/producers, and takes a complicated view of identity and representation (Ellsworth, 2005; Marshall & Sensoy, 2011). In our literacy teaching and research, we advocate critical media curricula that fuses popular media, creative production, and critical perspectives (Buckingham, 2003), often finding ourselves teaching with and against media in complicated ways.

Whether or not teachers intentionally incorporate television and film texts into curricula, we argue that popular media are already there, omnipresent pedagogies that powerfully shape who we can be and how we can act within classrooms and communities (Ellsworth, 2005; Kellner & Share, 2005; Medina, 2001, 2010; Wohlwend, 2009a; 2009c). In this paper, we use mediated discourse analysis to make sense of the overlapping practices and pedagogies in critical media education, looking closely at the ways performance pedagogy creates alternatives and possibilities for productive and critical response.

Popular media texts that excite students’ interest also circulate idealized expectations, exaggerated gender models, and problematic racial and ethnic representations. For example,
popular media messages affect girls’ self-image with implications for their academic trajectories and future lives (Mazzarella & Pecora, 2002).

Issues of identity and body image are foregrounded in such a way that a girl’s identity is intricately linked to her physical appearance and compliant behavior. Mainstream culture, found in messages in school as well as out-of-school contexts, “instructs” girls on the “approved” ways to become women. Pipher (1994) referred to a “girl-poisoning culture” (p. 20) and demonstrated that girls seem to lose themselves in adolescence, and they know it. (Sanford, 2005, p. 305)

Others have argued that media act as a cultural pedagogy that masks its individuating and regulating gaze as well as its ability to deflect attention from itself (Kellner & Share, 2005). Often, “it is women’s bodies that are the problem rather than the institutionalized scripts through which girls are socialized into gendered identities.” (Marshall & Sensoy, 2009, pp. 160). Further, postfeminism circulates a vision of perpetual self-improvement that focuses attention on beauty ideals that work to “re-secure the terms of submission of white femininity to white masculine domination, while simultaneously resurrecting racial divisions by undoing any promise of multiculturalism through the exclusion of non-white femininities from this rigid repertoire of selfstyling” (McRobbie, p. 70).

We argue that one among the many ways popular media work as a powerful pedagogy relates to the emerging spaces constructed between performance practices and more traditional views of pedagogy. These intersections are evident in popular “lifestyle television” programming (Hollows, 2000) where actors and audiences engage in the process of educating and being educated on particular lifestyles that are meant to develop ideal identities. “Lifestyle programming in all its forms operates on [an] assumption--that all goods (clothes, kitchens, and backyards) function as signs of identity--they tell others who we are (or rather who we want to be)” (Palmer, 2004, p. 178).
In this conceptual piece, we work around the question: How do popular media function as a pedagogy situated in the nexus of educative and dramatized practices? WNTW is an example of reality television that has a particularly direct model of education. We noticed the connections to education (explicit instruction of “the rules”, models, guided practice) in our own viewing and believed a close look at this program could be useful in triggering new ways of looking at reality television across ages, including programs about young children such as Nanny 911 or for adolescents such as MTV’s Teen Mom. Perhaps more importantly, we believe such analysis also has potential to complicate current understandings of performative identity work in schools. We look closely at one lifestyle television program, What Not to Wear (WNTW)¹, to tease out its pedagogical elements and the disjunctures and slippages that enable critical response and remakings. WNTW is a fashion makeover, a highly popular self- and home-improvement genre of television shows, evident in cable programming filled with similar shows such as 10 Years Younger, Trading Spaces, Save My Bath, Rate this Space, and Date My House. Self- and home-improvement are the goals of makeover television. In the case of WNTW, participants learn to dress more fashionably through intensive lessons in clothing selection, hair styling, and cosmetics application. Each WNTW episode follows a predictable before-and-after sequence as “fashion experts” critique and correct the “style” of a surprised subject, usually a woman, who has been identified as a “fashion disaster” by her relatives and friends (WNTW web page, 2009).

