

*INTERROGATING* **POSTFEMINISM**

**Console-ing Passions**  
**Television and Cultural Power**  
Edited by Lynn Spigel

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## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture <i>YVONNE TASKER AND DIANE NEGRA</i>	I
1. Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime <i>ANGELA MCROBBIE</i>	27
2. Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some Reflections on Postfeminist Girls and Postfeminism's Daughters <i>SARAH PROJANSKY</i>	40
3. Living a <i>Charmed</i> Life: The Magic of Postfeminist Sisterhood <i>HANNAH E. SANDERS</i>	7
4. "I Hate My Job, I Hate Everybody Here": Adultery, Boredom, and the "Working Girl" in Twenty-First-Century American Cinema <i>SUZANNE LEONARD</i>	I
5. Remapping the Resonances of Riot Grrrl: Feminisms, Postfeminisms, and "Processes" of Punk <i>ANNA FEIGENBAUM</i>	
6. Killing Bill: Rethinking Feminism and Film Violence <i>LISA COULTHARD</i>	

Steven Cohan

7

## Queer Eye for the Straight Guise

CAMP, POSTFEMINISM, AND THE FAB FIVE'S  
MAKEOVERS OF MASCULINITY

The big hit on American cable television in the summer of 2003 was the Bravo series *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, airing on Tuesday evenings. Every week five gay men, collectively referred to as the “Fab Five,” take on a domestically and sardonically challenged straight man. He serves as their “trade” but not in the sense of the term suggested by the double entendre of the title; rather, they do a complete makeover of the straight guy. Each member of the queer team represents what is taken as a gay-identified specialty: Carson Kressley is in charge of fashion, Kyan Douglas grooming, Thom Filicia decorating, Ted Allen cooking, and Jai Rodriguez something vaguely called “culture” but more accurately a hybrid of dating or hosting etiquette and leisure entertainment skills. Typically, each episode focuses the straight guy’s makeover around a particular “mission,” with the Fab Five’s renovation directed toward his achieving a personal or professional goal so that he can attain “confidence” and “grow up,” as is frequently said on the show. Regardless of the particulars, the Fab Five’s primary objective is to teach the straight guy how to satisfy the emotional and domestic needs of a present or potential female partner.

*Queer Eye* adheres to the makeover show format insofar as it defines a confident, mature masculinity through consumption and then normalizes it through a heterosexual couple, leaving the queer guys out of the loop except as spectators. Just as important, though, while decidedly aimed at restoring the straight guy’s cultural capital in a postfeminist marketplace, *Queer Eye* also makes a concerted effort through camp to visualize queerness in its contiguous relation to straightness. How one weighs these concerns, I am going to argue, determines what one can find in the Fab Five’s makeovers of the straight guys.<sup>1</sup> My discussion of the first season of *Queer Eye* will thus aim to situate its legibility as a queer show in light of this collection and the conference that inspired it. I have in mind (and am, to be candid, intentionally resisting) how some formulations of postfeminism have so readily absorbed the impact of queer theory but left out the queerness. Witness how, in addressing the woman now seemingly liberated by feminism, consumer culture and the mass media have transformed the visible gay male into what Baz Dreisinger aptly describes as “the trendy accessory for straight women,” namely, the “postfeminist” female’s best friend and confidante, and the inspiration for her ideal consort, that hip, het “metrosexual.”<sup>2</sup> While recognizing the extent to which *Queer Eye* encourages a highly comforting view of homosexuality as a useful accessory of postfeminist femininity, I want to examine how the series simultaneously enables a queer viewer to see past that agenda.

### Good Fairies to the Rescue?

*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* was Bravo’s effort to exploit the popularity of makeover shows, twisting the format a bit with its five gay experts. Moreover, Bravo paired it with another gay version of a reality tv genre, the dating show *Boy Meets Boy*, to create a two-hour bloc of “alternative” programming on Tuesday nights. The intent was to establish a niche identity, thereby overcoming the blandness of this NBC-owned cable network, and possibly to find a signature show. Having gay or gay-coded hosts on a cable reality series was not new; nor did *Queer Eye* make any pretense of reinventing the makeover format. All the same, in the absence of a big, tabloid, tv event in the summer of 2003, *Queer Eye* immediately received a great deal of media coverage because, unlike *Boy Meets Boy*, it featured five gay men perfectly comfortable with their homosexuality and openly identified itself as a series respectful of queer tastes and attitudes.

Exploiting the buzz that resulted from so much attention, NBC subsequently reran episodes several times in its powerhouse Thursday night lineup during the summer months (a significant spot for advertising the opening of new movies each week), and the series' success prompted an appearance of the Fab Five on the network's *Tonight Show* in August to do a makeover of the host, Jay Leno. They performed the same job for preselected audience members on Oprah Winfrey's afternoon talk show in early autumn. In the fall as well, the Comedy Central satire *South Park* parodied *Queer Eye*, indicating how quickly this new series had entered popular culture awareness. Aside from the expected gay demographic, the series quickly attracted a strong female following, prompting a Yahoo! discussion group dedicated to this important segment of the viewing audience, "A Girl's View of *Queer Eye*." Yet the series also drew a cadre of straight men. One fan site, "Straight Eye for the Queer Shows" (now apparently defunct), featured four openly heterosexual men who rotated responsibility for writing detailed, tongue-in-cheek recaps of each week's episode. This is not to suggest that the male segment of the series' audience took its makeover lessons lightly. A December 2003 survey conducted by Jericho Communications revealed that whenever a new episode aired on Tuesday evenings it encouraged more males to go shopping with a buddy the day afterward than at any other time during the week.<sup>3</sup>

The currency of *Queer Eye* throughout its first season occurred at the same time that same-sex marriage became a controversial, publicly debated issue.<sup>4</sup> Two Canadian provinces legalized such unions in the summer of 2003, making it possible for gay and lesbian couples to travel there from the United States and marry, and in November of that year the Massachusetts Supreme Court upheld same-sex marriages, prompting local civil resistance to the federal Defense of Marriage Act in states on the East and West Coasts. This timeliness certainly contributed, if indirectly, to the attention *Queer Eye* and its five hosts received in the months following the premiere. In its year-end chronicle of events, the American Film Institute (AFI) listed *Queer Eye* as one of the two major cultural developments of 2003 (the other was the issue of film piracy). The AFI singled out *Queer Eye* because it brought "gay culture to the national fore by spoofing and celebrating stereotypes, and unlike other reality shows, it did so in a winning and genuine manner that developed a bond between the gay and straight man."<sup>5</sup> The AFI was not alone in applauding the series' liberal viewpoint. Oprah Winfrey expressed much the same sentiment, often tearfully, several times during the Fab Five's appearance on her show.

