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INTRODUCTION

MEREDITH JONES

Je Suis Kim

Now every girl is expected to have Caucasian blue eyes, full Spanish lips, a classic button nose, hairless Asian skin with a California tan, a Jamaican dance hall ass, long Swedish legs, small Japanese feet, the abs of a lesbian gym owner, the hips of a nine-year-old boy, the arms of Michelle Obama, and doll tits. The person closest to actually achieving this look is Kim Kardashian, who, as we know, was made by Russian scientists to sabotage our athletes.

— Tina Fey (2011: 23)

The best comedy is a form of truth telling, exposing ideas and practices that are often difficult to pal ate. Thus, the superb Tina Fey, quoted above, encapsulates the complex issues around celebrity, bodies, fashion, faces, hybridity, sexuality, ethnicity, aspiration, class, labour, gender, age and femininity that this issue deals with. As I write, in early November of 2016, Kim Kardashian-West, who arguably embodies and promotes the most fashionable body and face of our moment (see Wissinger and Appleford, this issue), is in self-imposed seclusion. The best known and most visible icon of early-twenty-first-century fashion has virtually disappeared from the public eye because just over a month ago, as she attended Paris Fashion Week, she was attacked. In the early hours, five armed men disguised as police officers broke into her apartment, woke her, bound her with plastic ties,
gagged her with tape, put her in a bathtub and stole valuables worth many millions. Since then she has eschewed social media and in her rare forays into the world has been surrounded by armed guards. Her 40 million+ Twitter followers wait for a sign. Her family gives away few clues, and the vacuum is filled with wild speculation that it was all a stunt and implications that Kardashian-West was herself to blame for the violence enacted upon her because she flaunted her jewellery, her body, her self in public and on Instagram. A typical report goes something like this, quoting an 'insider':

The incident seems to have been a wakeup call for the social media maven. An insider told Us that this has been a ‘life-changing event’, and that Kardashian now ‘realizes she was living in a bubble ... Now she knows she was so naive'.

(Marquina and Hargrave 2016)

Despite such reports Kardashian-West was, before the attack in Paris, by no means a naive starlet. In fact, the Kardashians have witnessed violent abuse of women for decades. In 1994, when Kardashian-West was 13, one of her mother Kris’s closest friends, Nicole Brown, was murdered by her ex-husband O. J. Simpson. Ten weeks later, Dee Dee Martes, the mother of Kim’s then-boyfriend T. J. Jackson (nephew of Michael Jackson) was murdered by her lover (Smith 2015: 47–71). How such events shape a 13-year-old girl’s worldview are beyond the purview of what I can achieve here, but we can safely say that Kardashian-West has been no stranger to the violence that may be enacted on women who are too visible, incompliant, socially adventurous, or who are, simply, women. Her own divorce papers, filed in 2003 at the end of her first marriage (entered into when she was 19) describe her husband’s emotionally controlling and physically violent behaviour (Smith 2015: 85–102).

So, given that the barest facts prove that she was not naive and, more importantly, given that feminists have shown us, we should not enter into blaming any woman for being brutalized, what we must ask is: why do mainstream media insist that this crime on her person and her property was in some way Kardashian-West’s own fault? Why is it repeatedly implied that she was asking for it? Why are people actually deriving joy from the idea that she has been brought down (there was even a commercially produced Halloween outfit called ‘Robbery Victim’ – a long black wig, white nightdress, gag and wrist-ties)? The answer points to continued misogynistic currents in Western culture. Despite liberal rhetoric to the contrary, the underlying misogynistic thinking reveals itself particularly by despising women like Kardashian-West because they challenge stereotypes, cross boundaries and are in some ways uncategorizable, thus remaining, always, Other.

It is not only unprofessional and opinionated reporters who belittle Kardashian-West and her family: feminists do it too (see de Largie 2016, for a particularly extreme example). Giuliana Monteverde (this issue) notes that
the Kardashian-Jenners are frequently disparaged (they have been insulted by Jason Statham, Jonah Hill, Billy Connolly, Charlie Sheen, Jon Hamm, Sinead O’Connor and Rebel Wilson, among others) on the basis of their hypersexual and hyperfeminine presentation, but to position them as complicit with patriarchal constructions of womanhood belittles the groups that consume Kardashian media.

