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Abstract
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Keywords
Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, metrosexual, neoliberal, neoliberalism, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, camp, reality television

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Queens for a Day:

Queer Eye for the Straight Guy and the Neoliberal Project

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This paper moves beyond a conventional critique of Bravo's popular makeover show Queer Eye for the Straight Guy that focuses on gay stereotyping to consider how the show puts gay cultural expertise to work to reform a heterosexual masculinity that is compatible with the neoliberal moment. By analyzing 40 episodes of the show, in addition to a number of related texts, the author considers the newly public acknowledgement of gay taste and consumer expertise; the "crisis of masculinity" that requires that heterosexual men must now attend to their relationships, image, and domestic habitus; and the remaking of the straight guy into not only an improved romantic partner—the metrosexual—but a more flexible, employable worker. The author concludes by considering how camp deconstructs some of Queer Eye's most heteronormative aims, even while leaving its class and consumption rationales intact.

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Queens for a Day:

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"Would you like to be Queen for a Day?" Jack Bailey asked viewers of the popular prototype of television makeover shows, Queen for a Day, each week from 1956 to 1964. This show pitted women from the audience against each other in a competition for whose life history was most miserable. Bailey offered the winner not only her requested prize (a housekeeper to take care of seven children during her surgery, educational toys for a son with a brain tumor) but also of an avalanche of other gifts (a washer-dryer, clothes, cigarettes, a trip to Hawaii, even a kitten and a year's supply of cat food). But the main prize was being "Queen for a Day": being treated like a person of an entirely different class for "24 hours that a Queen will remember." Fifty years later, Bravo's makeover show, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, invites domestically challenged heterosexual men to adopt a gay men's perspective on style, grooming, cuisine, and manners—to be "queens for a day." From early morning until the evening's "reveal" to friends and family, the straight guy is trained to see himself with the same critical eye as his gay hosts'; somewhat paradoxically, he is encouraged to adopt gay male consumption habits in order to become a better heterosexual. Queen for a Day and Queer Eye for the Straight Guy offer contrasting narratives of transformation: Both promise a reversal of fortune, but make very different assumptions about who is considered a worthy recipient of a makeover, who is the appropriate catalyst for transformation, and what this transformation is intended to accomplish. Most critiques of Queer Eye have focused on stereotyping, in particular whether the show's hosts, the "Fab Five," are "good for gay visibility." Yet the significance of the show is far broader than this focus on gay representations allows: Queer Eye for the Straight Guy puts gay

style expertise to work to reform a heterosexual masculinity compatible with the neoliberal moment.

In considering makeover shows an important subgenre of contemporary reality television, it is tempting to overlook the appeal of personal transformation from the earliest days of broadcast media. Queen for a Day began in 1945 as a weekly radio show, moving to television in 1956, when it became the top-rated game show (Schwartz, Ryan, & Wostbrock, 1999, p. 181). As television's first makeover show, host Bailey interviewed five women from the audience about what they needed to solve problems usually caused by poverty, ill health, absent husbands, and general bad luck. In addition to an avalanche of product placement prizes, the reigning Queen was driven in a gold Cadillac from the hairdresser to a Hollywood studio tour, to dinner and a show at a Los Angeles "top establishment." Queen for a Day's Cinderella fantasy proved popular with advertisers, who provided products as prizes, sponsored product mentions throughout the show, and paid for advertising spots during commercial breaks.

Like Queen for a Day before it, Queer Eye has proven remarkably popular by cable channel standards, winning Bravo record audience ratings. Including goods and services as product placements on the show yielded huge increases in sales (Florian, 2004). The show's popularity in the US precipitated a slew of franchises across the globe and a US spin-off: Queer Eye for the Straight Girl. And if not only imitation but satire is the best form of flattery, Queer Eye has received no small measure of compliments: Comedy Central's Straight Plan for the Gay Man taught flamboyantly gay guys to pass as straight, and an episode of South Park showed the Fab Five making over the town's dumpy menfolk to become "metrosexual"—"Our cup runneth over," gasped resident gay character Mr. Garrison.

Predictably, Queer Eye's success was met with religious commentators' umbrage. The Parents Television Council, for example, railed that gay TV images "may be acceptable for that element in our culture that's already earning an advanced degree in Sin Acceptance," but was shocked that the upper echelons would agree to show a pared-down version of Queer Eye on NBC (Weinraub & Rutenberg, 2003, p. 133). But criticism also came from gay writers:

> Queer Eye for the Straight Guy is execrable—a catalog of homosexual stereotypes, played to a throbbing, techno-disco beat, that also systematically denies its gay stars their complexity and their sexuality. From first scene to last, they trill and fuss, displaying their talents at traditionally effeminate domestic tasks. (Kelly, 2003)

The show was seen as a form of gay "minstrelsy" (Sawyer, 2003), in which "gay TV has become the spectacle of gay men acting out for the amusement of straight people" (Stasi, 2003). Critics complained that the Fab Five perpetuated stereotypes that gay men "possess fabulous taste and deliver the best catty one-liners at any party" (Sawyer, 2003), shifting the image of the "superficial and sex-driven" to the "superficial and image-obsessed" gay man (Lowry, 2003). And despite the larger-than-life presence of the five gay hosts during the makeover process, some commentators have noted that they are ultimately marginalized within the dominant narrative of heterosexual romance. In a "creepy case of self-ghettoization," the Fab Five "literally have to watch the climax of the show from the margins.... They can't even stay to take their bows" (Kelly, 2003). Further, the show reproduces these stereotypes and power dynamics for no greater gain than promoting products, making "Queer Eye ... the single most shameless corporate tramp on television" (Sawyer, 2003).