Alongside that liberal approval, *Queer Eye* received its fair share of negative criticism for perpetuating, not debunking, gender-sexual stereotypes. News stories on the suddenly hot new show balanced criticism and praise in their accounts of the response from gay viewers.<sup>6</sup> Skimming several gay-oriented discussion boards during the months following the series premiere, I found that the strongest charge against the Fab Five was directed at their "unmasculine" appearance and mannerisms, epitomized by their flamboyant personification of effeminate stereotypes, with Carson and Jai targeted in particular.

Inevitably, a comparison was made with the more attractive gay men to be found on Bravo's other new series, *Boy Meets Boy*. Its hook was that the gay bachelor did not know his dating pool included straight men. While this premise appeared to belie the distinction between gay and straight on the basis of appearance, *Boy Meets Boy* reinscribed the axiom that the most attractive gay men are those who can successfully pass as straight, and the series only proved that, when it comes to dating, gay men can be just as banal and superficial as their straight counterparts. But *Boy Meets Boy* capitalized on the thinking that motivates the many gay personal ads seeking straight-acting men, and it exploited the fantasy, a staple of gay erotica, that straight men are seducible. What stood out in the contrasting remarks about *Queer Eye*'s circulation of gay stereotypes was the discomfort felt by hostile viewers precisely because the Fab Five were not gym junkies; they did not conform to the "Abercrombie & Fitch" ethos inspiring (not to say inciting desire in) gay men of their generation, which, as Michael Joseph Gross observes, is to look like everyone else, to be "regular guys—[but] with better-than-average bodies."<sup>7</sup> In short, these viewers preferred the buff, twenty-something, heterosexual-looking guys on *Boy Meets Boy*. While the criticism declared that *Queer Eye* reconfirmed straight prejudices about nelly gay men, it could be reduced to the simpler question: why can't these five queers act and look more like straight guys?

When watching that first season of *Queer Eye*, my own answer at the time was: if they did, we wouldn't be able to tell the difference. True, *Queer Eye* defines the queerness of the Fab Five through their expertise as consumers, not through their sexual orientation. As Anna McCarthy points out, "The Fab Five are totally sexless. They may tease their subjects, but there is no chance that they will get to sleep with them."<sup>8</sup> Their queer eye is for the most part not focused through a gay gaze—it's not *that* kind of queer eye for a straight

guy—but is meant to illuminate for heterosexual men what their girlfriends, wives, or mothers already know, namely, the value of “products,” perhaps the most repeatedly used term on the show, as the cornerstone of heterosexual self-confidence and maturity. The five hosts function for each episode not as protagonists but in the capacity that narratology calls helper figures, serving the needs of a domesticated heteronormality; this subordinate role in the narrative of each episode enables a makeover to be focused through a decidedly straight eye for the queer guy, which is why the five hosts may encourage what is actually “the fantasy that [the series’] straight viewers gain entry into an otherwise inaccessible, unfamiliar gay culture.”<sup>9</sup> With their homosexuality serving mainly as consumer culture’s equivalent of professional counseling for the straight couple, and gay culture itself reduced to shopping, the Fab Five do end up seeming all too reminiscent of the three drag queens in *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995): the asexual good fairies who bring a hip Manhattanite’s taste for style, flair, color, and cleanliness into a bland and dingy straight world and quickly depart as soon as they have spread their gay cheer.

As for its depiction of straights, *Queer Eye* follows the example of all the self-help relationship books that binarize the difference between men and women, depicting the genders as “different species entirely” and consequently promoting the expectation that heterosexual romance “is not a walk in the park but an arduous expedition.”<sup>10</sup> I think it is safe to assume that the appeal of the series for many women lies in its mission of softening masculinity’s rough edges for successful male-female cohabitation. Registering what Sasha Torres observes is “the incapacity of the heterosexual families that spawned the straight guys to sustain even a minimal quality of life,” *Queer Eye* depicts not only the domestic rehabilitation but also the class elevation of straight men for the benefit of their women.<sup>11</sup> Like other makeover shows, the series teaches its viewers that this dual mission is most easily performed through one’s appearance, and the urgency of such instruction is expressed every time the Fab Five obsess over men needing to shave in “the right way” and to remove all that gristly body hair, whether it’s the straight guy’s back hair, ear hair, or unibrow. As Torres notes, the show’s preoccupation with shaving crystallizes, through the Fab Five’s intervention, both the necessity of male-male tutelage in perpetuating the protocols of civil masculinity and the heterosexual family’s failure to perform this crucial function for its unruly sons, much to the dismay of their future girlfriends and wives.

With successful straight coupling requiring endless negotiation between alien creatures polarized in their libidinal, emotional, and domestic needs, *Queer Eye* brings in the Fab Five to mediate heterosexual difference; their visible queerness then functions to speak for women in an unthreatening male voice. As a result, the series brings out the contradiction constructing the postfeminist female viewer being addressed from this vantage point. Straight masculinity is identified as problematic more than oppressive, and it can be remedied through a male’s consumption of the same kind of products that enhance in order to regulate femininity. However, even though the makeovers serve the interests of women, *Queer Eye* concentrates on “the pleasures of companionship” between straight guys and their gay cohorts, relegating women to “a shadow presence on the show.”<sup>12</sup> A female’s main function is to nod approval at what the queer guys have achieved for her in her absence, which involves their pedagogical bonding with the straight guy as well as his makeover.

The cultural ideal of masculinity aimed for here—though it is a standard the straight guys on the series at best only approximate to provide the link between the makeovers and the advertising and product placement—is what the media has termed the metrosexual, the youngish, upscale, heterosexual male who spends so much time on his appearance (and so much money on hairstyling, fashionable clothing, and skin products) that he is readable as “gay” and too liberal to mind the mistake—but hands off, please! On the Fab Five’s return visit (21 November 2003) several months after their makeover of the *Tonight Show*, Carson Kressley defined this suddenly ubiquitous yet sexually ambiguous figure for Jay Leno as the straight guy who moisturizes but doesn’t have sex with other men. More accurately, the fashion guru quipped, he’s “a moistrosexual.”