Indeed, feminist analyses will be of little value if they are based on diminishing the Kardashians because of their gender presentations. To do so ignores and devalues the many women who choose to present themselves in similar ways, and who, as Monteverde points out, ‘are already often disparaged and undervalued based on the way they dress, or on their interactions with beauty culture’. In line with this, instead of bemoaning the constraints of beauty culture and further positioning the Kardashians as terrible role models for women and girls (another well-worn stance), the authors featured in this issue find unique and imaginative ways to interrogate some of the most challenging and complex characteristics of the Kardashian phenomenon. Each offers her own critical analysis, but this thematic issue is only a drop in the Kardashian ocean; we would need many volumes to properly examine the family’s influence, symbolism and role in terms of vast areas like social media culture and innovation, transgender visibility and politics, reality television, matriarchies, entrepreneurship, mixed race marriage and even that the very American culture that bred and nurtured them: the United States (Kanye West has announced he will stand for president in 2020).

The articles here address the Kardashians in terms of fashion, beauty and bodies. Each of them goes in some way towards describing what an ideal (beautiful, successful, acceptable) woman’s body is now; each to some extent examines how this body is understood, how it is created, and where it stands in relation to femininity, sexuality, race, age, class and makeover culture. To use Monteverde’s words, these articles seek to ‘critique the justification of beauty practices through a post-feminist neo-liberal rationality that encourages women to constantly fashion themselves into imposed ideals as a means of overall self-improvement’.

Crucially, the articles here work towards explaining how and why that ‘perfect’ body – in its current pinnacle form of Kim Kardashian – is so hated, so scrutinized, so subject to metaphoric, symbolic and physical violence. In The Masque of Femininity, Efrat Tseelon argues that Western culture places the woman in a paradoxical position: ‘It is a paradox which denies the woman’s place together with defining it’ (1995: 2). To the five paradoxes that frame the feminine experience in the contemporary West that Tseelon discusses, the Kardashian phenomena adds a further paradox: the ultimate rejection of the hyperfeminine perfection embodied by Kim Kardashian. I have chosen the ‘Je Suis’ meme as my title to try to explain how we are all Kim Kardashian in the sense that many of us share the privileges she enjoys and far more of us face the everyday hatreds that she endures. If feminists see a figure like Kim Kardashian as Other then we are plainly in denial. Let us talk instead about
what she is and how she has come about, let us look for similarities as well as differences between us, and let us develop understandings that are subtle, nuanced and deeply-thought.

In this Introduction, I present overviews of each of the articles; I set out some Kardashian-related arguments in terms of my own work on makeover culture, and I suggest some future directions for further feminist academic work on all things Kardashian.

Makeover culture

Makeover culture is a contemporary mode of being that flows through media and geographic borders. Within makeover culture nothing and nobody can ever be complete, finished or static. Makeover culture is a partner of neo-liberalism, comprising many of the activities by which that paradigm manifests. In makeover culture, becoming better is the key to living a good life. Crucially, that becoming is always more important than just being (Jones 2008, see also Weber 2009; Featherstone 2010; Leve et al. 2011). Makeover culture dictates that bodies, selves and environments must be in constant states of renovation, restoration, maintenance and improvement. And nowhere is makeover culture more obvious, more ubiquitous or more pernicious than in women’s bodies, which are subject to its forever-in-flux imperatives to change where – simultaneously and paradoxically – marks of age and experience are undesirable.

The Kardashians and their products (which are their television shows, their merchandising lines, their social media presences and their bodies) may be the quintessential examples of makeover culture. Not only is this family self-made in terms of the immigrant-made-good American Dream narrative, it is continually and demonstrably self-made on a public, daily, even minute-by-minute basis. Tweets and Instagram photos, reality TV, red-carpet events, paparazzi shots, interviews, etc. all push the narrative that this family is in constant flux through shared details of their marriages, divorces, sibling rivalries, pregnancies, deaths, births, friendships, addictions, depressions, illnesses, recoveries, etc. In other words, this is a ‘real’ family writ large – ourselves but bigger – a reality television producer’s dream come true.

