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All Blacks, eyeliner, and Queer Eye: Metrosexuality and the “crisis of homo/heterosexual definition”

When New Zealand and Wellington representative Ma'a Nonu played the 2004 final of rugby's National Provincial Championship (NPC) wearing black eyeliner, a flurry of debate ensued among media scribes and armchair pundits as to whether or not such apparently feminine body adornment could be reconciled with the necessary masculinity that a representative in the upper strata of “our national game” is culturally imagined to embody. As one indignant blogger neatly encapsulated the apparent dilemma: “An All Black wearing makeup? I really don't think this is right. The All Blacks have gone from the good old days of playing on with your testicles ripped out until you break your arm, to this” (Lindsay 2004).

When Nonu threatened to repeat his makeup wearing escapades while on All Black duty, team management moved quickly to protect the masculine sanctity of its most lucrative brand. Nonu's actions were rehabilitated within that most catch-all safety net of boys gone awry – the team prank – by an All Black spokesperson's suggestion that the player's Wellington team mates had imposed the action on him as an in-house fine (Kayes 2004). But when Nonu seemingly refused to narrate his actions as high-spirited male bonding, suggesting instead that his eyeliner was “a bit of a fashion statement” (Kayes 2004), confusion ensued. Online discussion boards again offer a succinct summation of the general response. Thus to the conundrum of signification that is a rugby player wearing make up apparently only because he thinks it makes him look better, “Sabbath” from skankyflat.net poses the obvious question: “what sort of poofta is the dood (sic)?” (MoxPearl 2004).

What my analysis here is concerned with is what happens when the sort of poofta the “dood” is might/must in fact be not a poofta at all. Using

the mediated response to Nonu, and the television text *Queer Eye* for the Straight Guy, this paper argues that the discourse of “metrosexuality” makes normatively intelligible those repetitions of masculinity that threaten to reveal the performative production of sexual identity.

Owing a particular theoretical debt to Michel Foucault's tracing of the development of sexual identity as an effect of discursive networks of power (1978), queer theorists argue that sexual identity is reliant on the discursively constructed coherency between gender, desire and identity. Therefore it is to disruptions of that link – to ‘incoherent’ articulations of desire, gender and sexuality – that it looks for subversive possibility. Judith Butler argues that when “the disorganization and disaggregation of the field of bodies disrupt the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence... that regulatory ideal is exposed as a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe” (1990: 136). Bodies which fail to ‘map’ in the hegemonic field of sexual identification expose the technologies of power that regulate that field by using sexual identification against itself in a way that opens it to new, permanently contingent, queer, possibilities.

But the extent to which the Nonu moment can function as such a queer interruption is displaced by the mediated attaching to it of the discourse of “metrosexuality” as a means of explaining his failure to be fully interpellated into familiar paradigms of masculinity. Toby Miller defines the metrosexual as: “Happy to be the object of queer erotics and committed to daily exfoliation and Web surfing, metrosexuals are feminized males who blur the visual style of straight and gay in a restless search ‘to spend, shop and deep-condition’” (2005: 2). In short, metrosexuality ostensibly makes cultural practices normatively definitive of homosexuality and/as femininity available to straight men. Media accounts almost universally cite the footballer David Beckham as the best example of this “new masculinity,” and position an interest in fashion and skincare among its defining characteristics. But metrosexuality, according to David Coad, exceeds the frivolity of its concern with “moisturisers, manicures, and matching colors” and

functions, at the same time, to produce confusion around the rigid categorisations of gender and sexuality (2005: 126).

