THE WORK OF QUEER: SEXUALITY, RACE, AND SUBJECTIVITY IN LATE CAPITALISM

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Master of Arts in the
Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By
Melanie A. Maltry, MA

*****

The Ohio State University
2006

Master’s Examination Committee
Dr. Maurice Stevens, Adviser
Dr. Tanya Erzen
Dr. Ruby C. Tapia

Approved by

[Signature]
Adviser
Department of Comparative Studies
ABSTRACT

Drawing from visual cultural texts produced in the 1990s and beyond, this project aims to make explicit the relationships between contemporary queer theorizing and political practice—especially as it relates to spatial conceptualizations of subjectivity—and the racialized logics of late capitalism. Investigating both the 1996 film Bound (Wachowski Brothers) and its treatment in scholarship, I illuminate the ways in which in which the methodology of queer theory isolates sexuality from important material and cultural networks. Mobilizing both a racially informed psychoanalytic theory and materialist analysis, I suggest that the performative status of white, upper-class queer sexuality relies upon the invisibilized labor and interiorization of working-class, racially coded subjectivity. Challenging the film's scholarly narration as subversive, I instead suggest that it promotes a neoliberal discourse invisibilizing racialized labor and celebrating consumption in a mode that buttresses whiteness. Situating the exteriorized subjectivity that queer theory celebrates within late capitalist logics and operations, I cite the 2003 television program Queer Eye for the Straight Guy to interrogate the queer theoretical assertion that exteriorization is necessarily politically disruptive in its destabilizing capacities. In an economic context in which the polyvalence of sexualities has diminished (though certainly not entirely done away with) the moral regulations of
nonheteronormativity, queer sexuality is put to use to animate consumption and promote whiteness while reifying heterosexuality. Finally, through an analysis of the 1994 film *Fresh Kill* (Shu Lea Cheang), I explore models of sexual and racial representation which, while invested in a politics of exteriorization, more fully account for its relationships to the conditions of production and consumption. By rendering legible the networked relations between the flows of transnational capitalism, the subjectivities it produces, and the labor that sustains it, I illuminate the ways in which emergent communications technologies offer possibilities for relinking struggles.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my adviser, Maurice Stevens, for reading drafts, for challenging me to think more complexly, and for providing intellectual support.

I thank Tanya Erzen for offering new directions and for encouraging me to expand the scope of my project.

I am grateful to Ruby Tapia for her continued willingness to support my projects and for years of fantastic coursework and syllabi that have undoubtedly shaped this thesis and all of my future research.

Thanks to all of my committee members for providing exemplary models of intellectual rigor, exciting and innovative scholarship, and of course, compassion.

I am indebted to Alana Kumbier who read all of my drafts and who helped to organize the Ladies Visual Culture Group.

Great thanks to Betsy for amazing patience and sound housecleaning skills.

Finally, thanks also to my parents. While their discomfort may keep them from reading this work, their tireless labor and uncompromising support of me has laid its very foundations.
VITA

March 16, 1980.................................. Born—Cincinnati, Ohio

2004.............................................. M.A. Women's Studies
                                          The Ohio State University

2001.............................................. A.B. English, The Honors Tutorial College
                                          Ohio University

2002-2003......................................... Research Assistant
                                          Department of Women's Studies
                                          The Ohio State University

2003-2005......................................... Research Assistant
                                          The Project for Afghan Women's Leadership
                                          The Ohio State University

2003-2006......................................... Graduate Teaching Assistant
                                          The Ohio State University

2005-2006......................................... Research Assistant
                                          The Kirwan Institute
                                          The Ohio State University

PUBLICATIONS

Research Publication

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Comparative Studies
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Bound to the Body: Racialization, Labor, and Sexual Interiority in the Queer Moment</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Bound and the Queer Critique</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>The Marked Body: Regression, Racialization, and Perversion</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>The Essential(ized) Laborer</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>The Clothes Make the (Queer) Man (White): Queer Eye, Sexual Exteriority and Late Capitalism</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>“Sexual Lifestyle” and Late Capitalism</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Lifestyle: Another Politic of Queer</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Contextualizing Queer</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Changing the Frame</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>“It’s Only Weird Because We’re Wired”: Hybridity, Connectivity, and Political Possibility in Fresh Kill</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Detritus: Material and Symbolic</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Wired: Geographies and Mediascapes</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Weird: Exteriorized Subjectivity and Late Capitalist Logics</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Political Possibility</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion: “A Virus in the System”: Gay Shame and Queer Futures</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION
THE TROUBLE WITH QUEER

Sexuality is linked to the economy through numerous and subtle relays, the main one of which, however, is the body, the body that produces and consumes.

--Michel Foucault

To the extent that they de-link sexuality from its historical connection to the human relationships of exploitation capitalism relies on, and to the extent that they reify desire, postmodern sexualities participate in the logic of commodity and help support neoliberalism's mystifications.

--Rosemary Hennessy

In one photograph in Judith Halberstam and Del LaGrace Volcano's 1998 The Drag King Book, a white king stands, his camouflage-clad hip cocked out in a defiant stance. Situated in an impoverished urban geography, the performer is flanked by a number of working-class signifiers: a sign advertising the pork restaurant “Hogs-and-Heifers,” cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, and other cowboy hat-wearing queers. By now, of course, both the circulation and scholarly analysis of images like this one is commonplace. The photograph is evidence of what scholars have identified as the two

---

1 While as Annamarie Jagose argues, "there is no exact agreement on the term 'queer,'" (76) I use it in two different, but interrelated, modes in this essay. First, I use it as shorthand for "queer theory," a primarily academic discourse rooted in poststructuralism which troubles stable notions of identity, focusing instead on performative practices. Second, I use it to denote a strategic form of non-heterosexual identification mobilized primarily in activist modes. "Queer" in this second sense expands identity beyond the essentialism and nationalism espoused in the mainstream gay and lesbian liberation movement making room for a broad range of gendered and sexual configurations, yet in many ways still bears some vestiges of a relationship to identity. For comprehensive discussions of the historical and theoretical contexts of "queer," see Lisa Duggan, "Making It Perfectly Queer" and Annamarie Jagose Queer Theory: An Introduction.

primary trends in queer representation that characterized the 1990s: increased visibility and the rise of queer theory as the foundation for a new queer performance-based politic.³ Sustaining the first extended televisual representations of queer subjects, a record number of queer-themed films, an explosion of subcultural photographic endeavors, and even a new queer presence on the catwalk, this period represents the burgeoning of a markedly distinct engagement with queer images and exemplifies its characterization as “the gay nineties.”⁴ Likewise, it is exemplary of the 1990’s engagement with queer theory, a methodological approach which, critiquing minoritarian treatments of gay and lesbian sexuality, interrogates heteronormativity and posits destabilizing performance practices as integral to undermining and “undoing” the sex/gender symbolics that organize heterosexuality and the power that it accrues. In this critical narrative, the geography, the clothing, the body language in the image all work to constitute a viable performance of white, working-class masculinity through a female body in a mode which serves to “reveal the imitative structure of gender itself” (Gender 178).

This photograph, however, is also evidence of another trend that cohered in the 1990s, but which, to date, scholars have given very little attention. That is, it indexes a shift in queer political and theoretical relationships to historical materialist analysis and “downward redistribution,” or a politics which focuses on the redistribution of wealth and power to those who have less access to it (Duggan), a critique of which race and gender

³ Here I use the characterization “queer performance-based politic” as exemplary of new engagements with political activism that employ theatrical techniques and camp sensibilities with the express purpose of challenging heteronormative regulations. This new form of political activism emerged with performances of the AIDS organization ActUp, expanded in scope through the direct action “kiss-ins,” “queer aquariums,” and “queer shopping networks” of Queer Nation, and continues in a number of modes including the newly invigorated political culture of drag king performance and photography.

⁴ Both Steve Caputo’s Alternate Channels and Suzanna Danuta Walter’s All the Rage offer comprehensive accounts of this explosion of queer imagery, meticulously cataloging queer appearances in television, film, and photojournalism.
are central organizing factors. Emerging in the context of other radical organizing, early
iterations of the gay liberation movement advanced a socialist critique which named
gender roles, family structures, and racialization as organizing vectors of economic
operations.\(^5\) The nation’s first gay and lesbian activist organization,\(^6\) The Gay Liberation
Front, assisted in organizing the 1970 Black Panthers’ Revolutionary Peoples
Constitutional Convention and the publications of gay liberationist organizations
included “anti-imperialist manifestoes and analyses of the racist legal and prison system”
(Duggan xvii). In 1977, the Combahee River Collective, an African American feminist
and lesbian organization released its statement arguing “we need to articulate the real
class situations of persons…for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant
determinants of their working and economic lives” (64). Yet, in the ensuing decades,
much of this capitalist critique was excised in a pursuit of new political models, a shift
which Lisa Duggan suggests was characteristic of many Left movements beginning in the
late 1980s.

The shift was engendered by many different factors. It was, in part, the result of
an important interrogation of the methods of Marxist analysis that occurred in both the
academy and activist circles. In granting primacy to the operations of the conditions of

---

\(^{5}\) Certainly, these movements should not nostalgically or Utopically be understood as accommodating
intersectionality. Indeed, a number of texts treating political organizing in this historical period attest to the
incapacity of movements to deal with intersections and difference. The Lavender Menace defected from
The Gay Liberation Front because of its sexism, The Combahee River Collective Statement notes both an
alliance with African American men, but also remarks on the sexism they have experienced, and This
Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color details the exclusion of women of color
from lesbian feminist theorizing. Yet, proceeding from Duggan, I suggest that they demonstrated a greater
analytical integration of the material with the cultural.

\(^{6}\) I am distinguishing gay and lesbian “activist organizations” from the earlier homophile organizations in
that they articulated a new politic that was critical of a systematized heterosexual oppression. This
distinguishes itself from the politics exemplified by homophile organizations, the most prominent of which
were the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, who advocated a more conservative politic by
focusing on the maintenance of gender norms and middle-class propriety. For a sustained discussion of
homophile organizations, see Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town.*
production, it often obscured the organizing factors of race, gender, and sexuality, and foreclosed possibilities for agency. Rightly critiquing these epistemological problems in the Marxist project, many scholars and activists turned to cultural analysis, and the methods of poststructuralism in particular. According to Duggan however, the turn away from Marxism and a focus on the redistribution of resources was also situated within a shifting political and economic context characterized by the rise of neoliberalism. The neoliberalism of the late 1980s and early 1990s constrained possibilities for the articulation of the “overlapping and interrelated” projects of Left theory and activism in the 1970s, inciting fragmentation. On one hand, neoliberalism’s success in the public sphere diminished social welfare programs and undermined wide-scale political critique, reducing the organizational restructuring of intersectional social movements to the strategies of liberal frameworks, especially legal action. On the other, neoliberalism’s “rhetorical separation of the economic from the political and cultural arenas” (xiv) was in some sense taken up by the Left, a move which Duggan suggests resulted in a politics of identity and culture isolated from material conditions.

Reflective of the shift from historical materialist analysis and a politics of downward redistribution to a concern with an analytics of culture and a practice of symbolic destabilization, this photograph (as a cultural production explicitly engaged with the project of queer theory) figures class fetichistically. The mise-en-scène, the clothing, the beers, are all object-signifiers, or props, that operate to confer (white working class male) identity. To the extent that this identity is produced explicitly as “a surface,” a form of simulacra which is not substantiated by a referent, the image’s significations are destabilized. While this may trouble heteronormative and racialized
symbolics in a "subversive" way, its intimation there are no "true" foundations for the
symbolics of class operates according to the logics of commodity fetishism. Isolated from
a sustained relationship to materiality, the objects are no longer indicators of economic
conditions of production, but merely unstable signifiers of identity.

The staging of class in this photograph is correspondent with the new political
project of queer theory, especially its investment in the exteriorization of sexuality. Queer
theory's framing of the exteriorization, or "surface inscription" of sexuality as politically
subversive emerges as a response to the modern disciplinary forms of control secured
through the interiorizing operations of identity. As Foucault has famously argued, the
process of interiorization, a term which I am using as shorthand for the production of
sexuality as essential "truth" and which scientia sexualis often located explicitly within
the body, was integral to the consolidation of a white bourgeois class and the installation
of heteronormativity. Describing the emergent form of sexual subjectivity, Foucault
writes

homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed
from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism
of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was
now a species. (43)

As a mode of both "classification and intelligibility" (44), the interiorization worked to
produce subjects who were not only beholden to the law of heteronormativity, but whose
very legibility as a subject was enabled by the law. "A binary system" distinguishing
"licit and illicit," "permitted and forbidden" (83) sexualities, the law mobilized "the
exclusive promotion of adult marital sexuality, the imperatives of decency, the obligatory
concealment of the body, the reduction to silence, and mandatory reticences of language"
(115), as regulations distinguishing normative and non-normative subjects. Naturalized and articulated through race, gender, class, and geography, these distinctions instantiated the white bourgeois Western subject and provided the grounds for its normative status.

Critical of these operations of interiorized identity as “instruments of regulatory regimes” (“Imitation” 13), queer theory argues for a shift away from identity as either essential or interior, instead proffering both “disclaiming” and gender performance as modes of “affirmative resistance to certain regulatory operation[s] of homophobia” (“Imitation” 16). Recognizing the dependence of the regulatory organization of culture on sexual identity, Butler deploys Saussurean linguistics and Lacanian psychoanalysis to deconstruct a sexual self and announce a new model for subjectivity. According to Butler, there is “no subject prior to its constructions,” (Bodies 125) instead sexual subjectivity “only takes on its meaning by abjecting an other” (“Imitation” 15), its “specificity…demarcated by exclusions that return to disrupt its coherence” (“Imitation” 15). If, in contrast to the modern (humanist) model articulated by Foucault, the sexual self is produced only in relationship to other significations, it indeed has no essence, but remains “a truth effect” (Gender), an “ontologically consolidated phantasm” (“Imitation” 21). Compelled psychically by terror (Bodies 96), the appearance of both the stability and legibility of sexuality emerges from the performance of reiterative acts “on the surface of the body” (Gender 173).

“Never fully accomplished” (“Imitation” 24), sexual identity must compulsively repeat itself, not only illuminating its own status as imitative but opening up possibility for resistance to it. Re-imagining the subversive potentiality of the heteronormative conceptualization of lesbians as “failed copies” of heterosexuality, Butler suggests that
the proliferation of such failed imitations can serve to “reveal the imitative structure of
gender itself,” (Gender 178), the absence at the center of a heteronormative symbolic. As
an exemplary mode of “imitative” cross-gender performance, drag was/is figured as one
mode to enact this destabilizing endeavor, and more significantly, is introduced as a new
brand of performance-based activism (Fuss). Clearly, for Butler (and a number of others),
the radicality of queer theory is rooted precisely in the refusal of an equivalence between
body, interiority, and signification that modernity insists upon, releasing the biologized
and the essentialized subject from the regulations of “sexual truth,” and finally troubling
the foundation upon which bourgeois heteronormativity is able to produce itself and
consolidate its power.