A recent invention of marketing and the urban press, the metrosexual male gives every impression of revising how straight masculinity has traditionally been defined in opposition to feminine activities such as shopping, grooming, and cooking, as Martin Roberts points out elsewhere in this volume.<sup>13</sup> Such a refiguration of masculinity has a longer history, though, deriving from an earlier representation of what was termed the New Man in advertising, TV, and films of the 1980s, itself an outgrowth of the kind of marketing aimed directly at male consuming, which *Playboy* magazine perfected in the 1950s.<sup>14</sup> Somewhat like the metrosexual, the New Man of the 1980s was depicted as being “tough but tender, masculine but sensitive—he can cry, cuddle babies

and best of all buy cosmetics.”<sup>15</sup> This newly styled image of a straight masculinity geared toward consuming was perhaps first signaled by *American Gigolo* (1980), the neo-noir film starring Richard Gere that put the clothing designer Giorgio Armani on the map, and it was featured in advertising campaigns for products such as Levi’s 501 jeans and Grey Flannel cologne. By the end of the decade, when the Liz Claiborne company introduced its own brand of men’s cologne, the marketing was specifically aimed at the New Man, “who attends Rob Reiner romances and tipples kir royales [and] might also want to take an introspective and vulnerable approach to the way he smells.”<sup>16</sup>

According to Suzanne Moore, the 1980s New Man drew on the visual iconography of soft-core gay pornography, drawing attention to the male body “as a pleasurable object [but] on condition that his pleasure can be contained within a narcissistic/auto-erotic discourse.”<sup>17</sup> Just as important, this image addressed women by offering “the possibility of an *active female gaze*.”<sup>18</sup> Moore attributes this kind of radical shift in depicting the masculine, which blurs the distinction between the active male voyeur and the passive female exhibitionist, to popular culture’s awareness of the “renegotiations over masculinity brought about by radical political discourses,” feminism, and the gay and lesbian rights movement in particular.<sup>19</sup> Because of the homoeroticism informing the visual representation of the New Man, however, the heterosexuality of this image of masculinity was never fully secure. Hence paying attention to how one smelled could signal vulnerability as well as introspection, just as it still connoted suspicion about—and feminized as narcissistic—the type of man who was *too* concerned with how he looked.

The 1980s New Man, in short, could always turn out to be a closet case. By contrast, as the newer term suggests, the metrosexual willingly displays his toned but moisturized body as a means of performing his masculinity through his ability to consume, using his exhibitionism to assert his identity as an urban, middle-class male. While this newest incarnation of a male attuned to the same consumerist desires as his domestic partner is presumed to be heterosexual, he is still poised between assumptions about what makes a man readable as “straight” and what makes him readable as “queer,” which is why he is more “metro” than “hetero.” Appropriating the tropes formerly used to identify the gay male consumer, the metrosexual reimagines masculinity from a postfeminist perspective, but the price remains this new man’s sexual ambiguity—the very anxiety that *Boy Meets Boy* appeared to celebrate

but actually fostered by keeping its gay bachelor in the dark about the sexual orientation of the men he was scrutinizing, flirting with, and sharing his feelings with in one-on-one encounters. For single straight women, even if the metrosexual moisturizes but doesn’t swing with the other team, his sexual ambiguity renews the motive for the much-quoted worry that all the best men are either already married or gay—for if they aren’t gay they certainly look like they are, so how is a girl to tell?

This is where the Fab Five come in: to clarify who is and who isn’t. *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* outwardly deploys their queerness to facilitate the mating of a metrosexual wannabe with his postfeminist partner, but these makeovers of the sleeping woolly beast for his date with Princess Charming are primarily structured around the opposition of “queer” and “straight,” not “masculine” and “feminine.” The series’ humor and its potential edginess reside in this opposition. The Fab Five’s queer eye slyly acknowledges the regulation and deregulation of domestic and urban spaces through that dualism, which places gay men outside straight culture yet makes them central to its successful operation. At issue is the spatial differentiation pointed out by the series’ title. *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* does something akin to what Joshua Gamson argues about daytime talk shows, which perform “an ambivalence about just who is doing what and how in public—and, more fundamentally, just to whom public space belongs.” “It’s not so much the *gayness* that is bothersome,” Gamson concludes, “it’s the *publicness*.”<sup>20</sup> *Queer Eye* does not represent that disturbance through violent confrontations in the manner of Jerry Springer or Ricki Lake. Rather, in order to stage the queer eye-straight guy encounter as a momentary deregulation of boundaries, *Queer Eye* foregrounds the public visibility of queerness in its adjacency to straightness through *camp*, although the Fab Five do not always maintain this viewpoint coherently or consistently in each episode.

### Camping with the Fab Five

Historically speaking, in the pre-Stonewall era of the closet (a crucial space for *Queer Eye* as it turns out), camp was a strategy of cultural differentiation for queers, one highly responsive to the imperative of passing—a “queer eye for the straight *guise*”—even more than it was a “sensibility” and “style” or a category of “taste,” to refer to Susan Sontag’s and Andrew Ross’s early commentaries on camp.<sup>21</sup> As I have written elsewhere, “In response to that era’s

oppression and censorship of homosexuality, camp allowed for the ironic, self-reflective style of gay men passing as straight, who kept a 'straight face' so as not to let outsiders in on the joke, while simultaneously winking at the initiated in shared acknowledgment of it. *Camp* can be defined as the ensemble of strategies used to enact a queer recognition of the incongruities arising from the cultural regulation of gender and sexuality."<sup>22</sup> Despite its later appropriation by the mainstream during the 1960s and 1970s, which began to efface its history and politics, camp still works by exaggerating the homologous boundaries of the visible/straight/natural and invisible/queer/unnatural in order to locate one side of the polarity in more direct tension with the other. This is why, as Esther Newton observes, "Camp is not a thing. Most broadly it signifies a *relationship between* things, people, and activities or qualities, and homosexuality."<sup>23</sup>

Today camp may seem politically incorrect because of its association with the oppressive politics of the closet, but its significance for gay culture, while reinflected according to the times, has not diminished. Camp still enables a queer perspective to be discerned through its *effect* (the ironic inflection of a witty putdown or pun, a coded allusion for those in the know, the exaggeration of artifice and theatricality) and, more profoundly, in its *affect* (the queer pleasure in perceiving, if not causing, the disruption of gender-sexual categories whether in representations of heterosexual normality, the values that reiterate it, or the commodities that derive from and reinscribe it). Although first feminism and then postfeminism have provocatively taken camp as a ground for theorizing the artifice of gender construction and regulation, and to serve as a strategy for reading against oppressive representations of women, I want to insist on what is still, to my mind, the intractable *queerness* of camp. It may illuminate the subordination of women alongside that of gay men, but because of its queer bias it is not reducible to either feminist political aims or postfeminist awareness of the interaction between feminine identities, gender performativity, and consumption.<sup>24</sup>

On *Queer Eye*, from Carson's double entendres to Jai's exaggeration of a drag queen in mufti to Ted's understated, straight-faced irony, the Fab Five engage in camp at the level of both effect (what they do and say to make viewers laugh at the straight people) and affect (how that laughter then yields pleasure in watching the makeovers, though a pleasure that exceeds the series' ideological purpose of recuperating heterosexual coupledness). Their camp

enables them to be readily perceivable as "gay," in contrast to the straight men they remake for straight women, but it also allows them to cast a queer eye on their job of serving heterosexuality as its asexual helpers.

