Working Smarter, Not Harder: Creating Neoliberal Citizens in *Queer Eye*

The re-creation of *Queer Eye* (2018) on Netflix varies definitively from its initial conception that ran from 2003 to 2007 on Bravo (Wikipedia). No longer restricted to straight men, the show expands exponentially in the depiction of multiple social structures. Cultural discourses of race, sexuality and class are all examined but then problematically individualized. The episode examined in this essay is in the first season, fifth episode where the Fab Five “pull off a miracle with a devoutly Christian father of six by redesigning his tiny home and giving his bride the reception she never had” (S01 E05). This description of the episode immediately introduces narratives of religion, class, flexible capitalism and the shameful panopticon. This episode was originally chosen for the individualization of homophobia and the “burden of synecdoche” (Fox qtd. in 204) placed on Bobby Camp, who is being made-over. Yet further examination yielded many problematic discourses of surveillance and shame, flexible capitalism, classing and statusing and the struggle between homosexuality and religion to create the ideal neoliberal consumer.

**Revamping**

First, the re-vamping of this show must be critiqued. This show explicitly abides by Madger’s (2009) critique of reality TV shows because all reality TV is consumerism friendly. This genre avoids controversial topics and adheres to dominant beliefs to enhance the positive, consumerism inclination of the viewer. The show also allows for extensive product placement, ensuring the show will gain profit through only subtle advertisements. *Queer Eye* is a reality TV show, so it abides by Madger’s (2009) second idea of popular television needing to correspond with a pre-established genre. And finally, the show complies with Madger’s (2009) third concept of producers finding, formatting and franchising an already existing show. The media
conglomerates follow these rules to ensure the highest success rate of the shows they do release, which is why so few concepts deviate from this norm; therefore, production companies are cycling already developed, pre-packaged formats instead of developing new ideas for TV. This encourages stasis which results in the lack of progression and diversification in the media viewers consume.

**The Constructed ‘Real’**

The genre of reality TV must be established as not “real” at all; production reorganizes the “real” to ensure popularity. The construction of narratives through who is selected to be on the show and the extensive editing to create the final product all nullify the reality into a commercial genre, promoting consumption and capitalism. Furthermore, the subjects depicted may adjust their behavior to suit the needs of the show; the camera contradictorily depicts this behavior as real and natural. Throughout the show, Bobby Camp is encouraged, and then explicitly forced, into a conversation about religion and homosexuality by Bobby of the Fab Five. By the end, Bobby Camp introduces this idea himself in their final discussion; his speech carries connotations of individual change and growth, framed with emotional music and shots of the Fab Five crying to depict a poignantly charged scene of love and acceptance. However, the viewer must attempt to distance and detach themselves from the corresponding affect this emotionally wrought media imparts on them; the viewer must understand that this is a construction, a representation of a past event. Therefore, the viewer must consume the scene with engaged and critical awareness. Through this mindset, we can assume Bobby Camp was picked exactly because of the narrative the producers could create with him; his representation was constructed to elicit an interesting narrative.

**Surveillance: Shame and Affirmation/ Internalizing Shame for External Affirmation**

Madger (2009) also discusses how surveillance of the camera is unquestioned, which in turn naturalizes social surveillance from micro (family, loved ones) to macro (society at large)
voyeurs. The normalization of the panoptic gaze is a neoliberal, capitalist function which shames “inadequate” (Sender 140) consumers if they do not abide by the cultural norms of consumption; simultaneously, the panopticon rewards the successful, adequate consumer through the praise of already functioning consumers. Sender (2006) theorizes this shift from an inadequate to adequate consumer as an internalization of the panopticon and the social idea that their worth is based only in their marketability as culturally perceived. All of these functions are evident in Bobby Camp’s episode on Queer Eye. Vera, Bobby’s wife, explicitly discusses her shame of Bobby, saying he “looks like a homeless person sometimes, sometimes he just throws on clothes that I think there is holes in them and they are stained and his hair is stringy and greasy and you look terrible” (S01 E05). It is important to note that Vera is portrayed as a more ideal consumer; the Fab Five constantly note how she is making an effort for Bobby with her appearance, meaning she wears make-up and nice clothes. Bobby is even ridiculed for his inadequate closet space and the clothes within it. Tan comments, “This is all the space you have? This is the saddest closet I have ever seen… all I see is polo, polo, polo” (S01 E05). When he admits most of his clothes are too large because they are hand me downs, explaining that if he has money for clothes, it would go to his wife or kids; he is not lauded for being unselfish but disciplined for it. Tan says, “[d]on’t you want to keep it tight for your wife?” (S01 E05). The script is immediately flipped to implicate the inadequate consumer; Bobby is not portrayed as unselfish in his refusal to spend money but as selfish for not wanting to improve his appearance for his wife. Instead of receiving praise, he is shamed.