While queer theory and the performative politics that emerged from it have done
important work in troubling heteronormative symbolics, and in some instances, even
inciting juridical changes, the isolated focus on sexuality has obscured a number of other
relationships of power—especially race and class—integral to and constitutive of this
process of exteriorization. This isolation of sexuality produced in the context of queer
theory, is in part resultant from the shift away from an economically and racially situated
analysis. Citing queer theory’s status as a “hypermanaged forbidden zone of cultural
work,” Rosemary Hennessey argues that “the very possibility of linking the study of
sexual identity to capital has become all but unspeakable” (84). While largely silent on
the issue, a few scholars have in recent years begun to raise concerns about queer
theory’s narrow methodological scope. Drawing correlations between queer consumption
patterns associated with lifestyle and “the cheapened labor that makes it possible,” (285)
M. Jacqui Alexander argues that
the consummation of an early marriage between queer theorizing and the dominant methodologies of post-structuralism in the US academy, have almost emptied these disciplines of any attention to the histories of colonialism and race, which would point the way to radical activist scholarship anchored in a sexual politic of anti-colonial and anti-racist feminism. (285)

Because, as Alexander argues, queer theory has been articulated so exclusively through methodologies concerned primarily with symbolics, the global organization of production and its continued relationships to racialized colonialism—the material operations that undergird late capitalism’s exteriorization—are obscured.

While analysis of these interrelationships have been largely avoided in queer scholarly discourse, tracing them raises important critiques of queer theory’s celebration of the shift to sexual exteriorization, especially as a political strategy. The performative subjectivity that queer theory celebrates is rooted not merely in the postmodern destabilization of referents, as Jean Baudrillard and others including Butler have argued, but also, as Fredric Jameson suggests, in the logics of late capitalism in which this significatory destabilization is rooted. Representing a markedly different stage in the operations of capitalism, that which has been variously termed “late capitalism,” “multinational capitalism,” and even “media capitalism,” (xviii) is, according to Jameson, distinct in its appropriation of ever-expanding spheres for profit (the process Ernst Mandel characterizes as flexible accumulation), the shift from use value to exchange value, and an emergent global division of labor. Because the intensification of consumption relies upon the social to generate value for exchange, late capitalism registers the extension or “mutation” of the sphere of culture such that “aesthetic production has become integrated into commodity production generally” (4). Securing
the image as a structural function of these operations, late capitalism has ushered in "depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality" (9).

While Jameson articulates the production of depthlessness generally in his discussion of the cultural logics of late capitalism, Donald M. Lowe expressly theorizes a subjectivity of surface that emerges in this context: lifestyle. The "visual construction and presentation of self in terms of consumption relations" (67), lifestyle clearly represents an exteriorized subjectivity. Within the hegemony of exchangist practices—conditions which register a shift in logic from the inherent use and meaning of commodities to one in which value is generated only within a context of cultural communications—identity is no longer essentially meaningful. Instead, the self is produced through the difference of commodity display. Because meaning is not inherent, but produced within the context of the cultural exchanges and communications of consumption, sexualities have multiplied.

Situating the exteriorization that queer theory celebrates within the logics of late capitalist consumption has a number of important implications. At base, it interrogates the degree to which queer performance is "subversive." While queer theorists have posited the destabilization of gender and sexuality as a mode which undermines the regulations of "the law" (via linguistic claims to the relational production of meaning),

---

7 While conversations about "gay lifestyle" and consumption practices circulate in queer conversations, it is rarely remarked that queer shares the same logics of the exteriorization of sexuality with the category "lifestyle" that Lowe has defined. Danae Clark's "Commodity Lesbianism," Miriam Fraser's "Classing Queer: Politics in Competition," and Nicola Field's "Identity and the Lifestyle Market" discuss the corporate identification of and appeal to the gay and lesbian market as well as the new queer lifestyle—characterized by the consumption of gay-themed cruises, pride goods, and gay cultural artifacts—that has emerged in its wake. While explicating emergent queer consumption practices that cohere as "lifestyle," these articles do not theorize consumption in relationship to shifts in conceptualizations of subjectivity. In short, they posit a priori subjects who consume, rather than subjects who are produced through consumption.
situating exteriorization within the logics of late capitalism indicates that “the Law” is not as regulatory as it used to be. While industrial capitalism required moral regulation to produce and organize the public and private spheres, late capitalism’s intensification of consumption relies less and less on separate spheres and its moral binaries. The proliferation of sexual difference engendered by the intensification of consumption and hegemony of exchange represents a breakdown of the moral regulations of licit/illicit, natural/aberration, normal/ perverse, that characterize the enforcement of heteronormativity explicated in Foucault’s Law (Sears 102). Incorporated as commodity, queer subjectivity is one of many forms of “pleasure-full erotic indeterminacy” (Hennessey 69). In much the same way as Jameson claims that the logics of surface in postmodernity have reduced what were once “apocalyptic” differences to mere “decoration,” queer theory announces subversion from a model whose regulation no longer bears the same strength in its new economic context, producing queer as style.

Far more significant, however, is not the degree to which exteriorized sexuality maintains disruptive capacities, but instead, the degree to which it reifies particular operations of power within the logics of late capitalism. As the epigraph to this introduction indicates, the performative subject and politic of queer theory risks reproducing a number of late capitalism’s logics including an obfuscation of “the human relationships of exploitation” that the production of self through commodity consumption of queer relies upon, the “reification of desires” framed by late capitalist consumption, and finally, the promotion of neoliberalism. Isolating performative sexuality from material conditions, an effect produced in part through poststructuralism’s methodological presumption that the instability of signification provides the only grounds
for destabilized subjectivity, supports a “a form of consciousness or cultural logic that alienates many aspects of human life from the network of social relations that makes them possible” (Hennessey 95). Not only does the methodological choice excise the role of late capitalism “from the network of social relations” that provide the conditions of possibility for an exteriorized sexuality, but more importantly it obfuscates the racialized labor that undergirds it. As Alexander suggests, it actively invisibilizes the racialized “Third World” that “provid[es] cheapened labor that makes it possible for lesbian and gay consumers living in the US and other First World metropoles” to live a lifestyle (285). This possibility for the effacement of these operations is heightened in context of “consumer fetishism,” conditions generated by the global division of labor which allow the easy invisibilization of Third World labor due to geographical distance (Appadurai 41).

This invisibilization of racialized labor is part of queer theory’s greater participation in neoliberalism. Reinvigorating the dualisms of 17th century liberalism, public/private, market/household, and individual/collective, neoliberalism endeavors to figure economic operations as neutral, isolating economic and politics from culture and inhibiting interventionary measures in the economic (Duggan). Reproducing neoliberal logic, the queer shift to performance as a primary mode of politics has foregrounded the role of culture and virtually eliminated an analysis of its relationship to the economy. Isolating queer from the networks in which it is enmeshed, queer theory has also produced a politic to which other struggles cannot be easily linked.

While critiques of queer theory’s isolating methodology are sparse, the cultural manifestations of the intimate linkages between an exteriorized queer subjectivity, the
logics of late capitalism, and racialized labor are manifold, a point evidenced by an examination of visual culture beginning in the 1990s and extending into the 2000s. Despite the general isolation of sexuality from other networks of social relations in scholarship, many of the visual texts of this period engage these intersections, even while responding divergently to them. I turn to a visual culture analysis because of the ways in which a burgeoning of queer visibility converges with the logics of late capitalism beginning in the 1990s. Often, the increased imaging and visibility of queer subjects is attributed to the activist political endeavors and legal achievements garnered in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{8} That is, the militant, performance-based actions of ActUp and Queer Nation were integral both to an increasing public recognition of queer subjectivities, politics, communities, and cultures as well as new legislation responding both favorably and unfavorably to them. Undoubtedly, these events have been significant to the increased visibility of queer subjects in both the mainstream venues of network television and Hollywood film, as well as subcultural avenues. The conditions of possibility for queer visibility in the 1990s and beyond, however, are also very much rooted in the extension of commodification into the realm of queer sexuality, a process which in soliciting the queer buck and commodifying its subject, resulted in the undoing of previously moral boundaries. Thus, not only are the politics of exteriorization widely imaged, but in some instances the relationship to the global economy is rendered explicit.

Considering the emergent historical materialist critiques explicated above through a reading of visual cultural texts of the 1990s and beyond, this project aims to make explicit the relationships between contemporary queer practice and theorizing, especially

\textsuperscript{8} Both Steven Capsuto’s \textit{Alternate Channels} and Suzanna Danuta Walter’s \textit{All the Rage: The Story of Queer Visibility} advance such perspectives.
as it relates to the shift from sexual interiority to exteriority, and the racialized logics of late capitalism. Such a critique, detailed in this project, requires a methodology that considers simultaneously queer sexuality, racialization, and class in a late capitalist context. In order integrate the critiques announced above, I mobilize a multi-faceted methodology which considers historical materialism, discourse analysis, and psychoanalysis as central components.

The intersections of race, class, and sexuality, especially in modernity, have been theorized and investigated with some vigor in the last ten years. Drawing from both discourse analysis and psychoanalysis, a number of studies have demonstrated the way in which sexuality, race, and class were produced through each other in an imperial context. Narrated through a discourse of civilization, “the perverse,” racially other--both within Europe and in the newly colonized areas, and working class and poor were figured as primitive and mobilized in the production of a white, European bourgeois class. Because these imaginaries are embedded and reproduced at the level of the psyche and because psychoanalysis was constituted in the wake of this imperial context, it provides a model, especially adaptable to the visual operations of desire, for investigating these intersections.

These analyses and frameworks for thinking about the imbricated imaginaries of sexuality, race, and class remain important in this work. Yet, as in the case of the first image opening this essay, these methodologies often figure class more as an identity than as a set of economic operations. In addition to discourse analysis and psychoanalysis

---

9 See Michele Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* and Ann Laura Stoler’s situation of Foucault’s work within the imperial context, *Race and the Education of Desire*. See also Anne McClintock’s *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest.*
then, I employ the methods of historical materialism. Historical materialism argues that cultural operations are located within the conditions of production and consumption in specific capitalist contexts. Drawing from both Lowe and Jameson, I use historical materialism to investigate both the ways in which the logics produced within particular contexts put sexuality and race to use, as well as the way in which production and consumption are organized along the lines of race and sexuality. Within the late capitalist intensification of consumption and hegemony of exchangist practices, this economic context has ushered in a new logics of exteriorization producing queer and culturally hybrid subjects, and which relies upon the global, and racialized, organization of production.

Framing my analysis through a thematic trajectory, rather than a chronological one, this project traces movement from an exploration of the ways in which the methodology of queer theory isolates sexuality from important material and cultural networks, to an interrogation of the exteriorized subjectivity queer theory advocates as subversive, and finally to new ways of conceptualizing a “radical sexual politics.” Locating its critical thrust in the methods of poststructuralism, queer theory has obscured its relationship to late capitalist operations and the racialized logics that undergird them. Through these operations, it has promoted a neoliberal politic foreclosing the articulation of the interrelations of queer struggles with global labor struggles, and the vectors of race and gender through which they are organized. Situating the exteriorized subjectivity that queer theory celebrates within late capitalist logics and operations, I interrogate the queer theoretical assertion that exteriorization is necessarily politically disruptive in its destabilizing capacities. In an economic context in which the polyvalence of sexualities
has diminished (though certainly not entirely done away with) the moral regulations of nonheteronormativity, queer sexuality is put to use to animate consumption while reifying heterosexuality. Finally, I explore models of sexual and racial representation which, while invested in a politics of exteriorization, more fully account for its relationships to the conditions of production and consumption. By rendering legible the networked relations between the flows of transnational capitalism, the subjectivities it produces, and the labor that sustains it, I illuminate the ways in which emergent communications technologies offer possibilities for relinking struggles. To explicate these arguments, I turn to three visual culture texts: the 1996 Wachowski Brothers film Bound, the 2003 television program Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, and the 1994 Shu Lea Cheang film Fresh Kill.

Chapter One, an investigation of the film Bound and its treatment in scholarship, challenges its “queer” political work by reinvigorating a racialized and materialist analysis. Read through queer theoretical methods, the destabilizations of subjectivity in which Bound engages have been largely celebrated in scholarship as subversive. Providing a close reading of the scholarship on Bound, I explicate the ways in which this reading relies upon the exclusion of the film’s material and racial operations. Mobilizing both a racially informed psychoanalytic theory and materialist analysis, I illumine the ways in which the performance of the white, upper class femme Violet relies upon the invisibilized labor and interiorization of the butch, working-class, racially coded Corky. Challenging the film’s scholarly narration as subversive, I instead suggest that it promotes a neoliberal discourse invisibilizing labor and celebrating consumption, in a mode that buttresses whiteness.
Turning from an analysis of queer subjectivity to queer lifestyle in Chapter Two, I examine the reality television program *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Exemplary of the extension of commodity logics into the field of sexuality and the diminishment of threat that characterizes exteriorization, *Queer Eye* mobilizes queer sexual style in the service of a global late capitalism, heteronormativity, and whiteness. Drawing correlations between the capitalist logics undergirding both queer lifestyle and queer performance, I interrogate the queer theoretical assertion that exteriorized subjectivity is as politically disruptive as it claims.