Well-intentioned as debates about stereotyping might be, they are less interesting than an investigation into the cultural conditions that make possible an open acknowledgement of gay-

specific style expertise in the heterosexual male makeover. As Henderson (2003) notes, Queer Eye cannot be so easily dismissed by the "commercial sexual repressive hypothesis": the assumption, after Michel Foucault's "repressive hypothesis," that commercial media production only represses sexual expression and diversity. Queer Eye does not just represent gay men (in stereotypic ways, or not), but uses them in a renewed attempt to solve the "problem" of the male consumer, a problem that has plagued advertisers and media producers at least since the debut of Esquire magazine in 1933 (Breazeale, 1994). With few exceptions—classically, electronics, cars, tools, and pornography—white, heterosexual men have proven hard to train as consumers, especially of "intimate" goods usually associated with women. If Queen for a Day brought poor and working class women into an idealized fold of middle class consumerism of the 1950s and 1960s, Queer Eye entices heterosexual men into a gay-inflected sphere of intimate consumption fifty years later. The social, economic, and cultural changes of the intervening half century help to explain the radical revision of the makeover project: its experts, candidates, and strategies of transformation.

Method

I analyzed 40 episodes of Queer Eye for the Straight Guy that appeared on Bravo between July 15, 2003 and January 11, 2005, including the show's pilot episode, three holiday specials, and "What's that Sound?" that documented the production of a music video that accompanied the release of the Queer Eye theme song. I recorded the name, occupation, marital status, age, and, when given, place of origin of each candidate, and each show's "mission." I added to this information my assessment of each candidate's race. I coded emergent themes in each episode, such as references to gay taste, gay/straight sexual double entendres, interactions

with girlfriends and wives, expectations for "good" romantic skills, professional development, what constituted a "successful" makeover, and so on. To put the show in the context of its brand and male self-improvement more generally, I analyzed the Fab Five's Queer Eye for the Straight Guy book (Allen, Douglas, Filicia, Kressley, & Rodriguez, 2004), as well as Michael Flocker's Metrosexual Guide to Style (2003). I read more than 50 articles, largely from the U.S. mainstream and gay press, which substantively addressed the show, Bravo's programming strategies, and the theme of "metrosexuality." I also analyzed spoofs on the show, including three episodes of Straight Plan for the Gay Man, and a South Park episode: "South Park is Gay!" For comparison, I watched the 11 available episodes of Queen for a Day at the New York Museum of Television and Radio, the 2004 version of Queen for a Day,[i] four episodes of the spin-off Queer Eye for the Straight Girl, the first season of Fox's makeover/beauty pageant hybrid The Swan, and three episodes each of the top-rated makeover shows (2003-2004 season): Extreme Makeover: Home Edition; Extreme Makeover; and Trading Spaces.

"All things just keep getting better"

Queer Eye's title song "All things just keep getting better" hints at the promise of both Queen for a Day and Queer Eye: consumption facilitates positive change. Yet the premise and the mode of transformation in each show are very different. Queen for a Day's contestants were poor and working class women who were victims of circumstance. Their makeovers required very little intervention on their own behalf, beyond telling the tale of woe that was their bid for the prize. The transformation of bad luck to good took place exclusively through the consumption of (placed) products, which were represented as both the vehicle for and evidence

of a change in fortune. Queen for a Day's contestants appeared to be passive and grateful beneficiaries of a fleeting moment of middle class comfort and material security.

Queer Eye for the Straight Guy is also a makeover facilitated by placed products. Yet here the lower-middle and middle class makeover candidates are exhorted to actively work on themselves, to become self-making men. The show's hosts renovate the straight guy's home and clothing, but the real work must be accomplished by the guy himself. After he is instructed to work on his grooming, domestic skills, and self-esteem he must demonstrate that he has learnt his lessons by producing a dinner party or romantic meal under the careful surveillance of the show's hosts. Most episodes' missions either explicitly refer to heterosexual romance ("Operation Eligible Dad") or implicitly do so ("Dance the Night Away"). In order to fulfill this mission, five gay men "come to your house, belittle your wardrobe and decor, and proceed to turn both into a brighter reflection of the real you" (Goldstein, 2003). The makeover experts are "food and wine connoisseur" Ted Allen, "grooming guru" Kyan Douglas, "design doctor" Thom Felicia, "fashion savant" Carson Kressley, and "culture vulture" Jai Rodriguez. These hosts are unabashedly gay, bringing a camp sensibility and homoerotic flirtation into the lives of the straight guys, whose responses range from gleeful pleasure to overt discomfort. The program suggests that after seeing themselves through a borrowed queer eye, these reformed heterosexuals will have had just enough training in romantic, female-friendly, hygienic living to function effectively in the straight world.

The shift from the Queen for a Day contestants' dependence on the beneficence of a television show to the Queer Eye candidates' active involvement in their personal transformation reflects profound social and cultural changes that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century as a result of shifts towards more "flexible" forms of capitalism (Andrejevic, 2004). In

both the United States and Western Europe industrial manufacturing gave way to the digital age, necessitating much greater adaptability to the demands of consumers, a knowledge economy for elite workers, a service economy for unskilled labor, the internationalization of manual labor, and a lack of job security for everyone. This economic phase demands its ideological helpmeet: neoliberalism. Liberalism here is not a "doctrine or a practice of government" (liberalism versus conservatism) but critique of government itself in order to govern less, to govern "at a distance" (Barry, Osborne, & Rose, 1996, p. 8). Welfare liberalism characterized mid-twentieth century public policy in the UK and much of Europe, and (with a less socialist philosophy) the New Deal of the 1930s through the Great Society of the 1960s in the US. Welfare liberalism involved greater government intervention in a range of activities hitherto believed to be the domain of private industry (such as energy production) and an expansion of programs and reforms that aimed to provide a social safety net. Yet, welfare liberalism came under attack from critics both on the left, who considered its social programs too interventionist in citizens' lives, and on the right, who argued that it posed too great an economic burden on both taxpayers and industry, and hindered entrepreneurial initiatives (Rose, 1996).

The dismantling of welfare-oriented provisions in the UK and in the US (however insipid these were, even at their height) that began in the 1980s marks a new version of liberal philosophy: neoliberalism. This involves shifts from authoritarian government to individual responsibility; from injunction to expert advice; and from centralized government to quasi-governmental agencies and media, including television, as sources of information, evaluation, and reproach. Proponents of neoliberalism framed welfare liberalism as burdening citizens with a dependency on and obligations to the state, contrasting this burden with the benefits of choice—especially consumer choice—and individual fulfillment.