This harsh, shameful surveillance is then taught to Bobby’s children as Tan encourages them to critique their father’s clothes with leading questions and a tone of subtle derision when he asks, “What do you think of this color?” (S01 E05) and his daughter, who is also at this point probably buying into the narrative of shame, says “It would be cute on a purse” (S01 E05). After
he changes his clothes, Tan asks the girls, “[h]e looks good huh?” and the daughter responds delightedly, “[h]e doesn’t look horrible!” (S01 E05). Bobby receives constant reaffirmation after he transforms; he is called “dynamite,” “young and cool,” has a “fantastic” physique, “phenomenal,” “so gorg” (S01 E05). It is only after these reaffirmations that Bobby can say, “I like it, I feel good… I feel pretty amazing” (S01 E05). Sender (2006) critiques this use of socially informed self-esteem as an indication of the success of the Fab Five. Bobby Camp explicitly displays he has internalized this shameful panopticon when he says, “[t]his is the better version of me, the one I want to present to my wife. That I want my kids to look up to” (S01 E05). He has internalized their shame, changed through his abidance of the laws of consumption and seeking external validation, which he receives from Vera, his children and his friends at his reveal. Karamo explains this was their goal all along, “I just hope and pray that he continue[s] on this path, because this Bobby is the Bobby the world needs to see” (S01 E05). Bobby is only deserving of the social gaze if he is abiding by its functions constantly; this is how they create the perpetual neoliberal consumer who must continually self-improve.

**Flexible Capitalism**

Sender (2006) examines the concept of “flexible capitalism” (136) within the first conception of this show and it is still evident in the reboot. The men chosen are condemned as being deficient consumers by the hosts, educating the public on what the ideal consumer looks like and reflecting modern discourses of optimal consumerism. The Fab Five introduce the idea that proper consumption should permeate all aspects of a private citizen’s life and further present the shift to ideal consumption as simple and easily attainable. Initially, the men must be labeled as insufficient consumers because of their lack of socially recognized contribution to the physical merchandise market. They are then taught to be proper consumers to sequentially produce themselves as products for society to consume or invest in. Becoming a “self-making man”
(Sender 134) is a neoliberalist ideal enforced through tying the validity of an individual to marketability as judged by viewing the subject through a capitalist lens. This requires the individual to not just a focus on what they consume, but how they produce themselves as commodities.

In this episode, Bobby’s family obviously consumes goods, but they do this in the “wrong” way. Instead of being “functional” and “organized,” (S01 E05) which are coded as ideals of neoliberal self-sufficiency through the show’s discourses, the family is depicted as improperly consuming. The house (which has six children) is described by the Fab Five as “messy AF,” “house of a hoarder,” “chaos,” and an “anxiety-panic attack in action” (S01 E05). To rectify this, the children are enlisted when purchasing items for the house and themselves. The Fab Five abides by normative gender discourses as well when they confront Vera about the state of the house. They hold her to the same flexible capitalism ideal of being a proper consumer through marketing her home as an acceptable space for capitalism and neoliberalism to thrive. They gendered her consumption as they hold her responsible for the marketability of the private, domestic sphere through abiding by proper social ideals of capitalism. Vera explains that she was bed-ridden for her pregnancy and the Fab Five divert this narrative by saying that the kids are old enough to help.