The family performs more than its emotions and its relationships: the success of the Kardashian brand is also deeply indebted to the active performance of makeover culture, such that gym work, grooming, diet, depletion and surgery, not to mention that ultimate body transformation that is Caitlyn Jenner’s gender transition, are all highly surveilled, monitored and reported. The Kardashians’ self-made millions derive from them being makeover culture’s poster-people. Their talents are for being exemplar makeover culture citizens and their professionalism is based on being able to market those talents. ‘Famous for being famous’ is a shallow, derogatory way to describe this new and highly rewarded mode of being – some of the complexities of which are explored in this issue.
The value of bodies

The academic study of the commodification of women’s bodies has a long history and is perhaps best summed up in Naomi Wolf’s (1990) assertion that beauty is a system of currency in which female embodiment and commodification are intertwined.

In this issue, Elizabeth Wissinger offers an insightful reading of a contemporary manifestation of this commodification, specifically in relation to the digital world and to what she terms ‘glamour labour’: ‘today’s regime of digitization, in which analogue images are converted into 1’s and 0’s, where everything from love to biology can be quantified, is changing the value of bodies’. Wissinger shows that what the Kardashians do, what they perform, is a prototypical and historically feminine form of labour. It is work that many women (and some men too) consciously or subconsciously undertake as part of everyday life. Historically, glamour labour has included the daily toil of exercising, dieting, depilating, exfoliating, applying make-up, dyeing and styling hair, having cosmetic surgery, etc. in order to be glamorous and in order to maintain a sophisticated and stylish public image. But Wissinger shows how glamour labour has changed, such that it now also includes the making and dissemination of digital images that represent the glamorized self. For models, and for people like the Kardashians, glamour labour forms the heart of their work: ‘looking good’ is not an adjunct to performing their jobs well, looking good is the job and now, in the early twenty-first century, looking good across a range of print and/or digital forums is part of the job too.

Further to her work around glamour labour and digitalization, Wissinger argues that bodies have become a new form of purchase and are now objects that may be displayed as manufactured status symbols in their own right: ‘the couture body, where the body is the new outfit’ is achieved via a strong work ethic and a melding of body and image – in short, it is created through a contemporary form of glamour labour. She explains how this is a twenty-first-century version of the American Dream, combining long-established self-responsibility and self-determination fantasies with new modes of communication that circulate around digital media, spectacle and self-making.

Many struggle to explain the success and popularity of Keeping Up with the Kardashians (E! Entertainment, 2007–). Could it be that this new version of the American Dream is a fantasy that they live out? They are not born princesses but make themselves into them (and show us how to do it); their frogs do not become handsome princes but rather have to be worked-upon and divorced if necessary; one of their princes even became a princess and went off to live her own fantasy life.

Wissinger carefully historicizes Kardashian-style self-modification and branding, noting stark similarities between selfie culture and ‘cartomania’, a trend in the 1800s around photographic calling cards or cartes de visite. Both, she argues, are currencies, means by which to gain ‘social legitimacy [...] for “normal” people’. Importantly for Wissinger, participating in glamour labour with the hopes that it will improve one’s life in any significant way is ‘a losing game’. Just as waiting for one’s prince is a hopeless way to live, so is participating in the never-ending work of being insta-beautiful,
for one can only be as successful as the number of likes on one’s last uploaded photo, and in the digital world we are always primarily commodified subjects, surveilled and chased by ‘marketing and tracking metrics that are anything but friendly’.

**Being complicit in ‘Thin is not enough’**

Decades before Judith Butler (1999) showed that gender comprises acquired skills in performativity rather than being in any way essential, British psychoanalyst Joan Riviere wrote, ‘women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men’ (1986 [1929]: 35). In other words, women who seek power may (consciously or unconsciously, but usually the latter) decide that it is in their best interests to present as uber-feminine. Could the Kardashians – a matriarchy, a group of influential, independent businesswomen – have gained their power without being highly feminine? Gemma Cobb observes in her article that ‘a[s] a family of self-made, highly visible women whose ethnicity is ambiguous, they threaten the status quo’. I suggest that it is no coincidence that they also embody what Cobb calls an ‘excessive and visible femininity’. We have read and seen far too many of what Monteverde calls ‘sexist and femmephobic interpretations of [the Kardashians] hypersexual, hyperfeminine gender performances’. I suggest that the links between high-femininity, misogyny and women’s power need to be more closely and properly explored. This is a possible direction for further feminist academic work on the Kardashians.