What I suggest here is that while metrosexuality is repeatedly positioned in these terms as disturbing the normative function of masculinity, and thus troubling the heteronormativity and homophobia that structures understandings of “sexuality,” it in fact replays the cycles of repetition and disavowal that normatively privilege heterosexuality. As a way of making sense of deviant masculinity, metrosexuality is thus marked by the “chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition” that Eve Sedgwick argues structures contemporary Western culture (1990: 1). How this function is rendered clearly in one of the most celebrated incarnations of metrosexual transformation, the television text *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, which replays and reaffirms the homo/hetero binary through its reassuring performance of familiar demarcating norms. What such recuperations reveal are important limits to queer theory’s positing of disturbances in the repetition of gender norms as a troubling of the constitutive repetition of heteronormativity. Given the extent to which metrosexuality functions as a new demographic in capital’s relentless quest for new markets, such limits need to be examined in relation to the place of the market in queer theory’s account of performativity.

Nonu’s queer eyes

The relationship of rugby, and in particular the All Blacks, to culturally imagined ideals of New Zealand maleness is well documented (Phillips 1996, Nauright 1996, Hokowhitu 2004). In *A Man’s Country?*, his influential account of the construction of Pakeha masculinity, Jock Phillips traces the historical mapping of idealized notions of toughness, hardness, and courage onto the bodies of the national rugby team, who he argues came to provide “by far the most significant role model for males in twentieth century New Zealand” (1996: 109). From as early as 1906, Phillips notes, such myth-making emerged in part as a response to anxieties around the imagined effeminacy of an increasingly urban life (1996: 98-9). Rugby not only provided a socially sanctioned roughness and physicality as an antidote, but its All Black

legend(s) bore the weight of a mediated nostalgia for the imagined pioneer “hard man” of New Zealand’s early colonial history. As that urbanisation progressed along with the century, so too did the myth making grow. Players such as Colin “Pinetree” Meads, a farmer and All Black from 1957 to 1971, whose venerated physical strength and apparent incapacity to feel physical pain were repeatedly narrated as a consequence of a tough life farming in the “backblocks” of the King Country became (and, to some degree, remain) imagined as the ideal incarnation of New Zealand masculinity (Phillips 1996: 120-21).

It is unsurprising then that it is figures such as Meads who are routinely juxtaposed to players of the present professional era of rugby as a way of emphasising the extent to which a more urbane player has emerged, apparently to the detriment of the All Black legacy. Following their defeat to the French national side in the semi-finals of the 1999 World Cup, in particular, the All Blacks and their management were derided in the media for losing the “mongrel” imagined to have made previous All Black sides so successful and so feared. Instead of the Meads and Shelfords of yesteryear who would sacrifice all for the cause, so the narrative went, these new All Blacks were more concerned with hairstyles and being “coddled” by management than with proving their fearless commitment to the success of the national team (MacDonald 2003). Meads himself played his role to perfection when he suggested that All Black losses could, in part, be explained the players eating “too much pasta and not enough red meat” (MacDonald 2003).

The response to Ma’a Nonu’s makeup thus follows a cultural narrative that is in some respects utterly familiar to the historical discourse of New Zealand masculinity. A Dominion Post article, for example, expresses particular concern at how Nonu’s actions will affect the international reputation of a sporting team inextricably identified with masculine toughness (Kayes 2004). Ex-All Blacks Norm Hewitt and Richard Loe, both “hard man” forwards in the Meads mould, are predictably sought for commentary, and duly provide the expected response. Loe places it in the context of the urbane preening perennially associated, in particular, with rugby playing representatives of New Zealand’s largest city, suggesting it is in keeping with the “silly lids”

(hairstyles) of two members of the Auckland NPC team (Kayes 2004). Hewitt, whose credentials for comment are established when the article helpfully points out that he played the 2000 NPC final for Wellington with a broken arm, “pleaded” for it to indeed be the team punishment that the All Black spokesperson suggested it was, and expresses hope that “he’s [Nonu’s] not going to get a nipple ring or an ear ring in the right ear next” (Kayes 2004).