The insistence on self-sufficient neoliberalism and maintaining the marketability of the house as interpreted by classed strangers (who disrupt her life) emphasizes that flexible capitalism must be adhered to despite circumstances outside of her (and the viewer’s) control. Vera in turn implicates Bobby as not being as domestically competent as flexible capitalism demands he be. She condemns the dinner he made the night previously as “the only thing he can cook” (S01 E05), exemplifying Sender’s (2006) idea that men must exhibit competence in more realms than they have historically done as they compete against women and other men to be competent citizens, domestically, socially and publically, even through simplistic competency of creating dishes and
consuming food. The Fab Five also push Bobby to increase his attractiveness, and therefore marketability, to Vera. Tan gives an anecdote about a previous partner who “let me go because I let myself go” (S01 E05). Tan now maintains his appearance through consumption of beauty products and clothes to ensure he does lose his marketability, and therefore attractiveness, as a significant other. Tan does not critique the superficial expectations of the capitalist society, but instead encourages Camp to internalize these discourses as he has learned to do. This emphasis on marketability encouraged by flexible capitalism is best exemplified in the subtitle “Work Smarter not Harder” (S01 E05). The individualized neoliberal ideal of self-efficiency and self-improvement is connoted as well as the implication that abiding by normalized social discourses is a strategy to improve oneself.

**Queerness and Religion: Individualization of Homophobia and the “Burden of Synecdoche”**

(Fox qtd. in 204)

Although racism is not explicitly focused in this episode, Kraszewski’s (2009) examination of the representation of racism in *The Real World* is still applicable when applied to homophobia instead of racism. The (presumably) liberal viewer of both shows would condemn homophobia and racism and would therefore be uncomfortable being implicated in homophobia or racism through their participation in social norms and discourses. The episode’s narrative individualizes homophobia as a problem which is spatialized and connoted as being perpetuated only by people who are white, rural, middle or working class, and religiously “zealous.” By rendering systemic issues reinforcing and upholding homophobia as invisible by depicting only individuals as potentially homophobic, the producers create an idea that individuals can repair histories of injustice and inequality through emotional discussion and personal change. Camp is depicted as a (seemingly) homophobic mirror to Julie, who is the implicitly racist individual Kraszewski (2009) examines in his article. Julie’s upbringing is emphasized as rural, white, middle class and devoutly
religious, all which contribute to The Real World’s individualization of racism to the privileged person who can become like the liberal viewer through education. The separation of liberal (white) identity from prejudiced individuals absolves the viewer of fault. This is also done in this episode of Queer Eye using the same prejudiced, white trope but now regarding homosexuality, not race.

First, Jonathan connotes the spatialization with the leaving of Atlanta for a more rural community with the excited call, “road trip!” (S01 E05) as the group passes by a pastoral scene with a white church in the middle of the frame. Religion, and specifically Christianity, is subtly but continually introduced into the narrative by the Fab Five. Comments like “Jesus take the wheel,” “Holy Moses” and “if God made it available for two men to have babies, I would want [Bobby] to look like Chris Pratt and George Clooney” (S01 E05) make constant reference to religion and actually links it to homosexuality explicitly in the final example. Bobby Berk continually attempts to engage Camp in a discussion on homosexuality, and when he succeeds, Camp tells him he has changed his mind from previous beliefs. He used to think “gays are crazy… gays are wrong… bad, pedophiles…evil” but now acknowledges he “just saw the rules, [he] didn’t see the grace” and that “God told me to love my neighbor” (S01 E05). He exemplifies the reality TV trope of the white, middle class, religious and therefore prejudiced individual but he has learned to internalize a more liberal narrative, obscuring social systems of homophobia and heteronormativity.

Simultaneously, while being cast as a prejudiced individual, Bobby Camp assumes the “burden of synecdoche” (Fox qtd. in 204) as he represents a larger homophobic collective. He is cast as the religious, prejudiced minority group in the greater liberal, accepting society. Similar to Fox (2013), he acts as a representative but contrary to Fox (2013) his group is not marginalized by society; it is only through the liberal narrative of the episode that this prejudiced collective is displayed as the opposition on the social norm. He advocates for his collective by attempting to
divert the prejudiced trope popular culture has labeled rural, white, middle class communities with. Camp states, “maybe you think we are judgmental. Maybe you think we hate gays. That’s not us” (S01 E05). The narrative recasts the typically marginalized group of gay men as the collective that the white, middle-class, rural and religious must regard as mainstream, relocating the burden of synecdoche onto the typically privileged who must apologize and conform to new ideologies.

