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# Black Resistance and Agency in America's Next Top Model

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## Abstract

America's Next Top Model in the early 2000s was a global cultural phenomenon shown in 170 countries, with an estimate of 100 million viewers. But since 2020, social and established media have taken up the controversies that the show presented. The focus on the contestants as victims places the responsibility on the production and hides the spectators' responsibility for watching it. The analysis is carried out with a multimodal critical discourse analysis. This thesis explores how the contestants on America's Next Top Model negotiated and resisted structural racism openly in the show and analyses why it was not interpreted as resistance. The contestants used their identities to 'talk back' against the harm they had experienced. It also found that manipulation of emotions reinforced harmful stereotypes that delegitimised the contestant's resistance.

*Keywords: Racism, Resistance, Reality Television, Emotions, Feminist*

## Table of contents

Black Resistance and Agency in America’s Next Top Model .....	1
Abstract .....	2
Abbreviations .....	4
1 Introduction .....	5
2. Theory .....	8
2.1 Literature Review on Cultural Violence and ‘Controlling Images’ .....	8
2.2 Conceptualising Everyday Resistance.....	13
2.3 Situating Black Resistance .....	15
2.4 Analytical Framework .....	22
3. Methodology .....	24
3.1 Ontology and Epistemology .....	24
3.2 Research Design .....	24
3.3 Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis .....	25
3.4 Data.....	28
3.5 Reliability and Validity .....	28
3.6 Reflexivity .....	29
3.7 Methodological Limitations .....	30
4 Analysis .....	31
4.1 Relations .....	31
4.2 Repertoires.....	46
4.3 Space.....	59
4.4 Discussion.....	65
5 Conclusion.....	67
Bibliography.....	68

## Abbreviations

ANTM	America's Next Top Model
RTV	Reality Television
MMCD	Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis
BIPOC	Black, Indigenous and People of Colour

## 1 Introduction

In February 2026 a documentary on Netflix was published that revealed the awful working conditions for the contestants and judges on America's Next Top Model. Throughout February it was the talk of the town for all the women around me, from my family to friends and colleagues, asking each other, "Have you seen the documentary?" "Have you heard what happened on the show?" and "Did you realise how horrible it was when we were young? ". America's Next Top Model aired from 2003 to 2018 and was a major cultural phenomenon. It was a beauty competition for young women in all sizes, shapes and ethnicities. As a Black woman, the host and former supermodel Tyra Banks had experienced racism in the modelling industry (Lee, 2026).<sup>1</sup> She tried to create a television show that could embrace all forms of beauty, from all backgrounds and ethnicities (Lee, 2026). Along with the two other queer and BIPOC judges, Jay Manuel and 'Miss J' Alexander, she created diversity and representation in reality TV. The first 7 cycles of the show were shown in 170 countries with an estimate of 100 million viewers (Martin, 2026). It has remained a cultural phenomenon, as the original show is rewatched and analysed by content creators and users on social media (Lee, 2026). However, it was exactly those content creators and social media users that brought forward the problematic parts of the show by posting and reposting content from America's Next Top Model (ibid., 2026). By rewatching the show, the younger generations of spectators started questioning scenes that showed forced tooth operations, fat-shaming, race-swapping photoshoots, fainting contestants and sexual assaults (ibid., 2026) Along with a nauseating use of the contestants' background stories, most of them coming from vulnerable backgrounds and economic insecurity (Lee, 2026; Martin, 2026). The problem is that these scenes were never hidden or subtle. They were a part of the entertainment that we watched

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<sup>1</sup> Note on the term Black: I use Black to describe people of African American decent in this paper, as my theories of feminist resistance and the contestants in the show refer to themselves as Black. I might use African American as well when highlighting historical and geographical details that were specific to the Black population in the USA.

while dreaming of becoming a top model ourselves. The question of “Did you realise how horrible it was?” also made us ask each other, “Why didn’t we see it?”. When asking “Why didn’t we see it?” people mean: Why didn’t we see the violence? But I think the question should be: “why didn’t we see the people that were subjected to violence?” The users of the social media, the newspapers and the documentary all focuses on the cruelties that happened on the show. But making the women into victims of America’s Next Top Model, both erases their reasons for competing but also places the guilt at the production team and makes invisible the partitioning of the spectators. Instead, this paper will recentre the contestants’ agency within the show. This study will investigate the narratives of the Black contestants and how they responded to the violence they faced, to see if they resisted. The reason why the study focuses on this group is because they are a minority in the programme, but are hyper visible on the show. Due to racist stereotypes, they are repeatedly being narrated as obstructive, loud and aggressive, whereas the white women, though still exposed to harm, are treated as neutral subjects who can fit all narratives. This position, being of hyper visible yet still a minority, ensures that African American women’s agency is given more screen time, which makes a better study to investigate everyday resistance.

### *1.1 The Aim*

The aim of this study will be to investigate everyday resistance performed by Black contestants through the understanding that resistance is an act that challenges power by negotiating the resisters’ subject position. The subject position refers to an actor’s discursive construction of themselves. The aim will be to create a framework of resistance as an action against cultural violence. To examine the construction of subject positions, this paper will use a method of multimodal critical discourse analysis.

### *1.2 The Research Question:*

How does the African American contestants construct their own subject positions in the reality television show America’s Next Top Model from 2003 to 2004?

This paper will start by outlining the literature about cultural violence and resistance. Next, it will develop a framework for analysing resistance as an act against power. The theoretical section will continue to situate resistance in Black feminism to create a context for investigating African American female resistance.

## 2. Theory

Reality television creates stereotyped images of its contestants which are highly political in the way it proliferates structural racism. This chapter will outline the literature concerning reproduction of racial stereotypes. It will also outline how the subjects are situated in the domains of power and how we can determine a negotiation of power domains. At last, I will arrive at an analytical framework for examining resistance in America's Next Top Model.

### 2.1 Literature Review on Cultural Violence and 'Controlling Images'

#### *2.1.1 Cultural Violence*

The social effect of using hostile tropes for entertainment has been examined in Social Sciences. Structural inequality and its violent consequences are a phenomenon that proceeds to be important and discussed amongst scholars in Political Science along with Gender Studies. Many scholars have taken an interest in direct violence and its consequences for human and non-human life, but studying violence also means paying attention to how it shapes social life.

Violence in cultural and social life legitimises social difference and inequality. A legitimisation that makes unequal structures such as poverty and racism seem neutral. Galtung has described this legitimisation as cultural violence (2013). To Galtung, violence is the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual (1969, p. 168). This means that when a cause of death or disaster is avoidable, such as hunger or poverty, it can be seen as violence (ibid. 1969, p. 169). Here it is not just actual death that can be counted as violence but also the belief system that lays the ground and perceives it as natural or unavoidable. Cultural violence can be seen as a macrostructure of knowledge of how a society conceptualises itself. On the micro foundations, Bourdieu and Wacquant define how legitimated knowledge constructs violent assumptions between people (2004). Violent constructions are identity constructions based in our use of language. They define it as 'symbolic

violence', which is the repetition and internalisation of power structures, such as racism and sexism. These structures becomes a part of the subject's identity as well (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2004, p. 272). A little provocatively, they write symbolic violence is "The violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (ibid., 2004, p. 272). This sentence describes how social agents can internalise and reproduce knowledge systems that harm them, because they 'misrecognise' knowledge as objective facts (idib., 2004, p. 272). Coming from the same constructivist school, Hall writes about language as determining for the subject's position and definition of themselves. Hall writes that the subject must accept its subject position to accept the discourse (1997, p. 56). In contrast to Galtung, Bourdieu and Wacquant, Hall's assumption on the subject's agency is open to a possibility that the subject does not accept its position in cultural violence. This does not mean that the cultural or symbolic violence is not present, but rather that the people subjected to it have an active choice in accepting cultural or symbolic violence as a part of their position. Rejection does not dismantle cultural violence. However, it opens possibilities of resistance.

### *2.1.2 From Margin to Centre*

Examining mainly how cultural violence works on the bodies subjected to it, we risk mistaking the bodies only as receivers of violence. Portraying Black women mainly as receivers creates a passive narrative that removes their agency and the women's own recognition of the cultural violence they are subjected to (Sabsay et al., 2020, p. 280). Sabsay argues that this portrayal creates an imposed vulnerability on the subjects of violence which reinstalls the structure of domination (2020, p. 280). Spivak and Mohanty, who writes in postcolonial and subaltern studies, both criticised the idea of passivity in their works. Mohanty criticised white feminists' generalisation of women around the world, as it makes the different class, colour and gender struggles invisible (2003). Spivak famously questioned, "Can the subaltern speak?" as a comment on how the subaltern's own voice was replaced with Western narratives and stories (1988). Lugones, as a postcolonial scholar, writes that the tension in creating the subject's own stories against invisibility is where resistance exists (2010, p. 746). She conceptualises resistance as; the tension

between subjectification and active subjectivity that establishes a sense of agency (ibid., 2010, p. 746). She argues that removing the colonial aspect of gender oppression would be to mute the voices of those who are exposed to both forms of oppression, as gender and colonial classifications are epistemically intertwined (ibid., 2010, p. 753). Comparing the idea that resistance is located in the subject formation, it becomes apparent that Black feminists write from the same perspective. One of the basic foundations in Black feminism is the intersection of race, sex and class – and that the gaps between the categories produce the invisibility of Black women and queer people as they fall in between the categorisation. Smith writes that traditionally Black culture has been examined through the category of ‘Blackness’, which completely erases the politics of sexuality (1978). To read literature without erasing its political contests, it should be approached with Black feminism and an understanding that sexuality, race and class are crucially intersecting (Smith, 1978, p. 21). Collins argues along the same line: Black standpoints have been silenced and intellectual traditions have been marginalised (2026, p. 8). The silencing of Black thoughts and ideas has made it easier to suppress and dominate Black women. However, the silencing created new ideas to stand on top of the oppression (Collins, 2026, p. 8). Collins argues that being historically marginalised, Black women have developed social thought to oppose oppression. Black social thought is used to navigate, oppose and survive social and economic injustice, which have made Black feminist theory a dialectic process of oppression and activism (ibid. 2026, p. 14). The fundament is the lived experience of the subject and how it affects the subject’s body (ibid. 2026, p. 15). Writing in gender and queer studies, Butler argues that resistance comes from those exact structures that make a population or individual vulnerable. Here they argue that vulnerabilities should be considered the position that makes resistance necessary (Butler et al., 2016, p. 20). Instead of the opposition to action, vulnerability is the engine of action. Combining these frameworks shows that resistance is centred in the reclaiming of the subject position at the intersections of power and cultural violence.

### *2.1.3 Controlling Images*

Examining resistance as an expression of the subject's own position might seem simple. The task, rather simplified, would be to sit down and listen to what they have to say. The problem is that the stories of the oppressed are coated in a long history of difference that devalues their stories' legitimacy. Fricker describes this as the 'epistemic injustice' (2007). Epistemic injustice assumes that social power determines the value of marginalised people's testimonies and voices. Epistemic injustice has two offspring. First, testimonial injustice, where prejudice makes stories and narration seem untrustworthy or illegitimate (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). The second is hermeneutic injustice, where a lack of knowledge about the social position establishes a gap in how marginalised people can make their social position accessible to outsiders (ibid., 2007, p. 1). The actual process of how Black women are situated in epistemic injustice is theorised by Black feminists. Many of them point towards the social stereotypes that establish Black women in limited social positions. Audre Lorde wrote that Black people often have been forced to see each other through racist cultural imagery (Khader, 2022, p. 242). In the same manner, Hall writes that 'They had the power to make us see ourselves as 'Other'' (1989, p. 36). Collins calls these stereotypes 'controlling images' (2026, p. 102). Controlling images are stereotypical images that have the power to define societal values that produce Black women as outsiders from the society's normality (Collins, 2026, pp. 102–103). The stereotypes that Collins describes originate in the economic and social history of slavery. To make domination over African American women and other oppressed groups possible (ibid., 2026, p. 107). By 'othering' the Black woman through stereotypes, white oppression legitimises its dominance through images such as the warm and compliant 'Mammy' that accepts white supremacy. Together with the sexually aggressive 'Jezebel' that threatens it (ibid., 2026, pp. 107–119). The controlling images become characters that ascribe certain sets of behaviours and emotions to Black women (ibid., 2026, pp. 107–119). This behaviour reinforces the epistemic inequality that constructs Black women as illegitimate knowledge producers.

Controlling images are reproduced in popular culture and are still widely represented on reality television today. White production teams tend to commodify the controlling images as entertainment (Deery, 2015, p. 117). Reality television's economic foundation is the audience's attraction to people being 'real'. To see them perform raw emotions, surprises and unpredictable outcomes (Deery, 2015; Hill, 2014). When the 'real' performance is constructed through racial stereotypes – because it is the 'reality' the (white) audience expects to see – it becomes problematic as it creates a false epistemic assumption on Black women's behaviour (Deery, 2015, p. 100). Deery writes that racial constructions of 'angry Black women' are not a mistake (ibid., 2015, p. 121). Rather, the angry Black woman and the Black diva are stereotypes that are economically beneficial for reality television shows (ibid., 2015, p. 121). This phenomenon can be seen in the reinforced racial stereotypes in the castings of the participants. But also how (White) audiences reject initiatives to discuss race on reality television shows (Bell-Jordan, 2008; Cossey & Martin, 2023; Walker, 2023). Other scholars who have used America's Next Top Model as a case, have been critiquing the commodifying racialised identities in reality television in general. Thompson describes specifically about ANTM that White contestants can perform their whiteness as unmarked and neutral, whereas the Black contestants are portrayed in accordance with their skin colour and marked as 'exotic' (2010). In many instances they will be eliminated on the show for being 'too ethnic' (Thompson, 2010). Describing the racial markers on ANTM, Hasinoff's study shows reality television makes sociolect and 'ghetto attitude' into unpolitical categories (2008). She describes how the categories are treated as 'personal flaws' that can be erased through a process of transformation (Hasinoff, 2008). This shows how Black women in reality television are often 'hyper-visible' but marginalised in their social and political position (ibid., 2008). To examine the current state of race representation in reality television, it becomes apparent that the 'controlling images' are alive and continuing. This shows that racial stereotypes are reproduced in popular culture, especially in reality television, where they reinforce cultural violence on Black women.

