Property TV: Financialized femininity and new forms of domestic labour

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Abstract
This article argues that melodrama plays an important role in shaping the ambivalent narratives of property TV. Using the HGTV Canada show Buy Herself as a case study, the article considers the rise of what amounts to a new women’s genre as an attempt to frame and contain gendered experiences of the financialization of the domestic sphere. Positioning the show within neoliberalism’s faux feminism and superficial discourse of diversity, the article posits that the focus on the melodramatic struggles of real estate buyers in the reality genre of property TV brings to the fore anxieties and contradictions incited by the neoliberal imperatives to reframe the domestic sphere as real estate investment and normalize debt.

Keywords
Buy Herself, melodrama, neoliberalism and women, property TV, reality TV

Introduction
In the years surrounding the financial crash of 2008, in which the inflation, devaluation and re-inflation of real estate figured prominently, real estate shows became a notable presence on lifestyle networks in North America, constituting part of what Joshua Hanan (2010) calls ‘the culture of real estate’ (p. 177; see also Bahney, 2004). Indeed, during this period, HGTV (Home and Garden Television) was credited with both inflating aspirations as a purveyor of ‘house porn’ and helping to moderate material desires in times of austerity (Rosenberg, 2008; Shimpach, 2012). In this article, my goal is to delve into
the operation of the genre of factual entertainment about real estate, also known as property or realty TV (Hay, 2010), as a form of financialized women’s entertainment. Here, I want to consider how this format shifts from the melodramatic orbit around domestic relationships and objects to the new emotional work of domestic real estate. In this, I follow Anna Everett’s (2004) identification of ‘the innovative ways that the HGTV network and its progeny remake key elements of traditional women’s media genres’ (p. 158; italics in original) as well as Fiona Allon’s (2014) discussion of ‘the naturalization and integration of finance within the ordinary spaces of everyday life traditionally coded as “feminine,” such as the home and domestic activity’ (p. 13). I work my analysis through a reading of the HGTV Canada show Buy Herself (2012), which considers the drama of new – and explicitly gendered – buyers attempting to get into real estate or in some cases struggling to stay in the market at a moment of great volatility. The show’s unique focus on single women lends itself to an examination of the ways in which such shows, and indeed much of the property TV genre itself, constitute a reworking of existing women’s entertainment, especially melodrama, potentially creating a new form of what Lauren Berlant (2008) calls a ‘sentimental public’, or site of affinity for women struggling with the limitations and distortions of gender under capitalism.

With its emergence in the 1990s, lifestyle television introduced a shift from demonstration and ‘how-to’ to a more diffuse aspirational logic of transformation (Ryan, 2015). Arguably, the genre of ‘reality lifestyle’, to which property TV contributes, takes this impulse to a new level. Reality lifestyle partakes in both the aspirational domesticity of lifestyle and the competitive field of reality TV, often characterized as expressing a ‘vernacular diffusion of neoliberal common sense’ (McCarthy cited in Shimpach, 2012: 523; see also Allon, 2008; Andrejevic, 2004; McElroy, 2008; Ouellette and Hay, 2008; Ryan, 2015). This orientation is expressed through an emphasis on self-responsibilized and marketized citizen relations and on competitive self-fashioning. Disciplined subjectivities and appropriately crafted spaces are rewarded with approbation and, often, financial remuneration, while failure to remodel the self is construed as an inability to learn and improve (Holliday, 2005), although the degree to which these messages are pedagogically successful has been contested (Skeggs and Wood, 2012). But what about property shows, such as Buy Herself, that often highlight the challenges and obstacles to achieving financial independence through property acquisition? When paired with melodramatic conventions, what kind of ideological and affective work do such shows allow? And what might they tell us about the current neoliberal regime’s articulation of gender and property?

In order to begin to answer these questions, I propose that we need to approach property shows as a genre. Considering these texts as technologies for enframing particular historical and material conditions may provide a helpful way to consider the cultural work they accomplish. In what follows, I attempt to complicate the more obvious neoliberal messages that the shows express. Instead, I consider the property television genre as a historically situated form of expression about domestic life that potentially allows for the transmission of the anxieties and contradictions that surround both shifting gender formations and the post-crisis housing situation. Specifically, I explore the ways in which such shows might allow for expression of a dose of ambivalence around the compulsion to become a homeowner. While the domestic sphere – politicizing it, reimagining it or escaping it – has long
played a key role in feminist politics (Brunsdon, 2003; Federici, 2012; Gillis and Hollows, 2009), property TV as a genre arguably only contains such critiques imperfectly.