Rather effortlessly, yet somewhat violently, the team moves in and out of the regulatory boundaries that uphold the distinction, in private and public, between queer and straight spaces. Each episode begins with the Fab Five speeding across Manhattan in their sport-utility vehicle as they briefly describe their mission of the day. The opening credits then identify each member of the team individually according to his expertise; pictures them in a group as if they were the Mod Squad, the A-Team, and Charlie's Angels combined; and locates them at the imaginary intersection of Gay and Straight Streets. Following the credits, the first segment records them arriving at their destination like a gay brigade of terrorists or kidnappers invading the presumed sanctity of the straight guy's home and disrupting its heterosexual space. With pseudo-militaristic fervor, the five charge inside and register their offense at what they find there: disarray, dysfunctionality, and dirt. In this first segment, edited in a fast-paced montage that does not follow temporal chronology, they appropriate items from the kitchen, bathroom, or bedroom closet in order to mock the straight guy's ad hoc domesticity, indifference to sanitation, ineptitude with clothing, and, whenever the opportunity arises—for instance, if they find porn or condoms or even his underwear—his sexual prowess. The humiliated straight guy stands by watching helplessly, often laughing but rarely offering resistance to this demeaning ridicule except to avoid physical contact, while the five queer men proceed to trash the place literally as well as verbally, even going so far as to toss his furniture or clothing out a window or over a balcony.

The next set of sequences leads the straight guy through the physical makeover, which amounts to a takeover. He passively puts himself in Carson's hands for a shopping spree and in Kyan's for grooming at a salon or spa; usually there is a third outing with one of the others for furniture or cuisine. The ostensible point of these sequences is his instruction—on what clothes suit his body, what areas of his face, hair, or body need immediate attention, and how to select furniture or food. Visually and verbally, the camp humor in these sequences depends on the extent to which the team can expose how this consuming disturbs their subject's comfortable occupation of public space as a heterosexual male. These are indeed "outings." Not only is

the straight guy undertaking an activity of specialized consuming presumed to be a gay man's preoccupation with his appearance for the appreciative gaze of another man, but this straight guy is doing it in public with an openly gay guy, so the act of consuming places the two together in a hybrid space that confounds a straight-queer dichotomy. Anyone who observes the straight guy in an upscale clothing store with Carson is not going to presume that these are two straight buddies—the pair identified by the Jericho Communications survey—picking up a new pair of jeans or polo shirt to replace a worn one. Flamboyantly rushing through the store with his straight guy in tow, Carson announces his queer presence at every turn by means of his camp manner. The straight guy, meanwhile, submits to a scrutinizing queer eye that is superior to his when Carson appraises his appearance; using a quick wit as well as a keen sense of style to exploit his discomfort and objectify him, Carson dresses down the straight guy while dressing him up.

Similarly, when Kyan supervises the straight guy's subjection to exfoliating, tweezing, plucking, and waxing—the work that goes into “femininity”—he also exposes him to the gaze of a queer eye. Although it does not occur in each episode, here the crossing of boundaries can most disturbingly question how *queer* and *straight* are still defined according to spatial regulation. This is most vividly apparent in episode 108, “Law and Disorder” (first shown on Bravo on 19 August 2003), which recounts the makeover of John Verdi, an Italian American cop living on Staten Island. A bald, pudgy, pasty, white man with gross toenails, John is taken to the Completely Bare spa for a spray-on tan. All he can mutter throughout is how embarrassed he is, not so much for appearing practically naked on national television as for doing so side-by-side with a gay guy. “See how he has a farmer's tan,” Kyan remarks to the female attendant while pointing it out on John's chest and verifying that the process can contour and slenderize the body through the way the color is blended. John, in the meantime, has his eyes shut tight. “Dude,” Kyan comments, “I have to say this is the most embarrassing thing ever done to help out a straight guy.” But John seems more flummoxed: “Dude, this is so embarrassing, to be standing next to a gay guy in skivvies and . . . disposable skivvies, I might add.”

Kyan: Well, you're no Prince Charming either, Big Boy.

John: I'm not—I'm not even looking at you. I don't want to look that way.

Kyan: Are you serious?

John: Dude, it's like . . . uh . . . you don't understand.

Kyan: What's gay about this situation?

John: Are you kidding me right now?

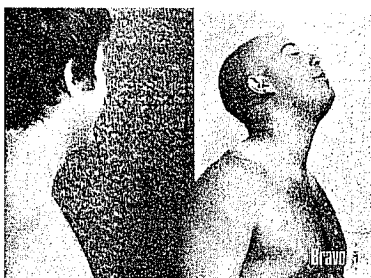
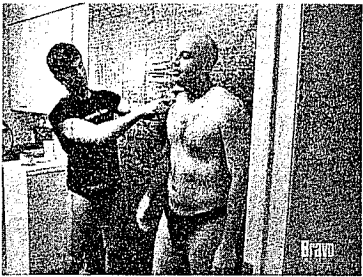
Kyan: I mean, over here it's gay. But (*pointing to John's space in the tanning booth*) what's gay about that?

John: Cause I'm in skivvies next to a gay—you don't understand.

But Kyan *does* understand. A short time later, he pressures the straight guy again, wondering to the attendant, “Can you make his penis look bigger?” “Guy,” John asks defensively, “why are you looking at my penis?” Kyan laughs, and John begs, “Come on, please.” Although Kyan demurs, his joke taken, the camera then focuses on crotch and butt shots of John as the tanning process is completed.