## 2.2 Conceptualising Everyday Resistance

Resistance is the process and possibility for the subject to define their agency. However, using it as a guideline for analysis, it becomes too broad for applying in praxis. Literature on resistance has a broad range of theories and methods to investigate the concept. Initially the field of resistance was only thought about as large mobilisations of groups that were driven by political initiative (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004; Johansson & Vinthagen, 2020). However, when Scott wrote his book about everyday resistance, conceptualised as ‘infra-politics’, he opened the field for different political agendas. Scott argued that peasants who resist oppressive structures are not always in a position of power where they can challenge the hierarchy without facing severe consequences (Scott, 1985, p. 33). Therefore, many resort to foot-dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, sabotage and so forth to challenge the oppressive structures (ibid., 1985, p. 29). In this sense resistance always depends on the form of power it answers to (ibid., 1989, p. 51). Ong defined resistance in the domain of gendered and patriarchal structures in factories in Malaysia (Ong, 2010). She argues that the village belief that women were spiritually weak made women use spirit possessions as a tool against the inhumane working conditions in the factories (ibid., 2010). This shows that resistance is context-specific and intertwined with the field of power and does not necessarily need to be progressive in terms of social politics.

Resistance studies are the interest in political behaviour that is not a part of broad movements or political organisation. The field depends on the assumption that small actions can contain political worth that challenges the dominant modes of ordinary lives. To use resistance as a concept for this paper, I focus on Johansson and Vinthagen’s conceptualisation of resistance as an act that transforms power (2020, pp. 9–10). Foucault argued that power and discourse shape the ways we can think and formulate truths about the world. This process has a disciplining effect on our bodies, as we will behave according to the ways we think and act in the world and believe what is true (Foucault, 1985). Foucault later argued that to examine power, we need to examine its antagonisms that shape it. He states that to examine power,

we should examine the modes of resistance that shape and dissociate the forms of power (Foucault, 1982, p. 780). When power is treated as a one-dimensional concept, it risks overlooking dimensions of cultural violence on gendered and racialised bodies. Being a Black woman makes you exposed to different forms of cultural violence than being a white woman does. Collins and Bilge write how the theory of intersectionality establishes an analytical method of investigating how social categories of gender, sex, race, class and dis/ability intersect and build on each other (2020, p. 18). This intersection makes the middle-class Black woman exposed to both sexism and racism intertwined, whereas the middle-class white woman is mainly exposed to sexism. Understanding intersectionality underlines that cultural violence and power cannot be seen as a coherent category. But rather as a context-specific process. Examining resistance as an act that transforms power can be used together with Lugones' definition of resistance: the tension between subjectification and active subjectivity that establishes a sense of agency (Lugones, 2010, p. 746). Combining these two established that everyday resistance is an act that recentres the subject position and challenges power.

Johansson and Vinthagen's concept of resistance establishes that resistance is an act that counters power – not a certain consciousness, intent or outcome (2020, pp. 9–10). This means that resistance can form even though the person is unaware of its political intent, but it will always answer in context and be historically entangled with power. By acknowledging the feminist critique that power shapes different contexts for racialised and gendered bodies, this means that resistance is intersectional and follows the powers that it engages with – it is not a singular power relation (ibid.,2020, pp. 9–10). The last point is that it changes in different contexts due to the transformative logic of power – it is not a universal strategy, logic or coherent form of action. (ibid.,2020, pp. 9–10). With this framework, they underline that resistance is inherently plural and placed in several power positions at the same time, even though the actors might not be aware of them all (ibid., 2020, p. 63). To use this analytical framework, the researcher needs to be aware of the power productions that seem invisible otherwise. One big factor in reality television that risks being overlooked is the presence of the camera.

Arguing that subjects can overcome power and cultural violence through resistance would be a misunderstanding. Ahmed argues that a utopia behind the struggle of resistance does not exist (2014, p. 172). The subject has the power to change the looks of this power and might slightly direct it on a new path, but they will always stay in the system they oppose (Ahmed, 2014, p. 172; Johansson & Vinthagen, 2020, p. 5). At the same time we need to acknowledge that resistance does not always end up challenging the power structure but can end up enforcing and maintaining oppression (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2020, p. 7). In this manner, resistance should not be romanticised any more than other actions that people do. Resistance as a concept, however, might help create a more complex understanding of people's agencies and see a more complex narrative and understanding of the forms of power that people experience in their daily lives. This section has built a general concept of everyday resistance to make a framework where resistance can be analysed from the outside. This theory develops resistance as a contextless concept that could be compared and defined in the contexts that they will be applied to. The next section will build on a context for understanding resistance and see examples of how special acts are defined as resistance by the Black feminist scholar bell hooks.

### 2.3 Situating Black Resistance

Balancing an analytical interpretation between openness and context-specific awareness is a complicated task. Closing the analysis towards predefined narratives of resistance could end up reinforcing harmful narratives on those subjected to them. The reason for this is that the codes of resistance often are those that are defined by power and cultural violence. Anger, as an example, is both a tool of resistance and a category that power and cultural violence use as a reason for delegitimising the angry subject's standpoint. On the other hand, a contextless analysis will overlook important power categories and subtle forms of agency. To situate the analysis and defining direction, this section will outline bell hooks' concepts of oppositional gaze and talking back. They will be described here, as they

are important for setting the context and understanding how gaze and talk can be understood as resistance. But they will at the same time be explored as open categories that are not definite and not applicable in all settings.

### *2.3.1 Oppositional Gaze*

Examining resistance in a highly produced genre such as reality television, makes it necessary to examine Black feminist theory of spectatorship and the camera. The epistemic assumption of the camera is that the camera portrays the world as it is seen, as merely scientific and objective. But historically and epistemically the camera is intertwined with the scientific history of creating racism (McClintock, 1995, p. 124). By documenting physical features such as bone structures and skull measurements, the episteme of the camera could visualise differences. The camera made the differences visual, which established them as ‘knowledge’ (ibid., 1995, p. 124). In this process of documenting all aspects from skull measurements to documenting the facial features of criminals, the camera helped establish racism as scientific (ibid., 1995, p. 124). McClintock writes that the man<sup>2</sup> behind the camera got the panoptical privilege of observing while rendering himself invisible (ibid., 1995, p. 122). Haraway writes that there is power in creating knowledge from a seemingly neutral standpoint. A neutral standpoint establishes a ‘god-trick’ as it makes the creator of knowledge invisible (Haraway, 1988). Reality television has the same epistemic problems, as the audience get access to experience the contestants’ emotions and reactions, seemingly from nowhere, without bearing in mind the production behind the presentation of the contestants.

The camera has played, first, a part in creating science out of racist ideologies and, second, a part in the reproduction of cultural violence, which is the exclusion of Black people in television and cinema. But hooks writes that the exclusion of Black bodies, especially female, has opened for Black audiences to develop an ‘oppositional gaze’. She argues that when the Black population first got access to watch television and see films, they were fully aware of the reproduction of white domination that was produced by it, as the Black population in their spectatorship

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<sup>2</sup> Most likely

recognised that they were absent in the image (hooks, 2003, p. 208). All the cinematic productions represented the white gaze and othering of Blackness, to which the Black population developed an oppositional gaze that identified and named the structures they were subjected to ( ibid.,2003, p. 209). The cameras have had a role in creating vision as epistemic truth, but many Black people recognised that this vision was created from somewhere.

hooks writes that the gaze has always been political as it holds power in challenging power structures. By tying together the gaze and the political history of African American slavery, she shows how the gaze holds political value (ibid.,2003, p. 207). The history of slavery becomes the backdrop that informs Black spectatorship ( ibid., 2003, p. 207). She writes that the gaze has the possibility of changing reality and affecting power domination (ibid., 2003, p. 208). The gaze can be reinforcing the subject position, as a gaze forces someone to recognise one's presence (ibid., 2003, p. 208). Diawara writes that every narration places the spectator in a position of agency and the position we watch defines how we interpret the identities in the films and of ourselves. Here moments of rupture can emerge where the spectator resists identification with the discourse produced in the film (Diawara, 1988). By examining and interrogating the cinematic representations of Blackness, it becomes possible for the Black spectator to define how the white gaze constructs the Black population as 'other'. The process consists of identifying and naming the power domains and cultural violence that is created (hooks, 2003, p. 208). This is a process that makes subordinates learn to look a certain way (ibid.,2003, p. 208). By focusing on gendered representation, hooks writes that many Black women rejected the gaze that they saw of themselves in the cinema (ibid.,2003, p. 212). Black women developed their spectatorship through examining their own absence. The only women represented in the cinema were White women. The White women were portrayed in relation to 'the male gaze' that positioned them as objects of desire. The Black female bodies were portrayed either directly or by their absence to sustain white femininity as the centre of the 'phallogentric' desire (ibid., 2003, pp. 210, 213). By refusing to identify with this narrative, Black women developed the oppositional gaze, which deconstructed the binaries of Western logic such as

desire/undesired and passive/active (ibid.,2003, p. 213). In this way the oppositional gaze became their resistance. By centring their own stories in opposition to the cinematic representation, they could identify their oppression. Black women became critical spectators that informed their own subject positions. hooks writes that: ‘those Black women whose identities were constructed in resistance, by practices that oppose the dominant order, were most inclined to develop an oppositional gaze’ (ibid., 2003, p. 217). But this also means that some women have not developed this oppositional gaze to deconstruct the domains of power. The gaze of opposition only becomes a site of resistance when Black women actively resist the dominant narratives and when they do, they are fully aware of the process and consciously name the position they are taking (ibid., 2003, p. 218)

### *2.3.2 Talking Back*

In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, bell hooks writes that ‘back talk’ and ‘talking back’ mean speaking as an equal to an authority figure or daring to have opinions (hooks, 2014, p. 22). bell hooks write from her own subject position and her embodied experiences through her life.

Hooks writes that she found her urgency to speak out with her own voice by listening to the women in her life. In the female spaces such as the home, women using their voice ‘giving orders, making threats, and fussing’ was helping her find her voice ( ibid., 2014, pp. 22–23). hooks writes how speaking without being spoken to is an act of risk and that she needed to do it in order to find her own voice and own narrative, as she was constantly tried to be silenced by adults ( ibid.,2014, p. 23). hooks writes that Black women have never been silent – they have just never been heard. Inside the safe woman space in the domestic sphere, speech and talk were a part in forming loving relationships among each other as sisters, mothers and friends (ibid.,2014, p. 23). Speaking and ‘talking back’ are the subjects of establishing their own agency. hooks writes that talking back is an act of resistance in all situations of domination and that talking back can create strength and power which can be healing and protect the subject against desperation and despair (ibid., 2014, p. 26). But it can also be seen as resistance in accordance with Lugones’ idea

that it creates agency and tension in forming the subject's own position (Lugones, 2010, p. 746).

The other part of talking back as an act of resistance is that it needs to challenge power domains. To this hooks writes that speaking out loud is a political gesture that challenges the invisibility that Black women are being subjected to (hooks, 2014, p. 27). Collins writes that Black women positioned as 'the outsider within' or 'other' is a position that silences their own position and narratives; when invited in to white spaces, they become hyper visible as Black women but at the same time become invisible as subjects (Collins, 2026, p. 19). hooks writes about this invisibility as 'the politics of domination would render us nameless and voiceless', where she continues to state that speaking out and talking back is a threat to white domination and patriarchy, which depends on Black women being silent (hooks, 2014, p. 27). This shows that talking back challenges invisibility by rendering the subjects' own narrative.

What talking back should not be mistaken as is a powerful act of defiance that makes the subject untouchable. On the contrary, is talking back also an act that positions the subject in a vulnerable situation, where hooks writes that being able to 'talk back' is also a struggle from within (hooks, 2014, p. 27). Many individuals coming from oppressed groups often learn how to suppress ideas that are seen as oppositional to the dominant narratives, as it can lead to punishment (ibid., 2014, p. 271). It involves a risk of being ridiculed, risking safety and being seen as sane. At the same time it involves fear that the inner emotions that women express will be ridiculed as nonsense and illegitimate (ibid.,2014, pp. 25–26), hooks writes that these fears should be overcome; otherwise women's thoughts, emotions and knowledge will remain in silence (ibid.,2014, p. 25). This is supported by Davi's study on the linguistic and communicative aspects of Black women's resistance and how their discursive practices can serve as protection against hostile situations, both politically and socially. They challenge assumptions that Black women speak out at all times; rather, they as often conform to existing hegemonic assumptions as the safest way to protect themselves from harm (Davis, 2018)

Talking back can be seen as resistance in the contexts where the speaker challenges power and cultural violence and redirects the attention towards the speaker's agency and subject position. These theories will be used to establish a basis for understanding and investigating resistance in the cases. The next section will develop a theoretical frame for understanding emotions in the data.