Finally, in Chapter Three, I situate the articulations of subjectivity in the film *Fresh Kill* against those represented in both *Bound* and *Queer Eye* to suggest that the film offers new ways of rethinking queer theory and imagining possibilities of linking queer struggles with those of anti-racism and anti-capitalism. Eschewing linguistic methods, *Fresh Kill* locates the destabilization of subjectivity within the transnational flows and visual technologies that characterize late capitalism. Because the film renders visible the role of US and Third world labor, the transnational flows, and the image culture that link the spaces, exteriorized subjectivities are figured not only as troubling, but also as easily consumed. Staging these connections, rather than invisibilizing them as neoliberalism does, *Fresh Kill* offers the possibility of re-linking politics through communication technologies.
CHAPTER 1
BOUND TO THE BODY:
RACIALIZATION, LABOR, AND SEXUAL INTERIORITY IN THE QUEER MOMENT

Corky: "This is the part where you tell me what matters is on the inside and that inside
you there's a little dyke just like me."
Violet: "No. She's nothing like you. She's a whole lot smarter than you are."
--from Bound (1996)

Bound and the Queer Critique

Released in 1996, the film Bound is situated firmly in the milieu of the popular
circulation of queer theory. Characterized as a “pomo homo noir,” (Noble 2) Bound is
undoubtedly marked by this historical and theoretical moment. The film not only stages
the distinctions between lesbian authenticity and queer performativity, but is itself
structured through a series of imitative utterances. That is, the film is produced through
the aesthetics and techniques of film noir, yet, for a number of reasons, fails at this
performance in a particularly productive way, one which “reveal[s] the imitative structure
of gender itself” (Gender 178). Perhaps its most obvious “failure” is its staging of an
explicitly mid-century filmic practice in the 1990s; the deployment of film noir in this
context produces a temporal disjuncture which reinvigorates the exploration of “old
themes” in a contemporary historical moment and opens them up to revision and
resignification.
Indeed, a number of scholars have suggested that the performative citationality of *Bound*'s film noir stylization provides the occasion for revisiting gendered configurations that “the original” itself was interested in exploring. Accordingly, much of the scholarship on *Bound* has centered its investigation on Violet (Jennifer Tilly)—the *femme fatale* of film noir who transmogrifies into the lesbian femme in the newer queer version—and Caesar (Joe Pantoliano)—the “new white man”\(^{10}\) of noir whose masculinity, already tenuous in the changing mid-century economy, entirely loses its grip in the updated version.\(^ {11}\) The film is figured as queer then both because of its interrogation of the “increasingly fragmented and impotent” (Noble 8) status of white heteronormative masculinity and a crisis in reading the significations that characterize Violet’s femme gender and sexual performances. Jean Noble’s “Bound and Invested: Lesbian Desire and Hollywood Ethnography” is exemplary of this celebratory figuration of the film as a quintessentially queer project. Her account of the film is worth explicating here, for it nicely describes the queer exteriorization of sexuality through the femme Violet, *but also* functions as a point of departure for my own exploration of other troubling figurations of queer female masculinity and white manhood in the text in this supposedly “queer moment.”

\(^{10}\) While discussions of the femme fatale have been copious in discourse on film noir, two texts—Megan Abbott’s *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film* and Stanley Krutnik’s *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, and Masculinity*—offer investigations into the less frequently discussed “new white man.”

Noble’s interest in the film emerges from the way in which it imagines and renders legible a heretofore indecipherable subject: the lesbian femme. The femme has been unable to articulate herself visually because of the way in which symbolics link gender and sexuality. On one hand, sexological discourse has figured “homosexuality” in terms of inversion and queer political discourse has narrated “subversion” through cross-gender performance. On the other, an overdetermined iconography of heteronormative gender has insisted that femininity is correlative with heterosexuality. If, in Butlerian terms, sexuality is “surface inscription,” the femme’s surface already “means” heteronormative (white) femininity. But, as Noble suggests, the link between outwardly signifying femininity and an interiority it is understood to represent, is not only disturbed, but the disruption is staged in the film.

According to Noble, Violet’s femme signification is made possible through the film’s mobilization of three techniques: film noir aesthetics, explicit engagement with lesbian-separatist and versus queer political discourse, and a pop cultural imaginary of lesbianism. Deploying the butch/femme iconography of queer political discourse and the plot structure of film noir, the conflict of the film hinges on multiple performances of Violet’s fem(me)inity. Violet, the mob-moll of Caesar has hatched a plan with the butch Corky (Gina Gershon) to take two million in mob money. The resolution of this plan hinges on Violet’s sexual allegiances, for at any moment she can “fuck” Caesar or Corky. As Violet mobilizes a heteronormative performance in carrying out the plan, her “true” sexuality remains entirely ambiguous. Likewise, her femme performance is also always suspect, both because in the popular imagination femme is not “really” queer and because Violet has argued that sexuality is about “work,” making money. All of these
tensions are, of course, heightened by Violet’s coding as the *femme fatale*, the trickster of noir who often dupes the masculine protagonist. That certain identification of the masculine protagonist remains undetermined also heightens the effect of ambiguity. In these moments, Violet’s “identity” remains significantly destabilized, refusing a secure link between surface inscription and an interior identity. Even as the plot resolves, confirming her queer allegiances and the ontological status she claims in a conversation with Corky (“I know what I am. I don’t need a tattoo to prove it.”), Violet’s performance remains queer. The “unnatural phallic power” of the *femme fatale* functions as the queer excess that characterizes the femme, failing productively at a reiteration of heteronormative femininity. Finally, Noble suggests, Violet’s “queer status” is punctuated by a popular “coming out narrative.” The architectural closet in which both Corky and Violet find themselves during an unplanned glitch functions symbolically as the heteronormative closet, from which Violet emerges metaphorically as *gay*.

In staging emergent queer signifying multiplicity and ambiguity through the character Violet, the film also necessarily investigates the interpretive strategies through which reading possibilities are produced. While Corky is troubled by Violet’s signification, Caesar is utterly duped. That is, Caesar fails to “see her,” and this “failure in reading practices constitutes straight masculinities’ inevitable and fatal undoing” (3). In losing the “struggle over hegemonic interpretations of female sexual iconography,” (10) Caesar also metonymically loses control over symbolic systems on which his own heteronormative white masculinity is based. The “new white man” of noir, troubled by his position in a shifting culture driven by capitalist demands, becomes both impotent and
hysterical in the simulacra of late capitalism, where Violet’s sexual performance operates as simulacra.\textsuperscript{12}

Despite the meticulous attention Noble gives to Violet ‘s transgressive gender and sexuality and the more sparsely detailed, but nonetheless sustained investigation into Caesar’s loss of symbolic white male power, she remains strangely silent on the conceptualization of gender and sexuality of the film’s protagonist: the butch Corky. Perhaps this is because, unlike the iconographic foundation provided by the \textit{femme fatale} and “the new white man,” there is no earlier figure through whom Corky can be re-imagined. Or at least, her historical filmic forerunner remains so “apparitional” that performative citationality would be a fruitless avenue for intervention.\textsuperscript{13} Despite the logical justifications that these speculations offer, I suggest that the absence of Corky from this analysis arises for another reason. While the film raises a specter of the “queer” possibility through the character of Violet, a closer investigation of Corky’s representation illumines a troublesome complication to Noble’s celebratory narration of heteronormative transgression in the film. While Violet’s textual performance asserts a critical disjuncture between vision, truth, and knowledge in terms of sexual identification, Corky’s filmic figuration works to secure the regulatory relationship produced through these very concepts. Figured in terms of an essentialized/interiorized sexual identity, which is also explicitly racialized as Other, Corky becomes the laboring subject who makes possible Violet’s troubling performance of white femininity produced, in part,

\textsuperscript{12} Here I am using Baudrillard’s characterization of simulacra as “the hyperreal,” an image for which there is no original. See \textit{Simulations}.

\textsuperscript{13} Here, I am referring to the arguments presented by Terry Castle in \textit{The Apparitional Lesbian} and Patricia White in \textit{Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability}. Both trace the “ghostly presence” of lesbianism incited, in part, through The Hays Production Code which forbade the representation of “ perverse” sexualities on screen.
through commodity consumption. Corky represents the “Third World” labor which Alexander argues queer theory has invisibilized.

_The Marked Body: Regression, Racialization, and Perversion_

The epigraph introducing this chapter intimates a representational distinction between the two characters, an embodied interiorization of sexuality and a performative discourse, that is elaborated throughout the text. At one level, Corky’s pedantic remark to Violet that “this is the part where you tell me what matters is on the inside and that inside you there's a little dyke just like me” seems little more than an overly-staged comment on lesbian authenticity. But on another, it condenses and symbolizes Corky’s greater textual figuration as “the regressive masculine homosexual,” the object of psychoanalysis whose sexuality, though psychogenetic and not biological, is nonetheless registered through and contained within the body. Similarly, Violet’s retort that “she's nothing like you; she's a whole lot smarter than you are” not only renders the difference clear, but codes her figuration in terms of performativity. For, as the above discussion has demonstrated, Violet’s “smartness” or “savvy” emerges from her capacity to work the system through performance of both heterosexual and queer identities. Centering on the tropes of interiorization and embodiment and the class and racialized coding through which Corky is imaged, my analysis troubles Noble’s figuration of _Bound_ as a “queer” text generally, and her characterization of Corky’s female masculinity “as a productive contradiction between a female inscribed body and a masculine gender performance” which becomes “the privileged site of masculinity in the film,” (9) in particular.
Perhaps obviously, it is not Corky's figuration as masculine that I contest, but rather the idea that there is a "productive contradiction" in this figuration. Corky's masculine signification is not performative in the same mode as Violet's, but instead is figured through a number of racialized Freudian tropes of "the regressive masculine homosexual," which produce not merely a naturalized vision of her sexuality, but one that—as in that old medical discourse—"erupt through the body as tell-tale markers of an interiorized and essential difference" (Terry 45). In his foundational text "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman," on which most contemporary psychoanalytic (as well as pop cultural) understandings of lesbianism still rely, Freud argues that homosexual desire in women represents a narcissistic regression into the pre-Oedipal phase. In his formulation, the female subject who already successfully and "normally" passed through the Oedipal phase—thus assuming the position of her mother and adopting her father as the object of desire—experiences a "disappointment" that incites a lapse back into a pre-Oedipal state. Once regressed, Freud argues that the subject "changed into a man and took her mother in place of her father as the object of her love" (22). Freud elaborates on the gender of his subject, extensively noting her masculine characteristics of "objectivity," her chivalrous treatment of her love-object, and her height—which resembles her father.

While Freud's "changed into a man" is generally understood to describe a psychic process, it also bears an ambiguous relationship to the body. Despite the objective of Freud's project—to critique biological discourses of sexuality that characterized sexology—and clear assertions such as "the degree of physical hermaphrodisim is to a great extent independent of psychical hermaphrodisim," (19) a link between bodily
difference and sexual object choice still remains both in his work and in psychoanalysis
during this period in general. Indeed, Freud’s figuration of his female subject’s height in
terms of her father’s body in the above cited passage illuminates this residue. Surveying a
range of psychoanalytic discourse, Jennifer Terry suggests that

…the body remained central even after some declared homosexuality to be
psychogenetic in origin. Then it became a site not for discerning hereditary
features per se but for tracing the afflicted individual’s anomalous psychosexual
development through analyzing, in minute detail, how the patient reacted
psychologically to the body’s anatomy and drives. (41)

Even in the context of denaturalizing sexuality through an exploration of psychic
processes, efforts were made to contain sexuality within the body, an endeavor which the
film reproduces by bodily registering Corky’s aberrance (a point to which I will return in
a moment).

While Lacan’s exploration of lesbian subjectivity represents a more concerted
shift away from embodiment, his exposition of the causality and figuration of lesbian
perversion remain central to this discussion. While relying on Freud, Lacan also makes
some important distinctions concerning both Freud’s conception of the development of
sexual subjectivity and his theorizations of lesbianism. Drawing from Saussurian
linguistics, Lacan suggests that sexual subjectivization takes place not through the visual
observation of biological sex, but through language, which is always already masculine.
Prior to the constitution of sexual subjectivity, the subject exists in “the imaginary,” an
unconscious location in which the subject is united with and indistinguishable from
her/his surroundings. The subject comes into sexual identification through the Oedipus
complex which marks the transition into a phallocentric linguistic structure (the Law of
the Father) of the Symbolic. Because phallogocentrism organizes the symbolic, sexual
subjectivity is organized patriarchally or masculinely, constituting normative heterosexuality. Despite the important adjustments Lacan makes to Freud’s theories, his conception of female homosexuality remains only slightly altered. Lacan notes that “lesbians deny sexuality because they assume the phallus and act as though they are it, but deny castration and therefore sexual difference” (qtd. in O’Connor 146). In each of these conceptions, lesbianism is masculine, regressive, and lacks a fully constituted subjectivity. Consequentially, lesbians are characterized by narcissism as well as a predilection for the oral, the infantile sucking action.\(^{14}\)

In addressing the significance of psychoanalysis for a reading of this text, it is finally important to note that, as Diane Fuss suggests, Freud’s Newtonian rhetoric of “the fall backward” into the pre-Oedipal is necessarily a devolution into “the presymbolic,” “the prelaw,” “premature,” and therefore “primeval” (55). While Fuss herself does not assert this suggestion, its is imperative to note that this stage, with its primitive connotations, is a specifically racialized stage echoing Freud’s likening of inscrutable feminine sexuality to “the dark continent” in “The Question of Lay Analysis.”\(^{15}\)

Narrating the emergence of sexual regulations and civilization through a temporal frame informed by recapitulation theory, Freud links infantile, “primitive,” and female sexuality to an earlier time in history characterized by sexual “free rein.” While the theoretical framework from which Freud proceeds is already clearly produced through a racist and imperialist discourse, his joining of infantile, primitive, and female sexuality through the

---

\(^{14}\) In addition to citing O’Connor, I also used Elizabeth Grosz’s *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* which I have listed in my works cited.

\(^{15}\) To render this argument, I have relied on the analysis provided by Mary Ann Doane in her chapter “Dark Continents: Epistemologies of Racial and Sexual Difference in Psychoanalysis and Cinema” from *Femmes Fatales.*
trope of "the dark continent" makes the racialization explicit. Nonheteronormativity is, in short, always already coded "primitive" and racially Other.\textsuperscript{16}

Detailing these psychoanalytic conceptualizations of lesbianism is central to this analysis because the film not only enacts this regression through the textual figuration of Corky, but also symbolizes the status of this regression through narcissistic and racial tropes, and finally marks the difference bodily. Much has been made of the first two scenes of \textit{Bound}, central as they are to establishing the core themes of the film: money, sexuality, constrained possibilities, and vision/knowledge/treachery. Scholars have narrated these two scenes—an image occurring \textit{en medias res} and a flashback—at length, but do so almost always separately. Linking discussions of these two scenes is central to announcing Corky's figuration in psychoanalytic terms, for the second scene is sutured to the first as a citation of "causality" through the filmic white fade. While the second scene establishes the cause of the first, an image of the butch Corky bound and gagged in a closet, as the central narrative and conflict of the film, I suggest that the temporal organization of these two scenes also operates as an Oedipal scene narrating the "cause" of Corky's lesbian sexuality, masculine gender, and, of course, the punishment she receives for perversion.

\textsuperscript{16} While I have cited Doane's analysis to argue for the epistemological links between queer sexuality and non-white racialization, a number of other scholars have noted the convergences of racialized discourses of primitivism with sexual nonnormativity from a range of different methodologies. See Jean Walton, \textit{Fair Sex, Savage Dreams} for an extension of the psychoanalytic framework discussed above. See Roderick Ferguson, \textit{Aberrations in Black} for a historical materialist analysis of the coding of African Americans as nonheteronormative. See Ann Laura Stoler \textit{Race and the Education of Desire} for a Foucauldian analysis of the ways in which white bourgeois subjectivity was produced against newly colonized racial Others in the imperial context. See Siobhan Somerville \textit{Queering the Color Line} for a historical discussion of the ways in which the deployment of the same scientific methods in the examination and production of African, African American, and sexual invert bodies as aberrant linked these marginalized subjectivities in the American imagination.
In this scene, Corky occupies the elevator but is quickly joined by Violet and Caesar. The two dykes exchange desiring looks through a series of shot reverse-shots. Next, an extreme high angle shot reveals the literal triangulation of the three, troping the Oedipal triangle, a shape echoed through the triangle-patterned floor of the mise-en-scene. The explicitness of this Oedipal triangle is rendered later in the text when a correlation is drawn between Violet’s father and Caesar. After sex, Corky vituperatively accuses Violet of being cared for by her “daddy.” While she employs the term “daddy,” she means the love-object Caesar, thus confirming Caesar’s status in the Oedipal triangle as “the father” rendering Violet “the mother.”