In television studies, the concept of genre is used expansively to consider the contexts in which genre expression is embedded. For instance, in his book *Genre and Television* (2004), Jason Mittell proposes the consideration of genres as more than simple textual categories. Emphasizing the historical production and reception of television, Mittell argues that ‘we need to look outside of texts to locate the range of sites in which genres operate, change, proliferate, and die out’ (p. 9). In the case of reality-based media, Mittell’s influential perspectives could be pushed further still. In a well-known late essay, Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) demonstrates that modes of expression are governed by historical formations, which he terms ‘speech genres’, making these situated cultural forms into political speech in the broadest sense. He argues that communicative acts cannot be understood out of the context of their production and reception, which encompasses and yet always exceeds their industrial formation. In its communicative dimension, each speech act or cultural utterance thus expresses historically specific social and economic conditions. For instance, by definition, property television is bound up in the larger world of real estate, and representations of women’s self-determination evoke feminist struggles. Moreover, lifestyle television’s turn to the dramatic conventions of reality TV, themselves drawn from melodrama, incites an even greater reliance on performative expressions of everyday discourses and behaviours.

The extensive literature surrounding reality television is arguably disproportionately weighted to emphasize the elements of surveillance and competition that such programming inarguably exhibits (e.g. Andrejevic, 2004; Ouellette and Hay, 2008). By comparison, the form’s default reliance on conventions of melodrama is relatively underexplored. Yet many of these shows, even those that emphasize surveillance and competition, rely heavily on intimacy and emotion, however contrived, for their impact. Indeed, as Bruce (2009), Dubrofsky (2009), Skeggs and Wood (2012) and Woods (2014) have all shown, melodrama, in the form of a focus on intimate relationships and romance, is an intrinsic aspect of much reality TV’s narrative construction.

With an emphasis on women striving to become independent economic actors through real estate investment, a show like *Buy Herself* refracts a reconfigured meaning of the domestic while still keeping it central to women’s entertainment. The show tends towards melodrama’s aim to appeal to viewers by framing social change in ‘private contexts and emotional terms’ (Elsaesser, 1985: 170). Indeed, as Thomas Elsaesser (1985) has characterized it, melodrama draws a close connection between characters and the spaces they inhabit (p. 174). Sarah Kozloff (2000) points out that melodrama’s emphasis on expressivity is usually pitted against notions of realism (see also Landy 1991). But, as Jean Bruce (2009) has compellingly argued, the combination of documentary techniques and melodrama has, in fact, become characteristic of much property television.

Marjorie Garber (2000) argues that houses and the profound sense of home that they index have long been central to women’s literature. The heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet, she notes, only somewhat ironically dates her ‘love’ for D’Arcy to the moment at which she first saw his impressive estate (p. 30). In terms of genre, a key question is how houses shift in cultural meaning when they are understood primarily as independently owned real estate. In this regard, property as a means to women’s independence is a
paradoxical answer to the critiques of the patriarchal home that were so prominent in second-wave feminism. Silvia Federici (2012) observes that the Wages for Housework movement of the 1970s was a provocation from a generation of feminists who had no intention of replicating what they saw as their own mothers’ entrapment in the home. And Imogen Racz (2015) highlights the feminist art practice of the same decade in which the role of the home in sustaining imbalanced gendered relationships in the heterosexual family unit was the central theme. However, as with other cultural critiques of capitalism that were absorbed into the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005), the cultural logic of neoliberalism established itself in part on feminism’s anti-patriarchal critique while sidelining its more radical calls for economic redistribution and solidarity among women (Fraser, 2013). This seduction at the level of individuation ensured that the condition of middle-class women’s escape from the home has been a dual complicity in the expansion of capitalism: first through the exploitation of their own labour power and second through the enlisting of the poor, racialized and often migrant women who to supply cheaply commodified, but still necessary, domestic work (Federici, 2012).