#### *2.3.4 The Limitations of Emotional Performance*

In other studies investigating resistance, many have focused on emotions as a reproductive force creating agency (Ahmed, 2014; Collins, 2026; Khader, 2022; Lorde, 1997). Especially anger is a productive force from which the oppressed can create knowledge on the structural inequalities they face. Love and queer relationships become a space of resistance as they create a sanctuary that undermines structural relations and ownership, defined by patriarchy, racism and heteronormativity (hooks, 2000; Lorde, 1997; Lorde & Clarke, 2012). This has led to several studies on the performance of emotions as in reality television (Cossey & Martin, 2023; Wingard & Lovaas, 2014). Cossey and Martin situate their analysis by using Lorde and her description of anger as a productive force that can dismantle personal and institutional oppressions (2023). Cossey and Martin analyse how anger can be a productive force in negotiating power and subjectivity, despite Black women having been typecast as angry Black women (ibid., 2023). Cossey and Martin exemplify that they, through anger, can fight oppression and show solidarity with other contestants; however, the expressions of anger can still have negative consequences for the contestants that express them (ibid., 2023). Cossey and Martin acknowledge that the expression of anger involves narrations that fit the image of the Black working-class woman, which reinforces her stereotype; however, they still treat the expression of anger as a resistance against compliant femininity (2023). Performance of emotions is important in the analysis of the contestant's subject position, but it is problematic in the genre of reality television. Reality television hunts for 'real' participants that can display raw emotions, surprises and unpredictable outcomes (Deery, 2015, p. 31). Contestants on reality shows make immaterial labour, often uncompensated, relying on their intellect, personality and emotions (ibid., 2015, p. 79). Reality participants often stage their own emotional

performance in accordance with what they know will give the best seer experience (ibid., 2015, p. 35-36). This is also why Deery writes that reality television's output is gendered, as reality TV focuses on domestic matters, unwaged labour and emotional and confessional revelations (ibid., 2015, p. 105). To analyse emotions as a site of resistance would be to treat the reality television's economic fundament as a site where resistance can occur. Because emotions are commodified in reality television, expressions of emotions should be treated cautiously. Ahmed theorises that emotions are not something that belongs to a subject. Rather, emotions involve miscommunication, and different bodies have different relations to the same feeling (Ahmed, 2014, pp. 10–11). Ahmed critiques the privatisation of emotions as an entity that 'belongs' to a subject (ibid., 2014, p. 12). She writes that emotions are processes between people and that emotions have objects (ibid., 2014, p. 11). It is through the social processes that objects become 'sticky' with affect, as they are produced as sites of personal and social tension (ibid., 2014, p. 11). The reality contestants can be seen as those objects; through the framing and narrative done by the show's production team, they become saturated with emotion that defines their bodies and being, creating them as objects of anger, shame and hope. Ahmed writes that 'feelings' become 'fetishes' and their history of economy and production are erased (ibid., 2014, pp. 11–12). By saturating the reality contestant with emotion that belongs to the audience, the process of portraying the contestants as 'angry Black women' erases the subjects' political position and the economic and social history of slavery that still inhabits their bodies.

This section has built a context for understanding Black contestants' behaviour and embodied knowledge. It will serve as a background for me as a white woman to interpret action and behaviour on the show but also to direct the attention towards how it is said and what is said. But using these as closed categories for analysis could risk reinforcing the harmful stereotypes of outspoken Black women. Instead, the next section will outline how resistance will be analysed as an open category that is informed by Black feminist theories.

## 2.4 Analytical Framework

Resistance is the subject's struggle for making their own subject position and is always an answer in several domains of power. To analyse resistance according to the power domain, I will adopt Johansson and Vinthagen's framework of everyday resistance.

### *2.4.1 Relations of Actors*

Examining how the social positions are constructed in relation to other actors can identify social domains of power and hierarchies. This conceptualisation is informed by Hollander and Einwohner, who identify that everyday resistance is social interaction in relation to other agents (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). The model consists of three actors: the subject (the resister), the target of resistance and the observer (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2020, pp. 106–107). The observer's position can recognise actions in power domains that are invisible to the resister and the target. This model establishes that resistance is taking place when one of the actors recognises that resistance is happening (*ibid.*, 2020, p. 107). This means that the target or the observer can recognise resistance without the resisters needing to acknowledge it themselves (*ibid.*, 2020, p. 107). The crucial point is that the social action challenges power or cultural violence and that this action negotiates the subject's own position and identity in the power domain. This means that the interaction also negotiates identities and identity constructions, as resistance can challenge the target's identity through their own subject position (*ibid.*, 2020, p. 107). The identity construction varies in accordance with the hierarchy between the agents, if it is individual or collective, and the context of the situation (*ibid.*, 2016, p. 423). Johansson and Vinthagen underline that subject positions are never fixed and should always be seen as relational to the context they situate themselves in and where they are positioned in the domains of oppression (*ibid.*, 2020, p. 108). This concludes that the analysis should also take the different subject positions of the individual contestants into account.

#### *2.4.2 Repertoires of Everyday Resistance*

Repertoires are culturally learnt routines that are both defined by power and a response to power (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016, p. 422). Power shapes the ways subjects understand their position in the world, which means that resistance will also be framed by the power domain. The repertoires are never static or given. They should be interpreted in the context of power they are investigated in, as power will shape the contour of an appropriate response ( *ibid.*, 2016, p. 422). Repertoires are a collection of methods that people are already familiar with through lived experience ( *ibid.*, 2016, p. 422). Talking back and oppositional gaze can be considered culturally learned routines and a set of methods to handle oppressive situations. However, it will not be counted as a repertoire if it is not a response of some power of oppression or cultural violence. An openness to an analysis of power domains will determine if talking back and oppositional gaze can be considered a repertoire.

#### *2.4.3 Spatialisation of Everyday Resistance*

Space creates power in the same ways as social relations, which makes it necessary for an understanding of resistance. Spatialisation is a social construct which creates political processes of inclusion and exclusion. Those who are excluded from space and those who are included are defined by the ideology that determines the space (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016, p. 425). Those that are included in a space have better access to power given by the space's opportunities (*ibid.*, 2016, p. 425). An example could be the physical segregation of Black and White people in the US in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Here physical space played a part in upholding a White domain of power. Social Spatialisation is happening both materially, as seen in this example, and also through social imagery and the ways that social spaces can be imagined in discourse (*ibid.*, 2020, pp. 121–122). As resistance is an answer to or rejection of power domains, a subject's act of 'manipulating' the borders of space can be seen as a way to create a subject position for themselves (*ibid.*, 2020, pp. 121–122). This means that manipulation of the spatial borders should be seen as resistance, as it will be a way to situate the subject in the space and make it possible for the subject to negotiate its position in it.

### 3. Methodology

In the last chapter, I outlined the theories of power and resistance and described how resistance can be understood as the subjects act to establish agency in different domains: repertoires, relations and space. As subject positions can be analysed through discursive constructions, this section will outline how discourse can be constructed in both image and text.

#### 3.1 Ontology and Epistemology

Investigating the subject agency of the contestants assumes their identities are social constructions that can be negotiated according to the context. This is informed by social constructivist ontology and epistemology that assume the social world is constituted through language (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 175). Language informs subjects and their subject constructions. Subjects' identities are social and context based and can be negotiated through language, mimicry and actions. This approach means that it is possible to learn about the world and investigate subjects through discourse analysis, as discourse analysis can reveal the knowledge constructions that constitute social life (Machin & Mayr, 2023, p. 2). This argument is not a denial of materiality. Rather should, social life be seen as both constituted in discourse and shaped by social practices, such as institutions and economy, which interchangeably affect each other (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, pp. 62, 177). This opens the researcher's position as a point of inquiry. The researcher's role in discourse analysis is to open existing assumptions and knowledge for critique and investigation (ibid., 2002, p. 177). Openness on the researcher's position ensures that other researchers can interpret the 'taken-for-granted' assumptions that this study can produce and make transparency in the knowledge production.

#### 3.2 Research Design

This study departs from uses a qualitative case study design for its potential to examine empirical investigation of the phenomenon of resistance in depth (Della Porta & Keating, 2008, p. 226). The case study design is meant to explain a

phenomenon from the chosen case by connecting it to a larger class of similar phenomena and elucidating the features and the ways the phenomenon shows in other studies in Social Science (Della Porta & Keating, 2008, p. 226). Through a process of abductive research, I have gone back and forth between theory and material to establish a coherent and informed way of examining cases. The choice of America's Next Top Model has been because of its wide publicity that has made it relevant again in 2026, but also because of the harmful situations the contestants have faced, despite ANTM promoting itself on inclusivity and representation. By studying resistance as a phenomenon in America's Next Top Model, I aim to expand on how resistance is claimed as entertainment, which conceals the original subject positions and the political value of the act. Reality television is a site of politics that influences our society as a whole by developing and mainstreaming ideas of subject performance and proliferating racism (Bell-Jordan, 2008; Deery, 2015; Hasinoff, 2008; Walker, 2023). Studies that have been investigating a reality television as a site for power and resistance used variations of discourse analysis (Cossey & Martin, 2023; Eriksson, 2015). Because of the consistency in the methods in this field, I have chosen to stay on track with a multimodal critical discourse analysis.

### 3.3 Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

This study will adapt a multimodal critical discourse analysis outlined by Machin and Mayr (Machin & Mayr, 2023). The reason for choosing this method is because discourse analysis investigates the immaterial social constructions, implied in the physical data (Kress & Bezemer, 2023, p. 138). The multimodal critical discourse analysis accounts for the material data by combining different modes such as gestures, speech, images or music (ibid., 2023, p. 140). All the different modes when examined together create discourse. Discourses constitute ideas of social life in the sense that the social world is created through the ideas that are produced in discourse and the assumptions of power behind them (Machin & Mayr, 2023, p. 3). It is interesting to examine ANTM through this lens, as it will reveal the social constructions that make the contestants' resistance invisible and show how the contestants are produced as a part of the social message that ANTM communicates.

Multimodal discourse analysis departs from the view of social semiotics. Social semiotics emphasises that all communication through images, language, music and so forth entails communicative options and choices which are drawn from the experience and knowledge by the communicator (Machin & Mayr, 2023, p. 3). The communicator of the message makes an epistemological commitment with each choice they are making, and in this sense produces new knowledge (Kress & Bezemer, 2023b, p. 149). Multimodality requires that we examine all modes without making a hierarchy of their value, which means that conversation holds no more value in an analysis than the image and angle of the camera (ibid., 2023, p. 143). Modalities are material in their essence, and therefore it is important to know the genre of the modes that are analysed, as they all imply different kinds of discourse (ibid., 2023b, p. 148). Knowledge about how the Black women have the possibility of deconstructing the perspective of the camera through the ‘opposite gaze’ will prove valuable when examining the knowledge constructions that the camera produces.

The analysis will be carried out by investigating the different modes of image, sound and talk individually. Then they will be put together to see how the modes inform each other and how the discourses take form through the three modes together. The modes and discourse are two social and semiotically distinct categories (Kress & Bezemer, 2023, p. 143). Multimodal critical discourse analysis uses the term ‘discourse’ in the same way as critical discourse analysis, where discourses are the ideas that are communicated behind the text (Machin & Mayr, 2023, pp. 26–27). This means that modes are the material that shows which semiotic choices were made in the show, where discourse is the small element of the message behind those choices. When all discourses are analysed together, they reveal the idea that constitutes the messages. The ideas are termed ‘discursive scripts’. Discursive scripts can be seen as discourses doing, the connection of all the discursive links that form the ideology that lies behind the messages (ibid., 2023, pp. 30–31). The ideology and power are interlinked because ideology is a formation of power that situates the subject in a certain position (ibid., 2023, pp. 36–38). The choices of how these modes are represented together by ANTM’s production team

can be examined to show which ideas and ideology constructs the social assumptions of the show. Power is the main interest of this study, as the mapping of the power dynamics is needed to position the contestants working against them and to examine if there is resistance.

To do a critical multimodal discourse analysis, it is necessary to place the material in social practice, production and ideology (Machin & Mayr, 2023, pp. 35–36). To achieve this I outlined studies that showed how stereotypes and ‘controlling images’ are produced and how they are often found in the reality television genre. The next step in my analysis is to analyse the semiotic choices that have been made (ibid., 2023, pp. 23–24). This means that I will analyse the camera's shot size, framing, angle and camera movement. I will ask, 'Which people are in focus?' Who is excluded? What does the composition say about the relations the contestants have with each other, the judges and the cameras? Here I will also pay attention to elements such as gaze, interaction and poses to identify underlying attitudes towards the setup and other people (ibid., 2023, pp. 93–102). In reality television, the contestant is often interviewed in a ‘confession’. ‘Confessions’ are small interview pieces where the contestant seemingly comments on the situation that unfolds. Confessions create epistemic assumptions of the ‘god-trick’ of the situation, which will be investigated as well. The notes on the camera style will be compared to the discourse analysis of the conversation.

The conversation analysis focuses on the people mentioned, the subject identifications and oppositions, and if the speech is active or passive (Machin & Mayr, 2023, pp. 146–148). In the conversation I will look for the lexical fields, meaning examining the choice of words, which are present and which are absent, which signifies identities, values and sequences of activity that will be presented in the talk (ibid., 2023, p. 47). By doing that, I will pull on the connotations that are presented in the choice of a word – e.g., why would ‘girl’ be used instead of ‘woman’? This examines which frameworks and references are presented in the conversation. The conversation will be put beside the single shot of the camera to show the scene. All the conversation that does not belong to the person shown in

the camera shot will be marked with green typography. The mood of the music is noted down to underline how the mood is constructed (Eriksson, 2015). Being shown together, language and conversation will reveal power dynamics that can say something about the subject constructions. In the end the findings will be compared to the theories on Black women's social practice and resistance by bell hooks to see if there is overlap that can say something about the findings.

### 3.4 Data

I have employed an abductive approach to the material by going back and forth between the theories and the material to make a coherent study. I chose my cases through purposeful sampling. This means that I have started out by reading theories about resistance and the genre of reality television. After that, I reviewed the material and watched the initial cycles from 1 to 3. I examine initial situations of resistance in all forms and from all the contestants. Finding a pattern of a hyper-visible and dominating behaviour by the Black contestants, despite being a minority group on the show, led me to choose them as cases. I chose the Black contestants who appeared to disrupt the social hierarchy of the show. Out of seven Black contestants, I chose four. The three cases I excluded were one who disrupted the social setting amongst the other contestants instead of challenging the social hierarchy and two others that seemingly internalised the white beauty ideals.