Hewitt’s deliberate reference to an ear ring in the right ear, historically often imagined as a coded reference to the wearer’s homosexuality, is telling. Its knowingness bridges a gap between the unspoken concern of the report itself as to what this might signify for Nonu’s sexuality, and its far more direct rendering in less careful public forums, such as the online forums cited above. While Loë’s concern (and simultaneous resignation) at players’ care with their appearance must, at some level, include the unasked question of who such players are preening themselves for, Nonu’s appropriation of an unequivocally feminised cultural practice threatens a more immediate insertion of the spectre of homosexuality (which might more correctly be that of transgenderism, but such distinctions are seemingly collapsed here) into a homosocial space that is dependent on the, often violent, disavowal of its (homosexuality’s) relationship to the signified heterosexuality of such spaces.

Brian Pronger argues that sport’s function in the “reproduction of orthodox masculinity” is dependent on the maintenance of “secrecy” around the potentially homoerotic social environment of male sporting contexts (1999: 193). While aspects of Pronger’s argument are problematic (his reproduction of the sex/gender distinction in particular), his account of the complex array of permissions and prohibitions that construct this homosocial environment where the male body functions as the primary spectacle, and the extent to which those regulatory practices are designed to ensure the reproduction of successful heterosexual masculinity, is insightful. In particular, Pronger draws attention to how the nakedness and body contact that fundamentally mark male sporting environments is managed:

Men’s locker-rooms and showers are typically designed in a way that maximizes the possibilities for displaying and observing the naked body... However, orthodoxy is preserved in the midst of all this by unwritten rules about conduct: one must never show sexual excitement by having an erection; masturbation is forbidden; one’s gaze should be surreptitious; one should not allow one’s hands to linger too lovingly or too long on one’s own body; and there should be no physical contact with the naked men by whom one is surrounded (Pronger 1999: 191).

Given such a context, it is revealing that one media report on Nonu informs its readers that he applies his eyeliner “in the dressing room before games” (Gomez 2004). That such a nominally small detail is worth recording is suggestive of the stakes here: Nonu is making himself look good in a room full of naked men. That he is doing so via feminine means which are also culturally equated with homosexuality thus raises the possibility that he is making himself look good for the room full of naked men. This is not to say that Nonu’s eyeliner application threatens to reveal that all men are “homosexual,” or that all the players sexually desire all the other players. Rather, the particular ways in which Nonu’s actions are narrated raises precisely those dangerous possibilities and must therefore, in the same moment, conceal them. “Masculine” desire for nudity and contact with the other players must unequivocally exclude that sexual component, and Nonu’s failure to repeat his masculinity “properly” (that is, normatively heterosexually) threatens to reveal how fictions of sexual identity arbitrarily (which is, at the same time, revealed as being anything but arbitrary) regulate the social contexts in which desire operates.

The crisis of homo/hetero definition

As Judith Butler argues, moments such as this reveal a paradox at the heart of a heterosexuality established through performativity. According to the psychoanalytic paradigm Butler utilises, in heteronormative culture an abjected homosexuality is relegated to the imaginary precisely because of its constitutive relation to heterosexuality, and to the terms by which heterosexuality gets to function as normativity. For Butler, what this suggests (and what is

immediately disavowed) is the possibility that there is a “possible identification with an abject homosexuality at the heart of heterosexual identification” (1993: 111). As she argues: a radical refusal to identify with a given position suggests that on some level an identification has already taken place, an identification that is made and disavowed, a disavowed identification whose symptomatic appearance is the insistence on, the overdetermination of, the identification by which gay and lesbian subjects come to signify in public discourse (Butler 1993: 113). Thus despite its relegation to the imaginary, the prohibited possibility of homosexuality is always implicit in the heterosexual frame, haunting the borders of the body as Butler puts it. Gender performativity thus fails ‘to finally and fully establish the identity to which it refers’ and this failure troubles the political terms that are meant to establish a coherent identity (Butler 1993:188).