In this article, we take a step back to critically read one WNTW episode as disciplinary lesson that instructs distant viewers how to consume and which goods are necessary for desirable

¹ What Not to Wear is a reality show that originated in the UK; the scenes featured here are excerpted from the US version which airs on The Learning Channel cable network.
identity performances of mainstream femininity. We see potential in this nexus of pedagogies as a contested and transformative space dense with opportunities for individuals to improvise and productively use power. We analyze excerpts from one WNTW episode to explore how a fashion makeover functions 1) as a school-like lesson that reinscribes a mainstream set of fashion norms for gender and ethnicity performances and 2) as a playful, dramatized performance with pedagogical elements that challenge identity erasure and proliferate available ways of being.

**Nexus of Practice**

Identity performances, including those scrutinized and remade in WNTW episodes, are situated in *nexus of practice* (Scollon, 2001), networks of implicit, valued practices and expectations that mark membership. Nexus are “sites of engagement” where multimodal interaction, social practices, histories for use of materials, and discourses that circulate in a particular place “come together to form an action in real time” (p. 28). In the current analysis, it is important to consider how nexus not only serve as markers of membership in the imagined community of fashionable women but also how nexus circulate cultural ideals, teach membership expectations, and recruit participants.

As the show’s subject stands in front of the mirror, the hosts read her reflected image for its cultural value, specifically, its congruence with postfeminist beauty ideals circulating in popular media. As the title of the show suggests, these readings are intentionally negative, focusing on “outdated” clothing that women should not wear and should not want to wear. (Wohlwend, 2009c, p. 73)

In WNTW, the formulaic scenes and repetitive practices center on correcting the participant’s use of key fashion practices (wearing particular combinations of clothing articles, selecting event-appropriate outfits) in order to inscribe the identity *worst dressed*. During each episode, normally tacit practices are foregrounded for the individual (and viewers) and explicitly taught in ways that make visible the range of acceptable and unacceptable identity performances.
We examine how this fashion makeover program teaches participants and viewers to value dominant gender and ethnicity performances through negative fashion readings of (primarily) women’s bodies, accompanied by a performative pedagogy that enabled moving between spaces and ruptures. We argue that the WNTW operates through media pedagogies through a range of familiar practices and scripts. The makeover genre circulates a foregrounded self-improvement pedagogy to educate viewers about better ways of living with newer possessions (Palmer, 2004). For example, as self-improvement pedagogy, this “how-to” television genre simulates remedial teaching with individualized prescription and correction. Each television episode acts as a lesson that teaches viewers to improve their lifestyle practices through demonstrations of new ways of decorating homes, cooking meals, or dressing bodies.

A makeover program circulates and is produced through practices of backgrounded performance pedagogies that produce dramatized examples and counter-examples of cultural values. From the perspective of performance pedagogy, each episode is a production, a how-to dramatization that shows viewers how to perform a credible identity as a sexualized subject who fully participates in postfeminist consumer culture. In WNTW, media pedagogies emphasize female consumers’ obligation to “stay current” by wearing new styles that require the latest mainstream-sanctioned products and necessitate purchases of up-to-date consumer goods and services.

...a sizable proportion of lifestyle television is devoted to the stigmatization of those who are laggardly or recalcitrant in their fulfillment of this duty and, through a combination of public shaming and financial incentives, to inducing them to become fully participant, consuming subjects in the neoliberal economy. (Roberts, 2007, p. 228)
In each WNTW episode, a sequence of critiques and demonstrations teaches the targeted person—“contributor”—who has been identified as a “walking fashion disaster” to purchase and coordinate articles of clothing in acceptable combinations. Each contributor is transformed over the course of one episode as she trades in her old wardrobe for a $5000 shopping trip. The show follows a formulaic progression of scenes: initial confrontation, explicit instruction in proper dressing, independent and guided shopping practice, hair and makeup demonstrations, and final product/performance evaluation by experts. The key scenes and repetitive practices center on correcting the subject’s purported misuse of key backgrounded practices and preferences for objects of distaste (e.g., clothes, shoes, makeup outside current fashion trends). These practices are foregrounded in the show and explicitly taught in ways that revise novices’ identity performances according to postfeminist fashion rules and cultural models. The dramatized and edited excerpts in WNTW provide vivid examples of identity revision, making this fashion makeover program an apt choice for illustrating how backgrounded nexus of practice and foregrounded correction of mediated actions constitute identity revision that powerfully influences opportunities to learn and participate in imagined communities (including classrooms).