How does the neoliberal state, with its commitment to “govern society at a distance” (Barry et al., 1996, p. 14), succeed in binding subjects to its fundamental cause—the willing participation of citizens in the generation of capital? Miller (1993) identifies “technologies of the self” as a range of strategies by which subjects can be governed at a distance, since these strategies “are applied by individuals [to themselves] as a means of transforming their conditions into those of a more autonomous sense of happiness” (xiv). Crucial in the shift towards neoliberalism is the partial replacement of external forms of government—both the expressly coercive (the police) and the apparently benign (social workers)—by internal forms, where success in the new labor marketplace becomes increasingly dependent on the ability to self-govern (Rose, 1996).

McGee (2005) considers the recent growth of the self-help industry as a governmental technology that helps subjects adjust to the new conditions of flexible capitalism. "Changing economic circumstances—declining real wages and increased uncertainty about employment stability and opportunities—created a context in which constant self-improvement is suggested as the only reliable insurance against economic insecurity" (p. 13). Social mobility through personal transformation has been a powerful American myth since at least as far back as Horatio Alger's stories of "luck and pluck" in the 1860s. At the turn of the twenty-first century, however, both the demand for self-improvement and the industries offering instruction have proliferated (Miller & McHoul, 1998; Rimke, 2000): McGee estimates the self-help industry to be worth $2.41 billion per year in the US alone. Further, reality television's proliferating subgenres have expanded the range of sites for neoliberal exhortations to improve the self (Hay, 2005; Illouz, 2003; McCarthy, 2005). Ouellette (2004) sees court television shows such as Judge Judy as outsourcing governmental functions to mediated environments that “construct templates for

citizenship that complement the privatization of public life, the collapse of the welfare state, and most important, the discourse of individual choice and personal responsibility” (p. 232). Like self-help literature, reality television shows are an intermediary, complementing and displacing government agencies as transmitters of cultural norms.

McGee (2005) distinguishes the ethos of men's self-making in the United States from self-help literature aimed at women. Whereas men's self-making books focus on generating economic and social capital, women's self help literature addresses the emotional and relational challenges of "having it all": full time work and domestic and child-rearing labor. The past three decades saw profound changes in gender relations both in the labor force and in the home, with a 16 percent increase in women working outside the home between 1970 and 2001, compared with a decline of 5 percent of men working outside the home in the same period (McGee, 2005, p. 49). As flexible capitalism put pressure on men's employment and wages, more women were both free to and obliged to enter the workforce. Men, accustomed to being the sole or primary breadwinner, now compete with women for jobs and struggle with wives over the domestic division of labor (Faludi, 1999). Faludi sees the "culture of ornament," in which men are increasingly judged according to their appearance, as evidence of a “crisis in masculinity” that new employment conditions have precipitated (p. 38).

Queer Eye, then, emerged as part of a larger response to the cultural needs and economic opportunities of flexible capitalism. “With social welfare programs all but dismantled, and with lifelong marriage and lifelong professions increasingly anachronistic, it is no longer sufficient to be married or employed; rather it is imperative that one remains marriagable and employable” (McGee, 2005, p. 12). Queer Eye represents a departure from the genre norms of makeover shows and the gendered traditions of self-making. The cultivation of style and intimate

relationships has traditionally been seen as facilitating upward social mobility more for women than for men, who are assumed to climb the social ladder through industry alone. Whereas Queen for a Day's contestants were impoverished, unlucky women, Queer Eye's candidates are middle class, incompetent, immature men. Queen for a Day's paternalistic, apparently heterosexual male host awarded material prizes; Queer Eye's makeover team provides a specifically gay expertise. Queen for a Day overwhelmed its winners with a fleeting moment of material abundance; Queer Eye's trains its candidates in creating a life of responsible and fulfilling citizenship through consumption. Queer Eye thus radically departs from the traditions of gendered self-improvement through its choice of experts, its candidates, and the project the show is designed to accomplish.

The Experts

Neoliberalism has been characterized as involving a shift from injunction to advice, where the authority hitherto exercised over citizens by governmental agencies "gives way to the private counsellor, the self-help manual and the telephone helpline, as practices whereby each individual binds themselves to expert advice as a matter of their own freedom" (Rose, 1996, p. 58). The Fab Five's expertise comes in part from their work backgrounds: For example, fashion advisor Carson Kressley formerly worked for Polo Ralph Lauren, and cooking expert Ted Allen was a food writer for Esquire magazine (Y. Cole, 2003). Yet these career trajectories are less important in constructing the Fab Five's authority as style experts than the fact that they are openly and recognizably gay—in their speech and behavior, but most especially in their taste. Queer Eye thus makes explicit the long association between gay men and the design, fashion, and grooming industries: in one episode Carson admires a former marine's ceremonial garb, asking, "Who says there are no gays in the military? Someone designed this uniform."

Queer Eye's open recognition of gay style expertise reflects, first, the increasing visibility of gay and lesbian characters on United States television, and especially in reality television shows. Gross (2005) observes, "Whereas, as recently as the early 1990s, the inclusion of a gay character would typically be the focus of some dramatic 'problem' to be resolved, today, particularly for programs that aim at coveted younger viewers, it seems that the presence of gay people is a necessary guarantor of realism" (p. 520). Second, Queer Eye capitalizes on the development of the gay market since the 1970s (Sender, 2004). The show deploys gay men's longstanding reputation not only as affluent but as having great taste in order court both gay consumers and heterosexuals who want to be associated with the positive attributes of the gay market.

Although all of Queer Eye's heterosexual candidates welcome their gay hosts' consumer expertise, some are nonetheless ambivalent about adopting what they perceive to be gay tastes, an ambivalence that provides much of the show's frisson. In one episode, food expert Ted Allen instructs Staten Island cop John Verdi how to make an Italian torta for a picnic with his girlfriend. After Ted describes a torta as "like a quiche," John appears to recoil. When his mother makes quiche he won't eat it. Evoking, if unintentionally, the 1980s satirical guide to manhood, "Real Men Don't Eat Quiche" (Feirstein, 1982), the show suggests that for John to eat—let alone cook—quiche would intolerably compromise his masculinity. Ted reassures John that "it's not a quiche, it's an Italian quiche, a manly quiche ... a quiche with balls." Here Ted frames the feminized dish within a hypermasculine version of John's ethnic identity to redeem the quiche from effeminacy.