Monteverde persuasively explains the gendered aspects of the Kardashians via a close reading of an episode that is structured around Kylie Jenner’s lip enhancement. Her article explores hypervisibility, hyperfemininity, the purchase of beauty and happiness, and ownership and control of the body (and therefore of the self) and she makes a powerful feminist statement, namely, that if we view some women as being more embedded in patriarchal structures than others, even if our (delusional and condescending) goal is to enlighten and save them, then we are committing injury: in this way, we are ‘complicit in causing harm to other women’. Instead of this, she argues, feminists need to embrace the fact that we are all in some way maintaining the structures that we critique and wish to change. She also suggests that by nearly always training our lenses on femininity rather than on masculinity we further believe that femininity is less than authentic, and that masculinity is somehow natural. What a fascinating Ph.D. project awaits the discerning feminist student: ‘An interrogation of Kardashian masculinity’.

Gemma Cobb’s work here focuses specifically on Kendall Jenner, the sister who is most hegemonically beautiful. By conducting deep discourse analysis of thread discussions about the Kardashian sisters on pro-anorexia websites such as Skinny Gossip, Cobb shows how Jenner was understood to be Cinderella-like: respectable, white, thin and ‘naturally’ attractive while her sisters (akin to Cinderella’s wicked and ugly step-sisters) lack her natural beauty and so must manufacture, purchase and toil over their versions of attractiveness. Cobb shows that in pro-anorexia logic (and by
extension, in much logic around feminine beauty) being thin is not enough – it is thinness combined with a specifically white, respectable, privileged, middle-class, prepubescent, passive version of femininity that comprises the ideal.

Further, she points out that anorexia is a practice of both ‘protest and compliance’ because of how it simultaneously rejects sexual bodies and embraces mainstream versions of women’s beauty:

Skinny Gossip’s discussions around Kendall Jenner illustrate an interaction between oppression and privilege. Pro-ana users are considered variously as dangerous, deviant and vulnerable, yet the bodies that members of Skinny Gossip aspire to are normatively feminine in that they are young, white and middle-class.

In this way, her analysis complements one that Monteverde makes about how Kardashian-style beauty both adheres to and supplants mainstream notions of attractiveness. Both articles explore the complexity of how women’s beauty must be continually monitored and managed, by selves and by others, from within and from without. And Cobb notes that ideal beauty is rarely held onto for long: contributors to the forums she analysed believe, collectively, that ‘Kendall was considered ideally thin, elegant and distinct from her older sisters when she was young, but as she grew up, she transformed into simply another tasteless Kardashian with the propensity for weight-gain’.

So, Cobb shows how easily women’s bodies become stigmatized via the tiniest of changes (such as simply becoming a few years older) and thus how the ideal is an ever-moving category, with superlative femininity dependent on thinness but also on largely unobtainable intersections of race, class, gender and age.

Monteverde notes how Kendall Jenner’s role in the family’s public life and on the television programme is often to play the voice of reason. For example, she is shown in the episode about Kylie’s lip implants trying to discourage her sisters from undergoing ‘too much’ cosmetic surgery. Thus, in certain ways Kendall plays the Other in the Kardashian world – it is only Kendall who acts within the bounds of ‘subtlety’ and ‘normality’, it is only Kendall who is not shown to be actively manufacturing her look, while her sisters and mother do the opposite. So here is another opportunity for further work: how is femininity ‘othered’ inside the Kardashian world, as opposed to how the Kardashian brand of hyperfemininity is ‘othered’ outside of their world, and how do these two schemas intersect?

**Hybrid beauty and the ‘slim-thick’**

A girl with big/toned thighs, plump booty, normal sized hips AND a flat/toned stomach. These girls are slimmer than ‘thick girls’ but are still considered thick. What really defines a
slim thick girl is her big, juicy thighs paired with a slim figure. They can have smaller curves than thick girls (who have an ideal hourglass shape).