As the organization of the three characters trope the Oedipal triangle in the first part of the scene, the second part of the scene stages the “disappointment of desire” incited by the primal scene. Here, Corky gazes at a wall covered in red triangle-patterned wallpaper while overhearing sex between Violet and Caesar on the other side. Simultaneously, in a telephone conversation with Mr. Bianchinni, the owner of the apartment she is renovating, she notes that she has “looked over everything.” A fundamental correlation between looking, the Freudian process through which one determines identification and object choice, and the primal scene is drawn and exaggerated through a lengthy and extended medium shot that hovers on the wallpaper while Violet and Caesar’s sexual noises permeate the room. Corky’s response is registered by a close-up on her face which shifts from a look of disappointment to one of desire. This latter act is signified through the attention to her open mouth and an exaggerated movement of the tongue in the mouth, a clear reference to the oral predilection of lesbian desire (a point upon which I will elaborate shortly).
Corky's primal scene, characterized by disappointment, is a textbook representation of Freud's narration of the incitement to lesbian desire. Corky's disappointment then functions as the causal mechanism for the previous (and very first) scene of the film: the visual exposition of Corky's regression. The scene begins with the emergence of a black phallus then pans vertically downward over a breadth of feminine signifiers which are eerily difficult to decipher.17 Visually, the camera "falls down," a move which echoes Fuss' argument concerning the Newtonian logic of Freud's rhetoric, terminating finally at the masculinely signifying body of Corky (the embodiment of regressive masculine lesbianism). The movement of this pan can be read as a passing backwards through the Oedipal complex, signaled by the phallus and the Law of the Father, and continuing to travel through a series of signifiers confusingly perceivable as feminine. This visual passing over of illegible shapes resonates with Lacan's imaginary—a state characterized by objects which do not make sense because they exist prior to the ordering structure of language—while Corky's literal unconsciousness animates associations with the Freudian unconscious.

These images are punctuated by disembodied voiceovers of Violet, Corky, and Caesar. Two of these voiceovers rendered by Violet are particularly salient. The first emerges with the visualization of the black phallus wherein Violet notes "I had an image of you," a comment which illuminates Corky's status as imitation, the image of the phallus rather than the real thing itself, while the image itself intimates the "darkness" of her masculine subjectivity. As Violet continues, whispering "inside of me, like you were part of me," her affiliation between lesbianism and the narcissism of the imaginary is

17 Discussing these images, Ellis Hanson writes "once the title disappears from the screen, we are unsure what we are looking at. We cannot make sense of the shapes on the screen" (qtd. Wallace 371).
explicitly drawn. The second interesting convergence of voiceover and image emerges as the camera lingers over a pair of white high heels and pans horizontally bringing into vision the stark contrast of Corky’s masculine boots. During this visual exposition, Violet notes that “we make our own choices.” The aural and visual organization highlights the *choice* of (gender) identification and therefore love-object between the feminine as symbolized by heels and the masculine as signified by the boots. The remainder of the horizontal pan confirms her “choice” as the masculine lesbian through clothing signifiers and a conspicuously lengthy close-up of her labrys tattoo—an object which not insignificantly embeds lesbianism literally in the body. The scene ends with a close-up of Corky’s face bearing a gash near her eye and a gagged mouth (a point to which I will return in a moment).

Reading this staged devotion in the context of an argument concerning the naturalization of Corky’s lesbian sexuality is, of course, troublesome, especially when many of the queerest moments in the texts are precisely produced through the strategy of “staging.” Yet, this staging does not illuminate the performative status of her masculinity. Rather, it represents the mobilization of the first of many Freudian tropes which ultimately operate to figure Corky’s sexuality through the body. The final image of this scene, a close-up of Corky’s face bearing a bloody gash near her eye and a gagged mouth, mark two central components of her embodied figuration as queer and which link nonnormative race and class significations to sexuality: vision and orality. Although less prominent than orality in the visual exposition of the film, the gash by Corky’s eye marks her queer difference on the body. Within the Freudian psychoanalytic paradigm, object choice is rendered through a discourse of visuality. Seeing the penis is what incites
castration anxiety in the woman. Of course, Corky has mis-seen or mis-recognized her object. Corky’s looking in the film is not merely related to the resolution of her Oedipal complex, but also a confirmation of her object choice and an expression of her sexual desire. Perhaps the most the potent rendering of Corky’s desirous gaze takes place shortly after the aforementioned elevator scene in which a shot to Corky’s face is followed by a slow motion shot of Violet’s legs walking away. The correlation between desire and looking is drawn when, after sex with Violet, she remarks “I can see again.”

More prominently however, Corky’s working class significations, her racialization as Other—both of which are central to her production of masculinity—and her female-bodied excess are all sutured together through images of abjection that trope the Freudian sign of the regressive lesbian: the oral. A signifying chain is established through the film linking Corky’s literal mouth to a number of other “watering” and dark, murky holes. The image of Corky’s mouth, bound and gagged in the first scene, shifts throughout the film, signifying desire after the aforementioned primal scene, and finally appearing later as bloody and horrifying. Corky’s mouth, both desiring and abject, registers her interior difference, monstrous and constrained. As a working-class plumber, Corky spends much of the film mining out “watering holes,” a characterization enhanced by the repetitive visual technique of high angle close-ups of toilet bowls. Of course, this material image of a watering hole is also symbolic of a specifically lesbian desire. The film’s imaginary lesbian bar is called “The Watering Hole” and a slow motion close-up of the dripping pipe that Corky unscrews to free Violet’s earring draws a correlation between water and both oral and sexual thirst.
The occupation in relationship to and symbolization of “watering holes” also generates her racial coding. In one of the first scenes of the film, Corky is shown snaking out a white bathtub covered in black, murky goo. This scene also marks the first of her characterization in terms of dirt—which covers her white shirt, and often her face, throughout the remainder of the film. Animating the “racial unconsciousness” of film noir (Lott), Corky’s figuration draws on the tropes of minstrelsy. Inasmuch as her name indicates her imitative phallic status (cocky), “Corky” explicitly connotes the practice of “corking up.” The dirt that consistently covers her face and body comes from various holes in the bathroom, invigorating associations with excrement and in turn the infantile and uncivilized behavior mobilized in minstrelsy to produce African American identity as biologically inferior. The racial operations are punctuated when an African American cop, the only embodied African American in the film and the only actual toilet-user, makes a brief appearance to use the restroom. The film cuts to a medium shot of the officer from the rear. The black material of his uniform, positioned in a perfect upside-down “V” frames the toilet, the textually established symbol of Corky’s watering hole.

These racially coded symbols and events do not appear in isolation however, but are an established part of the film’s slippage between “dyke” and “dark,” between “cocky” and “corking up.” Upon entering his poorly lit living room where Violet and Corky have been canoodling, Caesar remarks in an over-determined New York accent that “It’s fuckin’ dark in here.” Of course, his pronunciation of “dark” sounds so suspiciously like “dyke,” that the viewer suspects the female lovers have been caught.

The first scene of the film opens with the image of a black phallus which, through its

---

18 David Roediger draws this correlation between dirtying the face and infantile infatuation with excrement in his discussion of minstrelsy in The Wages of Whiteness.
metonymic linkage with Corky, symbolizes the imbrication of sexual aberrancy with non-white racialization. And Corky stands in as the replacement worker for Rajeev who "has returned home to India someplace."

Corky’s representation in terms of the abject, and especially the oral as abject, is significant first because it registers class/queer/racial difference through the body. As Julia Kristeva notes in *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, as a corporeal orifice the mouth “signifies a boundary of the self’s clean and proper body” (75). Far from clean and proper, Corky, in contradistinction to the function her name suggests, leaks fluids everywhere. Perhaps obviously, the oral orifice as a watering hole also doubly signifies as the other, more threatening, “watering hole.” Abjection is significant moreover, in marking ambiguity and the failure of a self-contained subjectivity. Because attainment of the clean and proper body is integral to the production of a fully-constituted self, Corky’s leaky, dirt-covered representation is central to announcing not only the regressive, and therefore partial subjectivity of the lesbian, but also underdeveloped racialization of “the primitive.”

Both the Freudian regressive and its production through the Kristevan abject illuminate Corky’s status as underdeveloped, a concept encoded through visual, spatial, and architectural dynamics of the film. Much of *Bound* takes place in two spaces ostensibly connected to one another through a singular wall. On one side of the wall is Violet’s home—a well decorated space which, despite its un-domestic signifiers (guns in the refrigerator and ropes in the cabinet)—remains entirely legible as a home and one that is specifically tended to by a wife or mother figure. Conversely, the other side of the wall reveals a practically barren space that, while not Corky’s actual home, is her
representative spatiality. Its hollow expanse is punctuated only by Corky’s transitive construction supplies, which consequently, never make much constructive progress, and obnoxious floral wallpaper composed of repetitive diamond structures. Many scholars have drawn attention to the ways in which the sexual triangulations of the film are reproduced through objects in the mise-en-scène. Interestingly, they have everywhere identified triangles in the diamonds rendered on the walls and floors, yet have failed to recognize that diamonds are not merely two triangles, but triangles that mirror each other. Thus, I suggest that the wall itself comes to represent a mirror between the different spaces and the gender identities and sexual object choices of the female characters who dwell within them. The status of the wall as mirror is visually rendered through two scenes in which Corky and Violet perform mirror image actions simultaneously against the wall. Indeed, in one of these two scenes, close ups of the wall paper on each side of the wall reveal diamond structures.

The mirroring function takes on special significance in the context of psychoanalysis, for to be the masculine lesbian regressive in Lacan’s figuration is to be re-positioned in the imaginary, the pre-cultural space prior to the mirror stage. Thus, Violet’s side of the mirror represents the woman who, because she is feminine, has ostensibly resolved the Oedipal complex normatively and is therefore legible as a subject (although a second-rate one). And as a feminine subject, she occupies the fully constituted space of the domestic. Quite conversely, Corky exists in the pre-symbolic that is not shaped by the gendered language of Lacan’s “Law of the Father” and therefore does not emerge as a legible subject. Her space is a “no man’s land” structured by a

---

19 Lee Wallace’s “Continuous Sex” mentions the triangulations in passing while Jean Noble’s “Bound and Invested” engages a full-length discussion of triangles in film’s “sexual geometrics.”
grander architecture (symbolically of sexuality), but bearing no signs of culture. Because she does not truly occupy the space of the father, she cannot build a home. To reiterate this affiliation between the lesbian and the racialized primitive or pre-cultural, I remind the reader that this apartment is also positioned as the home of the Indian Rajeev. Metaphorically then, the wall (through which Corky is introduced to the primal scene) becomes the mirror (stage) by which both kinds of lesbians are trapped. Corky cannot leave this pre-cultural space and Violet’s femininity figures her lesbianism as illegible.

*The Essential(ized) Laborer*

The figuration of Corky’s sexuality through embodiment and interiority is significant not merely because it demonstrates how resilient Freudian conceptions of immature lesbian subjectivity are even in ostensibly “queer” projects or because lesbian regression continues to be coded in racial terms. Indeed, the full significance of this filmic construction cannot be comprehended merely by considering the symbolic operations of sexuality and race, for this film, as an effect and constitutive force of the racialized and sexual logics of American culture, demonstrates the deep imbrication of the symbolic with the material. Typical engagements with the isolated sexual symbolics of the film, such as that demonstrated by Jean Noble, perpetuate a form of queer theory which as Alexander argues “ha[s] almost emptied these disciplines of any attention to the histories of colonialism and race” (285) and which obfuscate the reliance of First World” performativity through consumption on labor of the Third World. Indeed, seriously considering these relationships between the material and symbolic operations of the film illuminates that Corky’s essentialized sexuality, her figuration in terms of embodiment, is
central to her production as the laboring ethnic whose endeavors undergird Violet’s potential for transgression.

Despite the fact that few scholars have investigated the capitalist themes in the film, they play a prominent role in *Bound*, which, significantly, was originally entitled *The Business*. The economic operations undergirding *Bound*’s mobster plot represent networks of (late) transnational capitalism. Caesar is part of a patriarchal global money laundering organization connecting the US to India and Italy (a point made explicit by an airline ticket which reads “Trans Global Air”) which, as Corky suggests, “has lots of money and no rules,” and considers acts of violence and deaths which take place through capitalist operations as “all part of the business.” While scholars have endeavored to separate the gender and sexual thematics of the film from its capitalist context, they are very much situated within these logics of global (late) capitalism, a point symbolized by the opening scene’s foregrounding of the linkage between sexual “choices” and “prices.” Yet, the gendered and sexual logics that are produced within the context of late capitalism produce far different roles, outcomes, and relationships to power for the two dyke characters Corky and Violet—which are very much related to their racialization and classed statuses. A comparison of two images nicely encapsulates the diametrical figuration of the two characters in relationship to capital. The film offers two similarly shot close-ups of Corky and Violet which focus specifically on their mouths. In the image of Corky, her mouth is gory, seeping with blood. In the image of Violet, a reflection in the bathroom mirror, her mouth is smeared with red lipstick. This parallel imaging structure highlights significant differences between the two character’s imagining. While Corky is bloody, the oozing and uncontained abject body, Violet’s violation is merely on
the surface (a point made explicit through the mirror), a messy and smeared affectation, which in only moments is fixed, returned to its original and perfect performative form when she goes back out into the apartment to assist Caesar in his plan to dupe the mobster Mickey.

The "late capitalist" context of the film explains much about the divergent figurations of the two characters in relationship to class, racialization, and sexual identity. The superficiality or surface-ness of Violet's violation and her ability to fix herself up and return successfully to the scene of heterosexuality—a characteristic reflective of her performative and "queer" figuration—is enabled through a specifically classed and racialized femininity, white middle-class femininity, because of its historical relationship to consumption practices. Taking the late capitalist intensification of consumption as a central theme, *Bound* considers the gendered effects of the penetration of the private sphere by commodity capitalism. What once operated as the feminine safe-haven from the cruelty of the industrial laboring public sphere, is in this film entirely commodified. As Donald Lowe argues "the late capitalist household located in the hegemonic terrain of exchangist practices," is "neither a viable retreat, nor an institutionalized private space. With the breakdown between the public/private dichotomy, the household has instead become a center of consumption" (93). In turn, its centrality as a consumptive force has generated significant shifts in both the bourgeois family and "the signification of gender traits" (142). Significantly, in *Bound* "the business" and "the family" are interchangeable terms not only for the mobster Caesar, but also less obviously for Violet who describes her relationship with Caesar as "work" in a conversation with Corky. That Caesar "launders money" as an occupation then literally launders money after it is covered in
blood after a botched mob interrogation exemplifies the invasion of the domestic by (an implicitly violent form of) capitalism.