Eve Sedgwick identifies the same disavowal of the constitutive relationship between homo and hetero but argues that the opportunities for resignification are not necessarily the preserve of destabilising initiatives. Using a dyadic deconstructive formula Sedgwick demonstrates that heterosexuality both requires and repudiates homosexuality in order to sustain its normative status, and that despite the presentation of homosexual and heterosexual as symmetrical binary oppositions, their relationship is a more dynamic and unsettled one: first, term B is not symmetrical with but subordinated to term A; but, second, the ontologically valorized term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of term B; hence, third, the question of priority between the supposed central and supposed marginal category of each dyad is irresolvably unstable, an instability caused by the fact that term B is constituted as at once internal and external to term A (1990: 10). Thus, the system of sexuality operates via a fundamental paradox, what Sedgwick terms the “crisis of homo/heterosexual definition” (1990: 1). Heterosexuality requires homosexuality at the same time as it is committed to the disavowal of that connection. The line between hetero/homo must be maintained, especially at those moments when it is, in fact, clearly disturbed.

But revealing this irresolvable instability, Sedgwick argues, is, in itself, not enough. Indeed, she suggests that such an understanding has always been available, and has “continually lent discursive authority, to antigay as well as gay cultural forces” (1990: 10). Therefore, Sedgwick argues, control over that space of contradiction is the site at which discursive intervention as antihomophobic strategy can (and should) take place: I will suggest instead that contests for discursive power can be specified as competitions for the material and rhetorical leverage required to set the terms of, and to profit in some way from, the operations of such an incoherence of definition (Sedgwick 1990:11).

What the apparent contradictions between these simultaneous modes of meaning threaten to reveal, and what therefore functions as the “stakes” in the battle for discursive leverage, are the meanings of homosocial desire, and its articulations, that Sedgwick identifies as the key continuum of power that sustains hegemonic masculinity.

In “Multiculturalism, Or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism,” Slavoj Žižek offers a useful example of precisely how this works. Seeking a compelling answer to what he describes as the “naïve but nonetheless crucial question: why does the Army so strongly resist publicly accepting gays into its ranks?”, Žižek asserts that “there is only one possible consistent answer: because the Army community itself relies on a thwarted/disavowed homosexuality as the key component of the soldiers’ male-bonding” (1997: 32). He then describes the excessive permeation of the otherwise extremely homophobic Yugoslav People’s Army with homosexual innuendo. That both the signifiers of homophobia and of homosexuality inhabit the same space is not, according to Žižek, merely a quirk of coincidence or an issue of tolerance. Rather, he suggests, the former enables the latter to retain its key role, while not being signified as homosexuality. Žižek’s discussion here is in support of his assertion that a theory of power must account for the way censorship (in the Army example, of homosexual activity) in fact enables “the marginal or subversive force that the power discourse endeavours to dominate...to split from within the power discourse itself” (1997: 32). Censorship of homosexuality endeavours to (but ultimately cannot) contain and mask the constitutive relationship

of that homosexuality to the climate of “heterosexuality” being established. In the army context that Zizek describes (which is, of course, by no means peculiar to the Yugoslav army), the “male bonding” that a successful army requires functions as both the source, and the effect, of power.

Particularly given the excess of metaphors and analogies that routinely position the military in the same discursive space as the sports field, Zizek’s discussion is a useful one to utilise in consideration of Nonu. In an example Zizek uses in which soldiers greet each other with the demand to “smoke my prick” (1997: 32-3), the homophobic utterance functions as an imperative for the requester and the requestee to inhabit the abjected space. So too does the official explanation of Nonu carrying out an in-house fine imply a simulated erotic exchange of looking in both the command and its fulfilment (“you will wear make-up for me”/“I look like this because you wanted me to”) that normatively positions both parties “homosexually.” Leaving aside the possibility of an erotics of submission at work here, in both Zizek’s example and in the narrative of Nonu, the command itself in fact re-establishes each party’s heterosexuality by the extent to which the “homosexual” is the space of humiliation and subservience. Hence the importance of Nonu’s assertion that the eyeliner was his own fashion statement – it is a failure to submit to this position, to inscribe his actions as the normative operation of heterosexual masculinity. His performance thus threatens to disturb the complex network of prohibition and enunciation that productively regulate masculinity here. If Nonu’s actions appear to be a failure to repeat masculinity properly (the moment that for Butler offers so much subversive promise) might we then argue that Nonu’s eyes function queerly? Is this failure a refusal to “signify monolithically” as Sedgwick suggests we might understand the meaning of queer? (1993: 8).