This outsourcing of social reproduction, in particular, has led to a number of profound conflicts around the experience of gender. While normative ideas of care are still a part of aspirational ideals of femininity, they are often all but smothered in sentiment and nostalgia, sometimes expressed in the (ironically) retrosexual modes of handiwork and crafting (see Luckman, 2015; McElroy, this issue). Meanwhile, the actually existing private sphere is increasingly underwritten by an extensive network of service industries and a globalized division of labour that commodifies care provision for children, the sick and the elderly and outsources cooking and cleaning. Consistent with the 19th-century imagination of the home as a refuge from work built on women’s unpaid labour, the domestic sphere thus continues to be stratified into an imagined refuge from the world of work while becoming a site of extensive capitalization and commodification (Federici, 2012). When labourer, head of the household and homemaker are integrated into a single individual, compelling contradictions emerge and with them a range of telling affective responses.

**Buy Herself**

As noted above, lifestyle networks that launched in the mid-1990s, such as HGTV, were mainly focused on producing aspirational shows about decorating and gardening (Ryan, 2015). The most extreme domestic lifestyle shows, such as Changing Rooms (1996–2004) and Trading Spaces (2000–2008), combined décor with neighbourly rivalries (Everett, 2004; Lewis, 2008). It wasn’t until after 2000 that shows about buying and selling property emerged, alongside the bloating of the real estate markets in a number of key broadcasting markets. Canadian producers soon jumped onto the property TV bandwagon, making a spate of popular and even iconic shows, including Holmes on Homes (2001–2008), Property Virgins (2006–till date) and Love it or List It (2008–till date) that combined lifestyle, reality TV and real estate in novel ways. Even against this backdrop, the HGTV Canada show Buy Herself (2012) is particularly worthy of note. Hosted by celebrity realtor Sandra Rinomato, previously the host of Property Virgins, Buy Herself is a 22-minute, three property series that uniquely features single female home buyers. Although there are a range of narratives presented, the women tend to fall into two
groups, those in their 20s and 30s who still live at home but aspire to move out and become independent, and those in their 30s and 40s who have been divorced and, with or without children, are starting over again. Notably, the show’s participants parallel the target demographic for lifestyle broadcasters (18–49), rendering them a mirror of sorts for their audience. Rinomato helps each subject form a four-point wish list that describes her ideal home, and each woman’s finances, including the amount of her pre-approved mortgage, are revealed.

In the typical fashion of female hosts, Rinomato serves both as a cultural intermediary and as an aspirational stand-in (Figure 1). In the opening credit sequence, for instance, Rinamato evokes her professional experience: ‘I’ve been in real estate for 15 years so I know buying a house can be tough. Buying on your own: even tougher’. In a number of episodes, she confides personal experiences, such as her experience of divorce, blurring the lines between professional and personal advice. She often bonds with the women around their weaknesses for trendy fashion, their independent spirit and their gay ‘husbands’. Like many female hosts on lifestyle television, Rinomato thus functions as both expert and avatar, an independent professional woman in mid-life, at ease in the real estate sector (Ryan, 2015). Each house hunter is shown in the context of her family and friends, upon whom she relies to help her make the decision about whether and what to buy. The conflict within the couples or host pairs of other property shows, such as House Hunters or Love It or List It (see Mimi White’s article in this issue), is offloaded onto the support team, who invariably take diametrically opposed views about the kind of place their friend or family member should buy. Nevertheless, in foregrounding her community, the show highlights an element of sociability in a single woman’s life, at once disarticulating her social world and economic choices from heterosexual coupling and highlighting the anxieties this ‘loneliness’ can stir up. In one episode, 27-year-old Danielle, a property manager living at home who has aspirations to become a large-scale residential real estate investor, expresses anxiety at the thought of buying her first house: ‘The decision is super scary, knowing that it’s completely up to me. If I make the wrong decision it falls back to me. I can’t blame anyone else’.