Boy #1: look man, that girl has juicy thighs with a slim figure!
Boy #2: yeah man, that girl is slim thick!

(Jenny.V. 2015, original emphases)

Katherine Appleford conducted ethnographic research to determine whether black women in the United Kingdom are more likely to embark on weight-loss diets than they once were. While she found that the answer is a definitive yes, she argues that this is not strictly because of increasingly dominant ‘white’ aesthetics and indeed, that the more traditional version of black beauty that includes fatness has not been abandoned. Rather, a new fusion aesthetic is being sought, and Appleford introduces us to the term ‘slim-thick’. This describes a hybrid phenomenon that comprises two extreme stereotypes: the delicate, thin, white woman’s stereotypical ideal figure, and the larger, curvaceous, black woman’s stereotypical ideal figure. The young women who formed Appleford’s focus groups and answered her questionnaire aspired towards thinness and roundness, and were prepared to undergo rigorous diet and exercise in order to achieve this. Most fascinating, for the purposes of this issue, is that Appleford found that Kim Kardashian is considered by black women who adhere to this aesthetic to be the celebrity exemplar of ‘slim-thick’ (more so even than Beyoncé) because of her extreme curvaceousness, comprising large breasts and buttocks with a tiny waist and thin legs and arms.

Appleford notes that while black women’s body ideals are perhaps shifting more towards the white aesthetic, white western women appear to be seeking a fuller shape, with growing numbers of women opting for cosmetic surgery to enhance their derrière. All sorts of questions around hybrids and crossovers come into play when we examine how the Kardashians are discussed in mainstream media. Are they ‘naturally’ beautiful or is their beauty wholly artificial? Is Kris a manipulative, money-grabbing pimp or a loving mother working in her children’s best interests? Was the sex tape leaked deliberately or not? What is the difference between their public and private lives? Are the Kardashian-West-Jenner men weak or strong? Perhaps the most fascinating question of all is are they black or white? In fact, they are officially ‘white’ but are often described as ‘exotic white’ because of their father’s Armenian heritage.

The youngest Kardashian sister, Kylie, cultivates an aesthetic that is absolutely ‘slim-thick’. Notably, she is Caitlyn Jenner’s daughter, so has no Armenian heritage and can be considered nothing but white. Nevertheless, Kylie-watchers have seen her morph from a skinny white thin-lipped teen into a curvaceous young woman who favours black aesthetics. Like her sisters she has culturally appropriated various African American fashions, including long, highly decorated nail extensions, hair weaves, cornrows, and has even circulated controversial photos of herself with lighting that made her appear dark-skinned. The important blogger Amunnefercherri wrote a post titled ‘The evolution of Kylie Jenner, from white girl to light skinned black woman’ in which she states:
I remember her as a little white girl with her pale white skin and thin lips, her boyish figure and flat butt. A time before she dabbed into weaves, wigs and braided hair styles. Back when she was just a white girl [...] [Black women] are shunned and ridiculed for our natural features, but society will praise those same features when placed on a white woman.

(Anunnefercherri 2015)

Appleford notes that

[t]hough fatness and blackness may have been excluded from dominant representations of beauty, this does not mean that the black body is any less significant in the social construction of beauty ideals. The black body is of fundamental importance, because it sits in opposition to whiteness.

When we consider the cultural appropriation that the Kardashians indulge in, the public preoccupation with their ‘race’ alongside the facts that Kim Kardashian has had two black husbands, Khloe has never dated a white man, Kylie’s boyfriend is mixed-race, their brother Rob’s partner is a black woman and Kris is dating a black man, might we reasonably ask whether their corporeal and fashion hybridity is more than mere fashion or affectation? Could it possibly have an element of reverse assimilation as well as appropriation? Could it be then, that through assimilation/appropriation the Kardashians might actually be considered radical? A quick – and deeply uncomfortable because of the abundance of the n word – glance at Twitter feeds around Kim’s children with Kanye West attests that ‘mixed race’ marriages are still highly contentious in the United States. By conducting proud high-profile relationships with black people, and by coincidentally embodying as well as consciously adopting black aesthetics, are the Kardashians doing something more than simple cultural appropriation? By conjoining black and white aesthetics in the choices they make about how to shape and present their bodies, are they reducing the ways that black bodies can be used as opposition markers so that white bodies can even exist? While these questions are contentious, and also highly unlikely to yield positive answers given the multifarious intersectional discriminations at play for black women, they are nevertheless complex questions that feminist scholars could take up. Appleford argues that no matter what her intentions behind adopting black aesthetics are, Kim

