

## Constructing the Queer “I”: Performativity, Citationality, and Desire in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*

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Bravo’s “reality” television series, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, has become a pop-culture phenomenon. Critical reaction to date, however, has accused the show of being condescending in its portrayal of its stars and (re)producing stereotyped gay images in general. This article examines how the language of *Queer Eye* constructs identities for its speakers that challenge these claims of stereotyping and deepen our understanding of the nature of sexual identity, gender identity, and sexual desire. Applying the notion of performativity to speech and sexuality, I analyze the utterances in *Queer Eye* that index identities and patterns of desire, focusing on the conflicting, fluid, and uncategorizable—that is, “queer”—ways that the use of such language enacts and constitutes its speakers’ sexual identities.

The weekly television series, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, debuted on July 15, 2003, on NBC’s Bravo cable network. Since its premiere, *Queer Eye* has consistently garnered the highest ratings—and the most media attention—of any show in the 23-year-old Bravo’s history, establishing itself as a fixture not only on the once-obscure network’s prime-time lineup, but also as a “buzz”-laden element of contemporary popular media culture as a whole.

The weekly hour-long program can be classified as a makeover/“reality” show: On each episode, five self-identified gay men, “each an expert in one of the gay arts—grooming, cooking, fashion, culture, and interior design” (Skinner, 2003), arrive at the New York-area home of a different “hapless hetero male” (Elliott, 2003, p. 17), to improve not only his furnishings but also his wardrobe, hairstyle, hygiene, and manners. Through the gay men’s efforts, the straight guy is recoiffed,

redressed, remannered, and re-interior-designed, and as a result, becomes more confident about his appearance and demeanor, has a more positive outlook on life, and comes to appreciate the talents of aesthetically-focused homosexuals. At the end of the show,<sup>1</sup> the straight guy shows off his new look, new cooking and hosting skills, and newly decorated home to his friends, family, and female significant other as the “Fab Five” (as the gay protagonists have dubbed themselves) watch the encounter on closed-circuit TV.

Corroborating claims that *Queer Eye* was “the hottest show of the summer [of 2003]” (Giltz, 2003, p. 40), the “Fab Five” appeared on the covers of *Entertainment Weekly*, *The Advocate*, and *Vanity Fair*; among other publications; were selected by both *People Magazine* and TV host Barbara Walters as among 2003’s most intriguing people; provided a makeover for the set, cast, and star (Jay Leno) of NBC’s *Tonight Show*; were featured guests on *Oprah*; and had their larger-than-life images emblazoned on a building-size billboard in New York’s Times Square. *Queer Eye* was even proclaimed one of the top 10 TV programs of 2003 by *The New York Times* in an article deeming the program a “makeover masterpiece” and “the best new reality show” of the year (Stanley, 2003). There is no question that *Queer Eye*, an unexpected pop-culture phenomenon, has been embraced by viewers (that is, those viewers interested in watching a show featuring five openly gay aesthetes) and by the popular press.

What little scholarly reaction—and quite a bit of the response from the more elite media critics—has been published to date has been far less kind. In a guest column in the New York newspaper *Newsday*, Michael Bronski, a visiting professor in women’s and gender studies at Dartmouth, wrote the following: “queer eye or straight guy, these are hardly even real people. They are scripted stereotypes—almost cartoons” (Bronski, 2003, p. A26). Tom Shales (2003), culture critic for the *Washington Post*, decried the show as condescending and reactionary. That *Queer Eye* is or may be perpetuating stereotypes is a charge leveled even by the show’s more positive reviewers (Cohen, 2003; Giltz, 2003; Gordon & Sigismund, 2003).

Yet one of the comments offered by online television critic Terry Sawyer—who in his scathing review for the web-zine *Pop Matters* compared the show to “minstrelsy, the sincerest form of insult” (2003)—offered an unintentional insight that goes directly to the concerns of this article. After describing the show’s cast—and, by extension, the stereotypes (“stock representations”) that the show perpetuates—as alternately “tyrannical,” “materialistic,” and “vacuous,” and then denying that “anything remotely positive could be drawn from *Queer Eye*,” Sawyer asked the following: “How exactly could this representation ‘improve’ the position of

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<sup>1</sup>The show is edited in such a way as to suggest that each makeover takes only one day; in fact, four days are needed for the transformation due to the complexity of the interior-design work required (Giltz, 2003).

gays in mainstream culture? It would be better to broaden the representations and deny that being gay has any consistent content."

Indeed. Despite the frequent and often valid criticisms of the show's stars as "stereotypes" and the program's premise as both materialistic and troubling in its portrayal of gayness as being primarily if not exclusively in service to heterosexuality, an analysis of the language the *Queer Eye* cast actually uses—discourse that goes beyond discussions of fabrics and end tables and instead reveals and enacts gender identification and sexual desire—confirms precisely what Sawyer claimed: that being gay does not have any consistent content. The purpose of this article is to examine how the use of language in *Queer Eye* can inform our understanding not only of sexual identity but also the very nature of sexual desire. I am concerned with the varying, conflicting, and uncategorizable—that is, "queer"—ways that the use of that language, particularly as it reveals its speakers' gender identifications and sexual desires, enacts and constitutes their sexual identities. I take as inspiration for my inquiry, Judith Butler's (1993) insight into the construction and discovery of the self, the "I," through discourse:

Where there is an "I" who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse that precedes and enables that "I" and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will. Thus there is no "I" who stands *behind* discourse and executes its volition or will *through* discourse. On the contrary, the "I" only comes into being through being called.... (pp. 225–226)

I argue that despite our claim to "know" the sexuality, and thus (sexual) identity, of the cast members of *Queer Eye*—and, by extension, any assumed or self-labeled gay person—prior to engaging with the program, it is in fact only through those men's articulation of desire that such orientation-identities are brought into being in the first place. I show that such an identity—the queer "I"—is not predictable or knowable in advance, and it is not clearly or consistently intelligible even as it is being produced in discourse. Further, I explore the ways in which the different "matrices" (Butler, 1993) of sex, gender, and sexual desire performatively create sexual identities that are unstable and often contradictory, both intrapersonally and interpersonally.