If, as I have already suggested in my discussion of the penetration of the private sphere by the late capitalist intensification of consumption, the domestic space is no longer “domestic,” neither is femininity any longer natural, but bought and sold. That is, Violet as a female partner and potential wife is bought, a kept woman,\(^{20}\) but so too is her femininity itself. Violet’s feminine performance is characterized in particular by goods. Her clothing, shoes, hair, and makeup are fetishized by the camera. And the opening scene catalogues her feminine accoutrements in a visual exposition, illuminating their status as “goods” or objects which signify sufficiently without a body to wear and animate them. Race and class are so central to this performance not only because of purchasing power, but because historically white, middle class femininity has been articulated intensely through a relationship to commodification and consumption, the fashion industry being exemplary of this trend. The embeddedness and signifying power of this commodified feminine iconography is heightened by the fact that Violet “is not” middle to upper class; she is “class-passing.” The film offers two clues to Violet’s class background. Her father, like Corky, has an old Chevy that he works on himself, aligning him with Corky’s working-class status. And Violet’s previous employment is as a stripper, a far less lucrative form of sex work, before Caesar “makes something of her.” Violet’s viability as a middle to upper class white woman is never questionable, however. Likewise, is it never necessarily disruptive in classed terms. As Gwendolyn Foster suggests in her book *Class Passing*, class-passing is not troubling, but rather “like

\(^{20}\) Violet: “Caesar, you rented me like you rented this apartment”
whiteness, is not often noticed or examined. It is essentially viewed as normative behavior, especially in America, where one is expected to do as much class-passing as possible...” (4). That Violet’s class performance is neither questionable nor disruptive intimates the signifying strength of white middle-class/upper class femininity.

Exploring not merely the isolated “queer” aspects of the film, but their situation within a late capitalist narrative illuminates the idea that the conditions of possibility for Violet’s performance and transgression are precisely commodification and the wealth to consume. Middle-class white femininity, is central to both Violet’s capacity to perform as a viable subject and her symbolic mobility. In this way, Violet’s sexual representation demonstrates the slippages between queer theory and Donald Lowe’s characterization of sexual lifestyle, an exteriorized production of sexual subjectivity through the consumption of goods. In short, it is as much access to capital and goods that make performance possible, and therefore the exteriorization of sexuality, as the political and destabilizing endeavors that queer theory celebrates. And this form of self-production, which relies on the commodification of identity, is made possible through the often invisibilized ethnic labor of workers of the global South.

If Violet represents a form of exteriorized or queer sexuality, whose gendered instability is enabled by the consumption of products, then Corky’s interiorization becomes symbolic of a racialized labor which makes it possible. Multiple symbolics converge in the primitive and under-developed spatiality that Corky occupies and to which she is metonymically linked. Inasmuch as this space represents a failure to materialize her existence within a Freudian/Lacanian imaginary, it also represents an abject economic lack. On one hand, it invokes the historical rejection of capitalist
formations articulated in lesbian-feminist socialist discourse which lead Ann Pellegrini to suggest that lesbianism operates "as the abject in a capitalist culture" (142). That is, the space which reflects/represents her sexual identity is symbolically not domestic, but also not populated by commodities. Not only does Corky fix things over and over again, never purchasing new ones, but she is jailed for the crime of "the redistribution of wealth," a decidedly anti-capitalist endeavor articulated in Marxist rhetoric. Perhaps more significantly, however, the space animates associations with the "underdevelopment" of the "Third World." Not only does Corky take over the space and the laboring position from Rajeev who has "returned home to India someplace" but the space functions as a subaltern against which the "First World" constructs its identity. Invoking all of these significations, Corky functions both as a failed consuming subject and as a racialized laborer. The reliance of Violet's performances upon the labor of Corky intimates, in part, the film's coding of Corky in interiorized and racialized terms. This figuration works to naturalize her laboring function in much the same way as popular "nimble fingers" discourse work to naturalize Asian women's mental and physical capacities for tedious labor practices.²¹

Indeed, Corky's laboring, dirt-covered body is hypervisible in the text. In a discussion of Corky's female masculinity, Wendy Minkoff notes that she is almost always shot working, making a spectacle of "her butch body at work" (154) and describes this as a mode which functions to buttress Corky's masculine performance. Minkoff's assertion that her laboring operates merely as a constitutive force in Corky's signification as butch indicates a failure to see labor and its racialization as a significant aspect of the

²¹ For a more extensive discussion of "nimble fingers discourse see Winifred R. Poster, "Dangerous Places and Nimble Fingers: Discourses of Gender Discrimination and Rights in Global Corporations."
film. It is a blindness which, as in the case of Noble, resonates with queer theory’s
general disengagement with issues of labor and global capitalism that undergird the
performative and often consumptive subjectivity that queer represents (Hennessey). Yet,
as I have intimated, Corky’s labor is central to Violet’s endeavors. On a basic level,
Corky performs simple tasks for Violet, retrieving her earring from a sink drain. But
more significantly, Corky both “masterminds” a plan as Violet relays the details of
Caesar’s relationships with his mobster cronies and performs all of the “behind the
scenes” preparations in her “underdeveloped” apartment to ensure Violet’s successful
performance in duping Caesar by convincing him that Johnnie Marzzone has taken the
cash. The classed and racialized relations of power secured by this dynamic are made
explicit through the repeated declarations of Violet’s “pleasure” in her interactions with
Corky. As Saidiya Hartman argues in her discussion of minstrelsy, a representational
legacy which Corky’s signification draws upon, the violence inherent in the white
ownership of African American subjects was often rendered through enjoyment.22

While Corky is both a critical or resistant consumer and an essentialized ethnic
laborer whose work is rendered invisible, the film finally recuperates her character into a
neoliberal paradigm proving that, as the film’s tagline suggests, “you can’t buy freedom,
but you can steal it.” While the film characterizes Corky and Violet’s actions as a form of
resistance, a perspective which both “stealing” and the lesbian “drive into the sunset”
intimates, a sustained critique of the relationship of queer theory to a global capitalism
organized along racial lines is ultimately foreclosed. Significantly, earlier drafts of the
film’s screenplay presented a more critical relationship between the possibilities of queer

---

22 See, in particular, Chapter One: “Innocent Amusements: The Stage of Sufferance.”
sexuality and anti-capitalism. Immediately after Corky’s confession to Violet that she engages in “the redistribution of wealth,” she details her first experience with class-motivated stealing.

I started stealing when I was little. We were piss poor, which is not an excuse, just a fact. The first time I remember so vividly. A bunch of us kids were at Waxman’s Drugstore, when Mr. Waxman, who was a mean old prick, always worrying about us robbing him, dropped a roll of quarters. I can still hear that sound, those quarters, because right then something clicked inside of me. Some instinct took over and as everyone, including Waxman, dove down, I reached up and emptied the cash register. I gave most of the money to my mom. I told her I found it at the train yard. She was so happy she cried, calling me her lucky charm. Fifteen years later, I guess my luck ran out.

While stating that her status as “piss poor” was merely “a fact,” it nonetheless serves as justification for evening the score with the wealthier “prick” Mr. Waxman. This redistributive encounter also links sexual pleasure with the experience, as Corky nostalgically recounts the sounds of the events, and of course, the praise and approval she receives from her mother. Thus, in this earlier narration, the pleasure Corky derives from an encounter with female sexuality is both redistributive and symbolic. Yet, the “redistribution of wealth” that finally closes the scene is a fairly contained “redistribution” into the pockets of Corky and Violet, and one which ultimately introduces Corky into both the pro-capitalist narrative of the film and the performative coding that characterizes the film’s white subjects.

In the much-discussed final scene, in which Corky and Violet are imaged waist-up in the cab of Corky’s “brand new” truck wearing similar leather jackets, Corky affirms their essential sameness remarking “Violet, you know what the difference is between me and you?” and answering herself “me neither.” If, as Jean Cortiel suggests, this scene renders the femme Violet a viable lesbian subject, it also renders Corky a performative
capitalist one. Donning shades, an object heretofore worn only by the white mobsters, the actors in the global laundering network, Corky demonstrates a newfound investment in both the consumptive desires of late capitalism as well as its performative (rather than interiorized) codes. Not only does this scene mark the shift in the representation of Corky’s subjectivity from interior to exterior, but it also explicitly connotes a shift in Corky’s laboring practice. Corky has disposed her ’63 Chevy which she endlessly tinkers over in favor of a brand new high-tech truck, a move which both indicates the end of her laboring and intimates the active labor someone else has put into this new truck.

While the film troubles heterosexual norms and “un-binds” the two, it does so finally by promoting an uncritical neoliberal agenda focused on individual freedoms and consumption. Yet, by focusing merely on the “queer” aspects of the film, as a number of queer scholars have done, important capitalist and racialized operations are obfuscated. Recognizing the reliance of queer performance on developments of late capitalism and its racialized organization of production and consumption does not necessarily undermine the political aspects of the work Violet’s character does in Bound. It does not, in short, undermine the symbolic disruption which her performance engenders. There is, after all, no queer performance strategy that can be imagined outside of capitalist operations. Yet, such an isolated form of analysis contributes to a queer theory and politic which reifies the late capitalist intensification of consumption and invisibilization and essentialization of racialized laboring. Indeed, it contributes to the conditions of possibility for the mobilization of queer in the name of capital that appears, full-fledged, seeped in the simulacra of reality television, and entirely depoliticized in 2003’s Queer Eye for the Straight Guy.
CHAPTER 2
THE CLOTHES MAKE THE (QUEER) MAN (WHITE):
QUEER EYE, SEXUAL EXTERIORITY, AND LATE CAPITALISM

"In one of those extraordinary postmodern mutations, the apocalyptic suddenly turns into the decorative
(or at least diminishes abruptly into something you have around the home)..."
--Frederic Jameson, Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Bound was largely touted as “queer” in both popular discourse and academic scholarship. This characterization persisted, and continues to persist, despite even several themes that very much undermine—or at least trouble—the “queer” political status of the film: the narrative circumscription of queer subjectivity within the private sphere, the neoliberal objective of the film’s queer performances, and the erasure of racialized labor in the production of identity through commodity consumption. The critical reception of the interior design/makeover-themed reality program featuring five gay men released in 2003, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, however, has not been so generous. Jose Esteban Munoz, for example, argues that Queer Eye “signals the onset of a full-blown neoliberalism” (101) and notes its resonance with Lisa Duggan’s articulation of “a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized gay culture anchored in domesticity” (102). Similarly, Paul Allastone has characterized the program as a “bourgeois fairy tale of heteronormative reparation...metonymizing the consolidation of the Bush Jr. led United States of Empire” (209). Those troubling
relationships between queer subjectivities and global capitalism, merely intimated in *Bound*, appear fully developed, indeed hyperbolically, in *Queer Eye* in a mode which queer critics cannot ignore. If Violet’s deployment of the overdetermined object-signifiers of the *femme fatale* in her performance of a sexual/gendered self is “queer” because it troubles the heteronormative assumptions of Caesar, finally duping and doing away with them (even if it is only in the quest for cash), the mobilization of objects—indeed commodities—in *Queer Eye*’s performance of sexual subjectivity largely eschew the disruptive capacities of the exteriorization of gender/sexuality instead using this conceptualization of gender for conservative ends. No longer couched in narrative, but hypervisibilized through the generic conventions of reality television’s infomercial simulacra, *Queer Eye* represents the mobilization of queer “sexual lifestyle” in the service of a global late capitalism, heteronormativity, and whiteness.

Situating contemporary visual cultural forms of sexual subjectivity within a capitalist frame, the economic operations that provide the conditions of possibility for “the new hegemony of the destabilization of referents,” this chapter examines the effects of the exteriorization of sexuality engendered by the late capitalist shift from use value to exchange value. While the exteriorization of sexuality, most often described as “surface inscription,” has been largely celebrated as ushering a subversive break from the disciplinary sexuality Foucault famously announced, *Queer Eye* illuminates the dark (and yet very white) side of this equation wherein sexual exteriorization is mobilized, through whiteness, to promote heteromasculine consumption. Yet, this chapter is not merely an indictment of *Queer Eye*, an endeavor which, as its critical reception suggests, may be too obvious. Rather, by highlighting those connections between sexual subjectivity in
*Bound*, that which has been celebrated as “queer,” and *Queer Eye*, that which has been dismissed as “lifestyle,” and situating queer theory within the context of a capitalist frame, it raises questions about the saliency of “queer” as a political project.

**“Sexual Lifestyle” and Late Capitalism**

As I have already suggested, *Queer Eye* is exemplary of what has within the last decade come to be characterized as sexual lifestyle. As a number of scholars have argued, cultural conceptualizations of sexual identity have largely, though not exclusively, been undergirded by historically specific capitalist logics.²³ Foucault’s famous narration of the emergence and consolidation of sexual identities in the Victorian era, while primarily a discursive analysis, associated the rise of a disciplinary model of sexuality with capitalism. Though sparsely detailed, Foucault links the emergence of sexual identity as a condition of essence and even biology to the rise of a white bourgeois class and its project of consolidation as a coherent class. Giving more explicit attention to the historical materialist conditions of this cultural formation in her text *Profit and Pleasure*, Rosemary Hennessey aims to illuminate the modes through which “this cultural-ideological process was overdetermined by the logic of commodity, a logic that binds ways of knowing and forms of identity to changes in the relations of production” (103). The new technologies of sexuality that Foucault explicates are, according to Hennessey, produced and mobilized as an effect of the shift from household production to market production. No longer sufficient for securing social reproduction in a context that was not confined to the home, family alliance gave way to disciplinary sexuality, that is, an

²³ Michael Warner suggests that this poses a conundrum for queer theorizing because it equates advanced capitalism with queer progress.
interiorized conception of a sexual self organized by heteronormativity. Mapping a new form of sexuality as object choice onto older form of gender norms, disciplinary sexuality operated as a mode to secure social reproduction attentive to the new organization of the market, serving as the basis for a distinction between the public and private spheres (Lowe). At the same time that interiorized sexuality secured the private/public distinction, the market, through the wage labor and commodity production on which it was based, provided the conditions of possibility for the emergence of a coherent homosexual identity, a point John D’Emilio has famously argued in “Capitalism and Gay Identity.”

While the rise of market capitalism was fundamental to the constitution of an interiorized conceptualization of sexuality, it also laid the foundations for an exteriorization of sexuality which would come to fruition in late capitalism. As Hennessey notes, “this complex relationship between family and sexuality” that emerged in the context of market capitalism “lay the conditions for a full blown commodity culture” (pg). Endeavoring to create ever-expanding markets for capitalist appropriation with the rise of rationalized over-production, the “media displaced needs into desires and offered the promise of compensatory pleasures, or at least the promise of pleasure in the form of commodity consumption” (99), and in so doing, induced the formation of newly desiring subjects.