Figure 1. The body of host and celebrity realtor Sandra Rinomato is foregrounded in Buy Herself.
Image courtesy: Enter the Picture Productions Inc.
While many lifestyle and reality TV shows present women’s value as coterminous with their desire for improvements to the appearance of their bodies and homes (Heller, 2007; Sender, 2012), *Buy Herself* seems to challenge this assumption by teaching women to focus on being economically independent (Figure 2). Yet, the dramatic elements of *Buy Herself* connect it to a complex of ambivalent discourses and representations about neoliberal femininity. The show mobilizes a seductive post-feminist promise of adventure, sexual freedom and independence promised by a new home (see McRobbie, 2009). In this regard, women’s emergence as independent economic actors is tied, as though by default, to a discourse of feminine self-care. Prudent wealth management, like the management of health and appearance, thus becomes a gendered act. The show draws out the narrative and emotional rationale for such a shift in ways that both disavow and re-inscribe patriarchal norms. On having been pre-approved for a mortgage, divorcée Waffa – whom Rinomato describes as a ‘survivor’ – says, ‘it’s the most amazing feeling in the world to go from nothing to being able to get my own mortgage. I didn’t think it was possible and the day it was approved I was so proud of myself’. Thus, while women are shown to be independent economic actors, they are nevertheless forced to succumb to the discipline of finance capital (Lazzarato, 2015).

While inequalities of class and race tend to structure UK and US shows, the Canadian narratives share with those from Australia a preference for a fantasy of histories innocent of structural inequality (Rosenberg, 2008), although in certain cases, such as Alicia, a young African Canadian single mother who is renting a dingy apartment, vague references to *struggles* for economic independence are intimated. Most of the women expect upward mobility, and Tiffany, a young African Canadian woman, is presented as particularly entrepreneurial. Not only does she want to move out of her family home into a place she owns, she also wants the purchase to be the first step in the building of her own real estate empire.

Like many property shows, *Buy Herself* demonstrates a kind of market diversity that at once gestures at difference and erases it. Of the 14 episodes that make up the 2012 season, for instance, six of the subjects are women of colour and one is an out lesbian. Despite the apparent cultural differences, however, by and large everyone has the same

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*Figure 2. Buy Herself normalizes debt and property ownership as the route to independence. Image courtesy: Enter the Picture Productions, Inc.*
consumer desires – nesting and investing (Shimpach, 2012; see also Esch, 2008) – preferably with stainless steel appliances, granite countertops and walk-in closets. So, like the faux feminism McRobbie (2009) identifies as being integral to neoliberalism, these shows might be said to express at best a superficial discourse of diversity (see Everett, 2004; Holliday, 2005; Shimpach, 2012; White, 2013). In compelling ways, Buy Herself ‘dramatizes and feminizes’ aspiration in the new economy (McRobbie, 2009: 130), providing a normative vision of real estate ownership. Not only does the centring of real estate in women’s entertainment naturalize the need to undertake debt in order to be independent, it appears to highlight ‘economic management and financial calculation …[as] new kinds of domestic labour’ (Allon, 2014: 14).

Throughout the searches, Rinomato dispenses general advice for those entering the housing market congruent with neoliberal economic logic. Subjects are told not to wait too long lest they get priced out of the market and not to be too picky, holding out for everything on their wish list. Along the lines of Fiona Allon’s (2008) analysis of home ownership, they are advised to quickly enter the market and then ‘ladder’ up to the property they ultimately want (evoking another property TV show, Property Ladder [United Kingdom 2001–2009, United States 2005–2007]). In other words, more than purchasing a place to live, they are being encouraged to consider home buying as a means of entering a real estate game in order to maximize their own future welfare, however debt-fuelled (Hay, 2010). The virtues of buying in ‘up-and-coming’ (e.g. gentrifying) neighbourhoods are discussed as women must inevitably lower their expectations and leave the more affluent neighbourhoods in which they cohabitated with family, or rented, in order to find something they can afford. This places women’s liberation through economic security at the bleeding edge of gentrification and positions them as often unwitting accomplices in neoliberal urban policy.