The rescuing of Nonu (and of masculinity) from such murky indistinction comes with the invocation of the discourse of metrosexuality, which is at the same time the heteronormative application of “discursive leverage” in the rendering of cultural legitimacy to which Sedgwick refers above. The approval one report

cites of “Wellington’s style gurus” who apparently claim “metrosexuals have more fun,” for example, ultimately narrates his actions back to the realm of normative heterosexuality (Neville 2004). Similarly, the Dominion Post’s reporting that “Hewitt said that, if Nonu was hoping for a makeover by the television show *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy*, ‘he’s heading the right way’” (Kaves 2004) makes absolute sense when one considers how that text reaffirms homo/hetero distinction precisely while performing its collapse.

“Make-better” Metrosexual TV

Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, which debuted on the US Bravo channel in 2003 and fleetingly became the international ratings success story, has become almost synonymous with the making of the metrosexual. The show is premised on a familiar cultural narrative that positions gay men as arbiters of style, etiquette and aesthetics, and straight men as in all of these categories. This heterosexual handicap, the text suggests, foments a lack of success in the straight man’s relationships, career and life in general. In each episode, *Queer Eye* intervenes by offering a straight man a new way of looking at himself and his “lifestyle,” via the critical gaze of “five impeccably dressed gay men” (Allen 2004: 11). He is schooled in the finer points of fashion, food, grooming, interior decoration, and the somewhat nebulous category of “culture” by the *Queer Eye* cast (Carson Kressley, Ted Allen, Kyan Douglas, Thom Felicia and Jai Rodriguez), and gets to perform his new masculinity in the weekly event that functions as each episode’s finale. Just as David Coad suggests that metrosexuality in general ‘problematises our binary divisions based on gender...and sexuality’ (2005: 126), for a number of critics *Queer Eye* merges the cultural value of gay and straightness, and its metrosexual makeover appears to transform the normative significations of masculinity.

Certainly the text ostensibly makes available modes of looking that are prohibited in heteronormative structures of visual relations (and that are implicitly alluded to in the critiques of fashion conscious All Blacks cited above). In a discussion of the politics of looking in relation to men’s fashion, Tim Edwards argues that in encouraging men to look at

other men the “distinction of heterosexual and homosexual is undermined as, historically, looking at other men is seen as the sole preserve of homosexuals” (1997: 116). At the same time, he suggests, that looking is likely to be actively discouraged through “homosexual jitters” that see “‘Hey, that’s a great suit, where did you get that?’ as teetering “dangerously close to ‘Hey, you look great in that suit, do you want a date?’” (1997: 117).

What is distinct on Queer Eye is that the possibility that “great suit” does mean “want a date?” is enacted, in almost every episode, as deliberately unambiguous. Thus on the Carson Kressley led shopping expeditions, at the “fashion show” each straight guy must perform for the Fab Five, and as the queer eyes watch him in the bathroom and the bedroom as he prepares for the show’s conclusion, the straight man unequivocally functions as the subject of a sexualised male gaze. In the episode featuring James M, for example, Carson informs him that “if I didn’t know you I would try to lure you to a roadside rest area” (123), attaching the spectre of a deviant gay sexual culture to the signification of attraction.

Queer Eye both foregrounds and obscures desire in the homosociality that functions as the obscured/disavowed denotation of all male/male relationships. While it offers a queer eye ‘on’ the straight guy (which in fact a gay eye), it simultaneously offers the promise of a queer eye for the straight guy, as a way of looking at (and being looked at by) men, that has attached to it a knowing (and clearly signified) articulation of sexual longing. Bonds between men, relationships between men, and relationships of looking between men are played out against the rigidity of sexual demarcation between gay and straight, raising the possibility that the text troubles the prohibitions that produce homosocial desire as that demarcation.