This segment questions what makes one space gay and another straight, and does so at the straight guy's expense, triggering his homophobic panic at being in such intimate proximity to a gay male body—the seminude Kyan, the member of the group whom fans and the media consider the “hottest.” His gayness is for the moment defined in explicitly sexual terms as a queer eye not for products but for the straight guy's penis. This definition is then overlaid with the erotic display of Kyan's body for a gay and female viewer, as well as the camp deflation of John's endowment, which encourages one to infer that perhaps it is already looking a little “bigger.” Joking about penis anxiety is an obvious sign of the discomfort that arises when heterosexual identity comes into contact with homosexual desire, harking back to the embarrassment, insecurity, curiosity, and/or excitement that characterizes all those group showers straight boys have had to take after high school gym classes. However, the John Verdi episode is more complex than this for it also brings out how this straight guy's “Guido Mumbo” masculinity, as Jai calls it later in the hour, is not only a performance of heterosexual codes for the benefit of the queer guys but is also, shall we say, blended, contoured, and slenderized by homosexual codings as the condition of his being made over in order to be more compatible with his female partner.

As happens in each episode, following the physical makeover John Verdi returns home with his new queer buddies in order to see what Thom has accomplished in his absence (“You don't feel like you live in some gay guy's apartment?”), to perform a fashion show of the clothing Carson has selected

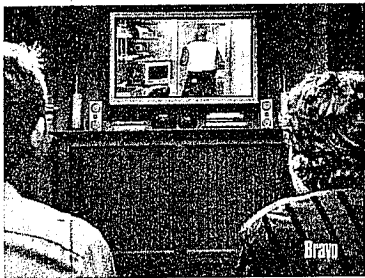


Crossing gay and straight spaces while getting a spray-on tan. (Episode 108 of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.)

for him (“Hip hop with a little more class,” but remember to zhuzh up the sleeves), to learn from Kyan how to establish a grooming regimen (proper use of products, which happen to vary each week, for “long-term skin care”), and to receive final instructions on preparing and serving food for the evening from Ted (in this case, a torte or quiche, though Ted reassures John that this torte is “a manly quiche, a quiche with balls”—even though it is made with eggs). Then the Fab Five depart for an apartment in Manhattan where, in the final segment, cocktails in hand and getting visibly looped, they observe how successfully the straight guy follows their tutelage on closed-circuit television (fig. 2).

Once again this episode reveals how camp identifies a distinctly queer eye for the show. John’s mission has been to rekindle his romance with his live-in girlfriend, Ayana, a “hot” African American model who is tired of mothering him. As soon as she enters, John abruptly readjusts his masculine persona: “Isn’t this re-mahk-able?” he asks, further showing his excitement about the makeover of his body and their home by jumping up and down and talking baby talk, all the while appreciating how her “boobages” look in her new outfit, which was also selected by Carson. In the meantime, much as if they were watching *Sex and the City*, the Fab Five gather in front of the tv for some camp camaraderie. “He’s bouncing around like a little girl, isn’t he?” Kyan asks in disbelief. “He’s acting gayer than I do,” Carson agrees. “He was all tough guy around us, and now he’s . . .” Ted cannot find the words, so he makes a flaming gesture. “He totally hopped out of the bedroom,” Thom adds. Throughout this segment, the Fab Five note every potential disaster or faux pas, as well as every sign of slippage, between queer and straight in John’s demeanor, as when he describes the dessert he has prepared as “divine.” “Divine? He used the word *divine*,” Ted exclaims, to which Carson replies, “He *is* gay.” John confesses to Ayana how for a while he has been lacking confidence but now he has “a spark in his pants” again, and Thom mutters, “Don’t look at me—I didn’t put it there.” “There’s a lot of power in a pedicure and a spray-on tan,” Kyan concludes, restoring the consumer orientation of the makeover. Mission complete, the Five toast their success in rescuing another straight guy from drabness.

*Queer Eye* may deserve the critiques it has received for its endorsement of class hierarchies based on consuming, but that does not mean the overt ideological agenda of the series warrants outright dismissal of the additional



With cocktails and camp wit, the Fab Five observe how well the straight guy follows their tutelage. (Episode 108 of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.)

cultural work it performs as a queer show. The series remakes straight masculinity according to bourgeois norms, but it does so through the mediation of queerness, which foregrounds the instability of both masculinity and straightness. For all their disavowals, most of the straight guys appear to realize the fragility of their heteromascularity at some point in the hour. For instance, while shopping, John Verdi tells Carson that he'd do anything for his female partner, "even start with five gay guys and get made over." His problem, however, is that he doesn't know "what sexy is." All he knows is that he wants it and the queer guys know how to gain access to it, so he submits to their tutelage.

John's confession makes explicit the gender instability on which the series' camp outlook spins. Straight masculinity is just another cultural product and a confused one at that. As John's makeover illustrates, the series just as explicitly recognizes how a so-called normative masculinity is a performance, frequently multiple in its signifying effects; that it achieves an impression of stability by maintaining the perceived boundaries strictly differentiating between and culturally locating hetero- and homosexual male identities; and that it occurs in a consumer-oriented society that, needing to exploit the male market, overlaps these two identities (as in the metrosexual advertising image), thereby requiring the performance in the first place. The series' understanding of how straightness is organized according to its disavowed proximity to queerness is best epitomized in the opening segment, which depicts the Fab Five's invasion of a heterosexual domicile, during which they ridicule the straight guy's veneer of manliness, exposing his dirty underwear literally and figuratively, and in the closing one, which records the Fab Five's withdrawal into their own camp camaraderie, where they laugh once more at the spectacle of a straight guy's performance of his newly acquired, upscale masculinity. This framing vantage point enables *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* to pass, in effect, as "safe" entertainment and yet display an edgier outlook, as the John Verdi episode well illustrates. The series can be read as straight or nonstraight, as noncamp or camp, depending on which eye you look with.