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

My analysis of the language(s) of desire and gender identity in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* hinges on the concepts of *performativity*, *citatoriality*, and *iterability* as originally defined by J. L. Austin (1961, 1962/1975), critiqued and clarified by Jacques Derrida (1971/1982, 1988), and reformulated by Judith Butler (1990, 1993, 1999). Given the premise of *Queer Eye* and this article's focus on the lan-

guage of its gay protagonists, I also look at the notion of “gay language,” particularly the ways that the topic has been, for better or worse, explored to date.

### Performativity and Citationality

The British philosopher of language, J. L. Austin (1911–1960), first formulated the concept of “performativity” in 1939, revising and refining it most famously in his posthumously published *Philosophical Papers* (1961) and *How to Do Things with Words* (1962/1975). If a person makes a performative utterance, Austin (1961) stated,

he is *doing* something rather than merely *saying* something... Suppose, for example, that in the course of a marriage ceremony I say, as people will, “I do” ... or suppose that I tread on your toe and say “I apologize”... In [such] cases it would be absurd to regard the thing that I say as a report of the performance of the action which is undoubtedly done ... We should say rather that, in saying what I do, I actually perform that action.<sup>2,3</sup> (p. 222)

In his essay “Signature Event Context,” originally written in 1971,<sup>4</sup> Derrida (1971/1982) reinterpreted Austin’s performative and identified what he considered its tragic conceptual flaw. Whereas Austin had dismissed the ever-present potential for performative “misfires” or “infelicities” as aberrations, insisting on the speaker’s intention as the performative’s defining feature, Derrida pointed out that it is not intentionality that gives a performative its world-changing potential, but rather the performative’s (that is, the speaker’s) inevitable reliance on citation—the explicit or implicit invocation of preexisting conventions, norms, or sources of authority. Further, for a performative to “work,” it must also “enter a structure of...*iterability*, which means [being able] both ‘to repeat’ and ‘to change’” (Kulick, 2003a, p. 122).

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<sup>2</sup>One of Foucault’s definitions of discourse is quite similar. Discourses, he said, are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (1972, p. 49).

<sup>3</sup>Although this initial formulation stipulated that performative verbs must be in “the first person singular present indicative active,” Austin later (1961, p. 229) amended that restriction: “There is at least one other standard form, every bit as common as this one, where the verb is in the passive voice and in the second or third person, not in the first;” his examples of such forms included the following: “Passengers are warned to cross the line by the bridge only;” and “You are hereby authorized to do so-and-so.” He then entertained the possibility that even these two “standard forms” might be insufficient; expressions such as “shut the door;” “this bull is dangerous;” and even just “Bull!” might “do just the same job as the more elaborate formula” (1961, p. 230).

<sup>4</sup>As Gerald Graff, the editor of the (1988) Derrida collection *Limited Inc*, noted in the foreword to that book, “Signature Event Context” had a complicated publishing history: Originally an article deliv-

## Butler: Expanding Performativity and Citationality Beyond Language

The contributions that the notions of performativity (and, to a lesser degree, citationality and iterability) have made to queer theory and gender theory are traceable largely to their capacity to be extended beyond the realm of language. Such extensibility has been most fruitfully exploited by Judith Butler. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993), she claimed that gender identity and gender construction might also be in some sense performative—but, crucially, not a performance—a claim she clarified in the 1999 reprint of *Gender Trouble*:

The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body ... What we take to be an "internal" feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts ... There is no subject who decides on its gender ... on the contrary, gender is part of what decides the subject. (p. xv, x)

As Kulick (2003b) later explained, "Performance is not the same as performativity ... performance is something a subject does. Performativity, on the other hand, is the process through which the subject emerges" (p. 140).

Butler acknowledged and engaged with problems that arise when performativity refers to both language and gender: "It may seem that there is a difference between the embodying or performing of gender norms and the performative use of discourse. Are these two different senses of 'performativity' or do they converge as modes of citationality?" (1993, p. 231). She later (1999) addressed the instability that ensues when grafting language philosophy onto speculations about the body, arguing nevertheless that the two are invariably related:

The speech act is at once performed (and thus theatrical, presented to an audience, subject to interpretation), and linguistic, inducing a set of effects through its implied relation to linguistic conventions. If one wonders how a linguistic theory of the speech act relates to bodily gestures, one need only consider that speech itself is a bodily act with specific linguistic consequences. Thus speech belongs exclusively

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ered at the August 1971 *Congrès Internationale des Sociétés de Philosophie de Langue Française* in Montreal, it was published in French in 1972 as part of Derrida's collection *Marges de la Philosophie*, first translated into English by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman in 1977 for the serial publication *Glyph*, then appeared in a different version in *Margins of Philosophy*, Alan Bass's 1982 English translation of *Marges*. In this article, page numbers given in references to "Signature Event Context" refer to the 1982 Bass translation. *Limited Inc*, however, uses the 1977 Weber–Mehlman translation.

neither to corporeal presentation nor to language, and its status as word and deed is necessarily ambiguous.<sup>5</sup> (p. xxv)

But speech, I would argue, is not limited to the domains of “word and deed.” Its use is also pegged to the construction and manifestation of, and inferences drawn about, an essence more abstract than those: individual identity.

### The Problem of “Gay Language” Research

It has long been commonplace that a person’s language, the aggregation of his or her individual utterances, is reflective of that person’s identity: We come to know who a person “is” by attending to what the person says; we reveal our “selves” to others, we believe, through the medium of speech, and conceal our “selves” through our silences and evasions. Such folk beliefs, although necessary for social survival, are crucially called into question by the notion(s) of performativity. If identities are not so much revealed by language as they are “accomplished in and through the use of language” (Cameron, 1998, p. 951),<sup>6</sup> then the study of people’s utterances is not a process of uncovering who they already “are,” but is rather an act of surveillance: an observation of a work in progress, the ongoing construction project that is the dynamic development of identity.