Of course, within this paradigm the gayness that ostensibly does the “looking” remains perpetually aware of how it is being looked at and how its gayness “plays out” in its proximity to heterosexuality. While ostensibly the Fab Five function as teachers of a gay consumer culture, a key component of the straight guy’s education is clearly his

enlightenment into the innocuous usefulness of gay men. As he emerges from his makeover “freshly scrubbed, newly enlightened” (Queer Eye website: About Us) he is, at least subtextually, less “homophobic” than before. Through the rehabilitation of his performed discomfort at being in such intimate proximity to gay men (of which the best example might be John V in episode 108), the text offers clear reassurances, to both him and to the audience, that gay men pose no threat to his heterosexual masculinity.

It is precisely these moments that cause Kyo-Patrick Hart to declare Queer Eye “the most positive representation of gay men [ever] on U.S. television” (2004: 241). Affirmatively noting that in Queer Eye the heterosexual male subjects are trained to become “stylish and metrosexual rather than stylish and homosexual,” Hart describes how several of the straight guys “explicitly express how their views about what is ‘masculine’ or ‘heterosexual’ behaviour have changed,” to argue that metrosexuality is a reformulation of masculinity that enables the straight guy to rethink the binarised terms by which sexuality is normatively defined (2004: 248-9). The evidence Hart cites, however, is revealing: “When asked by Kyan whether the eye mask, face mask, and manicure he is receiving at the spa are ‘very homo,’ one subject explains, ‘Straight guys just don’t think that this is masculine... but I’m here to tell you guys it’s not [homo]’” (Hart 2004: 249). What Hart seems to miss in this statement is the clear link made between what is not “masculine,” and what is not “homo.” Masculinity and heterosexuality continue to occupy the same signifying space, and a “new” masculinity, explicitly identified as heterosexual – metrosexuality – can enact exactly the same kinds of distinctions as the “old” masculinity, all the while signifying as that “new breed of man” (Hart 2004: 248).

In similar terms, Chris Nutter argues that Queer Eye is a key player in allowing in a new cultural moment in which “straight men are liberating themselves from homophobia, leaving themselves open to gay influence, and thus to a more expansive idea of what it means to be a man” (2004:19). For Nutter, Queer Eye ultimately collapses the distinctions between gay and straight, and the heterosexual man is in the process transformed into “the ‘post-straight’ American male” (2004:

19). Importantly, Nutter makes no comment on whether that male's homosexual brethren have, at the same time, become "post-gay." While straightness/gayness is an apparently collapsing distinction in discourses of metrosexuality, the very notion of metrosexuality retains the key distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality – gay men aren't metrosexual, straight men are. So while Nutter argues that gay liberation (of which Queer Eye is a part) "has begun to close the divide between straight and gay men," in the very next sentence he reveals the absolute (and key) limits of this new proximity: "Think of it [metrosexuality] as straight men's own gay liberation, just without the gay part" (2004: 20). In this newly gay-ified straightness, gayness is only a fleetingly encountered distillation of style.

The removal of the "gay part" from this space of liberation is deliberately performed in the text's "make better" (as opposed to "make over") distinction. Queer Eye as a "make better" experience refers in the show's official press to "taking who you are, emphasizing the best, eliminating the worst, and tweaking the rest... Queer Eye isn't a make-over show; it's a make-better show. Our goal isn't to turn you into someone else... That's so not what we're about" (Allen 2004:13). Importantly implicit in the make better rhetoric is the assurance that making the straight man "gay" (or signify in any respect as maybe gay) further underpins what is "so not what" the Fab Five are about. To that end, a repeatedly utilised discourse at Queer Eye is the extent to which a little bit of gay knowledge will enhance the romantic rewards of the straight guy's heterosexuality:

Perhaps straight guys don't talk about these things [food, wine clothing etc] because they're afraid it'll make them seem gay. Trust us: no. Just no. Think about the guy you know who cares the most about wine, who dresses sharp, shakes hands properly, and doesn't smell like an athletic supporter. Do you think he worries that his interests seem effete? No. Because he's too busy beating off women with a stick. 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 2004: 12)

Some obvious (queer) questions in response: Why should a straight man worry that his interests seem effete? What would happen if he set off someone's "gaydar?" The discourse of reassurance deployed here consistently reaffirms the signification of gay man as sexual threat, and of gayness itself as potentially contaminating. Thus it is crucial that the space of gayness made available (as consumption, as a mode of looking, and of being looked at) is, despite all the innuendo performing otherwise, a thoroughly desexualized space that enables the text to flirt with the limits of heterosexual masculinity even as it reaffirms them.

Thus the character that is at once both the most and the least threatening is that of Carson Kressley. Each week it is Kressley who most regularly performs the unwanted sexual attraction toward the straight man. From jokes about tops and bottoms, to attempts to enter the straight man's changing room, to initiating a game of Twister by thrusting his backside in the air and encouraging John V to "Get on – seriously – no really" (108), the most camp of all the Fab Five (and thus the cast member marked as the most clearly distinct from the straight guys) inhabits the activities ostensibly the most feared, but also the archetype that is perhaps the most comforting familiar, at least to a television audience well schooled in the archetype of the lecherous (but harmless) queen. That Kressley is nothing more than a caricature of unwanted advances whose threat is safely contained in a benign and complicit gayness, is evidenced by the appearance toward the end of season two of a "safe word" provided by one of the other cast members for each straight guy should Carson's innuendo get too much. While this plot device tacitly acknowledges that there is pleasure for the straight guy in Carson's advances, it nonetheless ensures that straight men remain protected from the worst excesses of gayness.

For Toby Miller, Queer Eye functions as "a sign that queerness is, indeed, a lifestyle of practices that can be adopted, discarded, and redisposed promiscuously — in this case, disarticulated from its referent and resignified as metrosexuality" (2005: 112). The homo/hetero distinction is by no means collapsed, except that homo may be redefined as a "sexuality" that has nothing to do with the

“sexual” at all. The new definitions of masculinity retain masculinity as a signification of difference between gay and straight, and no matter how “gay” the new heterosexuality (as metrosexuality) appears to be, its key defining characteristic is its heterosexuality, and as such it retains (indeed, relies on) the binary between gay and straight, a binary that always posits the heterosexual as normative, and homo/hetero definition as a naturalised and necessary demarcation.

So, despite the flirtatious playing out of camp “threat” to each straight subject in Queer Eye, the five cast members represent a cultural paradigm posited entirely separate from the one they are actively helping here, and one that has no interest in straight men apart from as the subject of a makeover. There is no suggestion that the straight man will be required to interact with “gay culture” in any context other than in this apparently fleeting moment, leaving him free to play along (in a literal game of “dress up”) with the flirtatious border crossing of homo/hetero definition. Indeed, as the event that concludes each episode consistently demonstrates, the lessons of the Fab Five are distinctly “rehabilitated” by the straight guy through the naturalised operation of his “prior” masculinity, as he fails to iron his shirt, offer his guests a drink or apply his hair product properly. Even as “meaning” is attached to that event by commentary from the Queer Eye loft, precisely how this meeting of gay and straight sensibilities will “play out,” is signified as being left firmly in the hands of the solitary straight man.

Context and commerce

Norm Hewitt’s suggestion that Ma’a Nonu is “heading the right way” toward rehabilitation by the cast of Queer Eye makes absolute sense because the task that Queer Eye undertakes is to ensure that what might disturb the performative repetition of masculinity in fact functions heteronormatively. As New Zealand queer moments go, it would be difficult to imagine one more delightfully disturbing than an All Black wearing eyeliner, and refusing to explain his actions in terms that accord with the familiar recuperative strategies of normative masculinity. Nonu’s failure to respond to the “hailing” offered by the

team prank explanation (to invoke the Althusserian scene of interpellative authority), requires new modes of address for him to be recognised/recognise himself within. Metrosexuality, it could be argued, makes his actions culturally legible.