Examining the first to the third cycle has the advantage that the first cycle was low budget and the performance is so raw that it reveals how heavily constructed the show is. This knowledge informs the analysis of cycle three, where the production has been more consistent and the cutting between scenes is smooth. It gives an initial idea about how the programme forms the contestant's subject construction to create entertainment for the spectators.

### 3.5 Reliability and Validity

To ensure validity, the research needs to be able to show coherence between what it states it investigates and what it actually researches (Mason, 2002, p. 39). This study has tried to conceptualise resistance as a subject claiming their own subject

position, which will be in opposition to a domain of power. Ensuring validity has been done in my choice of method, as multimodal critical discourse analysis maps underlying identity construction and power positions. This approach can be seen as establishing coherence between my theory and how I examine the data. Furthermore, the MMCD has been chosen, as it was the method that was best given to investigate discourse in a visual genre. Other studies researching reality television have chosen different methods of discourse analysis, both in the forms of critical discourse analysis and multimodal discourse analysis (Cossey & Martin, 2023; Dunsmore & Haspel, 2014; Eriksson, 2015; Wingard & Lovaas, 2014). The choice of the MMCD was made for its possibility for involving social practices and the visual genre and because the findings could reflect what other studies have examined. The choice of data has been in coherence with the study of resistance, as the genre of reality television uses the contestant's subject position to create drama and entertainment. Reliability is the trickier part of qualitative research, as it shows the accuracy of how the research methods and techniques were applied (Mason, 2002, pp. 39, 182–183). To do this work I have tried to be as transparent as possible about my selection of cases. To ensure reliability in my analysis, I will use tables and figures that display the relevant scenes and corresponding text, illustrating how I have reached my conclusions through the analysis.

### 3.6 Reflexivity

Feminist studies as well as social constructionism require reflexive consideration of the research process, as knowledge is always situated and created from a cultural and social point of view (Haraway, 1988; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, pp. 201–203). This study uses theories with foundations in Black feminist epistemology, which favours embodied knowledge conceptualised as lived 'wisdom' and critical assessment and thought (Collins, 2026, pp. 365–370). This means that I, as a researcher, am an outsider both to the theories that I use and to the context of Black resistance that I am applying to America's Next Top Model. hooks writes when Black women developed an oppositional gaze to their absence in the cinema, they thought that White women did the same – but they did not

(hooks, 2003, p. 213). hooks is right; at least my friends and I didn't. We consumed the white skinniness we were presented with and judged the 'weak' women, who did not comply with those beauty ideals. The realisation of the false assumptions was the engagement that made me do this study. With this absence in knowledge, I have needed to double-check assumptions presented in ANTM on Afro-American hair, skin, bodies, talk and sociolect, both through Collins' comments on beauty (2026). But also, through African American content creators and the former contestants commenting on the scenes from ANTM. I acknowledge that I will risk reproducing stereotypes and generalise assumptions, but if I had not investigated the position of Black women in ANTM, I would have ignored the vulnerable position they are placed in, and I would have reproduced epistemic injustice instead.

### 3.7 Methodological Limitations

Investigating the subject positions of the different contestants makes the possibility of generalising and repeating the findings difficult. As the subject positions are core in the analysis, a repetition of another contestant or another show creates different results on the identity construction which would affect how resistance is being shown. I have tried to make the analysis as transparent to ensure the validity in the process of how I applied the methods. Along with using already tested methods from similar studies, I will ensure that the paper still has research credibility. The last point is my situated position as a white woman that has made the possibility of some action or comment unnoticed in my analysis. To avoid this, I have double-checked all assumptions that I was unsure of and have read into Black feminist literature.

## 4 Analysis

In the opening scene of America's Next Top Model's first season, Tyra Banks voices her goal with the show. Because of her background as a Black woman in the modelling industry, Tyra Banks wanted to make a show that could embrace beauty in all colours, shapes and abilities (2003a, 00:00-00:50). But in the following cycles, the performance of the Afro-American contestants is consistently louder, more dramatic and more emotional than the rest of the contestants. They stir drama. The confessionals from the other contestants narrate the Black contestants as 'off-putting', 'arrogant' and as 'divas' (ANTM, 2003b, 2004a). During the cycle three auditions, the consistency in the performance made Tyra Banks exclaim to a Black auditioner, "I don't wanna cast another Black bitch." (ANTM, 2004b, 31:13-31:17)

Investigating the narrative of the 'Black bitch', I will analyse how the Black contestants construct their own subject positions and examine if it happens as a response to power. To do that, I will analyse the contestants' actions in the three domains that were outlined in the analytical framework 1) relationships 2) repertoires 3) space. The analysis will be informed by the theories of the 'oppositional gaze' and 'back talk' to situate the contestant reactions within perspectives from Black feminist theory. Every category will be analysed with examples from two or three contestants' cases. Every time I introduce a new case, a small introduction will outline the contestant and her case.

### 4.1 Relations

This section will underline which relation construct how the contestants act and which possibilities they have of resisting in ANTM. The section will analyse the interchanging narrative of the contestants, the comparisons to other contestants and the relation to the camera.

#### *4.1.1 Navigating Identity Constructions and the Interchanging Narrative*

The relations in America's Next Top Model are crucial for understanding which fields of power the contestants are imbedded in. Starting by analysing the contestant Yaya in her confrontation with the judges, I will investigate which discursive fields

the judges use to construct her position. After all the challenges, the contestants meet a panel of judges, centred around Tyra Banks as the front figure. The judges can critique everything from beauty to appearance and personality. The judging sessions are established so one contestant stands in front of a group of judges seated by the table. The next section will outline Yaya's case before stating the analysis.

### *Yaya*

Yaya DaCosta is a contestant with African heritage in cycle three. In cycle 3, episode 8, the contestants competed in a challenge where they should represent their personal style with a choice of hat. The judges had a selection of hats to choose from. Yaya chose a straw cowboy hat to represent her style instead of a stereotyped 'African' hat. The judges critiqued her for not choosing the African hat because she is of African heritage. However, she also faced criticism of overdoing her African heritage. This case was chosen because Yaya chose to challenge the assumptions on her African heritage by critiquing the judge's perception of African clothing and style. Yaya states:

“In response to trying to prove myself as an African, that's just where I come from. It's very natural to me. And I did not choose that [African] hat for the very specific reason, that it's very cliché. The fabric that it's made from is very artificial, very cheap, fake kente<sup>3</sup> [...] Just because we had a talk about you know Afrocentricity before. And it's kind of misunderstood” (ANTM, 2004c, 34:34-35:05).

Yaya's critique challenges the narrative that she is expected to follow. In this case it is a certain version of African heritage that she is expected to reproduce. This scene can be seen as a case of talking back as Yaya critiques the judge's idea of Africa. The judges and Yaya fight over the discursive domain of the African hat, as the hat implicitly bears connotations to Yaya's subject position and her African heritage. This can be seen when outlining the lexical field that Yaya uses. Yaya describes the hat as: *cliché*, *artificial*, *cheap* and *fake kente*, distinguishing herself

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<sup>3</sup> Kente is a pattern style from Ghana and other west African countries

from the connotations the hat symbolises (ANTM, 2004c, 34:42-34:51). The judges respond to her explanation by overexaggerating her statement and critiquing her for overstating her African heritage. This is done through mocking: “*Yaya I feel half African, half cowgirl. Looks like you're about to ride a giraffe*” and lexical structure establishing her through; *intensity, sort of Africanness, overbearing, too much, a layer on top of a layer*. In the following table 1 the two sides will be shown: how Yaya characterises herself and how the judges characterise her.

Table 1 – Yaya (ANTM, 2004c)

<b>Yaya</b>	
<b>Yaya's construction of self</b>	<b>The judges construction of her</b>
African It is where I come from natural Did'nt have time	Typical African hat Half African Half cowgirl Intensity Prove your sort of africaness Overbearing too much A layer on top of a layer Being defensive very defensive not attractive insulting Natural

The interesting aspect of the identity construction is that the judges create two logics at the same time. Not only that Yaya is not African enough because she did not choose the African hat, but also that she is proving her African subject position too much. The turn of narrative creates a discursive field of Yaya as being too much, too self-proving and overbearing. This establishes a power domain that delegitimises Yaya’s subject position. Because by not choosing the African hat, Yaya denounces her African heritage. And by overstating herself as African, her claims become considered false and ‘*overbearing*’. The delegitimation of Yaya’s position creates an impossible double-bind on her identity, as no space is left for her to establish her own subject position. This shows how Yaya’s subject position

becomes a discursive field that the judges can negotiate. In the next section it will be shown how Yaya's identity is created through imagery.



During the judging session, the judges create a split between the contestants' identities and their pictures from the photoshoots. If the photoshoot were bad, the image would be used as a mirror to show all the flaws about the person. If it was good, the split often creates a double standard between what the contestants can become and what they present now. This is evident in Yaya's judgement, shown in figure 1, when the judges display the images of her and contrast them with the outfit she chose to wear for the judging session. Figure 1 illustrates the clear distinction between Yaya's clothing choice of the cowboy hat and the photo taken of her.

Figure 1 – Yaya (ANTM, 2004c, 35:25-35:33)

Tyra Banks' body language clearly distinguishes between pointing at the picture and pointing at Yaya. In image 49 the high angle and the full camera shot show how Yaya looks small in comparison to her picture, which creates a structural opposition between the two.

Together with the lexical structure that connects to the image, such as *'aspirational'* and *'difficult to look like that'* and the lexical structure that characterises Yaya: *'every girl on the street can look like this'*. This shows how the camera makes Yaya's subject present as small and diminished in comparison to the judges and her picture. The power domains in the image established the judge's dominance over the discursive field but also show how Yaya's subject position and style choice are delegitimised when compared to her picture. The lexical field together with the visuals tries to erase Yaya's subject position and delegitimise her African heritage, as she should present as less 'African'. This evidence shows how the production team hyper-visualises Yaya's ethnicity but erases her embodied knowledge and political position. When the other contestants challenge the production team's discursive construction of them, it becomes apparent that the response is the same as with Yaya. The discursive fields create a double bind where the subject loses a position to negotiate their identity from. This can be seen in the other contestant's story lines as well and becomes especially apparent in the case of Robin, which will be outlined in the next section.

### *Robin*

In cycle 1 episode 7, the Christian contestant Robin Manning rejects posing nude for a photoshoot with jewellery due to her Christian values. When she is to be judged later in the episode, Tyra Banks confronts her with a story. She states that she saw Robin shake her boobs at the male stylist, Jay – a scene never shown on camera. This case was chosen because Robin chose to say no to the nude photoshoot and challenge the hierarchy of the show. When she did that, she criticised the production team for pushing the limits, which can be seen below.

“Last week, it was bra and panties. I probably would never do that. This week, it's two strands of ribbon and a thong. What is it going to be next week? My grandmother used to always tell me if you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything. So, this stand here I'm taking might make me be eliminated. So, my time is up. Then I'm okay with it ... I'm okay with that” (ANTM, 2003c, 27:47-28:12)

This scene is a direct challenge to the stylist Jay’s authority and the agenda of the show. This can be seen as Robin talks back and challenges the power domain that she is embedded in. Table 2 below will show how Robin and the judges create two different lexical fields of hers.

Table 2 – Robin (ANTM, 2003c)

<b>Robin</b>	
<b>construction of self</b>	<b>construction of her</b>
My body is sacred its mine My religion My body is a temple A representative Young women america as a whole integrety never do that (bra and panties) this stand here im taking My body is mine	apprehensive shaking her boobs at me Out of character You think no one is looking Nude Shook your chest Topless shaking your chest juggle, shimmy You are a human not making any sense taking your stands Dissapointed Of a different size big ba-donka-donk (ass)

The table illustrates the how Robin articulates her subject position as: *religion, a representative, integrity, my body is mine*. These connotations articulate a discursive construction of the 'politics of respectability', which is a historical Black feminine strategy to navigate racism by applying forms of conservative self-representation, such as promoting behaviour that emphasised morality and civility. This behaviour historically secured social acceptance, political equality and safety in predominantly white spaces (Menziez & Ryalls, 2020, p. 484). This subject position is challenged when the stylist Jay tells another contestant in confidence that Robin shook her boobs at him while Tyra Banks was standing in the corner out of sight. The show creates a narrative of evidence by making a confession scene with Jay. In a genre where the eyes' episteme creates knowledge, it is odd that there is no scene showing this happening, as the genre contradicts its own logic. In the judging session, Tyra Banks accuses Robin of double standards, referring to the shaking

boobs, to construct a double bind for Robin. The lexical field that becomes applied to Robin is; *out of character, nude, topless, not making sense*. Here Tyra creates a structural opposition to Robin's modest identity of being topless and nude. Which implies that Robin is sexual in her character. But Tyra also delegitimizes Robin's position by stating that she is: '*out of character*' and '*not making sense*'. Here Tyra uses an ideology of madness, as she states that Robin is not making any sense in her actions. hooks describes how Black women's resistance would be treated as madness by people around them (hooks, 2014, pp. 25–26). This can be seen reproduced in this discursive field. By making a discourse of Robin as mad, it enforces the discursive field of Robin as sexualized, because Robin's own subject position is '*not making any sense*'. Instead, the discursive field produces a sexualised 'controlling image' of Robin shaking her boobs at a man, which implies a 'sexually aggressive' attitude like the 'Jezebel' (Collins, 2026, p. 118). After establishing the 'controlling image' Tyra Banks states that if Robin had posed nude in front of the camera, she could have been creating a *strong platform* representing *women of a different size*. This can be seen when Tyra Banks says:

“If you would have done that photo shoot and showed that big ba-donka-donk<sup>4</sup> can be beautiful and it can be sexy and I can stand right next to these other girls and serve and be fierce. I think that would have been a very strong platform” (ANTM, 2003c, 36:31-3645)

This quote shows that the discursive field again creates a double bind. The production team can establish Robin as both aggressively sexual and too pious at the same time. Establishing an image of Robin as having a '*big ba-donka-donk*' places Robin in the sexualised discursive field. But it also creates her body as an opposition to the white beauty ideal. This reinforces racialised images of Black women's butt sizes. Creating Robin entirely in a discourse of racialised sexuality makes Robin's own subject position invisible, as she cannot claim the 'politics of respectability' for her identity. Both the fact that she showed nudity and that she wasn't nude can be used in this instance, establishing a double bind that is the

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<sup>4</sup> Ass

characteristic of the show. Creating the contestants in a double bind erases the contestants' ability to situate their subject position. The contestants' actions become resistance because the judges lock their ability to utilise their subject position. According to the theoretical framework, the target can recognise acts as resistance. Establishing a double bind on the contestants is happening because they challenge the narratives the judges have made for them. The two examples illustrate how the relations in America's Next Top Model establish a double bind for the contestants. They are damned if they do, but they are also damned if they don't. The relations between the judges and the contestants place the contestants in a double bind. In the double bind, the judges have the primary power over determining the contestants' subject positions. The next section will investigate the discursive constructions in relation to other contestants.