incorporates a big bottom into the white aesthetic, and thus converts it into a site of cultural value, as opposed to shame and disgust [...] what is considered legitimate may also be changing, as the white western ideal shifts, if ever so slightly, towards a black aesthetic.
Behind the scenes

The Kardashians are perhaps the most followed people on Earth. Between their social media feeds and the paparazzi, it appears that every move is scrutinized. Goffman’s dramaturgical model of social life – in which he deploys the traditional structure of theatrical productions to explain those ever-slippery notions of public and private in relation to everyday human interactions – is important here. It seems at first that the Kardashians and others like them actively blur boundaries between ‘front stage’, where the self is presented for the world/audience to see, and ‘back stage’ where that self is rehearsed, curated and assembled (or even where that self might crumble and be deemed unfit for public life). We have literally seen Kim Kardashian putting on her ‘stage face’ hundreds of times – she is famous for sharing her make-up tips (not

Figure 1: The Kardashian-West-Jenner women at Kanye West’s Yeezy Season 3 presentation as part of New York Fashion Week on Thursday 11 February 2016. From left to right: Kris Jenner, Khloe Kardashian, Kendall Jenner, Kourtney Kardashian, Kim Kardashian, Caitlyn Jenner, Kylie Jenner, North West (at front). Since this photo was taken Blac Chyna and her baby Dream Renee Kardashian have joined the family.
just swishes of eyeshadow and dabs of lipstick but highly skilled, mask-like, almost pantomime-style contouring and shading) — and in the television series we witness bedroom scenes, holidays, fights and crying along with mundane car trips and takeaway meal purchases. Thus, it might seem that the minutiae of the Kardashians’ ‘back stage’ is available, unedited, to the audience, and perhaps, in Wissinger’s words, we are witnessing ‘the Kardashians’ joyful abdication of the right to any privacy at all’.

But I argue that ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ are still very much differentiated in the Kardashianesque world of public/private. We are never given unrestricted access to behind-the-scenes; rather we are presented — here and in all reality television — with a carefully considered and staged ‘reality’ (Hill 2014). For example, Lamar Odom’s drug addictions were not mentioned on the programme until long after he and Khloe Kardashian’s marriage had ended, and Caitlyn Jenner’s surgical gender transition remained textually invisible (although not necessarily visually invisible, at least to those who possess that literacy) until it was a done-deal. Clearly, these are real people who have real private lives. As argued above, the Kardashians meld glamour labour with makeover culture, highlighting the primary importance of looking good while also showing how it is done. They act out the labour around self-presentation rather than leaving it behind the scenes. They are professional glamour labourers and also makeover culture experts whose livelihoods are invested in performing a credible version of ‘back stage’. This is different from an abdication of privacy. This new version of ‘back stage’, this novel interaction between so-called reality and so-called unreality, especially as they intersect with glamour labour and makeover culture, is worthy of further academic scrutiny.

This issue is a step towards surpassing the patronizing and moralizing ways in which the Kardashian phenomenon is often addressed. It goes beyond what Monteverde calls a ‘perplexed and perturbed masculine voice’ and instead identifies ways in which this extraordinary and ordinary family glories in its glamour labour, performing makeover culture by bringing family members’ cosmetic surgeries, workouts, facials, make-up, ‘waist training’ out from behind the scenes. Kardashian skins, buttocks, breasts, eyes, vulvas, hair, legs and waists circulate via many thousands of tweets and Instagram posts. We consume them, and we are what we eat. We are complicit in the ingestion of the Kardashians, and we must remind ourselves not to be complicit in the belittling of those who aspire to be like them. Indeed, we need to recognize that those people may in fact be ourselves. Je Suis Kim.

References


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