The majority of the show’s subjects are in the market for condominiums, which are presented as less expensive and more practical for those living alone. In this way, the series also provides a narrative and emotional perspective on Toronto’s rapid urban development. Toronto, where Buy Herself was produced, became the largest condominium market in North America during the first decade of the 21st century (Kern and Wekerle, 2008: 235; see also Boudreau et al., 2009). The condo boom radically altered the make-up of tenure options in the city, tipping the balance of home ownership above 50 percent for the first time in 2001 and then rising sharply above 60 percent over the next decade (Kern and Wekerle, 2008: 241). Significantly, women, who made up 40 percent of the condominium purchases (Kern and Wekerle, 2008: 242), became an important part of the shaping of what Neil Smith (1996) calls the ‘revanchist’ city, one characterized by an exclusive, upwardly mobile lifestyle for the few, rather than the creation of healthy communities for everyone. Security, for instance, became the purview of those with adequate economic means, ‘a lifestyle choice rather than a political issue’ (Kern and Wekerle, 2008: 244). In short, condominium living came to embody a key element of ‘urban entrepreneurialism’ (Harvey, 1989), polarizing rich and poor, individualizing social provision and tying individual homeowners into global financial markets (Allon, 2014).

At once the means to new individualized ways of living and the route to financial independence, condos highlight a deep-seated contradiction in housing discourses. For instance, Fiona Allon (2014) argues that, in the realm of housing, the privatization of social
provision has meant the bearing of ever larger and more risky debt loads, which come to operate as a powerful form of discipline (p. 23). According to Allon, there has been an even more intensive push since the economic crash to increase women’s use of financial products, mortgages and consumer credit (p. 13), which she terms the ‘feminization of finance’. Financialized women are economic actors well suited for the lures of ‘residential capitalism’, where the home itself has ‘been remade as a financial object’, and house finance becomes a form of ‘privatised Keynesianism’ (Allon, 2014: 19). With stagnating wages, privately owned residential property, however risky, becomes a potential ‘source of income over the life-course’ (p. 20). If life in the neoliberalized city is an enterprise to be managed, as Grundy and Boudreau (2008: 349) argue, women and their condos have become an important field across which this financial governmentality is operationalized.

In her book, Sex and the Revitalized City (2010), Leslie Kern demonstrates the ways in which condos have been marketed as particularly aspirational for young, single women. Kern suggests that while women buying property on their own may seem to rupture heteronormative narratives, in other ways the decision serves to maintain a gendered living arrangement in which the condo building itself becomes a surrogate paternal figure, standing in for father or husband (p. 81). Indeed, in much of the Canadian marketing for inner city condos, the inhabitants are shown to be glamorous young women, most often White, who are exempted from the work of social reproduction (Houpt, 2010) (Figure 3). The erotic search is transposed from ‘Prince Charming’ to ideal condo. This link is made explicit by one of the subjects on Buy Herself when she says that before committing, ‘I need to fall in love with my condo’ (Ana).

This profile fits for a large number of the women showcased on Buy Herself, the vast majority of whom are shopping for downtown condos. These episodes all feature a series
of fast swish pans that scan the glass towers of the Toronto skyline and expose the construction sites and cranes that border the elevated highway that runs through the city’s core. Yinnie, Wafaa, Ana and Bali are all presented as being from traditional ‘ethnic’ families in which moving out or buying a place without being married is a radical assertion of North American modernity and independence. For the non-racialized women, however, such as Kelly, Jessica, Michelle and Sarah, condos are presented as appropriate locations for their aspirational lifestyles and the expression of their sexual independence (Figure 4). And, indeed, the final reveal about the woman’s choice to buy (or not) and whether or not her bid was successful all take place in restaurants and bars, rather than the more private spaces of cars and offices where real estate agents more usually conduct their business. For all of them, real estate is presented as a wise economic choice through which they can ‘ladder up’ to more appropriate properties with future life changes. Despite Rinomato’s framing of the decision as smart and modern, all of the women express considerable anxiety about the prospect of solo home ownership. Ana’s observation that ‘It’s nerve wracking and scary’ is typical.