John's masculinity is bolstered not only by his Italianness but by his working class background. Yet it is precisely this class position that compromises the potential for the

makeover; according to the hosts, he needs to "elevate himself" to be a match for his "impossibly hot" girlfriend. Arguing that makeover shows in general dramatize "class mobility through proper consumption," Gamson (2005) points out that in Queer Eye this class mobility is assured through the association with gay upper class status: "if you become 'gayer,' you will become 'classier'" (p. 14). Fashion historian Shaun Cole traces the link between the upper classes, aestheticism, and same-sex passion back to Oscar Wilde. Because wealthy men were freer than working class men to be publicly gay in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, homosexuality and affluence are associated (S. Cole, 2000). More recently, this association has been consolidated by inaccurate market research data that over-represent affluent gay respondents (Badgett, 1998).

Queer Eye is less a show about class privilege, however, than about class mobility. None of the Fab Five comes from privileged a family background; rather, the hosts elevated themselves from modest beginnings by virtue of their gay tastes, and can instruct heterosexual men in those tastes to effect a similar class trajectory. Nowhere is this class instruction more apparent than in the ubiquitous advice to "jhooz"—the show's trademark neologism. According to the Queer Eye book, jhoozing "means taking something and tweaking it, fluffing it, nudging or finessing it to be a little more fabulous and fun" (Allen et al., 2004, p. 11). However fabulous and fun it may be, joozhing has a serious side. As Paul Fussell (1992) notes, "laboring to present yourself as scrupulously clean and neat suggests that you're worried about status slippage and that you care terribly what your audience thinks, both low [class] signs. The perfect shirt collar, the too neatly tied necktie knot, the anxious overattention to dry cleaning—all betray the wimp" (p. 58). As part of this unstudied look, joozhing protects Queer Eye's lower-middle and middle class candidates from displaying their class position and aspirations toward upward mobility.

In contrast to the hosts' nuanced instruction in class signifiers, Queer Eye's handling of racial difference seems awkward. Three men of color have appeared on the Fab Five team: James Hannaham, an African American who appeared only in the pilot episode; Blair Boone, also African American, who was replaced after two episodes; and Jai Rodriguez a Latino who replaced Boone. So prevalent is the value of multiculturalism among GLBT politics that the show was duty bound to cast at least one person of color as a host, yet it is striking that Hannaham, Boone, and Rodriguez have all been cast as the "Culture" expert. Advising the makeover candidates on matters of culture is arguably the most difficult of all the Fab Five's areas of expertise: "The other guys on the show have it easy," Rodriguez complains, whereas his job is complicated: "You can fix a guy's hair and tell him what clothes will enhance his physique, but how do you know what's happening inside? I've got to burrow into our straight guy's skull and figure out where his tastes could use some improving" (Allen et al., 2004, p. 209). The Culture expert's primary function seems to be buying new CDs to replace the taste deficient straight guy's Billy Joel collection, or dispensing tickets to the opera or Broadway shows. As Muños (2005) writes, Queer Eye "assigns queers of color the job of being inane culture mavens, while the real economic work is put into the able hands of the white gays, who shop" (p. 102). The role of the culture expert is marginalized because it is amorphous, hard-to-define, and arguably impossible to accomplish successfully.

Further, whereas the Fab Five affirm the ethnic backgrounds of white candidates in food, mostly, but also in decor, clothes, and family relationships, Black and Latino candidates are instructed to follow predominantly white norms. In one episode, the hosts admire Jamaican American Rob Munroe's dreadlocks but mock his clothes. Commenting that a dashiki, lovingly stored in a dry cleaner's bag, "looks like a bridesmaid's dress from the 1970s," Carson observes,

“The point is that you’ve got some great ethnic pieces that I want to work into an everyday wardrobe.” Jai concurs: “He’s got this cool cultural sensibility, but there’s too much of it all at the same time.” Too much “cultural sensibility” apparently means that this sensibility is too specifically “ethnic.” The extent to which Rob’s “ethnic pieces” survive in Carson’s fashion makeover is extremely limited, amounting to pieces of mud-cloth glued into a belt buckle and sewn into a jacket yoke.

In matters of interior decor, Rob’s taste is too specifically Jamaican. While out buying furniture, Thom comments to Rob: “A lot of this stuff [in the store], unlike your house, is from all over. There are things from Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Africa, all mixed in.... I want to bring together your photography, your love of ethnic furniture, and your respect for culture. I don’t want you to get trapped in one area.” The anxiety about being “too ethnic” or “too Jamaican” does not extend to food, however: Ted teaches Rob to make a spicy Caribbean fish stew to lubricate the first meeting between his beloved godmother and his new girlfriend. The show’s disavowal of Rob’s “ethnic” tastes in decor and dress compared with its ready adoption of Caribbean cuisine makes sense within the show’s two rationales: to sell tastes and things to audiences, and to remake the candidate into a more “presentable” straight guy. Whereas the audience may enjoy experimenting with “ethnic” food as a fleeting pleasure, and can thus be sold the fish stew recipe, they are less likely to adopt Rob’s distinctively Afrocentric style in dress and decor. Such a racially marked style implies a retrograde identification with places and cultures past, hindering the progressive impulse towards the implicitly white cultural norms of self-improvement that the show demands.

Queer Eye's radical departure from the norms of the makeover genre was to deploy gay men's skills, cultivated through decades of employment in the style trades, in making over

straight men. But the hosts bring a class-specific and largely white expertise to the show, which affirms ethnic differences among white candidates but is less respectful of the cultural tastes of the people of color on the show. Yet, because the potency of the Fab Five's expertise comes from the long-standing association between gayness and high culture, affluence, and upper-middle class taste, Queer Eye represents a significant cultural shift in the relations between experts and subjects in need of reform. After a long history in which gayness was considered medically and criminally pathological, here gay sexuality is not the problem that needs advice and adjustment. On the contrary, the Fab Five's gay taste and consumer expertise is precisely what qualifies them as makeover experts. The problem is the straight guy, whose heterosexual masculinity no longer equips him to court successfully.