The displacement of need into desire through the media that Hennessy describes is the foundation of Donald Lowe’s narration of the shift from identity to sexual lifestyle—the outward signification of difference through the consumption of commodity. The new demand for consumption beyond use-value incited a shift in the ideal
commodity form which, in generating value through its capacities for exchange, became emptied out of an essential meaning, function, and purpose. For the aim of generating value, “the late-capitalist commodity has, in effect, become a three-level semiotic hybrid of social and cultural values, changing product characteristics, and exchange value” (47). This process is exemplary of what Frederic Jameson has characterized as “depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality” (9) that characterizes postmodernism or “the cultural logics of late capitalism.” Not only do commodities come to primarily take on value through semiotic promotion, but those which become most valuable by the 1980s, as Hennessey suggests, are those which provide mobility across the boundaries of the decaying public and private spheres. The commodity, no longer essentially meaningful, also promotes the movement or fluidity across boundaries. As an increasingly consumptive economy which promotes the satisfaction of desire through commodity purchase, the changes in commodity form reflect the changes in the shifts in sexual subjectivity. In this formulation then, identity itself becomes “emptied out” of the body, shifting instead to an outward signification of difference in sexual lifestyle through particular commodity consumption.

_Lifestyle: Another Politic of Queer_

The production of sexuality through consumption of and metonymical association with particular commodities is structured by the generic conventions of the reality television makeover program. Mobilizing the imaginary of the late capitalist subject who always “lacks” (Hennessey, Morreale), the genre of the makeover reality program is premised on a “wounded” subject who necessarily seeks total transformation. Perhaps
obviously however, this genre is far more invested in foregrounding a visual
transformation than a spiritual or psychic one, even in circumstances in which the
spiritual or psychic remains a component of the program (Deery 213). The visual
spectacle of the transformation of self through commodity consumption, often called “the
reveal,” stands in for, rather than being reflective of, a holistic or “interior”
transformation. Diverting attention from the consumptionist motives, sentimentality
works to soften cynicism of its commercial project. Nonetheless, the production of self
through commodities is hyperbolized, foregrounded as spectacle as a function of the very
genre.

While many reality makeover programs produce sexuality as a commodity image,
*Queer Eye*’s framing of “the wounded” and “the knowers” in a heterosexual versus
homosexual frame renders the idea of the sexual self through specific consumption of
goods—lifestyle—explicit. That is, the “wounded subject” is male heterosexuality itself,
its consistently infantile and abject representation (a point to which I will return in a
moment) indicating the failure or inability to care for the self in properly capitalist terms.
In contrast, homosexuality itself is figured as “hip” style, the knowledge of new products,
and performance of middle class etiquette. Within this framework, straight men are
metonymically linked to “jugs of wine” and “polyester shirts” while queer men are fine
wine and natural fibers, not to mention, Ralph Lauren and Lord and Taylor. This
metonymical link is, of course, strengthened by the representational conventions of the
reality television program as infomercial. That is, the show’s makeover experts are both
imaged in close proximity to the brand labels/signatures and often narrate the values of
the products. “The Fab Five” are simultaneously subject, advertisers, and sign vehicles exciting the product’s desirable significations.

While both heterosexuality and homosexuality are produced primarily through metonymic association with particular forms of commodities constituting a “lifestyle,” male heterosexuality also has an additional signifying anchor which works to produce heterosexuality in more identitarian terms (while, of course, never shoring up this representation). The signifying “anchor,” the visual presence of the heterosexual male’s female object choice, works to secure identity in a mode not available to the program’s queer subjects. Because the disembodied queer aesthetic is mobilized to transform the newly unstable heterosexual lifestyle, the threat of the homosexualization of the heterosexual is animated. Easily dispelling this threat through the visual presence of the female object choice, heterosexuality is produced both as “lifestyle” and object choice/desire. Because of the differently sexualized frame in which the show operates, queer is, as Toby Miller suggests, “disarticulated from its referent” and its significations are redeployed in the production of “metrosexuality” (112). The “affirmation” of heterosexuality through the presence of the object choice as amelioration to the threat of an exteriorized heterosexual lifestyle, is central in differentiating heterosexual representations of sexuality from queer sexuality. While heterosexual is the style and desire/act, queer is merely style, pure exteriorization. The centrality of queer exteriorization of sexuality to the program is highlighted by the banning of an advertisement that featured gay male intimacy, a dictate rendered due to the commercial’s “borderline inappropriate content” (Kooijman 107). That is, gay style can be represented, but neither gay identity nor practice can.
The freeing of queer representation from identitarian indicators allows the mobilization of queer lifestyle in the service of commodifying heteromasculinity and promoting properly consumptive heterosexual citizens of a neoliberal economy. One of the primary modes through which the program performs this action is a civilizing discourse. Situating *Queer Eye* against a historical representational legacy that has imaged gay men as murderers and sexual predators, scholar Kylo-Patrick Hart concludes that these images of queer men are “positive” (pg) because it appears that gay men generally possess a range of impressive talents that straight men and straight women seem incapable of fully developing, enabling them—just like comic-book superheroes—to swoop in at just the right moment and help transform an ordinary straight guy's life into a glamorous existence (246).

While Hart never himself asserts this connection, his figuration of the “more developed talents” of queer men against their historical coding in primitive terms is indicative of a significant shift in the representation of gay men from primitive to civilized. As elucidated in the introduction, the 19th century project of consolidating white bourgeois subjectivity and producing it status as both civilized and normative, was achieved largely against the simultaneously primitive and perverse sexual and racial Others of the working class and newly colonized “savage” nations (See Foucault and Stoler). The representational shift evidenced in *Queer Eye*, however, is not demonstrative of a new cultural imaginary which, no longer invested in the primitive coding of nonheteronormativity, has finally recognized the full humanity of queers, a conclusion to which Hart’s analysis points. Rather, the bizarre deployment of a civilizing discourse through the very subjectivity it once coded as primitive is evidence of a hegemonic shift in referentiality in which queer can be mobilized in the service of the capitalist
reterritorialization of the final frontier of consumption: heteromasculinity. In a simultaneously stunning and entirely unnotable shift, queer subjectivity becomes the new purveyor of civilization, undergirded as it is by racialized and gendered logics, while (mostly white) straight men become the wretched and wallowing abject.

This figuration is established at the beginning of each episode wherein the “Fab Five” invade the domestic space of the heterosexual male subject of the *Queer Eye* makeover. “Downplay[ing] socioeconomic lack” that characterized older forms of reality television such as “Queen for a Day” (Deery 212), the queer specialists instead remark upon their dirtyness, indeed the absolute filth, that flourishes in the homes and on the bodies of heterosexual men. The deployment of a discourse on abjection to characterize what is often simply economic lack represents a significant shift in the circulation of discourse on class. Lack indicates the inability to purchase, foreclosing an increasing commodification of self while the abject intimates a dirtyness which can necessarily be recuperated through the purchase of cleaning agents, whether those be toiletries, clothes, or home décor.

As my explication of the historical coding of queers as primitive has intimated, the production of white heteronormative masculinity in relationship to these others has traditionally operated to figure white manhood in terms of rationality, the “mind” of the Cartesian duality, and therefore the calculated exercise of “self-mastery” over the passions, the body, and any other number of temptations of excess (Bederman 12). Perhaps more formative in the cultural imaginary is the conceptualization of the (white) male in terms of the “clean and proper body,” a symbolic status which Julia Kristeva articulates in her *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Consolidating his
subjectivity against the polluted and polluting female body, whose maternal and
menstrual capacities trouble the relationship between the self and the not-self, his is
symbolically the self-contained body. While the white male may not be understood as the
abject figure in psychoanalytic terms, he may in some sense be understood as the abject
in a late capitalist economy rooted not in production, but in consumption. The “self-
mastery” described by Bederman that has historically characterized white, middle-class
masculinity is a self-restraint exercised against the petulant excess and consumption that
characterized white, middle-class femininity. In short, the “lack” of consumption that has
characterized white middle-class masculinity not only incites its dirty connotations but
threatens the coherency of a culture rooted in consumption.

The coding of white heteronormative masculinity in terms of abjection lays the
groundwork for the queer men’s role literally as “cleaning agents” where cleaning, means
not merely managing “the health of its organism” (124) through the regulation of “the
clean and proper body” as in Foucault’s articulation of the modern “autosexualization of
the self,” but rather an intensified hypervigilance of the self which endlessly generates
new places and things that need to be clean, a process which might be more appropriately
characterized as “the properly commodified self.” Significantly, Queer Eye emerges in
the midst of calculable shifts in men’s relationship to aesthetics and commodity
consumption, factors which Toby Miller figures as the very “conditions of possibility”
for the production of the program. While many of the numbers are illuminating, most
instructive are the statistics on both hair care and plastic surgery, traditionally feminine
endeavors. Propecia, a drug designed to reduce the activity of alopecia, “secured a 79
percent increase over the last five years” (113) while hair color sales increased by “25
percent in the five years after 1988” (113). Less drastic, but nonetheless significant, plastic surgery once incontrovertible evidence of the gendered “beauty myth” in America, increased 34 percent from 1996 to 1998 (114). This drastic shift in numbers illumines steady ground for an intensification of heteromasculinity in which the program engages. Accordingly, “the Fab Five,” as exemplary subjects of style, clean up these dirty heterosexual monkeys by teaching them their civilized ways, indeed by constituting a new and distinct lifestyle: metrosexuality. The success of Queer Eye was critical to bringing “metrosexuality” to the fore of popular culture discourse. Although first printed in 1996, and likely in circulation longer, the term experienced an invigorated cultural currency in the wake of the program.

Whiteness is central to the rhetoric of cleanliness deployed in the promotion of the intensification of sites of commodification. Not only is the discourse of civilization rooted in a racialized legacy wherein cleaning and care of the white self meant distinguishing it’s body from class and racial others, but four of the “Fab Five,” as gleaming white subjects, are figured as the ideal to emulate. Indeed the whiteness of Carson Kressley, Ted Allen, Thom Felicia, and Kyan Douglas, as it connotes a particular class location, is mobilized not merely to sell, but to constitute the signifying value of the program’s featured products themselves. In a new capitalist logic wherein identity is signified through consumption, the program’s singular queer of color—Jai Rodriguez—is whitened through his consumptive similarity with the four white men who take prominence in the program. Moreover, despite his status as the purveyor of culture, his ethnic culture is rarely alluded to, let alone represented in a visual mode. While, as Marilyn Halter argues, ethnicity, like sexuality, “is increasingly manifest through self-
conscious consumption of goods” which “assist in negotiating and enforcing identity differences” (7), the show does not put the commodification of non-white ethnic identity to use, a move which figures whiteness as the program’s primary mode for enlivening consumption. As a result, “culture” is exemplified through activities such as putting engagement rings into chocolate boxes and buying flowers for the wifey, performances typically aligned with a historically white/European mode of chivalry. Finally, Paul Alliston has noted that the program’s project of “primping and pimping for empire” (pg) is an essentially racialized endeavor wherein the white nations of the global north invisibilize the labor of primarily of-color nations of the global south in its great pursuit of consumption.

The “Fab Five,” newly invested with powers of civilizing through stuff, not only clean up heteromasculinity making them viable consumers, but do so in the name of heterosexual union. When not planning a wedding itself, the “Fab Five” are preparing their men for dates and proposals. Not only does this operate to make the promotion of heterosexual subjects central to the narrative, tightly circumscribing the limits of the “Fab Five’s” “queering capacities,” but it also works to contain the narrative within the space of intimacy. The “Fab Five” are preparing their male subjects not for the business world, but for the domestic one. The strength of performance of domestic expertise, indeed the inhuman capacities produced through the use of simulacra, is central to the production of the intimate limits within which they operate. Even on the occasion that more public spaces, such as stores, are imaged, they are always recuperated as primarily domestic spaces through the erasure of a public and through the intimacy shared between the “Fab Five,” the store employees and the straight male subjects.
In short, *Queer Eye* is exemplary of lifestyle because it 1) presents a subjectivity, primarily as exterior, produced through the differentiation of commodity consumption 2) mobilizes that subjectivity as a way of invigorating consumption 3) promotes a neoliberal perspective on economy which is evidenced, in part, through its invisibilization of the racialized labor which sustains a hyper-commodity economy 4) circumscribes its project within the private sphere, effectively foreclosing political possibilities.

*Contextualizing Queer*

As I have suggested in the introduction, the very same characteristics that are rendered invisible in popular and scholarly discussions of *Bound* for the greater concentration on its “subversive” status, appear here as too flagrant to ignore. Yet, I suggest that these similarities between a project celebrated as “queer” and one dismissed as “lifestyle” should invite critical interrogation. Despite the obvious theoretical correspondences between the two, queer theory (and here I am using Judith Butler’s work as exemplary), is rarely situated in the economic context which serves as the very condition for its possibility. Indeed, Rosemary Hennessy notes that “despite their diversity, knowledges that come under the signature queer theory invariably, and at times insistently, separate the primary object of analysis from capitalism as a class-based system of production” (53). But Both “queer” and “lifestyle” share a common locus in what Frederic Jameson famously characterized “the cultural logics of late capitalism.” The evasion of this form of contextualization is suspect in and of itself considering that the similarities between Butler’s theorization of sexual subjectivity as “surface inscription” and Jameson’s narration of late capitalism as producing a “depthlessness, a
new kind of superficiality” (9) are perhaps obvious. Indeed, the theoretical foundations from which Butler proceeds are precisely those described by Jameson as a form of simulacra “which finds its prolongation…in contemporary theory” (6) and, in particular, Saussurean linguistics. Deleuze and Guattari’s epic *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* convincingly demonstrates how the instability of language that undergirds Saussurian linguistics, and therefore Lacanian psychoanalysis, is an effect of late capitalist logics. Leaving the explanation for why such obvious evasions have been allowed to proliferate unchallenged to more experienced scholars, I will endeavor to situate queer theory in its economic context.

Queer theory’s central project is to render a critique of the liberal bourgeois subject, consolidated as an “instrument of regulatory regimes” (“Imitation” 13), by interrogating a conceptualization of the essentialized self, undermining the capacity for free action, and delinking embodiment from interiority. In accordance, Butler argues for a shift away from identity as either essential or interior, instead proffering both “disclaiming” and gender performance as modes of “affirmative resistance to certain regulatory operation[s] of homophobia” (“Imitation” 16). Recognizing the dependence of the regulatory organization of culture on sexual identity, Butler deploys Saussurean linguistics and Lacanian psychoanalysis to deconstruct a sexual self and announce a new model for subjectivity. According to Butler, there is “no subject prior to its constructions,” (Bodies 125) instead sexual subjectivity “only takes on its meaning by abjecting an other” (“Imitation” 15), its “specificity…demarcated by exclusions that return to disrupt its coherence” (“Imitation” 15). If, in contrast to the liberal/humanist model, the sexual self is produced only in relationship to other significations, it indeed
has no essence, but remains “a truth effect” (*Gender*), an “ontologically consolidated phantasm” (“Imitation” 21). Compelled psychically by terror (*Bodies* 96), the appearance of both the stability and legibility of sexuality emerges from the performance of reiterative acts “on the skin, through gesture, though movement” ("Imitation" 29).