As linguistic anthropologist Don Kulick argued (Cameron & Kulick, 2003; Kulick 2000, 2003a, 2003b), hundreds of scholars have looked at structural and conversational aspects of “gay and lesbian language,” but have produced research that is generally ineffectual

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<sup>5</sup>Similarly, Deborah Cameron has commented that “because the term *performative* was invented by philosophers of language to explain how people are able, in J. L. Austin’s phrase, to ‘do things with words,’ there is a certain aptness in its re-appropriation for the analysis of how gender identities are accomplished in and through the use of language” (1998, p. 951). Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (2003) saw a fundamental connection between the linguistic and gender-determining senses of performativity that goes deeper than Cameron’s mere “aptness;” as they wrote, “gendering people can be thought of as accomplished through a series of acts, many of them linguistically mediated. ‘It’s a girl,’ pronounces the medical professional at the moment of birth, and indeed it is thereby made a girl and kept a girl by subsequent verbal and nonverbal performances of itself and others” (p. 131). Of course, not everyone has been as entranced by Butlerian notions of performativity. See, for example, Rothenberg and Valente’s (1997) scathing critique, “Performative Chic: The Fantasy of a Performative Politics.” Also noteworthy is Barad’s (2003) “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” which, although not exactly a critique of Butler, offers a post-Butlerian reconfiguration of performativity based on principles of both physics and metaphysics.

<sup>6</sup>This comment is reminiscent of an observation Cameron offered in an earlier publication: “Whereas sociolinguistics would say that the way I use language reflects or marks my identity as a particular kind of social subject ... the critical account suggests that language is one of the things that *constitutes* my identity as a particular kind of subject” (1995, pp. 15–16).

because it is plagued by serious conceptual difficulties. One problem ... is the belief in much work that gay and lesbian language is somehow grounded in gay and lesbian identities and instantiated in the speech of people who self-identify as gay and lesbian. This assumption confuses symbolic and empirical categories [and] reduces sexuality to sexual identity. (Kulick, 2000, p. 246)

Underlying—and resulting from—such confusion is an often inescapable tautology:

Because studies investigating queer language expect to find that language only in the speech of queers, the question of queerness in language is usually a foregone conclusion, and anything said by speakers we know to be queer can be taken as evidence that their language is queer (Kulick, 2000, p. 262)

Embracing Derrida's notion of citationality, Kulick suggested, can spring us from this trap. Researchers need to recognize that those aspects of language (stereo)typically considered "gay" are in fact "linguistic resources available to everybody to use, regardless of their sexual orientation" (Kulick, 2000, p. 247). Another shortcoming of the existing "gay language" research is that otherwise enlightened scholars "vaporize sexuality into gender," ignoring a foundational tenet of queer theory: that "sexuality is importantly different from, and not reducible to, gender" (Kulick, 2000, p. 270). Finally, recent work on gay language (e.g., Livia & Hall, 1997) that has incorporated only selected elements of Butlerian performativity has wrongly accorded intentionality to speakers, ignoring the Derridean argument that

*no language can be considered an essentially intentional phenomenon ... Performatives work not because they depend on the intentions of the speaker but because they embody conventional forms of language that are already in existence before the speaker utters them.* (Kulick, 2003a, p. 122)

In short, then, the bulk of so-called gay language research "has not focused on how language conveys *sexuality*. It has focused instead on how language conveys *identity* [and] the ways in which speakers reveal or conceal that identity in their talk" (Kulick, 2003a, p. 119). To avoid such problems, Kulick exhorts researchers to concentrate on what "from any perspective must be [a] central dimension of 'sexuality,' namely ... desire" (2003a, p. 119). Yet, even research focused on the language of desire must bear in mind language's inescapable iterability. Indeed, "the iterability of codes is what allows us to recognize desire *as* desire. This means that all the codes are resources available for anyone—be they straight, gay, bisexual, shoe fetishists, or anything else—to use" (Kulick, 2000, p. 247). A question that can be fruitfully pursued, then, is this one: Which linguistic forms do people use to encode homosexual desire?

## Empirical Investigation of the Language of Desire (and Gender)

How then might the language of desire—and its relation to the language of gendered self-identification—be studied empirically? As Deborah Cameron (1998) pointed out

sexual desire needs to be encoded linguistically if it is not to be inchoate and ephemeral, but at the same time it is a form of human experience that always exceeds the linguistic resources available for its encoding. How do speakers and writers deal with this contradiction? (p. 967)

Keith Harvey and Celia Shalom (1997) grappled with this problem head-on, citing a “theoretical imperative to describe the language [of desire] from the evidence of real text” (p. 4). Inspired by functional-systemic linguistics (Halliday, 1978, 1985), Harvey and Shalom argued that “language ... transforms experience into meaning through the choices that speakers make from the system” (1997, p. 4), a claim reminiscent of the central tenets of Critical Linguistics (Fowler & Kress, 1979). The mechanics of language, Critical Linguistics’ founders asserted

can code a world-view without any conscious choice on the part of the speaker ... There are social meanings in a natural language which are precisely distinguished in its lexical and syntactic structure and which are articulated when we write or speak. There is no discourse which does not embody such meanings. (Fowler & Kress, 1979, p. 185)

Linguistic encodings of desire, then, constitute not only distinct and describable phenomena (Harvey & Shalom, 1997), but “meaningful choices from within the possibilities available in grammatical systems” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 263). The challenge, of course, lies in capturing linguistic expressions of desire, expressions usually uttered only in intimate settings. Although finding examples of such utterances might have proved problematic in an earlier time, the electronic media have, for better or worse, greatly expanded the visibility of once strictly private subjects and are largely responsible for the “movement of private language and experience into the public domain” (Harvey & Shalom, 1997, p. 12). This movement has paved the way for the production of television shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, a program that embodies this private-to-public movement.

## METHOD

The specific research questions I hope to answer in this article are as follows:



- RQ1: How do the five members of the *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* cast use language to construct themselves as homosexual?
- RQ2: How do the *Queer Eye* cast members use language to express sexual desire?
- RQ3: How is the language used by the five members of the *Queer Eye* cast linked to a particular gender (i.e., masculine–feminine) or sex (male–female) identity?