Recursive processes of data collection and analysis in mediated discourse analysis provide a systematic way to look closely at the way that even the smallest ways with things—glancing at another’s paper, holding a pencil just-so—fulfill embodied expectations for particular identities within a nexus of practice. For example, teachers may closely observe students’ mediated actions to identify learners for remedial teaching (Wohlwend, 2009b), teaching that often involves practicing particular mediated actions until they become automatic (e.g., touching
words on a page, printing on a line) and can be instantly recognized as student performances of literate identities.

Mediated discourse analysis focuses on mediated actions—physical actions with material objects—to understand how nonverbal actions in everyday, taken-for-granted practices accept and evoke some identities but not others according to nexus of practice, a mesh of embodied expectations collectively set and reset through shared histories. Specifically, mediated discourse analysis uncovers how physical mediated actions interact to constitute social practices, how social practices interact in local contexts, and how nexus of locally-valued practices build identities and meanings situated in power relations circulated through global discourses.

Mediated discourse analysis sifts data to identify the key players, scenes, valued practices, and transformative events, making visible how practices and pedagogies mesh to teach preferred identity performances (e.g., *lifestyles*). Through a funnel design, mediated discourse analysis filters data to locate particular events in which nexus of key practices transform identities. Table 1 shows the progression of analysis where the first step, Locating Participants & Means (Row 1), locates participants concerns and identifies the means of circulating relevant discourses, in this case women and a postfeminist interest in fashionable dressing depicted in makeover television. The second step, Observing Scenes & Practices (Row 2), identifies the recurring kinds of scenes, such as critiques such as the initial confrontation, secret video, or 360 mirror critiques or demonstrations such as the presentation of properly-attired mannequins that are key parts of the WNTW makeover formula. In this article we focus on the third step and fourth steps. The third step, Locating Nexus of Practice (Row 3), examines scenes within the progression of a single episode, to see how practices work together as nexus to circulate valued
ways of belonging. In WNTW, the nexus of corrective and performative practices for evaluating and displaying clothing and bodies come together repeatedly across critique scenes in the episode with Cristina, a Latina drama teacher, to construct her as a remedial subject. The most significant and engrained practices in nexus circulate power, recruit members, and enforce identity-building activity (Gee, 1999), in this case correcting the ways that errant members (the worst dressed) choose and use cultural artifacts (clothing) in order to instruct female viewers how to construct selves with fashion. In the fourth step, Locating Transformative Episodes (Row 4), moments of transformation are located in the progression of critique scenes, in this case, places where identity shifts occur, as Cristina works with and against corrective and performative practices to perform multiple roles. In the fifth step, Microanalysis of Mediated Actions (Row 5), key moments of identity change are examined through microanalysis that looks closely at interaction (physical actions as well as language) for immediate transformational effects but also for links to global systems and discourses. In this conceptual piece, we do not attempt a full mediated discourse analysis but merely suggest the explanatory potential of the concept of nexus of practice for understanding complicated and contradictory media messages.
Table 1. Research Filters in Mediated Discourse Analysis with WNTW Examples

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Media, like all forms of performance including play, almost always involve representations and transformations of identity. The makeover genre makes this explicit in its demand for identity revision according to a set of stated and unstated norms; in this case, fashion norms in a complicated mix of discourses about femininity. Women are the target audience for
makeover television; the genre circulates a discourse of postfeminism which constructs women as empowered, sexualized subjects who consume fashion and transform their bodies in order to please themselves, not men (Gill, 2007). How does What Not to Wear teach audiences who they should be and what displays of body count as appropriate performances necessary for belonging in an imagined community of fashionable women?

Corrective Pedagogies

In a prescription and correction model of learning, learners are expected to follow instructor directions during discrete direct instruction lessons and complete tasks in conventionally accurate ways. Such lessons follow formulaic designs (Hunter, 1982):

1. objectives
2. standards
3. anticipatory set
4. teaching (input, modeling, check for understanding)
5. guided practice/monitoring/reteaching
6. closure
7. independent practice

In such lessons, corrective pedagogies require instructors to deliver content, model skills, provide guided practice which is carefully monitored for deficits which are remediated through reteaching. This approach enables testing and ranking of students according to the degree to which their skill performances adhere to mainstream norms. Media makeovers employ similar practices that promote uniform application of content, consistent with a skills mastery discourse (Ivanič, 2004) that circulates through government mandates for accountability and standardization (NCLB, 2002).