At the same time, while this paper has been concerned with the extent to which Nonu is recovered by being made to signify through a discourse that maintains the definitional boundaries of gay and straight (and that thus sustains heteronormativity), I want to also leave open the possibility that Nonu’s eyes might, after all, function queerly. Nonu does refuse the normative “out” offered to him in the first instance. He may well refuse to signify monolithically. And this may indeed trouble the reproduction of masculinity.

However, it is the “may” in that final sentence that continues to complicate the disturbances imagined in queer theory. Butler’s account of how discourses of gender and sexuality produce the very materiality they purport to describe remains, I would argue, a compelling one. Her argument that the only bodies that matter are those that correctly repeat those performative norms is “proved” daily in banal repetitions of homophobia such as those that filled online message boards in the wake of Nonu’s eyeliner. However those same enunciations also complicate queer theory’s proffering of disaggregations of the signifiers of gender and sexuality as corrosive of the requirement that they signify coherently. There is little in the public wake of Nonu’s misperformance to suggest that the naturalisation of New Zealand maleness is under any greater scrutiny in the terms that scrutiny has been theorised here. What this points to is a familiar difficulty in queer renderings of gender (non)normativity – the capacity to attach meaning to those moments that might be queer. While Butler acknowledges that the meaning of gender troubling is dependent on “a context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered” (1990: 139), Rosemary Hennessey makes a useful intervention when she asks: “what exactly is meant by context here?” (2000:117)

What Queer Eye for the Straight Guy demonstrates so clearly, particularly in its relationship to metrosexuality, is the extent to which

what is meant by context must account for commercial media culture. Given that discussion of such spaces is not part of Sedgwick's overall project in *Epistemology of the Closet*, it is with almost uncanny precision that she suggests that contests for discursive power can be specified as competitions for the material and rhetorical leverage required to set the terms of, and to profit in some way from, the operations of such an incoherence of definition (1990: 11 emphasis added). Sedgwick's claim is worth repeating as the invocation of "profit" is, I think, revealing. Control over the space of contradiction seems finally dependent on the mechanisms of capital.

The discursive field in which the contradictions of *Queer Eye* circulate, and in which the competitions *Sedgwick* invokes take place, is the commercialised space of media. The ability (or indeed the necessity) of the text to sustain its contradictions, and to make them function normatively, is occasioned as much by its status as commercial television, as by its location in a continuum of homosocial desire. In a television schedule littered with the capitalist instructions that constitute the "makeover" genre, *Queer Eye*'s gayness functions as a differentiating structural "hook" that functions, in accordance with the safety logic of mainstream television, as at once both "innovative," and familiar, to audiences, programmers and advertisers. As a means to attract and sustain an audience, *Queer Eye* encases the promise of radical transformation in the benign familiarity of "risqué" difference and camp hyperbole, and the distinctions it putatively seeks to collapse are those that separate the expert from the non-expert consumer. It positions gay men in a familiar cultural narrative outside of normative masculinity by aligning their expertise with feminised spaces of domestic consumption, and treats as axiomatic familiar claims around gay men's unique capacity to consume with distinction. Miller situates metrosexuality (and *Queer Eye*) firmly in a context of "self-styling and audience targeting" (2005: 115) that might be the apotheosis of decades long efforts to produce new market niches in the vein of the one being put up for "sale" here, that of the famed "pink dollar." If, in Foucault's analysis, the rearticulation of sodomy as the specification of homosexuality was enacted through the discourses of psychiatry,

medicine and the courts (1978), then queer analysis and critique of sexuality's representational spaces must account for such discursive production in the sphere of global media.

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