To answer these questions, I videotaped and watched all 16 episodes of *Queer Eye*'s first broadcast season (July–December 2003) and randomly selected 9 of those episodes for transcription and analysis. In my data selection, I looked specifically for linguistic utterances, encoding and indexing sexuality category ("gay" or "homosexual;" e.g., "Ladies and gentlemen, the homosexuals are here!"), sexual desire (talking about sexual attraction or expressing such attraction directly to its object, e.g., "Oh my god; your brother's hunky"), and gender-sex identity (words marked for masculine or feminine linguistic gender in self-referential utterances; e.g., "Bring those pants over here to Mommy").

Because my focus was limited to issues of sexuality category, sexual desire, and gender identity, I did not analyze any of the show's frequently-made references to nonsexual topics such as aesthetics, taste, or proper comportment, often stereotypically linked to homosexuality—and, in fact, practically the only "gay" components of ostensibly gay-themed TV programs such as *Will & Grace*—but lacking any immanent connection to sexual orientation, attraction, desire, or activity. The very premise of *Queer Eye* is that a group of self-identified gay men who are "experts" in such areas have been assembled; analyzing their discourse around these topics would reveal little or nothing about gender, sexuality, or desire. My focus, rather, is on how these men's sex-, sexuality-, gender-, and desire-indexing language brings into being their (homo)sexual selves—how they identify themselves directly or in contrast to straight men, how they construct their gendered or sexed self-identities, how they linguistically express (homo)sexual desire, and how—or if—such sexual desire is linked to their gender or sex identities.

## FINDINGS

### Sexual Self-Identification and Other-Identification

To address the first research question, I considered utterances in which the speaker indicated his own membership in the category I label *gay* (although *homosexual* or *gay man* might work equally well here) and his nonmembership in the category I label *straight* (or *heterosexual* or *straight man*).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Although some of the members of the *Queer Eye* cast might add "queer" to this list, and indeed often use it interchangeably with "gay," I purposely postpone my own use of "queer" until the discussion in the final section of this article.

*Direct self-labeling as “gay.”* Although it is a given that the five stars of *Queer Eye* are homosexuals—that is, of course, one of the show’s core concepts—I found quite a few instances of overt self-labeling as “gay.” Examples include the following:

- In episode number 110,<sup>8</sup> interior designer Thom Filicia talks with straight guy Tom, a 45-year-old divorcé. The straight Tom confesses the following: “At this point in my life, I hate that couch, I hate the way I look, I’m gaining weight, I need, I need—” Gay Thom completes straight Tom’s sentence for him: “I need five gay men to come to my house!’ You know, I say that all the time!”
- In episode number 115, food and wine expert Ted Allen plays catch with straight guy Richard’s son, commenting to the little boy, “Gay guys can really throw a ball. No problem. See?”

Although such utterances clearly do not encode desire, they do evidence—and indeed, construct—the speakers’ self-categorizations. It seems doubtful that many straight men would utter any of the remarks listed earlier in reference to themselves; doing so would, presumably, perform unwanted homosexual identity (if not sexuality) on them. It should also be noted that Ted’s comment about ball-throwing ability cites a pre-existing stereotype, that gay men are unathletic. Although Ted’s demonstration and comment are arguably intended to contradict the stereotype, they simultaneously reify it.

*Oblique self-reference as “gay.”* On occasion, a member of the group will refer to gay men but not in direct reference to himself. At the beginning of episode number 107, for example, the Fab Five are reviewing the dossier on straight guy John. Looking at the file, culture expert Jai Rodriguez announces, “he’s been, like, a plumber, a stripper, a Navy Seal, a carpenter...,” to which Thom replies, “He’s hit, like, every possible ‘I wanna sleep with a gay man’ job.” I read this as Thom’s way of self-identifying (or self-constructing) as gay, and perhaps, as indicating his potential desire to sleep with the straight guy himself.

*Labeling objects or events as “gay.”* One of the more surprising sources of humor on *Queer Eye*, a rather humorous show to begin with, is the declaration by the Fab Five that someone other than themselves—or that an activity, object, or even a piece of clothing—is “gay.” Two examples from episode number 113 will serve as illustrations. Early in the show, as interior designer Thom does his initial sweep through straight guy Jeff’s living room, he finds a decorative ceramic gan-

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<sup>8</sup>Episode numeration reflects that used on Bravo’s Web page ([http://www.bravotv.com/queer\\_eye\\_for\\_the\\_straight\\_guy/#](http://www.bravotv.com/queer_eye_for_the_straight_guy/#)).

der with a luxurious wool scarf tied around its neck. He picks up the accessorized object, while commenting to Jeff's wife, "This is the gay goose!" Later in the show, the Fab Five watch Jeff and his family prepare a recipe recommended by food expert Ted. "They're making fish filets wrapped in banana leaves and seasoned and then grilled," Ted explains to his compatriots. "How gay is that?" Thom retorts. "That's SO gay!" Ted agrees.

What is noteworthy about these two examples is that the gay men are referring to cultural artifacts—a method of food preparation; a living-room decoration—as "gay," although neither has any substantive connection to homosexuality (or, for that matter, to even being alive). Because the fish-grilling technique was a recommendation made by gay food expert Ted, he can self-mockingly confirm—and performatively confer—the "gayness" of the technique. At the same time, it could be argued, Thom is citing a locution often used by (presumably) heterosexual people as a derogation of ornateness. Although Ted's agreeing with Thom that the fish recipe is "so gay" confirms Ted's own (cultural) "gayness," Thom's initial comment to some degree constructs Thom as other than gay.

*Distinguishing oneself or one's group implicitly.* Fashion expert Carson Kressley, particularly, makes frequent references to—and thus performs himself as—being different from the straight guys he interacts with on the show. While so doing, he does not always label himself as "gay" or "homosexual" but communicates his differences from his interlocutors implicitly. For example, in episode number 113, he helps Jeff pick out clothing appropriate for fly-fishing. While shopping, Carson finds a feathery pink fishing fly; he holds it up to his hair, asking Jeff as he does so: "What do you people use this for? My people would use it to decorate shoes or perhaps a festive tiara."