The Candidates

Queen for a Day's makeover candidates epitomized the welfare liberal subject: impoverished women whose bad luck and poor choices thrust them on the mercy not of the state but of a television show. Queer Eye offers very different makeover candidates: men, usually young and lower-middle class, who have failed to produce an adult self that can function in the world of heterosexual romance. In neoliberalism, subjects' "self-responsibility and self-fulfilling aspirations have been deformed by the dependency culture, [their] efforts at self-advancement have been frustrated for so long that they suffer from 'learned helplessness,' [and their] self-esteem has been destroyed" (Rose, 1996, p. 59). They do not need welfare handouts but "a whole array of programmes for their ethical reconstruction as active citizens" (p. 60). The subject in welfare liberalism is implicitly feminine, either women like those on Queen for a Day, or emasculated men dependent on the "nanny" state and for whom reform is possible only through a virile claiming of a self-authoring life.

Much of the Fab Five's task involves identifying the makeover candidate's domestic shortcomings. The candidates' apartments are so messy or dirty that they are too embarrassed to invite dates over; the Fab Five gleefully point out the "DNA" on the sheets, pull the pornography from under the couch, observe the bathtub grime thick enough to write a name in. When Thom declares, "This is all the culture you have in your home, right here," he is referring the mold on a shower curtain. The candidates' limitations are also manifested in their appearance. Their clothes are scruffy, cheap, ill-fitting, or old-fashioned; their skin needs cleansing, exfoliating, and moisturizing; they have back hair, nose hair, and monobrows. Moreover, their romantic skills need buffing up. One straight guy is blamed for the "monogamy decline" after three years of living with his girlfriend, another hasn't remembered his wife's birthday in years.

The candidates' domestic and romantic shortcomings are diagnosed as largely a result of inadequate consumption. This leads to endless product placement sequences in which the hosts teach the usually baffled candidate not only what to buy, but how to use this dazzling array of new products. Queer Eye's training in correct consumption is ideally suited for the endless expansion of markets. As one journalist observed, straight men's "lack of sophistication may frustrate women and mystify gay men, but it surely drives the style industry nuts. We just don't primp, preen, moisturize or accessorize enough to open up new markets or boost bottom lines" (Shott, 2003).

What is striking here is that it is heterosexual men who need training. The plethora of fashion, grooming, domestic, and self-help advice available to women in print and electronic media demonstrates how extensively women have been held responsible both for relationship maintenance and for consumption. Queer Eye is notable because it turns this set of expectations onto men. Goldstein (2003) argues that the show only makes sense because of "the newfound

power of the female gaze. Now, it's not just women who dress to please; everyone is subject to objectification." For some critics, the culprit of this recent demand that men pay attention to themselves is feminism, which shifted gender roles and, consequently, standards of attractiveness. "Blame the feminists, or the idea that women don't need men anymore. Oh, they still want them, but the days when a woman's survival was intrinsically wrapped up in a man's attentions are long gone" (McQuaid, 2003, p. 19). McQuaid's is a particularly bitter interpretation of the rise of independent, postfeminist women characterized in Sex in the City, for example, who show that women no longer need men economically (in the early seasons, at least, they all had well-paying jobs), socially (they have each other), or sexually (they have the Rabbit vibrator). Many Queer Eye episodes acknowledge the threat of newly independent women to the candidates' romantic marketability: the Fab Five must turn John Bargeman, who has no specific career, from "Mr. Right Now" to "Mr. Right" by elevating him to his MBA student girlfriend's "level of sophistication."

Queer Eye's gay hosts offer their expertise not only for the heterosexual male candidates but for the benefit of the women who love them. The Fab Five's role as women's best friends reflects long-standing associations between gay men and straight women, for whom gay men are better "boyfriends" than their heterosexual counterparts can ever be (Bordo, 1999). The Fab Five bond with the straight women directly—taking them shopping and confiding that "your boyfriend's working my last gay nerve." Strikingly, however, the Fab Five accomplish what the girlfriends cannot: "A fundamental premise of the show is that women cannot teach straight guys the things they need to know in order to be with women.... It is as crucial that the Fab Five are gay men as that they are gay men" (Torres, 2005, p. 96). Coming from women, the show's makeover advice would be nagging; from the Fab Five it is brotherly counsel.

Queer Eye addresses the challenges the new gender economy poses to heterosexual men, whose romantic prospects are no longer as assured as they had hitherto imagined. This subject is the ideal makeover candidate, since he provides the rationale for a television show whose content is almost entirely concerned with how to consume more products, in a genre that relies on product placement to sell goods to viewers. But underlying this training in consumption is a more fundamental project: reworking the straight guy into a more effectively self-monitoring citizen.

The Project

While Queer Eye's project is ostensibly to improve basic life skills—how to shop, cook, dress, make a woman feel loved—the show simultaneously appeals to an ethics of self-transformation that is bound up with the production of an adult, responsible, worker-citizen. The show promotes technologies of the self with which candidates can engineer better, more fulfilling lives, including "responsibilization" (Burchell, 1996, p. 29) and the internalization of surveillance. Like other makeover shows, Queer Eye embodies the neoliberal imperative to cultivate an autonomously calibrating self within a framework that privileges consumer choice over other modes of citizenship.

Inculcating maturity is a fundamental feature of Queer Eye's makeovers. Looking at John Verdi's list of "Things to Do," Thom finds a series of goals: "Lose belly for summer," "Pay off debt" and, contradictorily, "Buy a motorcycle." Thom grabs the pen and writes at the top of the list: "GROW UP." The straight guys' immaturity compromises their prospects as romantic partners. Philly Rojas wants to reunite with his ex-wife Laurie, who says, "If he wants me to take him more seriously, he needs to get his act together." The hosts frequently take the candidates to task for being dependent on mothers or girlfriends: George Katsigiannis lives in the same

apartment building as his mother, who decorated his apartment and cooks for both of them. Other episodes blame a more general failure to mature on bad mothering. After viewers watch a catalog of the Bravo twins' truly revolting personal hygiene violations, their mother laments, "What can I say? I've failed as a mother." Inadequate tutelage by mothers or an inability or unwillingness to take responsibility must be corrected in order to produce mature boyfriends, husbands, and fathers.