Performance Pedagogies

A significant element of popular media relates to how media work as performance pedagogies (Conquergood, 1998; Garoian, 1999; Pineau, 2002). Performance arts and
Pedagogies intersect to "represent an expanded, heterogeneous field of cultural work within which the body performs various aspects of production, socially and historically constructed behaviors that are learned and reproduced" (Garoian, 1999, p.8). Performance pedagogies provide a view of identity in contemporary media that contests more traditional views of production and identity representations as finalized, rehearsed, and fixed. It emphasizes the flux of productivity as well as its product. As feminist performance theorist Diamond suggests, performance is always "a doing and a thing done" where even its dazzling physical immediacy, drifts between present and past, presence and absence, consciousness and memory. Every performance, if it is intelligible as such, embeds features of previous performances: gender conventions, racial histories, aesthetic traditions, --political and cultural pressures, that are consciously and unconsciously acknowledged (p. 1).

A view of media as performance pedagogies helps us understand how embodying particular identities works at the core of the production of a television show and how identities are produced, re-produced, resisted, and transformed as people "learn" new cultural practices. In media makeovers, performance actors and audiences are engaged in "improvisational encounters" where the production of identity is embedded in complex dynamics "playing" multiple positionings that are simultaneously situated between the real, the fictional, and the social. These positionings are in many instances in tension with each other, resulting in hybrid spaces where actual and projected identities are perceived in relation to ways of living and participating in communities including racial, ethnic and gender positionings.

Embodiment—“the body's social text” (Diamond, 1996, p. 4)--and the reinscription of bodies are also at the core of how makeover television works, particularly in shows like What Not to Wear. Notions of embodiment constitute key elements of how performance pedagogies
are understood, particularly in feminist poststructuralist (Grosz, 1994; St. Pierre, 2000; Pillow, 2003; Davies, 2002) and feminist performance theories (Pineau, 2002; Phelan, 1992; Diamond, 1996; Patraka, 1999; Garoian, 1999). Somerville (2004) suggests that "the body can intervene in discourse just as discourse can intervene into the body" (p. 51). In this dynamic, bodies are perceived as texts that simultaneously inscribe and are inscribed by social discourses. The conceptualization of what embodiment has to offer is not understood just in material and biological terms but in more expansive ways to consider the body as a site of social, political, and cultural inscription. In our view of the role of performance and embodiment in What Not to Wear, we perceive a productive tension between how bodies are disciplined (Foucault, 1995) and the forms of resistance that are made visible by the participants in the show.

Based on the above framework we identified two elements that are helpful here in looking at popular media as performance pedagogies:

1. Embodied texts - bodies write and are written through cultural symbols and practices
2. Productivity of improvisations vs. production of dramatic events - In improvisation, identities are fluid and dynamic and not rehearsed and fixed

**Teaching Identity in Media Nexus of Practice**

We examine media as a nexus of practice situated in overlapping pedagogies to make visible how combined pedagogies produce media’s pervasive educative force but also to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of using media in educational contexts. Table 2 represents our analysis of What Not to Wear within this nexus of practice. In this article, we analyze excerpts from this episode to understand how the “trash can scene” used school
pedagogy elements to discipline and inscribe embodied texts and how performance pedagogy
amplified resistant performances.

Table 2. Negotiated Practices in Corrective and Performance Pedagogies in WNTW Scenes

|------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Critique Scenes: Secret Video, Trash Can, Mirror scenes | • Establish need  
• State objectives | • Contested space  
• Resistant performance | • Discipline in assessment of needs  
• Inscribing texts through projected identities |
| Rules & Models: Fashion rules presented on mannequins | • Model skill or concept: presenting standards, teaching modeling | • Imagined final product  
• Projected dominant identities | • Production of (possible) embodied texts through modeling |
| Shopping Trip 1, solo with critique at close of day | • Independent practice  
• Check for understanding | • Producing  
• Rehearsing | • Attempting and assimilating the given embodied text |
| Shopping Trip 2, with “surprise” appearance by hosts and guided shopping | • Guided practice  
• Monitoring  
• Assessment & feedback  
• Reteaching through guided practice | • Proliferating identities through improvisation  
• Creative generation of embodied texts | • Imposing, improvising, and appropriating identities in between present and past, presence and absence, consciousness and memory |
| Final Reveal: Homecoming | • Closure & final evaluation | • Performing in the lines | • Mastering skills and disciplined bodies  
• Display of emergent embodied texts |
Educating Cristina, the “Most Difficult Contributor”