With the phrases "you people" and "my people," Carson, who often plays with gay social stereotypes, constructs himself as a member of a different category than that of his straight interlocutor. By referring to decorating shoes and tiaras, he is citing a gay stereotype; this citation is the source of—and the clue to—what "my people" means. Although the utterance is delivered in Carson's typically (self-)mocking manner, it still serves to say "I am not like you." The specific way in which Carson (and "my people") differs from Jeff (and "you people") is conveyed purely by implicature (Grice, 1975), however. Further, the distinction between "you people" and "my people" is not necessarily one related to overt sexual practice or desire.

*Labeling other people as "straight" and thus implicating speaker as gay.*

Another way the Fab Five self-perform gay identity via implicature is by labeling others (generally the straight guy and his family) as "straight." Examples include the following:

- In episode number 107, as the group watches straight guy John shave, grooming expert Kyan Douglas asks, “Do you think that’s the straight gene? They don’t know how to shave with the grain.”
- As Kyan goes through straight guy Steve’s wardrobe on episode number 112, he comments on a T-shirt of Steve’s (which says “NINTENDO HIGH SCORE”), saying “This is so heterosexual right here.”
- In episode number 114, food expert Ted inspects the contents of heterosexual Ross’s refrigerator and exclaims, “Yup, this is a straight man’s fridge: beer and grapes.”

As with a number of the “gay” references to nonsexual content, these utterances, too, serve to perform homosexuality on their speakers. In this case, of course, the gay men are citing heterosexual stereotypes (or variations on the umbrella stereotype of heterosexual men as taste-impaired), yet the result is the same: by distancing themselves from the “straight” traits they are disdaining, they are constructing themselves as nonstraight, at least as an identity category.

### Encoding Desire

Although the cast of *Queer Eye* is ostensibly concerned with the aesthetics of interior design, hair style, and clothing choice, sexual desire, too, is often conveyed linguistically. At times, this desire is merely recounted, described, or commented on; at others, it is expressed directly to its object. Harvey and Shalom (1997) offered a useful distinction between such utterance categories, referring to them, respectively, as “language *about* desire” and “desire *in* language” (p. 3). The former

produces texts where some account of desiring subjects, desired objects, or the processes of desire itself is present, often (though not exclusively) through third-person narration. In contrast, “desire in language” produces text that is designed to bring about a real-world change in the relationship between the participants. (Harvey & Shalom, 1997, p. 3)

Borrowing the Harvey and Shalom classification, to address the second research question, I considered instances of *Queer Eye*’s “language about desire” and “desire in language.”

*Language about desire: Orientational self-reference.* The Fab Five make frequent, offhand, and intentionally humorous references to their own homosexual orientations. Unlike the utterances considered earlier, which merely denote their speakers as “gay” or their addressees as “straight” as social-cultural identity categories, the following encodings index actual homosexual desire or activity:

- In episode number 115, Ted reads aloud from the dossier on the straight guy the group is about to meet: "Richard Miller of South Orange, New Jersey." To this, Carson quips, "'Richard' is so formal. Let's just say we're out lookin' for Dick."
- In episode number 114, on discovering a woman's feather-collared jacket in straight guy Ross's closet, Thom tries it on, exclaiming, "I can't believe she [Ross's girlfriend] wears this out. And she has a boyfriend and I don't. Isn't that scary?"
- During episode number 109, Thom explains to straight guy George the purpose of a certain décor element he's installed in George's house: "This is a bar. You wanna keep the ladies, you know, socially lubricated with alcohol at all times. That's what I do with the guys."

Some of the Fab Five's utterances citationally performing homosexual orientation are more risqué. Grooming expert Kyan, usually the last member of the group to allude to his own sex life, has this uncharacteristically self-referential conversation with straight guy Tom on discovering the latter's decrepit hair dryer (episode number 110):

Kyan: This has gotta go.

Tom: It blows good!

Kyan: Listen—I know all about good blow jobs. This isn't it.

Such comments are more typical of fashion guru Carson, as evidenced in this excerpt from episode number 114, in which he and Ted comment on straight guy Ross's dessert-preparation skills:

Ted: He's supposed to be running his finger around the edge of the soufflé dish—

Carson: [interrupting Ted]—rimming it.

Ted: Rimming it, if you will, because it helps it rise easily.

Carson: Rimming does help it rise, I've found.

Although references to "good blow jobs," "rimming," and "helping it rise," are arguably not indexical (and thus citational) of exclusively homosexual desire, the possibility of their being misinterpreted as referring to heterosexual sex acts is fairly limited.

*Language about desire: Direct reference to same-sex objects.* The next group of utterances removes any doubt about the explicitly homosexual nature of the desire discussed. In each excerpt that follows, the Fab Five talk about their attraction to the straight guy they are making over. Some of the comments are fairly tame or embedded in sarcasm. In episode number 107, for example, Carson tells straight guy John's girlfriend, "We really love your man. He's like a puppy. We wanna keep him. Where does he shop normally? Flea markets? Garage sales?" Other comments are both less facetious and more overtly sexual—and thus more demonstrably performative of homosexual desire:

- As the men watch episode number 109's body-builder straight guy emerge from his shower wearing only a towel, Carson remarks as follows: "He looks good. Totally edible. I need a moment to myself."
- Similarly, during the (episode number 114) soufflé dialogue discussed earlier, Carson makes this comment about straight guy Ross's cooking technique: "I love the way he works a stick of butter. It's gettin' me kinda heated up, though."
- During that same episode, the Fab Five watch (on closed-circuit TV) the handsome, muscular Ross head toward his bathroom clad only in boxer shorts. As Ross closes the bathroom door, Ted complains, "We finally get a hot one and we don't see him in the shower?" Moments later, as the group observes the now-showered Ross putting on his pants, but not his shirt, Carson comments as follows: "He could just stop there [i.e., shirtless] as far as I'm concerned. Look at the booty in those jeans. You could bounce a Howitzer off that."
- At times the Fab Five even make (joking) third-party references to acting on their homosexual desires. In episode number 112, as straight guy Steve's girlfriend is about to leave their apartment, she poses a question to Ted: "Do I get to kiss my boyfriend?" to which Ted replies, "We did—why shouldn't you?"