In some shows the Fab Five's role is to reveal the candidate's real self. One episode's mission is to "Uncover the Real Richard": Richard Miller's wife has never seen his bald head, and he believes his kids don't realize his hair isn't his own. After removing his toupee, Ted concludes that Richard "looks like himself only better." All he needs to do now is to develop confidence as a bald man. Queer Eye thus endorses the therapeutic ethos of the neoliberal moment, in which being authentic is a self-affirming accomplishment. But appeals to realness also signal that the makeover is intended to reveal the straight guy's "real self," which is significantly not a "gay self." The show's producers emphasize that what the Fab Five accomplish are not makeovers but "make-betters" (Fonseca, 2003, p. 24). The Fab Five reassure their audience:

> A little hair gel and some pants that fit aren't going to set off anybody's gaydar, people. Women know who's gay and who isn't, and gay men definitely know. If tomorrow morning you shave correctly and wear a shirt that's actually your size, gay men aren't all of a sudden going to start palming your ass on the sidewalks. (Allen et al., 2004, p. 12)

Revealing the "inner you" isn't going to make you gay, but will instead reveal the functionally and essentially heterosexual self that is dying to get out.

Queer Eye's dominant technology in the production of this real, mature self is surveillance, a fundamental characteristic of reality TV. Technological developments in camera and audio equipment allow the hosts, producers, and audiences to observe the makeover candidate's most intimate gestures. But reality television also fosters an internalized mode of surveillance: Queer Eye exhorts participants to adopt the gaze of educators, trainers, and other experts. What makes these figures of surveillance so effective is shame: "to feel shame is to feel seen in a painfully diminished sense" (Kaufman, 1989, p. 17). Whereas guilt comes from feeling bad about what one has done, resulting in anxiety about punishment for a specific transgression, shame is feeling bad about who one is, with an attendant anxiety about rejection as a whole person. Makeover shows mobilize shame not only to exhort participants to modify their behavior but to recalibrate their selves according to new rules of subjecthood. Through both the camera's monitoring gaze and the scrutiny of the Fab Five, the participants learn to see themselves as strange—as lacking in shared cultural mores. And whereas in infancy shame is a relational response to the reactions of a caregiver (anger, withdrawal), maturing children learn to internalize the monitoring gaze to reduce the risk of further shame. Queer Eye's candidates must "grow up" by internalizing the shaming gaze of childhood.

Felski (2000) considers shame in class terms. She observes that the lower middle classes, especially, have been portrayed as "driven by the fear of shame, tortured by a constant struggle to keep up appearances on a low income" (p. 37). She adds that "the opportunities for experiencing shame increase dramatically with geographic and social mobility, which provide an infinite array of chances for failure, for betraying by word or gesture that one does not belong in one's new environment" (p. 43). Queer Eye mobilizes class shame in order to prompt upward class mobility, while also helping candidates accommodate that mobility. If neoliberalism

involves both self-monitoring and increased adaptability in new economic and geographical circumstances, shame could be seen as the quintessential neoliberal affect, offering a highly efficient means to govern at a distance.

Significantly, the show's monitoring eye is a queer one: in the opening credit sequence the camera ultimately penetrates Carson's right eye; through this lens the audience will see as Carson, the quintessential queer, will see. The queer eye, however, has an ambiguous status in the narrative of the show. Because of the long association between gay men and the style trades, the queer eye is the expert eye, coolly assessing fashion violations and bad taste. But the queer eye is also the marginalized eye: having done their work, the Fab Five are ejected from the reveal, the site of heterosexual rebonding, only to observe the fruits of their labor by video screen. As Rollins (1985) found in her ethnographic study of black women domestics, marginalized social positions allow access to the intimate habitus of the powerful, affording a freedom to observe from an invisible position. Queer Eye builds this contradiction into the very structure of the show: the homosexual gaze, marginalized both historically and within the narrative of the show, is nevertheless granted access to the heterosexual family's private sphere. Unlike that of domestics, however, the homosexual gaze is granted institutional authority by the show's marketing and media apparatus.

If shame is the show's stick, improved self-esteem is the carrot. "Feeling better about yourself" is the reward for developing an internalized, self-monitoring gaze, becoming more the "real you," and becoming a more adult person. The "self-esteem movement," fashionable especially in the 1980s, blamed a range of social problems on subjects' lack of self esteem, not on poverty, bad housing, or unemployment (Cruikshank, 1996). Queer Eye represents low self-esteem not as an understandable response to depressing life circumstances but as a moral failing.

En route to meet Philly Rojas, the Fab Five discuss how Philly tore a ligament in his leg, stopped working out, and was dumped by his wife. One host comments, “It sounds like it affected his self-esteem,” to which another responds, “We are going to crash his pity party.” In another episode, perhaps one of the most painful of the first season, Alan Corey needs a makeover because he’s pathologically cheap: he buys his clothes at thrift stores and retrieves furniture from the street on trash day. The Fab Five make him over with products compatible with his thrifty sensibility. The one luxury is a beautiful vintage cocktail set. Left to prepare for the arrival of his parents, his girlfriend, and her parents, Alan is a disaster: panicking and bathed in sweat, the simple prosciutto and parmesan canapés Ted taught him to make seem impossibly complicated. The climax comes when he knocks the cocktail set on the kitchen floor, precipitating a self-hating diatribe as he sweeps up the glass: “That was the coolest thing in the world.... That’s why I don’t buy nice things. ‘Alan, don’t buy nice things. You will break them.’” The root of Alan’s cheapness is revealed: not a pragmatic thriftiness but a critical parental voice that tells him he does not deserve nice things. This is one of the few episodes that the hosts considered a failure, given Alan’s inability to recalibrate his low self-esteem.