#### *4.1.2 Comparison to other Contestants and Frames of Groups*

The discursive production of the subject positions relies on how the other contestants are framed according to the subject in focus. The constructions of sameness and difference are shown through both lexical and visual systems. The lexical field that uses pronouns that establish identification is; *we*, *you know* and *you would*. The contestants most often use the pronouns *we* and *you know*, when they want to create identification with the judges. Such as when Yaya states:

“Just because we had a talk about, *you know*, Afrocentricity before - and it's kind of misunderstood” (ANTM, 2004c, 34:58-35:04).

This establishes a mood of confidentiality, as she can rely on their shared intertextuality by referring to former conversations. The same thing happens when the production team tries to persuade the contestants to do something, e.g., making Robin pose nude. This can be seen when Jay says:

“What *we* have for an option for covering up, is the underwear and *we* got the band which *we* can double band round so *we* can go over once go back around a second time to make it wide. Tell me *your* concerns. Is it the illusion of nudity that bothers *you*?” (ANTM, 2003c, 25:10-28:13)

This quote illustrates that pronouns have a major impact on understanding situations of confidentiality or disidentification. It becomes apparent here that Jay uses *we* about the situations that imply confidentiality and trust. But it makes it apparent that it is the contestants who cause a problem when shifting to the pronoun *you*.

At the same time, the production team are seldomly referred to directly by the contestants, even when they are situated in difficult situations. In the gathered material, it can be counted nine times when the contestants refer directly to a specific person that is not another contestant. This can be seen in table 3 underneath.

*Table 3 – Table three did not account two ambiguous statements by Toccara, where she uses a pronoun, but it did not refer directly to a superior or other contestant*

<b>Contestants referring to superiors</b>		
<b>Person</b>	<b>Statement</b>	<b>Superior</b>
Yaya	We had a talk	Judges
Toccara	She shouldn't	Stylist
	You cant	
	You said	
Robin	You're looking	Jay
	You know	Tyra Banks
	with you	Tyra Banks
Ebony	Tyra would not	Tyra Banks
	The woman	Stylist

This implicates an interesting discursive construction. Often the people that have created a harmful situation for the contestant are not referred to directly. This establishes nominalised categories, where the people who make the actions are concealed behind passive verbs or generalised identity categories (Machin & Mayr, 2023). The best example is Ebony’s experience in the hair salon, which will be analysed in the next section.

### *Ebony*

Ebony Haith is a contestant in cycle 1. Ebony is queer, which is given much attention on the show, as she has the possibility of inviting her girlfriend for a scene. Queer love and relations are described as a space for resistance in Black feminism (Lorde & Clarke, 2012). But I did not choose that scene for investigating resistance, as I have previously argued for the exploitation of emotions that is the fundament of ANTM. The choice to cast Ebony's with a queer identity together with Robin's Christian identity can show that they were cast for conflict. However, in this case, episode 3, cycle 1, Ebony is given a makeover in a beauty salon. During the scene, three white stylists are shown making racist comments about Ebony's hair. Saying comments like "Should we write her name [in her hair]?" and leaving the haircut uneven (ANTM, 2003d, 06:17-06:19). The next scene, in the living room, shows Ebony complaining to the other contestants, saying this:

“It is very upsetting to an African American woman to go into a salon and the person to do her hair incorrectly. It is very inappropriate. It doesn't make any sense to me. [...] The African American man they had there was there for pieces. He wasn't there for that [cutting hair], that that wasn't his technique in his job. It's very interesting you would think that they would have one person there trained to do everything [...] I mean Tyra would not have this she's too famous for this...” (ANTM, 2003d, 08:58- 09:36)

This scene shows how Ebony is questioning what happened, opening the door for critique of the setting by recognising that Tyra Banks, as a Black woman, would not have chosen a salon where they were not equipped to cut Afro hair. Ebony's statement is challenging assumptions on the situation and states opinions on the inappropriate situation. This can be seen as Ebony articulating an oppositional gaze, because she analyses the situation and defines the missing links. Such as pointing out that neither Tyra Banks nor the African American man helped her.

When analysing the full lexical field from both the salon and the scene where Ebony explained the situation for the contestant. It becomes apparent that Ebony

articulates the stylists' actions by referring to them as a generalised group or indirectly. The stylists are portrayed as: *the people, everybody, not everybody* and *they*. When compared to table 3, it becomes apparent that this is a pattern that is repeated for all four contestants. By concealing the actor of harm, the discursive field makes a 'God-trick' where harm precedes and comes from nowhere. This neutralises the harm and makes Ebony's reaction seem misplaced and exaggerated. This places Ebony in a domain of power where the power production is invisible and therefore cannot be challenged. Because of this relation, the contestants' actions will always seem misplaced or exaggerated. This also implicates another point: that racism is made into a commodified source of entertainment. Here an actual situation of racist behaviour is concealed by establishing a discourse of Ebony as the only actor in the scene.

An important part of the discursive field is the contestants' internal social dynamics. All the contestants are a part in creating internal conflicts, opinions and generalised statements about each other. Such behaviour often happens in the confessional. The confessional is a short clip with a commentary from a contestant, seemingly commenting on the situation that is happening on the screen. The contestant is not talking directly to the camera but to the interviewer sitting next to the camera. It makes it look like the contestant talks to the spectators without breaking the fourth wall.<sup>5</sup> The confessional creates a God-Trick with the spectators, as they assumingly get into the contestants' heads and get access to all the emotions they have in a specific situation. Or that they can see the situation playing out from more perspectives than the angle of the camera. The confessionals often dramatise the situation and increase the intensity. It can be seen in the situation when Ebony is telling the other contestants about her haircut. Here the production team makes a clip with another contestant in confessional, Elyse and make her comment of the situation. It can be seen in the figure 3 below.

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<sup>5</sup> The term 'the fourth wall' comes from the theatre where it is the invisible separation between the performers and the audience. In television it is the screen. The audience can see and comprehend the story, but the story cannot comprehend the existence of the audience.

Elyse's confessional states that Ebony cannot stop. But in the scene, Ebony states that she is not a violent person. Because of the God-trick of Elyse's confession and the camera showing a closeup of Ebony, it creates an intense view of her frustration. The visual and lexical fields intertwined make the situation dramatic and create the exact opposite discourse on Ebony's subject



Figure 2 – Ebony (ANMT, 2003d, 09:05 – 09:16)

position. It establishes the possibility that Ebony might in fact be prone to using violence in some situations and creates a discourse of Ebony being angry and dangerous.

Cutting and camera angles can portray the other contestants as one group against the person in focus. The contestants' different reactions also legitimise or delegitimise the subject position of the person in focus. The next example will show how Ebony's narrative of her haircut is constructed as ridiculous or unserious due to the scene cutting with the other contestants' reactions. This creates a highly dramatised scene which can be seen in figure 3.

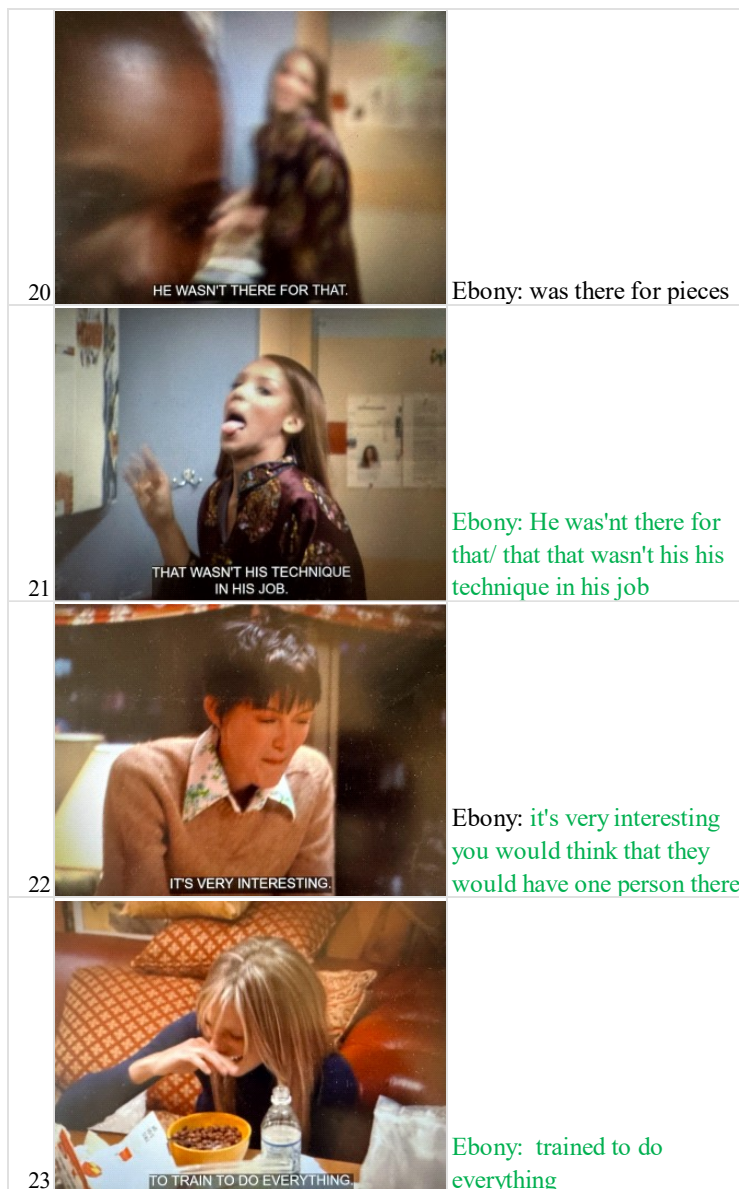


Figure 3 - *Ebony* (ANTM, 2003d, 09:17- 09:25)

Clipping the other contestants directly after each other, all of them laughing, makes them appear as a group against Ebony. Ebony is not shown in the image, which destabilises her narrative, despite her ‘talking back’ and analysing the situation.

Examining the material, it becomes apparent that the meaning of the text is defined by the image that is shown. This can be seen as the effect of the episteme of the camera, where what is shown is perceived as true. This means that

the discourse is determined by what the ‘mood’ in the image shows. The person's emotions in the frame will always affect what the contestants say. This effect can be seen here, where Ebony ‘talks back’, but the images show the contestants laughing. The images determine the mood of what is being said, as they overrule the narrative or the things that Ebony tells them. Ebony’s talk is shown as laughable and irrelevant because the other contestants are shown laughing while she speaks. This discursive field hides Ebony’s subject position and builds testimonial injustice towards her story. This establishes a domain of power where Ebony cannot push

her message through, which is another way of making her subject position invisible. Stating one person against a group is a way of making the contestants seem to be alone in their judgement of the situation and creating a group reaction that can ridicule or exclude the person in focus. However, deconstructing the scene shows these situations are highly constructed. When Ebony starts to present her story, she is standing up in the living room where the two others are sitting down. Ebony ends her talk and leaves the scene. But the next cut shows Ebony again in the living room in a closeup shot and one of the two contestants, standing up in the other end of the living room – laughing. The impossibility of the positions of the different people in the room makes the timeline of the situation impossible. But this is concealed through the high-cutting pace of the scene. The high pace of the shots is also a way to make the situation more intense, which increases the production of Ebony being frantic. The visual episteme constructs what the images show as being true. The use of emotion to conceal Ebony's story implies that her action was recognised as resistance by the production team. By establishing her narrative in a section with laughter, the production team delegitimised her talk. This implies that even though Ebony did not refer to the people who did it, the critique of the setup was still present. Ebony used her position as an African-American woman to argue why the treatment was wrong and used her position against the power domain of racism. Recognising the critique as resistance, the production team established her talk in a position of testimonial injustice.

This part shows how the mood and emotions of the other contestants can be used to frame a certain narrative. This relation shows how a production of emotions can create epistemic injustice towards the contestant speaking. And the discourse of the contestant will be determined by others' emotions.