“Never fully accomplished” (“Imitation” 24), sexual identity must compulsively repeat itself, not only illuminating its own status as imitative but opening up possibility for resistance to it. Re-imagining the subversive potentiality of the heteronormative conceptualization of lesbians as “failed copies” of heterosexuality, Butler suggests that the proliferation of such failed imitations can serve to “reveal the imitative structure of gender itself,” (*Gender* 178), the absence at the center of a heteronormative symbolic.

Clearly, for Butler (and a number of others), the radicality of queer theory is rooted precisely in the refusal of an equivalence between body, interiority, and signification that modernity insists upon, releasing the biologized and the essentialized subject from the regulations of “sexual truth,” and finally troubling the foundation upon which bourgeois heteronormativity is able to produce itself and consolidate its power.

Having spent much of this essay detailing lifestyle as a sexual subjectivity produced within the commodity logics of late capitalism, it is already possible to see the clear theoretical convergences between the two. Indeed, in his own explication of sexual lifestyle, Donald Lowe endeavors to situate Butler’s work within its provenance precisely because her arguments assert that “natural, stable gender identity is an effect rather than a cause” (137). The destabilization of subjectivity which occupies the center of her articulation of subversive potentiality is, in the lifestyle model, a key indicator of the operations of commodification which have worked to undo the modern conceptualization
of an interiorized identity produced in the service of industrial capitalism. By raising this point, I do not wish to suggest that there is any “authentic” form of queer sexuality unmired in capitalism which should properly provide the model for a truly queer political praxis. This is an impossibility that I do not want to belabor. Rather, I am interested, at the suggestion of Rosemary Hennessey, in how Butler’s articulation of exteriorized and fluid sexuality is illustrative of a failure to attend to the material context of possibilities for disruption. Despite Butler’s assertion that “parodic displacement depends on a context and reception in which confusions can be fostered” (qtd. in Hennessey 117), she never once suggests that the economic context which has served as the condition of possibility for the destabilization of queer may work against the potentiality of transgressive performance. In accordance, she fails to imagine that a generally destabilized context of sexual identity may undermine the subversive work that queer purports to materialize because heteronormativity no longer provides the stringent regulatory conditions it did during earlier periods.

Briefly considering Queer Eye as “queer” in the sense advanced by queer theory illuminates the problems that may arise from isolating queer theory from its economic context as the mobilization of “surface inscription” through consumption in the production of queer lifestyle demonstrated in Queer Eye is not so radically distinct from the formula of surface inscription or sexual exteriorization which Butler explicates. The program quite literally stages queer sexuality as a surface, a style. Indeed, it is a style which is a performance of femininity on the male body, even if it never approaches the full excess of drag. Consumption of and knowledge about fashion and the meticulous care and purification of the body have historically been feminine characteristics, an effect
of the historical regulation and commodification of femininity, (Bartky) a point which a
number of scholars writing on *Queer Eye* have noted. (See Ramsey and Santiago, Morish
and O’Mara) Moreover, the program stages the absence of a queer referent of sexuality
by rendering illegible all identitarian indicators of sexual interiority, whether it be “the
phantasy structure, the act, the orifice, the gender, the anatomy” (“Imitation” 17). And
yet, despite the production of sexuality as “surface inscription” and the potently
signifying absence of a sexual “core,” or indeed verification in any other form, these
representations of queer sexuality stop short of denaturalizing heteronormativity. Indeed,
“detached” from the referent, the “Fab Five” are mobilized as “sign vehicles for other
sign contents” (Lowe 133), energizing commodities in the very service of
heterosexuality. In a narration of the operations of postmodernity, strangely prescient in
this context, Jameson’s assertion that “the apocalyptic suddenly turns into the decorative
(or at least diminishes abruptly into something you have around the home)…”
materializes in *Queer Eye*. The program images a particular “queerness,” a sexuality that
is not interiorized, but both “decorative” and domestic and which never finally becomes,
as in Butler’s model, “apocalyptic” and subversive, even as it performs a certain
feminization on the male body.

*Changing the Frame: Sexuality, Race, and Subjectivity in the Late Capitalist Context*

Throughout this project, I have situated Butler’s analysis of “surface inscription”
within a framework of “the cultural logics of late capitalism.” In closing, I wish to make
clear that my endeavor to read “queer” in this light does not emerge from a desire to
dismiss its possibilities merely because it is located in capitalism, nor does it seek to
undermine the cultural threat that queer continues to pose or that either of the two visual cultural texts discussed here engage in, even in circumstances in which those might be minimal. Finally, and most importantly, I do not wish to suggest that this is the only outcome of engagements with queer theory. Indeed, there are many and many more disruptive ones. Rather, I hope this endeavor has illuminated the ways in which an isolated engagement with sexuality, as distinct from capitalist logics and their racialized forms of organization, will undoubtedly produce theoretical shortcomings that Queer Eye materializes, ones which install the "decorative" where once it was thought the "apocalyptic" would emerge. Or perhaps even more dangerously, that queer could become a theory in which "wealth and education seem to be prerequisites for the adoption of new counter-hegemonic forms of identity" (Hennessey 109). A sound response to the problems with queer theory that I have attempted to illumine, however, is not to reinvest in "identity" as a form of resistance against the postmodern loss of depth and referentiality. Donald Lowe argues that

We cannot fall back on the body as an individual identity, subjectivity, private self, or any other stable, autonomous or unitary identity. Such conceptualization may have been useful under industrial capitalism, because they presupposed the oppositions between public/private, work/leisure, individual/society, production/reproduction...[but these formations] no longer exist in late capitalism. (175)

Not only does identity rely upon a number of binaries—public/private, work/leisure, individual/society, production/reproduction—that, as Lowe argues, no longer exist in the context of late capitalism, but a return to the logics of identity necessarily risks reproducing the racial and sexual logics that existed in industrial capitalism.

Rather than turning to a nostalgic reinvestment in identity, this project turns to
modes of response that lay within the provenance of postmodernity, yet which also announce the operations of capitalism and its articulations through race. While queer theory endeavors to trouble individualism, it has, as these two visual texts illuminate, been mobilized in relatively isolated terms, promoting a concern with the (in process) self as the primary mode of resistance to heteronormativity. This has, as Munoz argues in the introduction to this chapter, produced a queer subjectivity very much in line with the objectives of neoliberal politics. As an alternative direction for the isolated endeavors that have developed in the wake of queer theory and a destabilized sexual subjectivity in general, Hennessey argues that

making visible the connections between forms of identity and capital’s historical processes can change the frame through which we might imagine the horizon for change and can perhaps enable us to forge new forms of subjectivity and political alliance that might target for transformation the exploitative, oppressive, and acquisitive relationship neoliberalism protects. (109)

In accordance with Hennessey’s argument for queer critiques that account for the relationships between forms of subjectivity and capitalist operations, the final chapter investigates Shu Lea Cheang’s 1994 Fresh Kill, a film which represents a “change in frame.” That is, Fresh Kill makes visible the relationships between destabilized queer and racially hybrid subjectivities, the networks of transnational capitalism through which they are produced, and the racialized Third World labor that sustains them. Rather than celebrating destabilizing endeavors as political, the film instead figures them as effects of transnational flows and networks of media communications. In a context in which depthless subjectivities are the norm, Fresh Kill imagines other models of political resistance. The film posits visual technologies, the very sites which engender both
destabilization and exploitation, as the means by which queer, anti-capitalist, and racist political struggles are connected and resisted.
CHAPTER 3
"IT’S ONLY WEIRD BECAUSE WE’RE WIRED":
HYBRIDITY, CONNECTIVITY, AND POLITICAL POSSIBILITY IN FRESH KILL

...something has changed...the Faustian, Promethian (perhaps Oedipal) period of production and
consumption gives way to the...era of connections, contact, contiguity, feedback and generalized interface
that goes with the universe of communication”
--Jean Baudrillard

Detritus: Material and Symbolic

As I detailed in Chapter Two, the New York that Queer Eye images is a site of
privatized consumptuary fantasy. Mobilizing a naturalizing simulacra, Queer Eye tightly
controls that which is made visible, presenting a New York that consists exclusively of
domestic spaces and shopping meccas while simultaneously fetishizing sexual otherness
to excite consumption. In this way, Queer Eye renders invisible the potential crossings its
presence engenders by promoting a heterosexual, white, and liberal consuming subject.
While Queer Eye represents a neoliberal fantasy—a world available to all for purchase—the
New York of Shu Lea Cheang’s Fresh Kill (1994) takes that world and makes legible
the abject which haunts its constitutive limits: the material waste that accumulates in its
wake and the symbolic detritus of both workers and hybrid subjectivities produced in a
hyper-consumptive economy.

63
Set on the former Staten Island, now named “Fresh Kill,” a landfill which accumulates seventeen thousand tons of garbage each day, the geography orients the film. The detritus that *Fresh Kill* hyperbolically references represents both the overlooked garbage and pollution that is a precipitate of hyper-commodity production and consumption, as well as the symbolic status of the hybridized Others who are simultaneously figured as the effect of late capitalist “progress” and whose marginalized status provides the justification for their exploitation. “Positioning the periphery at the center” (Marchetti) of the narrative, *Fresh Kill*’s primary subjects are economically impoverished, racially other, queer, homeless, and schizophrenic polyglots who reside on the dump. Even while those marginalized in the US context take center stage in the film illuminating the emergent ethnic, racialized, and gendered hybridized forms that characterize the US, these Others are always also linked to the laborers who reside in the Third World, in particular Asia and Africa. For example, shots of the interior spaces of Naga Saki, an Asian fusion restaurant which sells Yamakazoo fish lips as “a concept,” are cut with shots of indigenous men of Orchid Island, off Tawain, laboring as fisherman. Not only does the film cite these labor practices, but it calls attention to other networks of transnational capitalism linking the groups. A “ghost” barge scheduled to dump in Staten Island instead traverses the globe finding a more suitable Third World locale for its waste. And finally, jarring cuts of indigenous resort employees being trained in the art of Euro-American entertainment illuminate the connections between US consumption and Third World labor and subjectivity in a mode that refuses the invisibilizing endeavors of late capitalism and stages new forms of spatiality which exceed national borders.
This context, which announces rather than invisibilizes both the organization of production and consumption as well as the emergent forms of connectivity that characterize late capitalism, is central to the film’s conceptualizations of exteriorized subjectivity. Performative and hybrid subjects abound in *Fresh Kill*. Yet, their parodical excesses and border-crossings function as troubling mechanisms as often as they are easily and pleasurably consumed. For example, in one scene, a group of indigenous children on Orchid Island wear Madonna t-shirts while they are directed to “shake your asses harder” in learning to perform “native” dances (and native identity) for a resort that is under construction. While in another scene, a well-dressed bourgeois African American duo, who speak in rhyme announce, “the incorporation of indigenous rhythms” as the surest way to achieve success in the entertainment industry. While the first image denaturalizes the “nativeness” of often essentialized indigenous subjects through signifiers of American popular culture icons and staging the learning of, rather than exhibiting intuitive knowledge of, (what are likely “fake”) “native dances,” the second demonstrates how easily “indigenous rhythms” are appropriated for profit in the US entertainment industry. In the first of another set of such parallel images, three of film’s protagonists sit on a psychiatrist’s couch: Shareen, an East Asian lesbian, her African American daughter Honey, and her Asian American friend Jianbinn, who plays a parenting role to Honey. Critiquing their parenting, the psychiatrist insists upon the necessary binaries of “yin and yang, top and bottom, push and pull.” In another, Global Exchange, a multi-national corporation, images two little boys in a commercial, one white and one brown, to advertise their slogan “we care.” While sexual and racial difference functions as disturbing liminality in the first, it merely serves as marketable
signifier of benign multi-culturalism in the second, which as it turns out, obfuscates the racial violence in which the company engages.

Eschewing a neoliberal rhetoric of atomized individualism, *Fresh Kill* actively situates this “weirdness,” that is, exteriorized, hybridized, and shifting subjectivities within a state of being “wired.” In *Fresh Kill*, “wired” represents both the global interconnectedness generated in the context of transnational capitalism as well as the technologies, primarily television and the internet, on which these forms of networked operations rely, even to the point, in some cases, of creating cyborg-like states of being.\(^{24}\) By tracing the networked operations between the corporate appropriation of First and Third World labor, the corporate use of these spaces as dumping grounds, the hybrid ethnic and sexual formations that emerge in the late capitalist context, and the ethnic and sexual fetishization of the market, Cheang’s film provides new ways to begin re-thinking queer theory and politics. Insisting upon rather than obfuscating connections between production, consumption, and subject formation, the film locates the exteriorization of subjectivity, not only within the logics of poststructuralist models of language as many queer theorists have argued, but also within the logics of late capitalism, and in particular geographical crossings and the emergent autonomy of the visual or surface. Giving complex attention to the manifold uses to which destabilization has been and can be put, including both market-based lifestyle and a performative politic, the film suggests that exteriorized sexuality and performativity are not political in and of themselves. Indeed, nearly every character in *Fresh Kill* is figured to some extent through exteriorization

\(^{24}\) In this passage, I am referring to Donna Haraway’s discussion of the “cyborg.” As a figure who represents a fabricated hybrid of machine and organism, the cyborg is a liminal subject straddling a number of binaries, and representing “partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity.”
including top executives and schizophrenic homeless persons. For example, the homeless schizophrenic "Mother Mary" performs a violent and indecipherable monologue about motherhood while the wealthy corporate executive Stuart Sterling waxes poetic in a schizophrenic integration of languages and dialects from the countries he visits in his business travels. In this context then, exteriorization only becomes resistant when it engages in large scale communications and in particular, those which are linked to other struggles against the excesses of capitalism, racism, and heteronormativity. While this model is demonstrated in a number of ways in the text, including the character Jiannbinn's internet activism, it is most fully articulated in one of the final scenes in which the film's protagonists sabotage a broadcast of The American Communications Corporation and enumerate the racist and heteronormative project of The Global Exchange Corporation introducing a new anti-corporate movement. Finally then, the film posits a vision of political connectivity, where subjects and subjectivities are situated within networks of late capitalist operations and the technologies that enable them, but who mobilize those very same connections for political possibility in a mode that never reinforces the identity politics of "community" or collectivity.