The central joke driving the series, it bears repeating, is that men with no sexual interest of their own in women have to be brought in from outside a clearly delineated heterosexual space in order to teach a straight guy "what sexy is," which enables heartfelt appreciation by heterosexual men and women alike of this needed queer intervention. This joke defines what the queer eye can see in the makeover because it also highlights what the straight

eye fails to see. Thus, the remarks posted by females on the "Girl's Eye View of Queer Eye" Web site, right after the John Verdi episode aired, confined themselves to appreciating how "adorable" the Fab Five looked or behaved at certain points and how striking John appeared in his new clothes, making him such an attractive date. A more interesting response appeared in the recap of this episode on the "Straight Eye for the Queer Shows" fan site. The writer, "Larry," goes into great detail; he describes all the bristly interactions between the cop and the Fab Five from their entrance through each stage of the makeover, including the trip to Completely Bare (although the point seems to be what NBC edited out when it reran this episode), and he quotes much of their dialogue. However, except for noting that the gay men dwell on the size of Ayana's breasts (their response to John's appreciation of her "boob-ages"), "Larry" ignores the final segment, in which the team watches the results of the makeover. Instead, as if the Fab Five's viewpoint were transparent, this straight fan disregards their camp commentary and only describes what they see—John and Ayana's night out. Expressing his appreciation of John's efforts to please Ayana, "Larry" concludes:

Now a number of people have complained how John gets such a hot chick. In his defense, he's tall, pretty fit, and strong (though he's gained some weight) and a cop. He's apparently good at the kissing (full alignment with light tongue tizzle) and it seems like he had a good sized package while being spray tanned. Many women out there want a guy who can take care of them and really love them and this guy can do it. Any man willing to stretch himself to keep his relationship fresh, is a good catch, and most women should be so lucky.<sup>25</sup>

The difference between queer and straight viewpoints depends on the extent to which, as "Larry" typifies here, a viewer disregards the Fab Five's camp mediation and identifies primarily with the woman as the motivating force behind the straight guy's makeover—he's doing it solely for her, and she then serves as his private audience when he shows off the results of his makeover. However, in fulfilling that role for this type of viewer, Ayana is also participating in the performance, which the Fab Five simultaneously watch on their closed-circuit TV. Because they filter the straight couple through their camp spectatorship, it is difficult to extract a bona fide feminine viewpoint from the closure, however much "Larry" tries to do so. The couple themselves are

rarely if ever shown recognizing any camp element in their performance of heterosexuality, even when they acknowledge the performative dimension of the makeover and its subsequent test run as the straight guy shows off what he has learned for his partner's inspection and approval.

Yet, by casting his closing response to this episode through an awareness of Ayana's needs and not the Fab Five's camp, "Larry" can display the post-feminist male sensibility that, one has to assume, allows him to take pleasure in the series and coauthor the "straight guy" Web site. No doubt influenced by all those self-help relationship books, which are supposedly written in the wake of feminism but present an option other than feminism when it comes to women's relations with men, "Larry" writes as a male seemingly liberated from sexist attitudes and, what is more, since he did notice John's "package," as a male not subject to insecurity about the stability of his own heteromascularity. To sustain this viewpoint, he has to ignore both the Fab Five's camp eye and the subordinate role of women in the makeover. For her part, Ayana knows very well her limited contribution to the makeover process; on departing the premises so that the Fab Five can take charge of John's makeover, she loudly announces, "The vagina is leaving the nest." "Larry's" summary does indicate why a woman's presence, at least in the closure of each episode, is still a crucial element in the series' success. She facilitates the more sanguine, straight male response to the Fab Five's queer intervention in heterosexuality, which Larry typifies when he in effect rewrites the John Verdi episode to concentrate solely on the couple through Ayana's point of view.

#### A Straight Eye for those Queer Guys

That a female figure cannot easily be removed from the series' formula stands out all the more when we look at the guest appearances of the Fab Five on the Oprah Winfrey and Jay Leno shows. Not surprisingly, given their target audience, each guest spot retains the series' premise but not its structure, more noticeably marginalizing the five gay men as outsiders for a predominantly straight female and male audience, respectively. The difference between the two spots is quite revealing. Winfrey's singling out of the female motivation for the makeovers considerably tames the Fab Five's impact, negating any jarring collision of straight and gay spaces, whereas a female's absence from the Leno makeover brings out more clearly the disturbance that the series itself manages more insightfully through camp.

On the Winfrey show (first shown in syndication on 22 September 2003), the queer makeovers of the various straight guys selected for a much-needed rescue, at least according to Oprah and the men's wives, cause members of the female audience to cry, with everyone who had a stake or hand in the renovations gathered together onstage for a big group hug at the end of the hour. One exemplary moment occurs in the final segment, when a formerly shaggy middle-aged man named Roland returns to display his new appearance, supervised by Kyan. Previously Roland had not shaved his beard or cut his hair in over twenty years, during which time his wife and two daughters had never seen what lay behind all the hair. Not only does the family break down in tears at the revelation that a well-groomed Roland is as handsome as "a movie star," but Oprah herself is open-mouthed when gazing at his dramatically different look. While Kyan, as befitting his role as product endorser, reflects that "shaving is all about preparation and products," Roland himself confesses, "I feel like I'm alive again." He grabs Oprah in a tight hug and begins to weep, and she gets caught up in the emotions too. "Let's all just have a cry," she sobs, inviting the predominantly female audience in the studio and at home to participate in the emotional outburst that confirms feminine gratitude for the queer intervention on behalf of what Oprah has earlier called "frustrated wives" who are unable to assist their "helpless husbands." The way the show is shot encourages such empathetic participation throughout the hour, and it does not involve the visual or verbal mediation of the Fab Five, despite the many times Oprah laughs heartily at Carson's camp barbs. The desperate wives who have "turned in" their husbands, as Oprah puts it, sit in the front rows as audience members, whereas the husbands stand uncomfortably onstage like wanted men; repeated close-ups of the wives' disgruntled then delighted faces equate their reactions with those of the audience members at large, fostering identification with this point of view by the home viewer as well.

By contrast, no tears are shed when Jay Leno receives his makeover. To publicize it, the Fab Five show up the night before the big reveal, appearing after Kevin Costner, who is promoting his new western, *Open Range* (2003), which was broadcast on NBC on 14 August 2003. As soon as the Fab Five make their entrance, Leno begins to bait Costner, implying that the star's heteromascularity, not Leno's own, is in doubt because of its proximity to queerness. After describing the *Queer Eye* slogan, "Five gay men out to make



The makeover on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* results in tears and a group hug, whereas on the *Tonight Show* Jay Leno gets a booty check and has a "pubic hair" plucked from his ear.