#### *4.1.3 The Relation to the Camera*

The final relation that will be analysed is the contestant's negotiation with the camera. Reality TV's genre format makes the audience into observers of real events (Deery, 2015, p. 31). The audience can have a feeling that they are a fly on the wall in a real situation. Even though the spectators might know logically that this is not

the case, the production helps establish this relation by cutting out unintentional eye contact with the camera. Also, in interviews the contestants talk to someone beside the camera, not directly to the camera. This

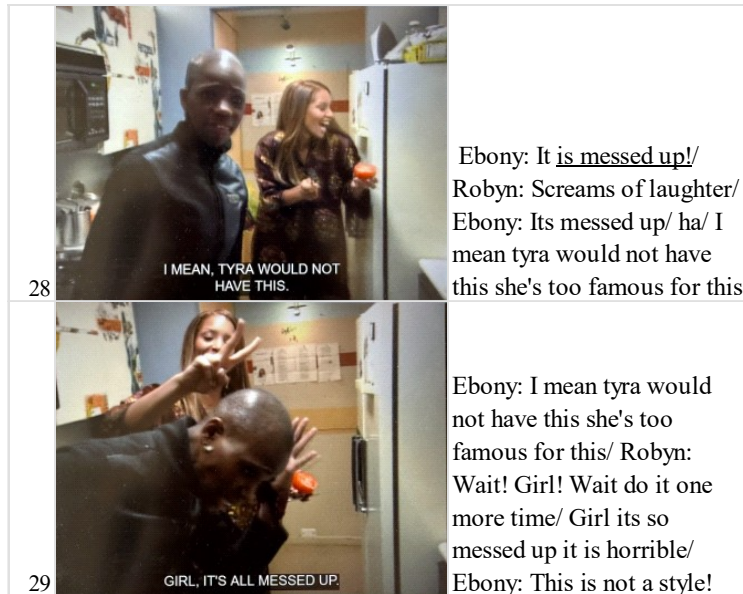


Figure 4 - *Ebony* (ANTM, 2003d, 09:33- 09:39)

produces an experience of watching the situation as an observer whose existence the contestants are unaware of. On the other hand, the contestants are in the real situation knowingly surrounded by cameras that they must perform in relation to. Opposite to the episteme of the show, the contestants are aware of the camera. The figure 4 below shows Robin making 'rabbit ears' or a 'peace sign' over Ebony's head after Ebony told the others about her haircut. Robin asking her to do "it", meaning putting her head down, "one more time" so she can make the hand gesture over her head.

This scene shows how Robin acts as someone who would pose in front of a photo. Asking Ebony to bow down again so the camera can see Robin's hand and making a still gesture can be seen as an effort for the camera to get the right shot and shows that the contestants are not only aware of the camera but also negotiate their relation to the camera and create body postures and poses for it. This moment shows how the contestants develop an oppositional gaze towards what they think the camera captures and are aware of their position in the frame. This opens the possibility that they can negotiate the discursive field of the visual material. The 'oppositional gaze' deconstructs the power relations of the camera. By having awareness of how the camera treats them as visual material, the contestants will negotiate this power relation. This relation can be seen not only as a repertoire but also as a relation that

informs resistance. Through the theory, it becomes apparent that the oppositional gaze is a historical and cultural method for Black women to interpret their absence in the cinema. In this sense the ‘oppositional gaze’ becomes a repertoire. But in this context in front of a camera, the camera becomes a relation of power the contestants are aware of. To interpret the contestant’s awareness of the camera means that when they talk back to the judges, it is because they are informed by this relation of power. The reason why they establish their subject position can be seen as their awareness of how they will present on camera.

This section demonstrated how the relation between the target and the resisters established the contestants in a domain of power. Both the judges and the production team recognise their resistance. To re-establish power, they position the contestants in a double bind, making it impossible to negotiate their subject position. They also use emotions as a tool for creating testimonial injustice. This section also demonstrated how the discursive field makes actors of harm invisible. This approach assigns guilt to the contestants instead. Analysing how the contestants use the oppositional gaze created an understanding that the contestants are aware of the power domain of the camera; the next section will analyse how the ‘oppositional gaze’ also becomes a repertoire.

## 4.2 Repertoires

The former section showed how the contestants navigate a double bind. This section will investigate how the contestants create their subject position as a part of their repertoires.

### 4.2.1 *The Subject’s Agency*

The contestants rely on establishing their subject position by speaking out loud. This is shown in the way the contestants always rely on their own subject position in their talk. Even though it establishes a power domain where the actors are hidden, it reveals information about how the contestants perceive their own subject position and their means of agency. Sound as well as images can be manipulated in reality television. Talk and conversation could be manipulated as well. The possibility of manipulation of the conversations, e.g., by removing accusations against the actors,

does not alter the fact that the contestants' discourse about themselves reflects their perception of their agency in the competition. This can be seen in the case of the plus size model Toccara, which will be described in the next section.

### *Toccara*

Toccara is cycle three's only plus-size model. In episode 7 cycle 3 Toccara was modelling in a photoshoot with the theme 'alter ego'. The theme showed a daytime vs nighttime photo of the contestants. The other contestants modelled high society vs. superheroes. But Toccara modelled as a parking attendant vs high society. Toccara challenges the stylist's choice of outfit for her by commenting on the choice of clothes. This can be read in the case below.

*Stylist:* you have to understand, too, Toccara, if you were to do catalogues, you know, for plus-size models and stuff like that/

*Toccara:* I know, but this is high fashion, it is not catalogue I got to prove myself to the high fashion people/

*Stylist:* do you think that I'm going to be able to get a rack like this loaded with/ *Toccara trying to interrupt/* clothes in your size?/

*Toccara:* You can't find something in my size, so I'm supposed to feel bad because/

*Stylist:* *trying to interrupt*

*Toccara:* You said, you said you had a certain time..(*being cut off*)

*Stylist:* You're taking everything as a negative. I don't think that you realise how this whole modelling thing works. It is like no appreciation.

(ANTM, 2004e, 27:09-27:37)

The stylist in the show can be seen as an authority figure, as her choices of clothes and styling will frame Toccara's appearance on camera. The discourse of the clothes, which can be seen in figure 7, p. 58, is produced in the visual fields of: *low pay*, *working class* and *male*. This establishes a discourse that pulls both from the structural poverty of the African American population but also from the de-feminisation of the Black female body (Collins, 2026, pp. 108–109). This discourse

establishes Toccara in a structural opposition to the white skinny female body and works on assumptions that Toccara cannot be a model while being Black and big. Toccara's conversation reveals how Toccara finds her own agency in the situation. By commenting on the stylist's choice of clothes, Toccara shows that she is aware of the narrative that the stylist establishes her in. This can show that Toccara is using an oppositional gaze to analyse the narrative the clothes will make about her.

The lexical and visual field of Toccara connotes to the discourse of the matriarch vs the mammy. Collins describes that the controlling image of the lazy, unappreciative 'matriarch' is established in structural opposition to the hard working and caring 'mammy' (Collins, 2026, p. 109). What becomes apparent from this small section of the interaction is that Toccara uses the same lexical field as the stylist when stating her own arguments. Toccara says: '*it is not catalogue*' and '*you can't find something in my size*'. Both statements are followed by Toccara's subject position as she says: '*I got to prove myself to the high fashion people*' and '*so I'm supposed to feel bad*' which redirects the action away from the stylist and back to Toccara's subject position. This creates a 'god-trick' that hides the stylists' actions against Toccara. The stylist could have adapted her wardrobe to fit Toccara. Instead, the lexical field implies that Toccara should fit the wardrobe. By making a god-trick, the discursive field creates Toccara in a neoliberal position. Where she becomes the only actor that can affect her own situation. In the full conversation, Tocarra always refers to herself as subject, such as: '*I know, I got to, I have been, I am just trying to*', etc. The discourse narrates Toccara as a 'matriarch' together with making invisible the actor that harms her. The consequences are that Toccara establishes herself in a lexical field of needing to work harder and trying to be grateful, which connotes on neoliberal values of hard work.

The examples can be seen in the table 4 below:

Table 4 – Toccara (ANTM, 2004e, 26:56-29:50)

<b>Toccara</b>	
<b>Statements on self</b>	<b>Statements on others</b>
I wanna know why I gotta prove myself to the high fashion people I have allowed people to take my energy I don't think I did a very good job I should have kept a positive attitude I really let it get to me I just tryna stay positive I'm big I know I cant compare myself to everyone else but damn! I think it's just hard because I'm standing (I'm) Just trying to be so grateful	You can't find something in my size You said you had a certian time All the girls were so nice looking That they would have made me feel so bad and ashamed. Everybody is like are you loosing weight will you just stop telling me that She shouldnt makeing me feel like that you know But it hurts

The table shows that Toccara’s statements on herself count more than the statements on others. It also shows that Toccara is using active verb sentences when describing her position. The other people are being described or addressed directly three times: *You said, You can’t, she shouldn’t*. Where the others are referred to indirectly as: *all the girls, everybody is like, will you just stop<sup>6</sup>, it hurts*. This passage shows that most of the time when she refers to somebody’s action, responsibility is blurred, making it unclear who tells her to lose weight. On the other hand, her statements articulates a clear subject position: *I gotta approve myself, I have allowed people to, I don’t think I did a good job, I am big*. The idea behind the discourse develops from neoliberal ideas that it is Toccara’s own responsibility that she is big. It is also Toccara’s responsibility to not ‘allow people’ to take her positive energy away.

The discourse that blames incidents on the contestants is repeated in the other cases as well. The ideology behind this discursive field is neoliberal values that erase structural differences and disadvantages such as racism and gender and make success into a question of work performance (Hasinoff, 2008). However, Toccara’s subject position shows that she reproduces this discourse about herself. Toccara

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<sup>6</sup> This sentence is ambiguous because despite using ‘you’ as pronoun. It does not refer to someone obvious that have been shown in the scene. It shows that the ‘you’ rather connotates an empty category of ‘someone’

communicates that she is in control over the situation and herself. She tells the camera that she should try to stay positive and have kept a positive attitude. Toccara is more concerned with trying to narrate her own perspective and subject position than accusing someone of doing something bad to her. This implies that the ideologies that Toccara reproduces are a mix between neoliberalism and respectability. In this sense, respectability and neoliberalism inform her repertoire of expressing gratefulness and her successfulness in doing her 'job'.

Keeping her focus on her own subject position can be seen as self-protection against a harmful situation. After talking back to the stylist, Toccara could have created more value for the camera by stirring more drama, but she chose not to. This can imply that Toccara uses a repertoire based on respectability and neoliberal work. By establishing herself as the main actor who can change her situation, she uses a repertoire of neoliberalism and individuality. It makes sense that in a contest that reproduces ideologies of neoliberalism, Toccara would use the same ideology to resist the harmful stereotypes. The ideology of neoliberalism establishes individuality and self-control as a method to situate herself as a subject. Toccara is not the only contestant using control over the subject position as a repertoire. Articulating a sense of self is the repertoire that all four contestants use after a harmful experience. The next example will show how Robin uses the same repertoire when she argues against posing nude for a photoshoot.

### *Robin*

Table 5 shows how Robin only accuses the stylist Jay at one point of overstepping the line. This is when she makes the argument: "Last week, it was bra and panties. I probably would never do that. This week, it's two strands of ribbon and a thong. What is it going to be next week?" (ANTM, 2003c, 27:47-28:12). The question is rhetorical and is made to the spectators and Jay. To make them fill out the scene themselves, but it does not state directly that Jay is the actor that pushes her to do the photoshoot.

Table 5– Robin (ANTM, 2003c)

<b>Robin</b>	
<b>Statements on self</b>	<b>Statements on others</b>
Me personally, being nude, Like I said, is that illusion is really not sitting well with me either It doesn't sit well My body is sacred its mine My religion teaches me My body is a temple a representative for not only young women, but America as a whole Woman that has integrity I probably would never do that My grandmother used to always tell me So this stand here I'm taking So my time is up then I'm okay with it I didn't want to feel uncomfortable My body is mine I just didn't think that that is what I needed to do in order to get	having people having people see that You are looking What is it gonna be next week? you know, Mr. Jay, like that. And then he said he looked like! to be honest with you it's not like Mr. J hasn't seen

In the same way as Toccara, Robin keeps referring to her own subject position instead of accusing the production team of pushing it too far. To make this argument, she establishes a repertoire where she repeats her values on her own position and draws from her catalogue of experience. Robins' repertoire stems from the same ideology as Toccara's but uses more from the politics of respectability and less on neoliberalism. Taking from these ideologies, Robin establishes her repertoire through her values of her family, nation and church. This repertoire shows that Robin, in the same way as Toccara, uses her own position as resistance instead of accusing or destabilising the situation in other ways.

Toccara's and Robin's repertoires overlap in ideologies and cultural perceptions. This means they use their subject position and identity construction to shelter from harmful discourses. This is a consequence of the double bind the production team establishes. Another aspect of this could be that both Toccara and Robin have

developed an oppositional gaze on the situation. If they start to accuse the judges or throw a fit, they will reproduce a ‘controlling image’ of an ‘angry Black woman’ in front of the camera. This shows that an oppositional gaze on the situation could be the reason why the contestants rely on self-worth and values instead of accusing someone else of being hostile to them.

By taking on the role of the angry Black woman, they would create drama in favour of the production team. Hill writes that much of the drama in reality television is created by the contestants themselves, as they know it makes good television and increases the contestants' visibility (Hill, 2014). The repertoires that Robin and Toccare use reinforce their identities and values. This can be seen as a contrast to dramatic behaviour. The reason for doing this can be because their actions are informed by a repertoire of ‘the opposite gaze’. Both Robin and Toccare analyses how their actions will look through the camera. Knowing how their behaviour will look from the outside, they retort to their identities as a repertoire of resistance. This can be seen as their way of actively avoiding the ‘controlling images’. As seen in table 3, the two other contestants don’t use accusations either. Yaya's statements show that her repertoire comes from cultural identification of her African heritage. She uses this as a repertoire when she accuses the African hat of being; *very artificial, very cheap, fake kente*. And she states her own identity as being African. On the other hand, Ebony uses her position as an African American woman and the history of racism to underline that: *“It is very upsetting to an African American woman to go into a salon and the person to do her hair incorrectly. It is very inappropriate”* (ANTM, 2003d, 08:57-09:04). She uses herself and her identity to show that it was wrong. Showing that the contestants might have an oppositional gaze and know that they risk being reproduced as “angry Black women”, the contestants use their own subject position as a repertoire when they are being challenged on their position and values. This repertoire makes the contestants ‘talk back’, to protect their subject position. The former chapter has shown that the contestants are embedded in power domains of the camera and the double bind. Using the oppositional gaze, they can analyse how they are being portrayed from the outside. By talking back, they challenge the vision of the camera and try to

establish their own position. This implies that talking back is a repertoire that the contestants use to establish their position in the domain of power.