In all of these encodings, it is particularly clear that the citations made by the Fab Five to preexisting homosexual norms of desire and practice serve to enact their own sexualities.

*Desire in language.* Even more performative of overt homosexual desire are those utterances made by the Fab Five addressed directly to, not about, the objects of their desire: the straight men they are making over. In some cases, these utterances are little more than compliments on the men's improved appearance, observations such as "Now you're officially hot" (Thom, episode number 113) or "You look amazing" (Kyan, number 109). Such comments, arguably, could be offered by any speaker to any listener without being construed as indexical of homosexuality or performative of homosexual desire. But that could not be said for the examples that follow, which are more indicative of desire:

- Carson mock-flirting with straight guy Steve on episode number 112:

Carson: You don't have an office—you just have cargo pants?

Steve: I like to keep everything in my pants.

Carson: I don't like to hear THAT.

- Carson, as he pulls up George's shirt (episode number 109) during a makeover, revealing the latter's muscular midriff: "What's this hot, sexy scar?" then commenting on the shirts he's chosen for George to try on: "These are things that I pulled when I was thinking about you. I also pulled some other things when I was thinking about you, but we're not going to get into that."

- Carson's various utterances to handsome straight guy John (who is about to propose to his girlfriend, Tina) on episode number 107: "Have you thought about modeling? What is this? [admiring John's yin-yang necklace] Your ying and your yang? Can we see your ying and your yang?" "You know what? If you asked me to marry you? I think I'd say yes" "We love what you're all about. You're in. If she won't marry you, you know what? You get to marry one of the five of us. Isn't that great?" And finally, as John is modeling a particularly flattering new outfit, Carson says the following: "Just make us wish we were Tina some more, why don't ya?"

Some of the more humorous, yet still homosexual-desire-indexing, utterances occur in episode number 114, involving straight guy Ross, the handsome, muscular, and affable military man. While Ross is at a clothing store trying on new trousers, Carson asks him, "Do other Marines ever tell you your ass looks cute?" Then, as Ross, clad only in underpants, heads back to the dressing room, Carson says, "Now we'll get changed. You let me know if you get cold or scared." Later, as Ross returns to his refurbished apartment, designer Thom greets him with this remark: "I've got good news for you and I've got bad news for you. Remember when you told me you'd make out with me if I got you a flat-screen TV? [Thom reveals a new television.] Pucker up, baby!" Although it is clear that Thom is only joking with Ross, the source of his humor lies in the veracity of the nature of his referenced desire.

### Performing Gender Identity

All the utterances considered up to this point evidence a certain uniformity of citational performativity—in regard to both sexual identity category and direction of sexual desire—across the five members of the *Queer Eye* cast. Such apparent sameness is, presumably, the impetus for much of the "stereotype" charge that appears in so many media accounts of the program and its stars. What has been completely overlooked by the popular press (including the gay press), however, is the

significant variation in gender identity among the Fab Five—a variation that belies the charge of stereotyping.

Carson, the most histrionic, flirtatious, and arguably, flamboyant member of the team—and, by implication, the most stereotypically (that is, effeminately) gay—is also the one given the most attention in journalistic accounts of *Queer Eye* (Fonseca, 2003; Giltz, 2003; Gordon & Sigismund, 2003).<sup>9</sup> Consequently, in response to this study's third research question, it is instructive to look at those of Carson's utterances that index and perform his gender identity, and perhaps even more enlightening, to consider those linguistic utterances of the other members of the Fab Five—particularly Kyan—that perform their self-constructions of gender.

*Linguistic encoding of feminine gender.* As much as Carson is singled out for his manner and his provocative one-liners and sexual innuendoes, it is actually rather difficult to isolate clues in his utterances that mark him as identifying as feminine. In my viewing of all 16 first-season *Queer Eye* episodes, I was not able to find even a single instance of Carson's use of "inverted self-appellation" (Bunzl, 2000, p. 207)—the practice of referring to oneself using pronouns inconsistent with one's biological sex, reported to be common in some homosexual social circles (Bunzl, 2000; Graf & Lippa, 1995)—and only one instance of his use of inverted pronoun appellation regarding another cast member.<sup>10</sup>

There are numerous occasions, however, where Carson performs—in both the "performance" and "performativity" senses—not feminine gender as much as female sex through self-referential statements. In episode number 109, when muscle-bound straight guy George emerges from a dressing room in a bathing suit, Carson puts an arm around his waist and exclaims in an artificially high voice, "Look at our beach boy! I'm going to be Annette Funicello! Hold onto me, Frankie, hold on!" He jokingly identifies with (or as?) a rather different female star in this conversation with Kyan and straight guy John in episode number 107:

Carson: Who do you look to as your fashion role model?

John: People say I look like Keanu Reeves.

Kyan: People say I look like Keanu Reeves!

Carson: People say I look like Ellen DeGeneres.

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<sup>9</sup>For the most part, journalists seem to be tiptoeing around ad hominem attacks on Carson, framing their "perpetuating gay stereotypes" comments about the cast as a whole, but often immediately before or after discussing that one particular cast member. *The Washington Post* critic Tom Shales, however, called Carson "the most outgoing and arguably most obnoxious of the group" (2003, p. C1).

<sup>10</sup>In episode number 104, as "culture" expert Jai Rodriguez is sitting at the straight guy's computer, pretending to type, Carson yells out, "This is Ms. Rodriguez. *She's* going to be our court stenographer to-



Unfortunately, Carson is not above linking himself to derogatory female-sex stereotypes. In episode number 113, he and Thom are chatting with the teenage daughter of straight guy Jeff, a recreational hunter and angler. Thom asks the daughter, "Does your dad ever smell like fish or dead animals?" When the daughter answers, "Fish, 24-7," Carson pipes in as follows: "I thought I smelled something. I thought it was me. I was feeling not so fresh." Although such a remark is not necessarily (stereo)typical of gay men, and although delivered in a facetious manner, it does support the contention that Carson's primary sex identification is not always male.