To understand how the show teaches identity performances in complicated ways, we examine excerpts from an episode featuring a Puerto Rican drama teacher, described by one of the hosts as the “most difficult contributor ever” to appear on the show. The aim of WNTW is to explicitly teach the contributor, or featured participant, to identify valued ways of dressing to fit the postfeminist ideal of a successful, modern woman. But what do participants actually contribute? Ostensibly their wardrobes, but in effect, contributors submit their bodies and identity performances for reading and correction.

Trash Can Scene: Constructing Need, Performing Resistance, and Disciplining Cristina

Cristina: That is a great piece.
Stacey grimaces and tosses the lace top into trash can.
Cristina: You know, I want to jump in there [points to the trash can.] I need a therapist.
Both hosts place hands on hips and Clinton rolls his eyes.
Stacey, “This is the therapy, baby. Get used to it.”
Cristina: Help! [She shakes bar of clothes rack as if shaking the bars of a cage.]
Stacey: Oh, yeah. Help is right. Help.[Stacey continues to rummage through the clothing on rack.] Help! Help us! [Mocking Cristina]
Cristina: No puedo, no puedo, no puedo.
Clinton shuts his eyes while Stacey gasps and opens mouth in exaggerated shock and surprise at Cristina’s shift to Spanish
Cristina continues in Spanish, using Spanish to express emotion and shut out hosts. As Cristina speaks, she gestures to her breasts: They’re not happy.
Stacey: Oy.
Clinton: I don’t know what she said but she [changes pitch to enact a whining childish voice] sounded mad.
Stacey echoes Clinton’s enactment [also assumes a crying tone] I know.
Cristina: That’s Cristina [gesturing to clothes in trash can] that you’re throwing out. I have nothing left [gestures to torso in circular motion]
Cristina: [switching to a calm voice and composed stance, clasping hands] You know what? I think you guys should go, you did a great job, thank you, and I’ll take care of this [Cristina firmly grasps the trash can with the overflowing pile of clothes]
Clinton: Oh thanks. You’re excusing us? You’re the boss?
Cristina: Well, no. I just don’t want you guys to work any harder.
Stacey: Remember, the rules.
Cristina grasps the sides of the trash can mounded over with her clothes and begins dragging it out of the studio, clothes spilling out along the way.

Clinton, shouting: Cristina! We’re going to call the authorities.

Cristina screams as Stacey tips over the trash can, dumps the clothes on the floor. Stacey strikes bodybuilder pose.

Clinton [to Cristina]: Look what you’ve done. You’ve made a mess.


Cristina? That’s Cristina for you [indicating discarded clothing]. This? [indicating body] I have no idea who this is.

WNTW makes the boundaries of a fashionable lifestyle explicit through negative examples that point out individual fashion blunders. What “we” hate is made explicit through individuated exemplars and their articles of clothing become markers that reinforce the boundaries (Wilk, 2000). In this way, WNTW polices the border of fashionable dressing. Attractiveness is the overriding criterion as hosts ignore or ridicule contributors’ reasons for keeping articles of clothing that don’t follow the rules: a treasured sweater from a loved one, a pair of practical shoes for work, a cheaper dress that fits a family’s economic realities, or objects that are physically or emotionally comforting. Ethnicity is never addressed or acknowledged as a valid concern on the program. However, Woodward (2007) found that clothing choices not only represent but construct identities, producing daily anxieties about appearing “not me” while working through the contradictions and ambivalences which are core to women’s clothing choices.