Displays of emotion, partly a by-product of the ‘structured reality’ production routines (quickly shot and soft-scripted) (Woods, 2014), are consistent and even central elements of the show. While providing a key element of melodrama, this emotional display also corresponds with Eva Illouz’s argument that, far from being relegated to the private sphere, the ability to express and rationalize emotion has become one of the central competencies of capitalism. ‘Emotional capital’, as she terms it, can be translated along with other competencies into social and economic status (Illouz, 2007: 69). For instance, the subject of one episode, Michelle, has recently been divorced and sold her house. For her, prospects of a new home cannot be separated from the thought of ‘picking up the pieces’ and starting her life over again, and through the episode she becomes emotional several times (Figure 5). After seeing two properties, she starts tearing up when she realizes that she is making a decision for herself: ‘It’s making me realize that I’m making choices based on what I want and what I feel, as opposed to having to share it with somebody … I did it for love and
now I’m doing it for myself’. Rinomato replies, ‘and that is for love … You have to
rejoice in the fact that you are taking a giant leap forward towards your real life,
towards the real you, towards your happiness’. Along with this close association of
real estate and self-care, the use of the long-held close up allows for the audience’s
‘reaction to reaction’ (Skeggs and Wood, 2012: 13; italics in original), a typical fea-
ture of melodrama. Coupled with her financial capacity, Michelle’s expressions of
emotion are reinforced by Rinomato in order to illustrate that she is therapeutically
readying herself for life in her new circumstances. By the episode’s end, Rinomato
claims that the house-hunting ‘journey’ has allowed Michelle ‘to heal’. Unlike those
setting out to purchase their first home, the need for new accommodation that
Michelle’s change in marital status has brought illustrates Rinomato’s advice about
shifting properties as demanded by the life course; her emotional process and her
search for real estate are drawn intimately together.

Essential to the show’s exploration of women’s experiences in the housing mar-
ket, and uniquely within the property TV genre, not all of the women end up purchas-
ing a property. Following from the show’s melodramatic logic, this is usually justified
not only in economic terms but also in emotional ones: the subject is simply ‘not
ready’ to shoulder the emotional weight of becoming a homeowner. For instance,
Sarah decides to wait to save up for a bigger place, and Rinomato affirms her deci-
sion in emotional terms, saying ‘my job is to help you to be happy’. Yinnie’s resist-
ance to choosing a condo is diagnosed by Rinomato as a part of an emotional block
that goes ‘much deeper than we are aware of’, having to do with her fear that her
assertion of independence will disappoint her close-knit family. Rinomato says,

This will be the first time in your life that you will branch out away from the umbrella of the
family and say, ‘Hey, wait a second. This is for me and I’m going to do it my way’. That’s
tough. I’ve been there.
Towards the end of another episode, Ana, an immigrant from Angola, begins to cry as the realization dawns on her that she cannot afford any of the homes she has seen; she walks away from Rinomato and out of the frame. The camera follows Rinomato as she pursues Ana and gives her a hug, affirming that this is not the right moment for her to ‘pursue her dreams’ (Figure 6). This moment fits well into the melodramatic tension between gratification and its ‘equally constant blockages’ (Landy, 1991: 14). And, indeed, Rachel Dubrofsky (2009) characterizes melodrama’s claims to realism as being based in part on the ability to ‘signal emotion has been felt’ (p. 359). Yet, although the show’s emphasis on individual responsibility forecloses the possibility of a discussion of structural inequalities, it leaves open the viewer’s response to Ana’s decision not to buy. Through the melodramatic focus, her inability to enter the real estate game is individualized; however, the story may also appeal to a sentimental public who identify with her struggles for housing.

It is not surprising that property shows should be continuous with the corporate ideology that supports and sponsors their production, as well as with neoliberal government policies that increasingly favour individualized approaches to welfare provision (Ronald, 2008). Indeed, they can be seen to offer graphic evidence of women being disempowered by the ‘very discourses of empowerment they are being offered as substitutes for feminism’ (McRobbie, 2009: 49), such as large debt loads. Yet, given the high level of anxiety that Buy Herself narrativizes and refracts, it would be difficult to maintain that it is simply an ideological support for neoliberalism. In fact, with the strong emphasis on ambivalence and anxiety required for the dramatic narrative, at times the show seems to be demonstrating precisely how challenging this new rationalized vision of individual security actually is to maintain.