over the world—one straight guy at a time,” Leno turns to Costner, warning, “and you’re next, buddy.” Leno goes on to joke that Costner intentionally lowered his voice when greeting the Fab Five, to tease Costner about getting his buttocks pierced, to propose that the Fab Five should plan Costner’s upcoming wedding, and to suggest that, possibly because he had already spent too much time on the open range when making his movie, Costner is now rethinking the whole marriage thing. Although at moments Costner does seem uncomfortable, especially when the Fab Five first descend on him en masse, at other times he gets into the spirit of things (asking Jai, for instance, what he means by “working a room”), but Leno repeatedly attributes discomfort to him. Additionally, Leno turns every comment made by his guests into a joke about straight masculinity that actually endorses it as the impeachable norm—just in case any one is wondering. For instance, when Thom explains that the worst offense he finds in straight domiciles is bad lighting, typically supplied by a single torchiere halogen lamp, Leno again makes a joke at Costner’s expense: “Straight guys like that porno lighting,” Leno explains. “See, Kevin knows what I’m talking about.” When Ted comments on straight guys’ insecurity about ordering fine wines at restaurants, Leno similarly reasons, “it comes from going to strip shows.”<sup>26</sup>

Without a straight male ally onto whom he can deflect his anxiety, the following night Leno resorts to homophobic jokes about the makeover process, playing up the gayness of the Fab Five in contrast to his own resistant straightness (broadcast on NBC on 15 August 2003). Distancing himself from the makeover even while going through it, Leno repeats his worry that the process effeminizes him by forcing him to think about fashion and skin conditioning. Not deterred, the Fab Five keep their banter going, chiding Leno for his appearance and his show’s decor. They anticipate his stale straight-guy jokes, beating him to the punch line or turning the jokes awry, and four members of the team have an opportunity, with their customary chat and drinks, to view the remodeled set’s disclosure and Ted’s gourmet spot with Leno on a TV monitor from behind the scenes.

Somewhat like the tanning booth segment with John Verdi but with less good-natured candor, what seems disturbing to Leno, because it motivates so many of his jokes during the makeover, is how intimate contact with these gay guys makes his body vulnerable to anal penetration. Indeed, the makeover edition of the *Tonight Show* begins by explicitly identifying this fear and making it central to the whole enterprise of renovating Leno. On this night,

the program forsakes its usual opening credits and begins instead with an imitation of the Fab Five’s own series opening. As the team discusses its new mission, making over a famous talk show host, Kyan remarks that Leno is “a spa virgin” and Jai rejoins, “You’re going to pop his spa cherry.” Whether improvised or scripted, this exchange predetermines how the audience will subsequently view both Leno’s discomfort during the shopping and spa montages and his many attempts to go for the easy, homophobic laughs. “I feel like the new guy on his first day in prison,” Leno announces as the Fab Five inspect him, a sentiment also included in the teaser for the makeover shown the night before. Kyan’s discovery of “a pubic hair” growing out of Leno’s ear is just the proverbial tip of the iceberg. Carson insists on doing a “booty check” when Leno tries on pants. Displaying for a whining Leno a broad pinstripe suit (the one he will wear on the show), Carson compares the pattern to racing stripes, which Leno confirms he likes but does not want up his ass. During his hairstyling, Leno complains, “These guys are putting, like, KY Jelly in my hair.”

On the two *Tonight Show* appearances by the Fab Five, women are excluded from all phases of the encounter. Without a woman to motivate the makeover and safeguard the straight guy’s heterosexuality, the Fab Five’s difference as gay men is more homosexualized and shown to be more potentially tempting to a straight guy, though not to Leno of course. On a shopping spree to buy new furniture for the show’s set, Jai does a Christina Aguilera impersonation and Thom remarks to the young salesman, “It’s kinda scary when he does that. He’s so good acting like a woman.” Sitting on the floor, the salesman replies, “The scary thing is, it doesn’t bother me,” so Jai mimes, “call me,” drawing a big laugh from the studio audience. While this brief encounter seems daring for the *Tonight Show*, even as it reiterates the stereotype that gay men are at heart women (both are reasons for the laughter), it actually goes far beyond that (the reason I laughed). From the return of looks, we are encouraged to see the straight-looking salesman responding to Jai with homosexual interest, and, what is more, this not so straight guy is neither attracted to nor put off by Jai’s effeminacy—rather, it just doesn’t bother him. The Winfrey show, on the other hand, places the makeover’s value for the straight guys’ wives always in the foreground, which keeps queer and straight men at a much safer distance from each other while also sentimentalizing the beneficial results of their interaction, little of which is shown to viewers. The Fab Five serve as the wives’ domesticating surrogates; unable to do the work of civilizing their

matés themselves, for whatever reason, these wives, like the women on the series, have to rely on the kindness of queer strangers to clean up the mess.

In contrast to the Fab Five's appearances on the Winfrey and Leno shows, their own camp spectatorship of the straight guy's makeover in the closing segment of each *Queer Eye* episode parodies the hegemony of the straight guy and his mate in order to reverse the inside-outside dichotomy that marginalizes the queer. Even more than their expertise as specialists in fashion, grooming, cooking, decor, and "culture," their camp is the sign that these five men are the true insiders—the savvy cultural observers—as far as the series is concerned. When an episode can develop its edgy camp outlook, as in the John Verdi example, *Queer Eye* skillfully engages both queer and postfeminist viewpoints but also takes care not to make them identical. The series' camp target, after all, is straight masculinity, not femininity; while the Fab Five mockingly introduce straight guys to the domesticating regimes of grooming and housework long associated with femininity, the Fab Five never challenge the validity of such protocols, instead offering women the compensation of laughing at the ineptitude and insecurity of straight men when it comes to performing the social rituals that they have had to master in order to attract the guys in the first place. This camp perspective enables queerness to be visible amid straightness, just as it distinguishes the queer eye from a postfeminist one even though both are acutely aware of the construction of masculinity and femininity alike through consumption.

As telling of the culture industry's absorption of difference, though, *Queer Eye* has been unable to sustain its camp perspective week after week with any degree of rigor or consistency. The rigid formula of the makeover structure, the budgetary restriction to Manhattan and its outlying boroughs and suburbs, the sameness of the straight guys willing to expose themselves, the necessity for seemingly endless product endorsements on the series, and the Fab Five's own gleeful emersion in popular culture as the latest media darlings all work against the camp humor that made *Queer Eye* seem more queer than one could have expected when it first aired. The Fab Five have gone on to do a music video, star in commercials, and write self-help books; their celebrity keeps their queerness visible and in circulation but homogenizes it as a product—the gay accessory—for lifestyle consumption. As success begets repetition on television, it also breeds boredom, and even camp gets dull and predictable when prepackaged as a commodity in its own right.