#### *4.2.2 Performing Emotions*

The former section showed that the emotions shown in the image create the moods of the talk in the scene. Emotions become visual discourse that establishes ideas behind the message. Earlier studies of resistance in reality television have treated emotions as a way to negotiate subject positions (Cossey & Martin, 2023). However, I argued that emotions are the economic fundament of reality television and can therefore not be treated as a site of resistance. This section will investigate the discourse that emotions produce and how they are an unreliable source for determining a subject position.

In America's Next Top Model, emotional responses are often shown as a closeup, so that the spectators will only see the face with the emotional expression and not the background. Using closeups as frames without background makes a possibility of the production team manipulating emotional responses to fit the drama of the situation. Because the person is not talking and the only part of the body shown is the face, those emotional pieces are valuable for creating dramatic scenes with a lot of social conflict. The next figure 5 will show how emotional expressions are shown in between statements from the judges, with examples from all four contestants, to establish a certain reaction that fits the discursive field of the judges.





73		Tyla: <i>Yaya, it was like you were on this pedestal and</i>
74		Tyla: <i>this hat smelled like dookie</i>
75		Yaya: <i>gaps/</i> Tyla: <i>You're insulting the person</i>
76		Tyla: <i>that chose that hat.</i>

Figure 5 – Yaya (AMNT, 2004c, 38:50 -38:57)

### *Yaya*

Figure 5 shows how Yaya, in image 75 closeup and low angle, gasps dramatically at Tyra Banks, stating that she treated the hat like dookie<sup>7</sup>. This reaction fits the drama of the situation and establishes Yaya accepting Tyra Banks' discourse of Yaya as insulting and obstructive.

The anonymous background only showing Yaya's head opens for the possibility that this reaction was cut in to fit the situation and construct Yaya as obedient. The opposite discursive creation can be seen in Robins case in figure 6.

<sup>7</sup> Shit

## Robin

In figure 6, Robin's image 69 translates as nervousness, where image 71 seems to show disbelief or rejection of the narrative. These two expressions are cut in between two shoots of Tyra Banks while Tyra is still talking. Robin's seemingly rejection of the narrative suits the dramatic situation and increases conflict and the double bind of her subject position. This scene establishes the discourse on Robin as obstructive, as her reactions are portrayed as a structural opposition to Tyra Banks.

This is the part where cycle one's low budget production will play a part. In cycle three, Yaya's reaction fits the situation, and the scene seems smooth. But in cycle



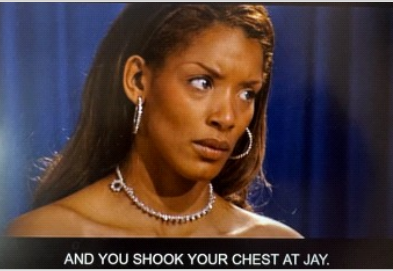
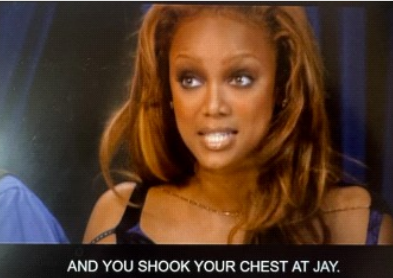
69	 <p>WHEN YOU THINK NO ONE IS LOOKING.</p>	Tyra: when you think no one is looking, when you didn't know Miss Tyra was right there,
70	 <p>I SAW YOU OPEN THE DRESSING ROOM</p>	Tyra: I saw you open the dressing room at the couture house and you were nude
71	 <p>AND YOU SHOOK YOUR CHEST AT JAY.</p>	Tyra: and you shook your chest
72	 <p>AND YOU SHOOK YOUR CHEST AT JAY.</p>	Tyra: at Jay

Figure 6 - (ANTM, 2003c, 35:25 -35:34)

one, image 71, Robin seemingly side eyes a person or object that is to the right of Tyra Banks. But this does not make any sense because Tyra sits in front of her and Jay is not present in this scene. If we could have seen what Robin looks at, it could have changed the narrative completely, but her side-glance establishes the discourse of disbelief and obstruction. Therefore, the shoot is placed there.

*Toccarra*

The next figure 7 is the case of Toccarra, which shows how emotions can also be used when showing the contestants outside the judging room. The next example in image 32 shows Toccarra rolling her eyes when the stylist Jay states something about her appearance in the shoot.

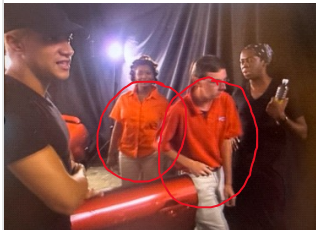

30		Jay: she's opening the door
31		Jay: for the glamorous one because look at her
32		Jay: She's a parking attendant. (Toccarra is rolling her eyes)
33		Jay: I want to feel

Figure 7 – Toccarra at photoshoot (ANTM, 2004e, 27:50-27:57)

Figure 7 shows that by clipping image 32 of Toccarra rolling her eyes before image 33, showing a clip of the stylist, the production has created intense but silent drama. Making these two come straight after another, the production team creates social conflict. Images 32 and 33 create Toccarra and the stylist in a structural opposition. In image 32 Toccarra dominates the frame with a close-up of her rolling eyes. Where image 33 shows the stylist established as calmer and

further away from the camera, seemingly neutral. It establishes a discourse where Toccarra becomes dominating and obstructive against a subject that is neutral and calm. This establishes a power relation where Toccarra becomes insensible in the situation. Here emotions and facial expressions become tools for establishing a discourse of the contestants that is beyond the contestants' possibility for negotiation. This also works the other way around with passive expressions. This can be seen in Toccarra's case, in figure 8, when she is about to prepare for the next

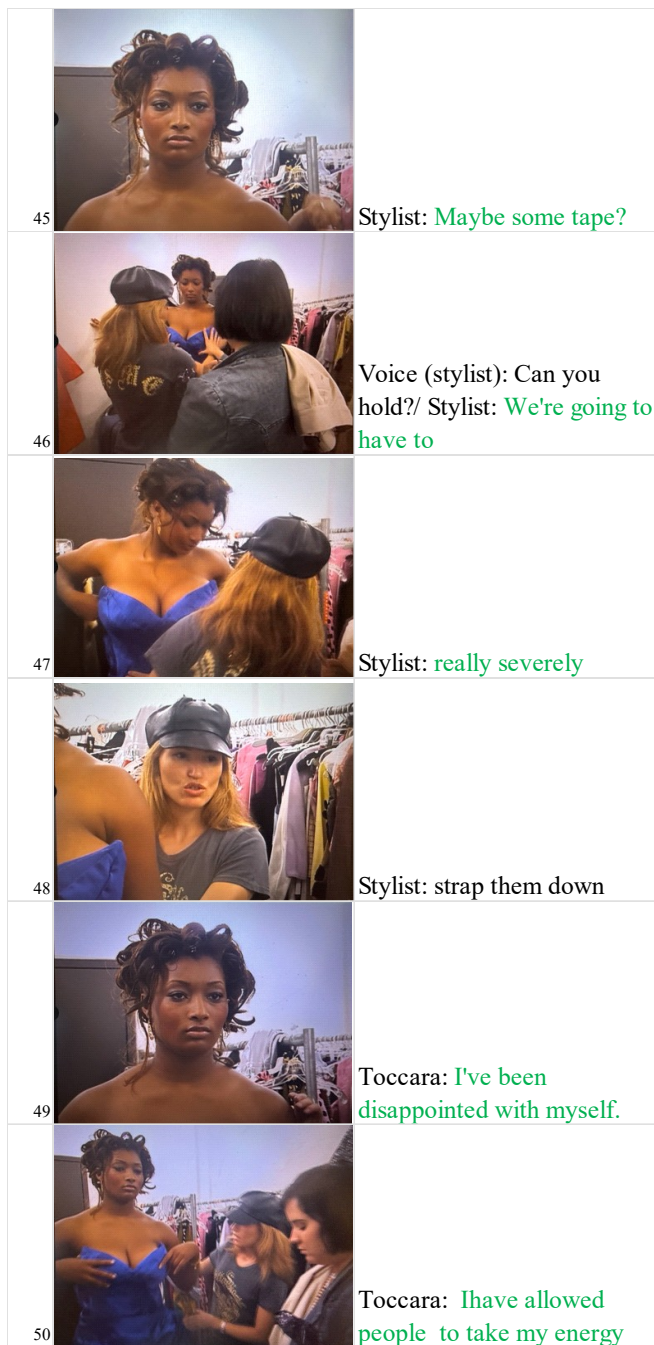


Figure 8 – Toccara backstage (ANTM, 2004e, 28:16-28:27)

shoot and the production team has chosen to frame several images of her in a passive position.

Figure 8 shows Toccara in a waiting position when the stylists dress her for the next shoot. The conversation shows the stylist talks about her size by addressing the size of her boobs. They are going to: “really severely strap them down” (ANTM, 2004e, 28:16-28:27). Toccara’s face shows a passive expression in images 45 and 49. At the same time, the lexical field establishes her size as big. Because the visual discourse influences Toccara’s expression, it becomes constructed as passive aggressive. What becomes apparent is that passive expressions are an empty category that can be

determined by the discourse in the lexical field and by the other visual material. Toccara is positioned in a way that makes her look larger than the stylists in the frame. The positions create a visual hierarchy where the stylist suddenly becomes small in comparison to Toccara. The visual effect creates a discourse that Toccara is dominating. This dominance establishes her passive expression as overwhelming

because it seemingly takes up more space in the frame. It shows how a passive expression in a scene becomes an empty category that the production team can use to establish a discursive field of the contestant. Ahmed describes that emotions ‘sticks’ to objects (2014, p. 11) and this shows here, because the way Toccara is portrayed makes her image ‘sticky’ with the emotion of anger. The reason is that the spectators fill in the holes where there is no expression guided by the ‘controlling image’ that Toccara is

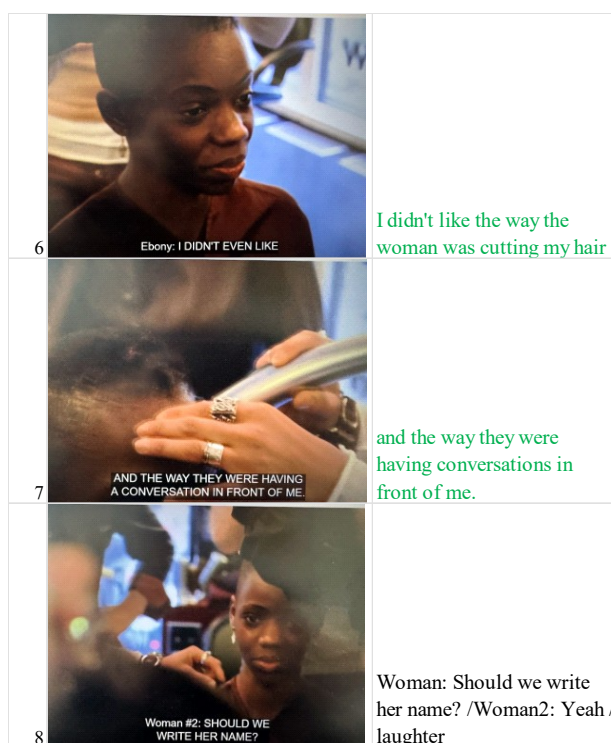


Figure 9 – *Ebony* (ANTM, 2003d, 16:13 -16:19)

constructed in. Competing on reality television makes contestants perform immaterial labour that relies on personality, intellect and emotion that produces a source of income for the reality production (Deery, 2015, p. 79). Passive expressions are the opposite of emotional labour because they show an absence of emotion and personality. However, a passive expression, when shown in America’s Next Top Model, becomes an opportunity for mix-and-matching emotional responses to certain situations. In the example with Toccara, the emotion becomes interpreted as anger. Passive expressions are used to fill in gaps in with all the contestants. But it is especially visible in the case of Ebony, in the hair salon in figure 9.

### *Ebony*

Ebony’s passive expression opens for an interpretation of her being passive aggressive, because her expression overlaps the lexical fields of her voiceover. This scene creates a ‘God-trick’ as it seems that the spectators can get access to Ebony’s thoughts. Ebony’s frustrated voiceover spills over to create her expression as frustrated. The angles and the shots are also showing her from a high angle, which

creates her being smaller than the rest and makes her appear even more passive. This scene shows that the stickiness of anger also shapes the perception of Ebony.

Passivity could be considered a repertoire, as the absence of emotions can be a way of negotiating their subject position by refusing to do emotional labour for the camera. However, it is not possible to understand when a passive expression is a reaction against the camera and when it just shows the contestant resting. It is apparent that stating a passive expression removes the contestants temporarily from doing emotional labour. But making a passive expression opens up for establishing the contestants in a discursive field and constructing their subject position around it. This is partly due to the stickiness of the emotion of anger. Because the spectators expect to see, e.g., anger, it will be easily portrayed in the scene. The other aspect is the controlling images that also established expectations on emotional behaviour. Through these expectations the spectators fill in the emotional gaps. Therefore, passivity will not be categorised as a repertoire.