**Conclusion**

Sarah Matheson (2010) argues that we shouldn’t be too hasty to dismiss Canadian lifestyle channels as simple mouthpieces for neoliberalism and anti-feminism. Instead, she
suggests viewing them as ‘ambivalent spaces and places of conflict that offer potentially contradictory discourses on women and women’s culture’ (p. 158). As a set of texts, property shows are certainly open to an array of readings. At the very least, the popularity of the genre signals that they touch on dimensions of experience that resonate with viewers. In an inflated and insecure housing marketplace, viewers (mainly women) are grappling with the search for safe and secure housing in liveable communities. Without being reducible to a singular reading, then, these shows nevertheless provide a prompt to think about the ambivalent meanings being crafted around real estate and gender.

The home plays a central role in melodrama as the iconic container of thwarted characters’ dreams. Yet, when combined with the financialization of the home and the currently destabilized global economy, this aspect of melodrama paradoxically becomes suffused with realism. Heather Nunn (2011) has identified the heightened emotional experiences of home in anxious times. When things are precarious and insecure, as they are in neoliberal regimes, not only does one’s home provide social status and security, but it also provides an emotional focus for those intangible things (p. 170). Thus, women may not be more important consumers of real estate than men, but they are trained to be more emotionally expressive and are, perhaps, more susceptible as viewers to the ‘sentimental public’ being built up around the ambivalences and anxieties of the home as real estate investment. To this end, property television’s exploration of the drama built into the commodification of the home and the privatization of welfare provision through real estate renders its work as genre particularly compelling.

As I’ve tried to show, this potentially conflicted experience of the domestic maintains an explicitly gendered dimension. Single girls and women have taken up a prominent place in post-feminist popular culture, so long as they are affluent, beautiful and, above all, young (McRobbie, 2009). These women are encouraged to become residential capitalists through home ownership, thereby changing the meaning of the domestic sphere. As Gillis and Hollows (2009) point out, ‘Much of the recent surge of interest in marketing the domestic to the capital-possessing girl makes clear that this version of domesticity ignores the ethics of care which are bound up in the cycle of housework and domestic duty’ (p. 8). Yet, the abrogation of care notwithstanding, property shows do seem to continue the trends in women’s middlebrow popular genres, albeit with a distinctly neoliberal flavour. Unlike the conventions of melodrama that emphasize the ‘structural suffering’ of the racist/patriarchal/capitalist world (Berlant, 2008), reality TV tends to rely upon competition and surveillance to promote ideas of self-improvement and the therapeutic discourse of self-help. Nevertheless, the emphasis on drama in lifestyle property shows, in particular, arguably makes them into a site for the representation of the complex entanglement of public and private spheres in capitalism (see Lewis, 2008; Papacharissi, 2010).

While *Buy Herself* predictably enough indexes the post-feminist ideology of female empowerment through financial independence, it more surprisingly expresses some compelling contradictions. While homes and conflicted emotions have both been long-standing elements of melodramatic women’s entertainment, in its quest to make home ownership itself into drama *Buy Herself* may be seen to express ambivalence about the neoliberal domestic formation itself. Indeed, the fact that *Buy Herself* only lasted for one season, despite the continued popularity of property TV, may indicate that its depiction
of the challenges of the real estate market for single women proved altogether too real for HGTV.

Property shows geared at women present a telling genre for thinking about the reorganization of both domestic and urban life, private and public spaces. Arguably, they are a potentially productive site for thinking through the work of television in making visible the centrality of gender, as well as the performance of emotion, in the current economic configuration. In making this claim, I am not positing that such shows demonstrate merely a melodramatic and feminized version of what is ultimately a more sober, masculine economic reality. On the contrary, through their narrative framing of real women’s struggles with the real estate market, they have emerged as a genre perfectly suited to express and refract the pervasive logics and fantasies around and through which gendered neoliberal subjects are expected to construct their subjectivities, finances and living arrangements. In this respect, the genre of property TV demonstrates that the ‘culture of real estate’ has a clearly gendered dimension and plays an important role in highlighting the opportunities open to certain women in the credit economy while leaving the residual anxieties of residential capitalism and the attendant social injustices of neoliberal times to be experienced obliquely and affectively.

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References


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