From “Homeless” to “Hobo:” The Reassignment of Class through Consumption

Sender (2006) examines how proper consumption transforms the inept, lower-class consumer to a socially perceived higher-class consumer, enabling class mobility through conformation to dominant social discourses of capitalism. This encourages the internalization of the panopticon mentioned by Sender (2006) and Ouellette (2009) which encourages self-governance to abide by normative narratives instead of challenging them. The panopticon is what shames the inadequate consumers on the show to engage more with the capitalist market, in turn increasing their individual marketability, and therefore class. Proper consumption informed by the internalization of the self-shaming panopticon allows the house to have a “hobo” feel post-make-over when pre-make-over, Camp was shamed for looking “homeless” (S01 E05). Engaging in the capitalist market allows the shift from inefficiency to efficiency. The increase of self-efficiency mirrors the increase in marketability, and therefore social worth through the function of class. Bobby shifts from appearing “homeless,” connoting low social worth and class, to being perceived as “refined,” “dressed up” and George Clooney-like. His increase in social worth is exhibited through classed terms and comparisons typically used to indicate higher-classed individuals. This also perpetuates the discourse that conventional, mainstream attractiveness indicates wealth, encouraging all neoliberal citizens to better themselves by conforming to western ideals of beauty. The house is also up-classed from the Fab Five’s perception of it being a “disarray” to becoming “so functional, so practical, so beautiful” through extensive engagement with the capitalist market.
This convinces the viewer that even if they have a “tiny home” (S01 E05) like the Camp family, it can be perceived as higher class by emphasizing its functionality; even the house must be a reflection of the efficient consumer. The Fab Five are portrayed as higher class through their consumption habits and are therefore not held to the same standards as the Camp family, who (pre-make-over) have yet to prove themselves as ideal consumers. This divide is explicitly depicted when the Fab Five enter the Camp house and make disparaging remarks about the unclean state but then engage in a glitter and shaving cream fight which no one critiques them for. The class division then “ensures that the working class are always receptive and thankful for the ‘good taste’ bestowed on them” (Palmer 52). When the house and the individuals in it meet the capitalist standards of society, the Camps are perceived as higher class by the Fab Five and the viewer through their improved presentation of wealth and status.

Teaching the Next Generation of Neoliberal Citizens

Palmer (2015) theorizes that capitalism is depicted as a “warm, responsive mechanism reacting to community needs” (55) in reality TV, teaching the viewer and the Camp family that engagement with the market is a tool used to improve the micro lives of individuals. The Fab Five rescue the Camp family by teaching them to be neoliberal citizens who engage in capitalism, demonstrating Ouellette’s (2009) idea that “neoliberal constructions of ‘good citizenship’” (224) depend on consumption. The Fab Five coming “together out of fellow-feeling” (Palmer 51) for the Camps, armed with glitter, money and social status create the discourse of capitalism as a “magical” (Palmer 55) function. The episode emphasizes the “powerful myth about the centrality of the family” (Palmer 52) which is a unit depended on by capitalism. This is why the Fab Five focus on the Camp children as potential consumers and neoliberal citizens as well as Bobby. Bobby Berk wants to make a garden to teach the children responsibility and self-sufficiency; Karamo does not think the kids clean enough so he creates a chore board; and Tan encourages
Bobby’s daughters to critique his inappropriate clothes and applaud his new wardrobe. Perhaps the most insidious yet explicit example is when one of Bobby’s daughters is not engaged in what Jonathan is saying, so he leans over to her and says that he bets she is thinking “why should I care.” He retorts to this self-created dialogue, “someday when you get older, you are going to have to worry about what you put in your hair because this hair is outrageous” (S01 E05). The previous examples were implicit scenes of training the children to be future, ideal neoliberal individuals in a capitalist market. Here, Jonathan explicitly mentions the importance of proper consumption in her future without critiquing the social discourse that mainstream ideals of beauty should be abided by through consumption and the use of the capitalist market.

**Conclusion**

The inadequate consumers in the show are turned into idealized neoliberal consumers engaging in capitalism to improve their socially perceived and assigned worth. Discourses of the shameful panopticon, flexible capitalism, the burden of synecdoche, marketability and class all coalesce to create an individual engaging properly, and therefore excessively, with capitalism. Discourses of self-sufficiency and self-governance permeate the episode entirely as the capitalist market is idealized over state intervention and assistance. Social inequalities are rendered invisible as the individual and the family are held personally responsible for all their socially-interpreted failings which can be rectified through proper consumption.
Works Cited