This section showed how the contestants argue and negotiate harmful situations with their own subject position. This can be seen as a repertoire because by arguing for their own position, they hold on to their subject position and try to avoid being captured in a 'controlling image'. This section also showed that emotions are often shown in closeup, which removes the emotion from the context. This creates a position where the contestants' emotions can be used against them to frame them according to the controlling images. However, the contestants also negotiate their position in the camera's objective. Which will be analysed in the next section.

### 4.3 Space

This section analyses the spatial dimension of resistance. As the contestants cannot see how the camera captures them, will their action be recognised as resistance by the observer. Observing resistance without the resisters perceiving it as such is possible as long as the observer recognises that their action challenges power (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004).

Seen across all the seasons, there is a certain body posture that all the contestants take when they are in a situation of judgement. Arms down to the side or behind the back and kept steady through the judging session. This pose can also be seen in situations when they are getting a message from the stylists before a photoshoot. The assumption is that position creates the most coherent image, so scenes can be cut together without interruption in the background. This assumes that the contestants have been instructed to stand in this position. This becomes apparent when the contestants start to use gesticulation when arguing with an authority. Because through using gestures and arm movements, the contestants can negotiate the closeness of the camera's objective. This can be seen in figure 10, where Robin argues with Jay and Tyra Banks, where she uses gesticulation to take up space in the room to show her perspective of the situation.

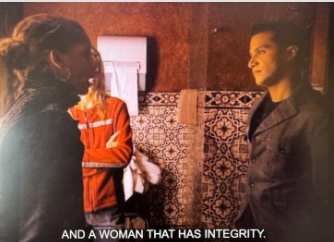
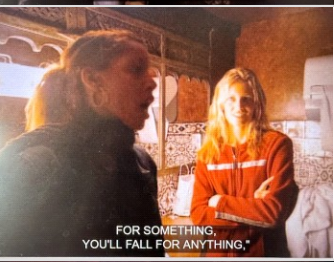

44		<p>Robin: <i>And a Woman that has integrity/</i>          Robin: Last week, it was bra and          panties/ I probably would never do that/          This week, it's two strands of ribbon          and a thong/ Jay: Laughing/ Robin: What          is it going to be next week? My          grandmother used to always tell me</p>
45		<p>Robin: if you don't stand for something,          you'll fall for anything. So this stand here          I'm taking.. Might..make me be          eliminated.</p>
46		<p>Robin: <i>So my time is up</i></p>
47		<p>Robin: then I'm okay with it. Jay: <i>mm-          hmm , mm- hmm/</i> Robin: I'm Okay with          that .</p>

Figure 10 - (ANTM, 2003c, 27:47-28:12)

### Robin

Figure 10 shows that when Robin uses body language and arm gestures, she negotiates the closeness of the camera zoom as the camera tries to capture her body language. Robin leans forward and claps her hands for each point she is making to underline her argument. Instead of showing her in a closeup, the camera captures her in a

medium shot. This takes away some of the intensity of Robin's emotional expression and leaves more communication to the body language. This helps Robin's subject position to get communicated more easily in the image. Another aspect of this is that arm gestures can communicate a different message than what is said.

Examining the gestures and body language alone without sound can show evidence of a different situation. Robins' movement seems slower and less intense without music and talk. This can be seen in figure 11. In shot 83, Tyra Banks gesticulates in a hectic manner to show how much Robin's boobs shook when she showed them to Jay. Tyra Banks' gesticulation is fast and hectic, showing Robin's boobs going up and down at a fast pace. On the other side, in image 84, Robin's movements when illustrating her


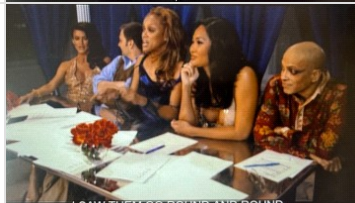

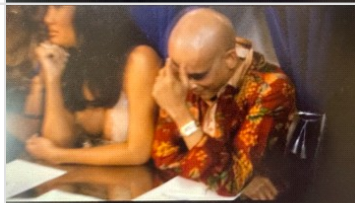

82	 <p>JIGGLE, SHIMMY.</p>	Tyra: jiggle, shimmy. I saw them go round
83	 <p>I SAW THEM GO ROUND AND ROUND AND UP AND DOWN.</p>	Tyra: and round and up and down./ Judges behind talk
84	 <p>Robin: NOW WHETHER OR NOT THEY SHOOK OR WHATEVER,</p>	Robin: Now, whether or not they shook
85	 <p>I'M GOING TO OWN UP.</p>	Robin: or whatever, I'm going to own up/ Janice: shes is good!
86	 <p>I'M GOING TO OWN UP TO WHAT I DID.</p>	Robin: I'm going to own up to what I did.

Figure 21 - (ANTM, 2003c, 35:50 -36:01)

boobs shaking are more controlled and slower, making only one movement in a less dramatic way. Cutting between a closeup in frame 82 that shows an intense frame of Robin's expression and cutting between Tyra Banks in frame 83, who makes fast movements. The clipping creates a hectic setting that dramatises the scene. Robin

becomes established in a discourse that is fast and hectic, which makes her response seem dramatic. Tyra Banks and Robin mirror each other as they both gesticulate with arm movements. However, in this scene Robin creates an opposition to Tyra Banks, as Robin mirrors Tyra in a slower and more controlled manner. By mirroring Tyra, an established visual but slower response can be seen to exercise control over the situation and establish a self in opposition to the controlling image. This sequence shows how body language and gesticulation can negotiate the frame and width of the shot of the camera by taking up space with the body. This creates a less intense scene of emotion and communicates more of the contestant's message. It can be seen as resistance as it negotiates the discourse of the visual material. Creating a wider frame and distance to the camera objective. The next case will investigate how Yaya performs gesticulation to negotiate space.

*Yaya*

Body gesticulation can also be used to negotiate the space and frame of the camera, as some gesticulation reaches outside of what can be seen in the frame. The next figure, 12, will show how Yaya negotiates the frame with her arm movement.






22		Yaya: It's very natural to me.
23		Yaya: And I did not choose that hat
24		Yaya: <i>for the very specific reason</i>
25		Yaya: <i>that it's very cliché.</i>
26		Yaya: /soemone trying to interrupt/ The <u>fabric</u> that it's made from is very artificial, very cheap,
27		YaYa: <u>fake kente</u>

Figure 32 – Yaya (ANTM, 2004c, 34:38-34:50)

Tyra Bank's passive expression in frame 25 is placed in a structural opposition to Yaya's emotional expressiveness. This establishes Yaya as an opposition to Tyra, who expresses control and calm in a passive pose, listening to Yaya. Shots 26 and 27 narrow the shot size to a closeup as Yaya's hand gesticulation is closer to her face. The closeup intensifies the expression of her emotions again, especially in contrast to Tyra Banks' passive face. The frame establishes a stickiness of emotion to Yaya's body as it intensifies her as being aggressive. But by making large hand gestures, Yaya can negotiate this position.

Shot 22 and 23 show how Yaya's gesticulation makes the camera show her in a

medium full shot, above Yaya's knees. The reason is that the camera needs to make space for her hand and finger pointing outside of the frame at something. Shot 24 shows what she seemingly is pointing at: the stereotypical African hat.

What this short section from the data set does not show is that in the image before Yaya talks back and in the image after, there is no hat on the judges' tables. It shows that the ways the contestants use body gesticulation can become a negotiation with the camera's focus and the timeline of the production. By pointing at something outside the frame and saying "that hat", Yaya freezes the time and space in which she is talking back because she points at something outside of the camera's frame. In Yaya's reality the hat is in front of her, and the production needs to show that to make Yaya's statement make sense. Yaya's action leaves a hole in the production of reality that would become odd if it was not filled out. Cutting in a frame of the hat in front of the judge that Yaya is pointing towards becomes necessary for creating a coherent message of reality to the spectators. Yaya, by this gesture, opposes the power domain of the camera and its episteme. She negotiates the storyline by freezing a part of it, where she articulates her subject position against the stereotypical connotations of the 'African hat'. Here she resists the domain of the camera by creating space for her to establish her own subject position.

Yaya's actions are spatial resistance as they negotiate the power domain of the camera. According to the definition where resistance can be recognised by an observer, this act can be seen as spatial resistance (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Yaya could not know that her pointing would make the camera zoom out to capture her action. She just pointed towards the hat in front of her. Only the spectators could observe that her gesture would have that effect. The production team altered the reality of the show to fit her action. Body poses and gesticulation actively negotiate with the camera to establish the subject's space and time in the frame.

The analysis shows that the contestants talk back to authority figures to create space for their subject position and to resist the narrative of the show. By investigating the relations between the judges and the four contestants, I found that the judges use a double bind on the contestants, which creates an impossible situation for the

contestants to negotiate their subject position from. To resist the double bind, the contestants use a repertoire where they rely on their identities and avoid controlling images. Their repertoire of resistance is based on 'the oppositional gaze', which informs how they 'talk back'. The visual side showed that the images of emotions created the moods that reinforced the production's discursive field. Emotion in general is an unreliable source for investigating the contestant's subject position. The reason is that the contestants' emotions and passivity are weaponised against their subject position and instead create sticky emotions that draw on references from controlling images. Nevertheless, the contestants use their oppositional gaze to negotiate the relation to the camera and create space to show their body language and embodied position.

#### 4.4 Discussion

The analysis found the contestants can make their subject position clear and negotiate their position despite heavy production and television manufacturing. Examining everyday resistance in reality television is a rather new field. But a few scholars have tried to do the same. Analysing the contestants' subject position, studies found that contestants have the ability to negotiate their position despite the high level of production in reality television (Giannino, 2026; Levy, 2025). However, most of the literature examining race and gender points towards the fact that subject positions are often used to reinforce racial stereotypes on television (Bell-Jordan, 2008; Giannino, 2026; Hasinoff, 2008). Through the analysis I found that emotions are not a reliable source for investigating subject positions in America's Next Top Model, because the emotions are determined in the visual material. Emotions are 'sticky', and they establish the contestants in testimonial injustice (Ahmed, 2014; Fricker, 2007). Instead, I found that the contestants established their subject position through their talk, informed by hooks' theory of talking back (hooks, 2014). However, much Black feminist research shows that the subjects locate their everyday resistance in the emotions of anger as a way to analyse injustice (Lorde, 1997). This theory informed Cossey and Martins' study on emotion management in Love Island, which I took inspiration from (2023). Cossey

and Martin found that expressions of anger establish solidarity among the female contestants on Love Island. But their anger is still exploited for creating interesting television and reinforcing stereotypes of race, gender and class (Cossey & Martin, 2023, p. 1218). My study in comparison to Cossey and Martin's found that it is the visual material of the emotions that establish the 'controlling images'. This makes them an unreliable source for resistance. Despite different theoretical frameworks on emotion, another reason for the different finding is the application of methods. Cossey and Martin use critical discourse analysis, with a focus on conversation, whereas this study used multimodal critical discourse analysis. This approach means that I put more analytical focus on the interpretation of the images, which found that the images had equal value of assigning emotions to conversation and talk. The two different discourse analyses showed the same results. That race and gender become hyper-visible but structurally marginalised. However, I point towards the construction of images as an extra dimension of how the production behind the show establishes controlling images.

This study investigated everyday resistance through the contestants' establishment of their subject position in the data. But what this study has not been able to investigate is the contestant's own explanation for acting as they do. Johansson and Vinthagen reconceptualised that resistance can be investigated if the act is recognised as resistance by an observer. In this study I have taken on the role of the observer and claim that their acts are destabilising the power dynamics and reinforcing the contestant's subject position. Their actions can be seen as evidence of everyday resistance. By using Black feminist theories of resistance, I have tried to inform myself about making such claims. However, as this conceptualisation opens for new power dynamics between the researcher and the observed, these power dynamics could reinforce epistemic injustice on the observed. The studies of everyday resistance are scholars' attempts to give the observed agency in defining their own reality. However, considering the power dynamic of observer and observed, the scholars of resistance should continue their dialogue on this dynamic. The legitimacy of the observers' positions on recognising everyday resistance should still be discussed in the field.

## 5 Conclusion

This study investigated the African American contestant's resistance to harm and cultural violence in America's Next Top Model. Resistance is an act that challenges power and negotiates the contestant's subject position. The theory established a foundation to understand how reproduction of 'controlling images' is a type of violence which harms the people subjected to it. The Black contestants in America's Next Top Model did not only face harmful situations such as forced tooth operations, fat-shaming and sexual assaults. They were also repeatedly narrated in a stereotypical discourse of race that reinforces the harmful narrative against them and reproduces cultural violence. The contestants in America's Next Top Model found themselves in a double bind that made their subject position seem impossible. What became apparent through the analysis was that the contestants used their subject positions, such as their values and their identities, to negotiate this domain of power. The contestants constructed their own subject position by repeating their sense of self and reinforcing agency, mainly blaming themselves in situations of harm. This was interpreted as avoidance of being trapped in a controlling image as an 'angry Black woman' and as a negotiation against a harmful stereotype that would expect them to blame their harm on others.

The investigation also found that emotions in a genre like reality television should be treated with caution. Emotions are the economic foundation of America's Next Top Model. Therefore, small sequences of face expressions will be cut in between the scenes to set a mood and create an impression for the spectators. As emotions are 'sticky', a scene showing a negative emotion will often reinforce the controlling image of the contestants. This paper points towards how reinforcing controlling images over a subject can hide their agency and legitimise harm against the person. Accepting stereotypes in cultural productions will make the subject invisible and reinstall harm. However, looking for resistance and the subjects' own position, hopefully it will be possible to prevent the cultural violence in future productions.

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