*Linguistic encoding of masculine gender.* As much as Carson, and, to a lesser degree, Ted, Thom, and Jai, can be observed to linguistically index feminine gender identity or female sex identity, the fifth member of the Fab Five citationally performs masculine self-identity in his utterances. Kyan, the *Queer Eye* cast member consistently singled out in the press as well as on the show itself as the most attractive facially and bodily,<sup>11</sup> is also the one who evinces the clearest identification with masculinity and maleness.

Much of this identification is evidenced by the appellations Kyan uses when addressing the straight men he interacts with in his "grooming" expert role, appellations these heterosexual men and their similarly oriented peers presumably use to address each other in all-straight-male contexts. It is impossible to get through an episode of *Queer Eye* without hearing Kyan call a straight man "bro," "dude," or "my brother," or initiating "high fives" in celebration of some makeover-related accomplishment—utterances and actions he does not use with his fellow homosexuals. Still, there is often an unintentionally humorous incongruity when Kyan uses these appellations in utterances referring to grooming products and treatments. While at a hair salon in episode number 109, for example, Kyan says the following to straight guy George:

OK, my brother. I'm going to put in some highlights and a couple levels of low lighting. The goal is to get to your natural color eventually. As your hair grows, you can sort of back out of this color gracefully. OK, bro.

Also distinctive is the overt male bonding Kyan cultivates with the straight men, as seen in utterances such as "This is a mission; we're on a journey together" (to straight guy Steve; episode number 112); "It's the start of a new day, my friend; give me a hug;" and "This is a big one, my friend. I'm here. We're in this together"

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day in the proceeding of Fashion versus The People..." Carson does on occasion refer to his colleagues as *ladies*, but surprisingly, no more than the much less flamboyant Ted and Thom use the term *girls*.

<sup>11</sup>Carson describes Kyan as "the cute one" (episode number 107, *inter alia*). Even ex-Marine straight guy Ross describes Kyan as "quite a looker," and, as part of a challenge to engage in a push-up contest, calls him "pretty boy" (episode number 114).

(these last two were directed at episode number 115's straight guy Richard, who, at Kyan's insistence, has just decided to remove a toupee he's worn for 13 years).

Such male-bonding-enacting utterances by Kyan may not be surprising in light of a statement he made in an interview for the gay newsmagazine *The Advocate*: "I enjoy my relationship with straight men. It's very nurturing. It's very validating to hang out with straight guys and be accepted" (quoted in Giltz, 2003, p. 43). Kyan's frequent uses of "bro," "dude," and "my brother" attest to that sentiment—and cite (socially) heterosexual male language norms to effect his own masculine identity. More than that, they also call into question the essentialist equation of feminine gender identity and male same-sex desire attributed by the psychoanalytic tradition—and Western heterosexist stereotypes in general—to all gay men.

### DISCUSSION: GENDER IDENTITY MEETS DESIRE (OR, CAN WE ESCAPE THE MATRIX?)

In looking at the linguistic utterances of the members of the *Queer Eye* cast, we see intragroup and intrapersonal consistency in terms of self-identification as members of the sexuality identity category "gay" (or "homosexual"), reference to non-membership in the category "straight" (or "heterosexual"), and expression of same-sex desire. Yet the Fab Five's linguistic encodings of gender and sex identity crucially lack such intragroup and even intrapersonal uniformity. Such inconsistency suggests that, at this point, the term *queer* might be not merely useful to this discussion but perhaps even necessary.

To this point, I have purposely avoided using the word "queer," choosing instead to use the words "gay" or "homosexual" to focus on sexual attraction toward people of the same sex and to indicate speakers' self-determined membership in the category of people who experience (primarily) same-sex attraction. Yet in looking across the range of the *Queer Eye* cast's utterances, and considering as an aggregate their linguistic encodings of self- and other-directed sexuality categorizations, expressions of desire, and gender or sex self-identifications, it becomes clear that even within such a small and superficially homogenous group of homosexual men, we see a reification of precisely what (self-described) queer theorists define as "queer:" "a specifically lesbian and gay reworking of the post-structuralist figuring of identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions" (Jagose, 1996, p. 3); a reworking which "cut[s] against mandatory gender divisions" (Warner, 1993, p. xxvi).

Some scholars (e.g., Rezek, 2003) have argued that *Queer Eye* is resoundingly gay but not at all queer, if "queer" is taken to mean challenging assumptions, redefining categories, or removing categorial boundaries altogether. Indeed, the professions of the Fab Five break no new ground in the public perception of gay men and may very well entrench public perception that gay men are only interested in

matters of taste and aesthetics. Admittedly, there is nothing "queer" about such a message (a message which is, after all, the theme of *Queer Eye*), and certainly nothing transgressive or iconoclastic. Yet at the same time, as we have seen, even among the *Queer Eye* cast, a group of individuals who freely, and consistently, self-identify as gay, there is not always a consistent co-occurrence of linguistically indexed gender identity, biological sex, and desire direction. If, as Jagose noted (1996, p. 3), the use of "queer" focuses on "mismatches between gender, sex, and desire [and] describes those gestures or analytical models that dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender, and sexual desire," then a case can easily be made for the appropriateness of "queer" as a descriptor for *Queer Eye*, "gay" as the show and its cast members may primarily be.

Indeed, where *Queer Eye* does serve as a truly queer artifact of popular culture—and one unique given the context of other purportedly "gay" shows such as *Will & Grace*, in which the sexuality of its so-designated "gay" characters is all but nonexistent—can only be appreciated by looking past, and paradoxically, into its stereotypes. How do these perhaps prototypically gay men encode their sexuality, their sexual selves, their sexual attractions? How do the identity categories they, and their audience, construct for themselves, both align with who they are sexually and also contradict who they are sexually? What tensions exist within the messages about sexuality and sexual desire communicated by this program? And how does the language of the men of *Queer Eye*, rather than simply confirming some preexisting sexuality, instead actually perform it, bring it into being, cite and reiterate existing norms and categories, and, at the same time, bend and redefine those categorial constraints?