Irrespective of women’s social positioning or background, the pivotal dynamic which underpins how women choose what to wear is between clothing that is ‘easy’ and ‘safe’, and clothing that allows women to transform themselves. (p. 340)

In this early scene in the episode, Cristina resists the hosts’ trashing of her wardrobe, explicitly framing the critique as erasure. She describes the identity work as an assault, “You’ve destroyed me. It’s over. You know what, I have no soul,” inscribing her body as a text to respond to the
symbolic violence in the somewhat physical confrontation. Cristina’s attempts to reclaim her wardrobe demonstrate her resistance to trashing her identity, which she will eventually call “the old Cristina.” Her actions can be read as moves to leave an unbearable situation in order to escape identity erasure and while the host’s violent reactions can be read as countermoves to block her escape. Cristina is valuable as the object of the show; she serves as a bad example, an unfashionable subject. This video clip reveals the violence in identity revision in structured pedagogy of schooling. The interaction indexes corporal punishment in the physical restraint and the host/teacher’s demonstration of power as she tips over the trash can and blames the contributor/student for making a mess. Because the media scene occurs in a drama/schooling nexus, the symbolic and material violence to identities in structured pedagogy is exaggerated and made visible through the combination of the embodying and dramatizing pedagogy of dramatic performance. The hosts’ clowning entertains audiences and frames their critique as playful teasing.

This is popular entertainment which uses irony to suggest that it is not meant to be taken literally. However, this does not mean that there is no humiliation. Participants frequently dissolve into tears and there is ‘panic mingled with revolt’ as they are put through their paces, unlearning what is considered unacceptable and unattractive about themselves. (McRobbie, 2004, p. 105)

We also see productivity in this scene as Cristina improvises and performs in and out of several identities. We see her drawing upon cultural repertoires (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003) of teaching, drama and ethnicities to perform resistance through fluid moment-to-moment changes in roles as Cristina as defiant Latina, Cristina as teacher in charge, and Cristina as considerate and compliant contributor.
Playing Past Compliance/Resistance

Second Shopping Trip Scene: Reteaching Skills, Improvising Roles, and Proliferating Identities

Cristina: So you see, Clinton? Low-cut, see-through, hmmmm. [holds black dress up and sways as she sings] “you say good-bye, I say hello” [waits for response from hosts] Aghuh.

Hosts look at each other and roll their eyes
Cristina: [holding up second dress] This is something I would wear…right before I jumped off a bridge. And you can see me going “Aaaaaahhhh” [waving her arm to indicate slow motion falling] and you can see the dress going [whistles and billows out dress to simulate falling]

Hosts burst out laughing and continue to struggle to resume their mock severity as Cristina picks out a third dress, exclaiming: Ooooh.

Clinton: Why don’t you show us some things that follow the rules that we showed you?
Cristina: I don’t remember the rules. I was too traumatized.
Cristina chooses a fourth dress and holds up the dress with hanger behind her neck.
Clinton: The only way you’re walking out with that in your hands is stepping over my lifeless body.
Cristina removes dress from her neck: Guys, you have to have a little room to be crazy. I mean everything is not like [holds dress stiffly in front of her and marches in small circle]
Clinton: You’ve got more than a little room. Our body parts don’t talk to us…or at least not that we’re willing to admit.
Cristina: You need to be in tune with your body.
Both hosts burst out laughing and Cristina scolds: Look at you, having a great time at my expense, huh.
Stacey: Absolutely not at your expense, Cristina. [Laughing and smirking]
Cristina: I’ll try on what you suggested [walks off stiffly with arms extended out in front of her]

In this scene, we see elements of corrective pedagogy as Cristina as the “off-task” student, playing the clown, thwarting the teachers when she should be applying previous lessons to her remedial practice. However, in this instance, Cristina foregrounds the stage and uses the tool of improvisation in performance pedagogy to morph rapidly through roles, seductive temptress who sings to Clinton, suicidal fashion victim who jumps off a bridge, traumatized student who can’t remember the “rules”, and the robotic soldier who complies with orders. In response, the hosts use the stage to mock Cristina’s performances and her admonition to be “in tune with your body” by joking about how she talks for and with her body (“they are unhappy”).
Of course, performance pedagogy provides deniability for these jabs as it’s just a performance, all for the entertainment of viewers at home.