## Notes

1. In a substantive analysis of *Queer Eye* that appeared after I wrote this essay, Beth Berila and Devika Dibya Choudhuri examine the multiple ways in which, by reinscribing a white, middle-class bias through effacement or minimalization of racial, sexual, and class hierarchical differences, the series "contains gayness by reducing it to a commodity that services heteronormality" ("Metrosexuality the Middle Class Way," para. 4). I do not disagree with their careful and lengthy critique, which shares but develops much more fully the concerns of critics noted below; however, I think it is important to place alongside that kind of critique consideration of how the Fab Five's performance of the show's ideological agenda can at times also allow some viewers to see its transparency and laugh at it. Thus, while Berila and Choudhuri note that *Queer Eye* "troubles heteronormality on one level while reinscribing it through the commodification of gayness on the other" (para. 8), I am arguing that the series does not always manage this strategy so easily or readily and specifically that its cultural impact during its first season had much to do with the way episodes were not necessarily reducible to a single, recuperative, and heteronormative viewpoint in the makeover narratives.
2. Dreisinger, "The Queen in Shining Armor," 3.
3. "Survey Finds 'Queer Eye' Affects Shopping," Zap2it.com, 4 December 2003.
4. Gallagher, "*Queer Eye* for the Heterosexual Couple," 224.
5. "Piracy, 'Queer' on AFI Timeline," *Hollywood Reporter*, 16 December 2003.
6. During the summer of 2003, a Web search turned up articles reporting on both the positive and negative responses to the series and not only in the dailies of large urban areas. See, for example, Potts, "'Queer Eye' Makes over View of Homosexuals"; and Moon, "'Queer Eye' Opens Window to Gay Life."
7. Gross, "The Queen Is Dead," 64.
8. McCarthy, "Crab People from the Center of the Earth," 99.
9. Gallagher, "*Queer Eye* for the Heterosexual Couple."
10. Dreisinger, "The Queen in Shining Armor," 4.
11. Torres, "Why Can't Johnny Shave?" 96.
12. Gallagher, "*Queer Eye* for the Heterosexual Couple," 223.
13. See Roberts, "The Fashion Police," in this volume. Toby Miller chronicles the 1990s marketing invention of the metrosexual figure in "A Metrosexual Eye on *Queer Guy*."
14. See Cohan, *Masked Men*.
15. Moore, "Here's Looking at You, Kid!" 45.
16. Rothenberg, "Claiborne's Approach to Today's Man."
17. Moore, "Here's Looking at You, Kid!" 55.
18. *Ibid.*, 45.
19. *Ibid.*, 48.
20. Gamson, *Freaks Talk Back*, 201, 203.
21. Sontag, "Notes on Camp"; Ross, "Uses of Camp."

22. Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment*, 1. The book's introduction elaborates more fully the historical understanding of camp that I am summarizing here (see pp. 1–19). For further discussion of the mainstream appropriation of camp, see pages 208–10.
23. Newton, *Mother Camp*, 105.
24. My point is that, while recognizing the affinities of camp and feminism, I do not want to erase the queer location of camp, which is crucial to understanding how it operates in practice, beginning with its ironic stance toward the regulation of heteronormality. To be sure, camp—in large part when it is solely equated with drag queens and their adoration of female stars—has a history of being read for its hostility to feminism. Camp was repudiated for its apparent misogyny in parodying “women’s oppression,” reflecting the tension between the feminist and gay rights movements of the 1970s, as Michael Bronski notes in *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (205). Camp still bears this dubious status for many feminists. Yet, while certain instances of camp may be misogynistic, camp as a cultural strategy has another history of being quite valuable to feminism and of serving its transition into postfeminism. Although her source in camp is at best implicit, rendered through the extended example of drag, Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, has offered what is perhaps the most influential theorization of gender as a performance of identity through the convergence of camp and feminism. It is worth noting, however, that, even though *Gender Trouble* has become a landmark text for both queer theory and postfeminism, in her new preface to the 1999 edition Butler locates the agenda of her book in feminism, not queer theory, nor does she identify her project as a postfeminist one (rather, she cites its genealogy in poststructuralist French theory). For a different sort of example of how camp has been usefully linked with feminism as a cultural strategy taken up by women, see Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, though here, too, note the author’s need to call what she is analyzing feminist camp in order to point out her paralleling of women’s camp strategies and gay men’s. From a different perspective, in *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam examines the possibilities of a recent phenomenon, lesbian camp. According to her, masculinity still tends to rely on tropes that efface its performativity, which resists the predication of camp “on exposing and exploiting the theatricality of gender,” so she proposes, as an alternative to “the camp humor of femininity,” a new term, *king-drag*, to designate “[lesbian] drag humor associated with masculinity” (237–38). While the enhanced theatricality of femininity has always been an easy target for camp humor and display—hence the long-standing but also somewhat limiting reduction of camp to drag—I think that camp can be sharply attuned to the performative dimensions of masculinity, as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* illustrates. But see also my chapter on Gene Kelly’s camp masculinity in *Incongruous Entertainment* (149–99).
25. “Queer Eye #108—Law and Disorder: Special Picnic Unit,” Posted by “Larry,” [www.straighteye.com](http://www.straighteye.com), downloaded 21 March 2004.
26. During the Fab Five’s return visit to the *Tonight Show* in November 2003, Leno baited the comedian Colin Quinn in the same way, causing the irritated guest to exclaim, “Jay, I thought it was going to be *me* and *you* against *them*!”

Sarah Banet-Weiser

## 8

### What’s Your Flava?

RACE AND POSTFEMINISM IN MEDIA CULTURE

In the spring of 2003, an advertisement appeared on the children’s cable television channel Nickelodeon for the Mattel toy company’s recent doll line, Flavas. This ad features young girls of various races and ethnicities playing with female Barbie-type dolls characterized by ambiguous ethnic identities—with “neutral” skin color and vague facial features, the dolls could easily be Latina, African American, Asian, or white. What is clear is that the dolls are urban: they wear clothing that is hip and trendy, they carry boom boxes, and they are sold in boxes with a cardboard backdrop that resembles a concrete wall covered with graffiti. On [toymania.com](http://toymania.com), a Web-based toy outlet, Mattel issued the following press release the week the dolls appeared in stores.

EL SEGUNDO, Calif.—July 29, 2003—Flava, according to “Hip Hoptionary: The Dictionary of Hip Hop Terminology” by Alonzo Westbrook, means personal flavor or style. With the nationwide introduction of Flavas (pronounced FLAY-vuhz) this week, the first reality-based fashion doll brand that celebrates today’s teen culture through authentic style, attitude and values, Mattel (™) has created