Although homosexuality in and of itself poses a challenge to what Judith Butler identified as the "heterosexual matrix" of psychoanalysis—that is, the regulatory "logic that requires that identification and desire be mutually exclusive" (1993, p. 239)—I would argue that the diversity of gender-identity and (homo)sexuality performativity patterns—observable in even as small a group as *Queer Eye*'s Fab Five—goes even further in its disruptive power, calling for a rethinking of the normativity of "intelligible genders," Butler's term for "those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice and desire" (1990, p. 23).

Homosexuals of any stripe violate such "coherence." Male homosexuals, for example, have a biological sex that "wrongly" matches that of the objects of their desire, in direct contradiction to the dictates of the heterosexual matrix. In the case of a biologically male homosexual who gender-identifies as feminine, and possibly, sex-identifies as female—a case that could be made for *Queer Eye*'s Carson—there is at least some "coherence and continuity." People who performatively and citationally gender-identify as feminine or sex-identify as female are "supposed to" desire the masculine or male. Paradoxically, cast member

Kyan, in being less stereotypically “gay”—that is, less (or perhaps not at all) self-identified as gender-feminine or sex-female—represents an even greater disruption of the heterosexual matrix. As his linguistic utterances reveal and perform, Kyan desires men and sees himself as one. The objects of his evidenced homosexual desire share his masculine-gender and male-sex identity. If Carson—consistent with the Lacanian notion of desire as “absence, loss, and lack” (Kulick, 2003a, p. 125)—in fact desires what for him is absent or lacking, namely the masculine or male, then how would Lacan explain Kyan, who desires that which he is and has?

As Butler (1993, p. 239) argued, “the heterosexual logic that requires that identification and desire be mutually exclusive is one of the most reductive of heterosexism’s psychological instruments: if one identifies *as* a given gender, one must desire a different gender.” Again, paradoxically, such logic, reductive as it is, might be seen as an explanation of the consistency of the performativity of Carson’s gender-desire configuration: he identifies as feminine and thus desires the “different” gender. At the same time, this logic fails to explain Kyan’s complex sex, gender, and desire performativity.<sup>12</sup> As Butler noted in a passage (1993, p. 99) that might have been written with such fluencies in mind, “we are not in the position of *either* identifying with a given sex *or* desiring someone of that sex; indeed, we are not, more generally, in a position of finding identification and desire to be mutually exclusive phenomena.”

Lest it appear that I am dismissing Carson as a mere “stereotype” both predictable and easily categorizable, allow me to show that this is not so. For as much as Carson may (theatrically and constitutively) perform femininity, it is not the case that he identifies unilaterally as female. Although he is incessantly forthright about his desire for men, he is (on admittedly rare occasions) capable of linking that desire to a direct acknowledgment of his own biological maleness. In episode number 107, he flirts with handsome straight guy John (who is about to propose to girlfriend Tina) with this line: “So what has Tina got that I haven’t got—besides a working vagina?” In this one brief quip, Carson constructs himself as (a) male, (b) other than straight (via the implicature of his construction of John as heterosexual, enacted through his reference to John’s interest in Tina), and (c) desirous of John, specifically. Although “So what has Tina got ...?” could easily be dismissed as a typical Carson throw-away line, it is at the same time atypical in its performativity of his sex-identification, attesting to the possibility that even Carson, on occasion, is capable of challenging the heterosexual matrix as powerfully as Kyan, marrying his own rarely-performed male identification with his much more frequently cited desire for male sexual objects. It is hard not to see Carson in Butler’s words when she writes, “here it becomes clear why refusing to draw lines of causal implication

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<sup>12</sup>Such logic also fails to explain Ted’s and Thom’s alternations of references to the Fab Five cast as “ladies,” “girls,” “gay men,” and “gay guys.”

between these two domains [identification and desire] is as important as keeping open an investigation of their complex inter-implication" (1993, p. 239).

Carson also lends support to another of Butler's musings: "[W]hat is to restrict any given individual to a single identification? Identifications are multiple and contestatory..." (1993, p. 99). Through the performativity of their own gender-sex-sexuality matrices, Carson and Kyan, and, by extension, *Queer Eye* as an aggregate text, corroborate Butler's claim that "the heterosexual matrix proves to be an *imaginary* logic that insistently issues forth its own unmanageability" (1993, p. 239). But as Derrida (1971/1982) pointed out, just as any utterance is available for misappropriation or forgery, so too is the discourse of the heterosexual matrix. Although performativity may well not be grounded in any speaker's or actor's intention, at the same time, the power of citationality, available to all, makes possible the escape from the heterosexual matrix, as evidenced by the multiform linguistic encodings of desire and identity in even a television program as whimsical as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.

In developing her theory of constitutive gender performativity in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* Butler (1993) wrestled with, and ultimately rejected, the possibility that identity, the "I," preexists the construction of gender. It is unclear, she argued,

that there can be an "I" or a "we" who has not been submitted, subjected to gender, where gendering is, among other things, the differentiating relations by which speaking subjects come into being. Subjected to gender, but subjectivated by gender, the "I" neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves. (1993, p. 7)

Extending and adapting Butler's argument, I would like to suggest that a similar statement might be made about (homo)sexual identity, by which I mean the matrix of self-categorization, sexual desire and practice, and not (necessarily) gender. Homosexual identity, it could be argued, like gender identity, is performative, in that it too "neither precedes nor follows" the process of sexual expression, but "emerges only within and as the matrix" (Butler, 1993, p. 7) of the recognition and encoding—both embodied and linguistic—of sexual relations themselves. This would be true for private as well as publicly accessible expressions of desire, as exemplified by contemporary media texts such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. In either case, linguistically encoding desire, via the inescapably citational (re)signifying practice of naming it, constitutively performs the queer "I."

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