**Makeovers as Embodied, Dramatized, and Globalized Lessons**

It is important to remember that Cristina is not the only one who learns. Drama is a spatialized and spatializing literacy that allows Cristina’s embodied lesson to reach wide audiences with viewers as remote learners and the studio as an imagined classroom. Each distant learner is tacitly invited to view herself along with the foregrounded subject (for studies on media audience and reception see Hall, 1992; Lull, 1990 & Morley, 1986). Viewers also learn to contribute; they read their own bodies and they revise their own identity performances to comply with the self-help advice and to participate in the discourses of postfeminism. This goal is apparent in Cristina’s episode as she talks about her successful search for an idealized, essentialized, and unified identity, an improved self through the fashion makeover: “Not only did I find Cristina, but I found a new Cristina.”

The show’s pedagogy teaches viewers to critique others as well as themselves. Fans can demonstrate their ability to recognize others who do not know “what not to wear” through the device of peer nominations. On the program website, viewers are invited to nominate friends and family members as future participants. The nomination also establishes the nominator as a fashion-wise member of an imagined community of stylish women. As fans watch WNTW’s cautionary tales, they learn to apply the lessons to read bodies and revise identity performances:

- to read their bodies and clothing practices as lacking (need)
- to monitor their own fashion errors, as well as others (surveillance)
- to recognize, value, and seek out expert advice for identity revision (compliance)
• to take up new fashion practices that circulate an imperative to consume
  (regeneration)

A further step back reveals that the show’s intensive critique and insistence on compliance with beauty ideals reiterates, week after week, that women and girls must attend to physical presentation of self through proper bodily displays.

Thus, this television makeover program operates as an embodied lesson on (at least) two planes. First, the program is a dramatization that represents one woman’s (portrayal of) lived practices and clothing choices which are read on her body as personal expression of fashion trends. Second, each videotaped episode in the reality program is a globalized lesson, situated in the nexus of discourses about gender, ethnicity, and consumerism that shape viewer identities. These media lessons with body texts require new ways of reading and responding that allow learners to see the power relations behind constructions of identity performances as errors and cultural practices as unacceptable.

Performance as Productive Critical Response to Media Pedagogies

This examination of a media makeover demonstrates, perhaps not surprisingly, that media are not innocent; media circulate and legitimate powerful discourses and dominant cultural models, in this instance those associated with corrective pedagogies. However, the juxtaposition with performance pedagogies provides opportunities for microtactics (Foucault, 1978). On first reading, we saw reproduction of stereotypical roles along with Cristina’s resistance. But when we looked more closely, we saw agency and productivity in the fluidity of her playful proliferation of identities. Reading Cristina’s response as resistance or rupture is too narrow, too unidirectional, relying on dualistic notions of power and identity. Rather, we see her dramatized critique as divergent tangles of multiple, complicated, and complicating
performances. As educators, we need critical readings and responses that deconstruct and disrupt, yet embrace media texts and provide multiple paths in, out, and around its powerful discourses. Performance pedagogies provide improvisational space that brings implicit discourses up to the surface, making the tacit visible and accessible for deconstruction. We see media as the site of many overlapping nexus that can integrate or clash. As Baker and Green suggest, we might “turn this ‘frame clash’ into what Agar (1994) calls a ‘rich point,’ a point where cultural patterns, practices, and knowledge become visible…” (Baker & Green, 2007, p. 194).

**Implications: Teaching With and Against Media**

Of course, each episode is an explicitly dramatized staged performance and not an accurate representation of lived experience. And contrary to the “happy ending” constructed in each episode, we don’t know if contributors’ lives are enhanced, harmed, or unchanged by their participation in the show. However, these concerns are largely beside the point. The relationship between staging the performance of everyday life and the everyday life serving as a staged performance is a provocative element of new media for viewers engaged in the consumption of these shows. In WNTW, the real learners are television viewers who learn to avoid fashion errors through teaching that corrects by ridiculing and amplifying errors so consumers can see what NOT to do. This makeover exemplifies how media nexus brings together the immersive and transformative power of dramatized texts and pervasive schooling of selves through media. When we teach with media, we’re inviting a powerful, very effective teacher into our classrooms. This suggests that rather than treating media as a textual object, we should be treating media as rich sites of identity play and embodied production, more amenable to immersive performance pedagogies than detached rational deconstructions. We will require
more than the traditional tools of critical literacy, of literature discussion that deconstructs, responds, and sometimes redesigns. We will need performative pedagogies that let us try on uncomfortable identities, look critically at ourselves clothed in roles we hate, and play our way out of trouble.

**References**


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