In Queer Eye the crisis of masculinity is framed not in terms of financial, professional, or relational pressures on men, but as a failure to grow up, to see the self as others do, and to have positive self-regard. Like other makeover shows, Queer Eye articulates templates of adult, responsible, self-realized subjecthood to consumer choice as the quintessential model for cultural participation. The show teaches straight guys to be better consumers and more girl-friendly boyfriends—in short, to be metrosexuals. Coined by British journalist Mark Simpson (1994), “metrosexual” described a male “commodity fetishist, a collector of fantasies about the male sold to him by advertising” (p. 22). Not necessarily gay or straight, the metrosexual was “the single

man living in the metropolis, and taking himself as his own love object." By the time the term became articulated with Queer Eye, however, "metrosexual" had been straightened out, adopted by marketers, and lost some of its bite. One journalist described the metrosexual as "a straight guy who loves to shop, cook, primp and preen.... He exfoliates and emulsifies. He does yoga and cardio. He just won't do 'that'" (Morris, 2003). Uses of the term tend to emphasize a feminized consumption while distancing heterosexual men from gay sex. From its origins as an ironic term to describe any male narcissistic consumer, "metrosexual" has since become a more positive description of a sensitive, girl- and gay-friendly straight man, a description embraced by marketers oblivious to its critical origins.

The metrosexual man in the new labor economy

Queer Eye presents the male makeover as a privilege: in an increasingly progressive sexual environment, the assumption goes, men are finally free to explore their "inner girlie guy" (Sitt, 2003, p. C1). What is underplayed, however, is the work involved in this transformation. Andrejevic (2004) has discussed "the work of being watched" on reality shows from two perspectives. First, participants labor for usually less than the minimum wage for media corporations, which can make huge profits on this cheap programming. The makeover candidates on Queer Eye are not paid but do receive significant compensation in product placement goods. The Fab Five are paid, but much less than writers and actors on fictional shows (they earned $3,000 per episode in the first season). The second form of labor is performed by audiences. As with all commercial media, when people watch reality shows they are being sold as a product to advertisers; profit accrues to media companies when they can sell this audience for more than the

cost of the programming. Audiences thus also work when they watch advertising and product placements.

While focusing on the labor of working for reality television, however, most critics have not addressed how makeover shows, especially, serve the labor economy beyond the television environment. Queer Eye trains participants to be better workers, endorsing "the spread of self-fashioning as a requirement of personal and professional achievement through the US middle-class labor force" (Miller, 2005, p. 112). Many episodes involve direct interventions in the candidates' professional lives. Philly Rojas, for example, has been in the same position at his graphic design company for four years, and his colleagues won't show clients around the office because they think he looks unprofessional. Kyan observes, "it sounds like he's not taking his professional life very seriously." The Fab Five get to work: Carson aims for a "dressed up hip hop [look] so you still look cool ... but also so you are sophisticated at work so people give you credit." Ted teaches Philly the finer points of selecting wine and recommending dishes, not for pleasure but for professional development: "A great deal of business in American culture is done over dinner tables, and I think this should be part of your bag of tricks." These efforts are rewarded at a dinner party, where Philly's boss enthuses, "I think the sky's the limit as far as your career [goes]—I think you see it, I'm glad you are focused, it's great to see you confident." What is at stake here, then, is not Philly's competence as a graphic designer, which is never in question, but his self-presentation as someone who "takes his professional life seriously."

Embedded in Queer Eye's preoccupations with heterosexual romance is a sustained narrative about class mobility in an increasingly uncertain world of work. Whereas in industrial capitalism work was seen as necessarily alienating for most people, now workers (or, at least, skilled workers) are expected to invest themselves in their jobs (Gee, 1996). Success in this "new

work order" depends less on the kinds of skills workers have than on how adeptly they have absorbed a work ethic attentive to self-presentation and self-management. Miller (2005) observes that between the early 1970s and the late 1990s, far greater proportions of men reported dissatisfaction with their appearance, in part because "the middle-class US labor market now sees wage discrimination by beauty among men as well as among women, and major corporations frequently require executives to tailor their body shapes to the company ethos" (p. 113). The metrosexual appears at a particularly uncertain moment for heterosexual men, not only in relation to women, but also as employees.

Faludi (1999) argues that increased numbers of women in the labor force precipitated a "crisis of masculinity" for men on two fronts: greater competition with women for jobs, and decreased family stability as women's economic independence grew. She notes, however, that the narrowing of the pay gap between women and men in the past 30 years "reflected not an improvement in women's wages but a decline in men's real earnings" (p. 263). To blame the crisis of masculinity on women and on feminism overlooks the extent to which flexible capitalism both allowed and demanded gender shifts in the workforce. Queer Eye's emphasis on a gender crisis, which requires the Fab Five's intervention into the romantic lives of the show's straight guys, effaces the extent to which the straight guys also face a class crisis caused by lower annual earnings.

Queer Eye's emphasis on heterosexual romance is not independent of neoliberalism's requirement to reshape the male labor force, moreover, but inherent to it. Coupled relationships privatize "the costs of social reproduction, along with the care of human dependency needs, through personal responsibility exercised in the family and civil society—thus shifting costs from state agencies to individuals and households" (Duggan, 2003, p. 14). Insofar as flexible

capitalism has contributed to a destabilization of the nuclear family in the past thirty years, its survival simultaneously depends upon the family as a form of privatized welfare in the post-welfare era.

The de-racing of the men of color in the show—making Jamaican American Rob Monroe "less ethnic," Puerto Rican Philly Rojas "less hip hop"—may be a response to the even more precarious labor conditions for Black and Latino men than for white, lower middle class men. In a labor economy where the unemployment rate for African Americans is more than double the rate for Caucasians, racial signifiers may be dangerously associated with not "fitting" in the workplace.[ii] If white men have to grow up and take responsibility in order to be both employable and good marriage material, men of color must add to this a tempering of their ethnic style.

Much of the criticism leveled at Queer Eye focused on its gay male hosts and the perpetuation of gay stereotypes, overlooking the extent to which the show's joke is on its makeover candidates: now straight white guys have to work harder, in the ways women and gay men have had to work, in order to get and keep their mate, their job, their class position. Men of color have to work harder still. The turn of the twenty-first century is not the first time that men have faced the crisis of authority that comes from being unable to provide for a family, but whereas during the Great Depression of the 1930s economic hardship was seen as resulting from forces beyond men's control, the current neoliberal ethos frames such hardship as a personal failing. And if it is a personal failing, it is also a personal responsibility to fix, through the ministrations of experts such as Queer Eye's Fab Five.

The camp eye

Queer Eye, then, looks like a project for heterosexual dupes. But Queer Eye seems to exploit gay men too, as they make straight guys more marriageable at a time when same-sex marriage is not a constitutional right in the U.S., make them more employable when GLBT people have no federal employment protection, and expand consumer markets in the service of large corporations that may or may not care about their GLBT employees and consumers. Yet Queer Eye's queerness cannot be so easily folded into the grinding functionalism of a neoliberal analysis. As Henderson (2003) notes, the show's queer sensibility cannot be subsumed into a critique that emphasizes only exploitation and marginalization. The irony is that the queer eye that is the show's source of expertise is also the camp eye that undermines values fundamental to its project: class aspiration, gender conformity, and heteronormativity. Queer Eye's signature campness performs in excess of its pedagogical purpose, which helps to account both for its delightful effervescence and its progressive politics.

Richard Dyer defines camp less as a property of people, objects, or texts, than as a "way of looking at things" (Dyer, 2002, p. 52). Nothing in the straight guys' homes is protected from camp deconstruction: Kyan dons chintz curtains as a robe and turban to offer "mystic" advice on poker night; Carson takes pink feathers from a fly fisherman to decorate a tiara. Camp lifts the lid off bourgeois respectability, airing the dirty laundry of people who would rather such things remain private. As John Verdi feeds his girlfriend chocolate sauce from his finger, Carson comments, "In our community that's frowned upon, when you have a big brown wad.... Get rid of that." And if the Fab Five bring to light the unseemly underside of bourgeois respectability, they also ridicule its pretensions. Thom devises a game in Jeff Toale's house that involves the family finding as many dried flower arrangements as they can in the shortest possible time. The pleasure in revealing the distance between the ideal and the real is not only afforded to the hosts

but to Queer Eye's editor, too. During a lesson on fake tanning, the editor places the text, "AIR BRUSH TAN: emphasizes muscle definition" over the straight guy's flabby belly.

The camp eye also sees that "roles, and, in particular, sex roles, are superficial—a matter of style" (Babuscio, 1984, p. 44). In a hilarious moment of butch drag, Carson takes a waxing strip, covered with a candidate's copious back hair, and tucks it into his shirt to fashion a hairy chest. The show is also replete with moments that deconstruct the boundary between the apparently heterosexual and the possibly gay. Steven Smith asks whether the shoes he is trying on will "make me gay." As Carson leans around him to help him on with the shoes he retorts, "No, but this will," his pelvis in close proximity to Steven's ass. Contrary to an essentialized view of gender and sexuality, which holds that some people are masculine, others feminine, some inherently gay, and most are heterosexual, Queer Eye flirts with such cut and dried distinctions in ways that both the straight guys (for the most part) and the Fab Five seem to enjoy.

Camp also tempers the sober neoliberal emphasis on becoming a responsible adult. The Fab Five often present themselves as playful and childlike, disrupting domestic order, trying on clothes, and playing with kids' toys. Camp distinguishes the straight guys' pathetic immaturity from the Fab Five's joyous playfulness. As Sontag (1966) writes, "Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to 'the serious.' One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious" (p. 288). The Fab Five are not immature, even if they are at times childlike, because they know the "real adult" rules and when to apply them. "Rebuilding a better straight man" is important labor indeed, and the straight guys' love lives and careers depend upon it, but delivering training in playful ways is precisely what makes the training bearable and the show watchable. The Fab Five are playful in the serious task of the

makeover, but they are also serious about what is conventionally held to be frivolous. Engaging in the frivolous is now a necessity, not only for women and queers, but for straight men too.

The camp eye thus dislocates the straight guy's usual perspective, forcing him to see himself from a different point of view. The hosts capitalize on this shift in order to improve relations between straight and gay men. Co-producer David Collins has remarked, "gay guys, straight guys, they may do things a little different in the bedroom, but in the end, they're just guys. They just want to feel good about themselves, and confident" (Morago, 2003). Importantly, the realm of consumption is situated in the show as the ideal place to enact this new kind of male bonding. Kyan and Andrew Lane discuss the possibilities of gay-straight male friendship while having their nails done. Kyan assures Andrew: "It's fun—building bridges, one manicure at a time." By "building bridges" between heterosexual and gay men through new forms of consumption, Fab Five reverse the homophobic hostilities of the schoolyard—not for their own benefit, but because straight men need them to.

Queer Eye promotes a very different personal transformation from the Queen for a Day model. The earlier makeover show features the paternalistic attentions of a heterosexual male host, prizes, overwhelmed women, the transitory nature of the promotion to "queen," and the overarching frame of luck (bad and good). In contrast, Queer Eye's Fab Five offer brotherly advice and placed products to help incompetent heterosexual men become "entrepreneurs of themselves" (Rose, 1990, p. 230). Through a lifetime of self-monitoring, self-improvement, and consumption, the straight guys produce themselves as viable commodities on the labor and marriage markets. Yet along with the constitution of better boyfriends, better consumers, and better workers, the show promotes changing ideas about gender and sexuality, and especially about relations between gay and straight men, that cannot be collapsed into a functionalist

neoliberal critique. Queer Eye nevertheless leaves assumptions about upward class mobility and the benefits of consumption firmly in place. The show suggests that the appropriate place to negotiate gender and sexual politics is the commercial realm, leaving its progressive message vulnerable to the vagaries of audience ratings and marketers' patronage. As the popularity of Queer Eye waned in the fall of 2004, with ratings for the show dropping by 40 percent compared with the previous year (Wallenstein, 2004), Bravo's gay programming may prove fragile in a commercial television marketplace in which sizable and sellable audiences are the nonnegotiable bottom line. Queer Eye asserts that to be a queen for a day offers training for a lifetime of fulfilling self-surveillance and shopping, but the moment for a progressive politics that this neoliberal project affords might be fleeting indeed.

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Notes

[i] The 2004 version of Queen for a Day changed the original show's format: In the recent version, community heroines (not luckless audience members) were rewarded for their good works by being pampered for a day.

[ii] In 2004, 11.1 percent of the African American labor force was unemployed, compared with 4.8% of the Caucasian labor force (United States Department of Labor, 2004).