*Wired: Geographies and Mediascapes*

The networks of interconnection between transnational corporate action, the exploitation of First and Third World labor and other resources, and the hybridized subjects occupying the US-based dump that *Fresh Kill* investigates are generated both through the circulation of commodities and through visual techniques which together produce new models for conceptualizing spatiality. Space, no longer constrained by
geographical proximity, represents relationships and connections established through different forces.\textsuperscript{25}

The narrative action for all of the characters in \textit{Fresh Kill} is generated through contaminated fish caught by indigenous fisherman in the waters of off Orchid Island, near Taiwan, a dumping ground for nuclear waste in the 1980s. The fictional Yamakazoo, or sucking fish, makes its way to the US as an in-demand commodity for the hip restaurant Naga Saki, run by a Taiwanese-American businesswoman. Extracting only the lips, ethnic flair meets sexual fetishization as “a concept” for which bourgeois consumers pay “top dollar.” GX, or Global Exchange, a corporation which has through a recent purchase of the American Communication Corporation achieved a global monopoly, uses the poisoned fish bodies as the base for the cat food Sea Wonder. This chain of connections and exchanges all converge at the film’s nuclear characters, a queer family unit consisting of an interracial lesbian couple, the East Asian American Shareen Lightfoot (Sarita Choudhury) and the white Claire Mayakovsky (Erin McMurtry), their Asian American friend Jiannbinn, their African American daughter Honey, Claire’s African American mother Mimi, and Shareen’s Native American father Clayton. An employee of Naga Saki, Claire feeds the Yamakazoo to her daughter Honey who, like the radioactive cats of Fresh Kill that consume Sea Wonder, seems to disappear at the hands of GX. This final event engenders GX’s public denouncement of both Claire and Shareen, through the decidedly nonnormative characterization of their queer motherhood as “unfit, unsettled, untidy, unsafe, and unmoral.” The poisoned fish, contaminated in the first place by the military exploits that the restaurant name “Naga Saki” animates, trace the linkage

\textsuperscript{25} I draw on the discussions of Aylish Wood in her article “Fresh Kill: Information Technologies as a Site of Resistance” to generate this discussion of the film’s reconfiguration of geographical space.
between the multiple critiques that the film produces: corporate exploitation of Third
World labor and resources, the consumption of ethnic and sexual lifestyle, and
normativizing regulations of racialization and sexuality. Moreover, the networks
generated through the circulation of these fish provide the connections for the film’s
activist interventions. Events which are typically not only understood as isolated, but
which are actively constructed as such through neoliberal discourse, share a space
visually and narratively in this film.

While the radioactive fish remain the central networking force, a number of other
links are secured between the economic and social forces affecting the film’s protagonists
and those affecting the Third World. As already noted in the introduction, a “ghost” barge
slated to dump on Staten Island, travels the world looking for a better locale, settling
finally on Africa’s Zwaziland. A militant activist group, The African Unity Network,
feeds back communications to the US using media-sabotage tactics to stage the capture of
an American hostage and to encourage boycotts of a range of products. Intercepting the
messages, the computer hacker Jiannbin, responds to these images generating a
feedback loop through internet communications. The television sets which erupt
excessively all over the public and private landscapes of New York wash up on the
shores of Orchid Island.

Just as significant as the film’s narrative to illuminating these interconnections, is
the mobilization of non-conventional and non-linear visual techniques. Deploying
montage styles, the US-based visual narrative is violently interrupted by cuts to images of
Orchid Island. Nuclear waste is buried in the agricultural areas. Televisions wash up on
the shores next to accumulating piles of poisoned dead fish. Indigenous children are

69
trained in "native" dances for the resort that is under construction. Looking from binoculars on Staten Island, Claire sees the fisherman bobbing in the water off of Orchid Island. Symbolically linking both the detritus and forms of ethnic fetishism that take place in the US and in these Third World locales, the montage and abrupt cutting styles generate a geographical disorientation that troubles borders, linking the spaces.

While this disruptive cutting between images and events of the narrative's locales illuminates the relationships between the apparently distant geographical spaces, the filmic techniques used to represent media communications, such as television and the internet, create the effect of a space that transcends geography, that which Arjun Appadurai calls a mediascape. An emergent form of spatiality created in the context of transnational flows, the mediascape is a field of high-speed communication which indistinguishably combines information on commodities, news, politics, and entertainment, blurring the "realistic" and fictional and generating a world of simulacra. The film's initial shots of television sets and computer screens, which take place in both the US and on Orchid Island, locate the objects geographically and narratively. That is, the televisual and computer frames are situated within the narrative's primary frame in a mode which gives specificity to both their locations as well as their viewers. For example, in the film's opening scene, Shareen is shot wandering through a particularly cluttered part of the landfill, gazing at a pile of televisions which work despite their lack of electricity source, a factor which intimates, but does not yet hyperbolize their autonomy. Examining the objects more closely, she fidgets with their dials. The film cuts to full-screen shot as a program flickers onto the screen. In the first shot of the pile of television sets, screens appear as frames within the primary narrative frame. Even when
the frame fills the entire screen for the film spectator, Shareen’s knob adjustment indicates that she controls the appearance of the media. Yet, as the film progresses, the visual communications disrupt the film’s narrative, occupying the entirety of the screen with no actor to control them. In a second similarly organized scene in which Shareen wanders through the landfill, this shot is interrupted with a shot of Mimi’s activist program “Yours Truly” filling the entire screen. As Mimi demands knowledge of “why Sea Wonder is being pulled out of circulation,” this shot is interrupted by a broadcast of GX executive Roger Bailey covering up the scandal that Mimi announces. Finally, this second shot is interrupted by a third, a news program announcing the death of an ACC news reporter trying to uncover GX’s role both the poisoning and the “disappearances.” The film then cuts back to Shareen. Dislocated from the narrative, these three sources battle for representational authority of the scandal in the mediascape. No longer situated in the narrative, no longer isolating or identifying the viewing subject, and no longer controlled by him/her, communications take on an autonomous position and ultimately become the narrative itself. The visual shift that this film traces—from being located within the narrative to becoming a force which is capable of not only disrupting the film’s primary narrative but also of becoming its own autonomous space of communication—demonstrates the emergence of new spaces of information exchange that produce connectivity visually. In so doing, Fresh Kill makes explicit not only the ways in which the First and Third Worlds are linked through the media, but also the ways in which the struggle for representational authority of events results in the production of simulacra.
Because this technique produces a disjunction from the film’s primary narrative generating an autonomous space of visual communications, the character Mimi becomes coded in the visual terms of the screen. Imaged both in the same mediascape and through the same digitized forms as GX spokesman Roger Bailey, African Unity Network’s revolutionary African woman, and the newscasters of ACC who never appear outside of this mode of representation, Mimi is figured as simulacra. The multiplicity of subjectivity that Mimi’s name intimates becomes particularly clear in two montage visual sequences. In one, Mimi is shot from the frame of her television program gleefully shaking her fists near her face. Cutting to a digitized, technicolor image of the African Unity Network’s female representative angrily screaming both in the same physical position and situation within the frame, Mimi is aligned with both her status as activist and as image. The second image is more complicated. Cutting from her image framed within a single television, to one in which her image occupies the entire screen, and finally to a shot where she imaged, from five different angles, on five different screens, the film uses this series of shots to establish her signification “as image” in a mode which both underscores her status as simulacra and undermines her capacity to be “yours truly.” That the character Mimi, established within the narrative of the film as “a real person,” takes on an autonomous position within the mediascape in a way that calls attention to her performative status, intimates the film’s treatment of exteriorization as both deeply imbricated within the operations of late capitalist modes of communication as well its force as destabilizing and simultaneous potential as a disruptive form of communication.
Weird: Exteriorized Subjectivity and Late Capitalist Logics

As intensely destabilizing forces, both the geographical crossings and the autonomous spatiality of visual communications characteristic of late capitalism are integral to the multiple forms of exteriorized subjectivity that the *Fresh Kill* references. Many queer projects rooted in performance have staked politicization on revealing the fictional status of interiorized subjectivity. Drawing from linguistic models which stress the relational production of meaning, and the organization of culture through signification, these queer projects have advocated staging practices which incite symbolic disjunctures and illuminate the performative status of subjectivity. *Fresh Kill* interrogates this method, locating exteriorization not only in language (as it certainly remains a site of destabilization), but also in the porosity of geographical boundaries generated by transnational capitalism and the emergent forms of communication invested in “the surface.” Because *Fresh Kill* narrates exteriorized subjectivity as a condition of late capitalist logics, performative iterations of self are not exclusively figured as subversive in a political mode. Instead, they are the standard form of subjectivity that operates in the film.

Performative and hybrid subjectivities are central to the film’s interrogation of regulatory norms like racial essentialism, Orientalist investments in indigenous purity, heteronormativity, and excessive consumption-based desire. For example, the queer interraciality of the Mayakovsky-Lightfoot family, who occupy the center of the film, calls into question both the naturalization and normalization of heterosexuality, racialization, and the bourgeois nuclear family. A unit consisting of an interracial lesbian

---

26 For a more comprehensive discussion of this mode of political engagement, refer back to my explication of Judith Butler’s theorization of performativity and drag in the Introduction and Chapter Two.
couples, the white Claire Mayakovsky and East Asian American Shareen Lightfoot, their Asian American friend Jiannbin, their African American daughter Honey, Claire’s African American mother Mimi, and Shareen’s Native American father Clayton, the family engages in a number of crossings. Its non-nuclear structure, its queer mothers, and its impossibly multi-racial generationality all interrogate conceptualizations of the family as a “natural” unit and trouble the ideal model of white, middle-class, pure, bourgeois heteronormativity.²⁷

Just as this queer hybrid family illuminates the performative status of the nuclear white bourgeois family, Claire Mayakovsky’s hyperbolic performances of multiple gendered roles illuminate the constructedness of femininity. Marking her gendered and sexual performances—as queer woman, daughter, and mother respectively—as staged, Claire plays her accordion to the camera in three different scenes. In the first, Claire’s accordion playing obfuscates her lesbian sex with Shareen both calling attention to the performative status and playfully addressing the scopophilic gaze that has historically framed lesbian sex. Appearing on her mother’s television program after numerous aggressive bequests, Claire performs in a hyperbolically girlish uniform which disturbingly contradicts her age. And, after the disappearance of her daughter Honey, her accordion playing punctuates a highly stylized and violent scene in which Claire wrestles with her partner Shareen over the loss of their daughter.

²⁷In The History of Sexuality, Foucault argues that this model of the white, bourgeois nuclear family works to consolidate the power of white, middle-class status by distinguishing the normal and natural gender and sexual forms from the aberrant and perverse. Not only does this mean coding non-white racialization as nonnormative, but as Ann Laura Stoler argues in the imperial context, it means non-European subjects as deviant.
Yet, while these and other troubling imitations are central to the film’s critique of normativity and its forms of power, it does not uncritically celebrate the disruptive crossings enabled by exteriorization. Rather, in many instances, *Fresh Kill* illuminates the ways in which ethnic and sexualized performances and hybridized crossings are generated within capitalist flows and can easily be mobilized to engender fetishistic consumptive desires. As a hybrid formation of the film’s geographical and economic interactions between the US and Asia, the restaurant Naga Saki represents not only a troubling mixture, but also a mode through which, as the “sucking fish” metonymizes, a sexualized and ethnicized “concept” can be consumed. Moreover, as the name Naga Saki suggests, the desire for and consumption of otherness by Western cultures effaces the history of US violence in Asia.

In this space, Jiannbinn performs “Asian masculinity” by seductively preparing sushi for Pamela Mandel, an aggressively sexual white woman who has an Orientalist fetish for Asian American men. Sliding an obviously phallic knife sexually over his fingers (which embody an agility Mandel admires) in his preparation of “the quintessentially Asian dish,” he actively stages the castrating effects of Orientalist conceptualizations of Asian American feminization. Produced through US legislation regulating Asian American men’s labor and denying entrance to Asian women, the emasculation of Asian American has been installed both at the level of the national imaginary and psychic operations such that Asian American men are understood as castrated (Eng).²⁸ Marking both his knowledge of this imaginary and of the power

---

²⁸ I have chosen to proceed from the work of Eng in this description because of his explicit treatment of castration. A number of other authors however have also traced the emasculation of Asian American
dynamics in operation, Jiannbinn’s performance of castration, as a response to Mandel, refuses the naturalization that she assumes and insists upon. Despite the disruptive possibility of Jiannbinn’s staging of this Orientalist fetish as a “surface,” the context in which this happens undermines the critical thrust of exteriorization. That is, in the restaurant Naga Saki, exteriors of sexualized “Asianness” are bought and sold as a “concept,” as a form of lifestyle. Indeed, these Asian “concepts” are so emptied of meaning that the name Naga Saki functions not as a marker of an imperialist act of war undertaken by the US, but simply as an “Asian-sounding” name.

The Orientalized and sexualized performances in which Jiannbinn engages resonate with those of the indigenous children of Orchid Island. On one hand, the Madonna t-shirts they wear refuse a fantasy of a “pure Third World subject,” the essential difference produced in the (often scholarly) Western imagination which often amounts to primitivism in its “celebration” of difference (Chow). On the other, the directions they take to “shake your asses harder” while they learn a “native” dance for a resort that is being constructed, is an ethnic and sexual performance that is easily consumed by the West. That the ethnicized performances within these spaces shift so easily as the Asian fad gives way to an organic one (a point to which I will return in a moment), highlights the easy consumability of these performances. Naga Saki, its owner, and its workers simply transition into purveyors of Louisiana creole culture by changing the restaurant’s title (Mumbo Gumbo), costume, food, and décor to register the new difference. As in the case of the name “Naga Saki,” “Mumbo Gumbo” turns the violent British colonization of manhood. See Robert Lee, Orientalis: Asian Americans in Popular Culture and Jachinson Chan Chinese American Masculinities: From Fumanchu to Bruce Lee.
southern Africa and the hybrid culture of creole into something hip and consumable (and links historical British imperialism to the US’s dumping on Swaziland).

In contrast to *Queer Eye*, which renders queer a consumable lifestyle, yet endeavors to stabilize and naturalize white heteronormativity, *Fresh Kill* figures white heteronormativity in terms of exteriorization. Both geographical transgression and surface inscription converge in the representation of Stuart Sterling, an executive for GX. A “homeless” subject who traverses the globe for business opportunities, he speaks in staccato cadences combining multiple languages and accents, stock quotes and statistics, and digital scramble. Just as in Lacan’s description of schizophrenia, Sterling’s speech represents a breakdown in chains of signification resulting in a “rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers” (Jameson 26). While this disjuncture of surface/signifier from depth/signification that Sterling’s speech exhibits is registered through language, the specificity of its mixtures reveal other sources of destabilization. For example, his slippage between various accents and languages point to his many geographical traversals, flows, and dislocations that characterize transnational capitalism. His iterations in digital scramble, as a citation of the cyborgian mixture of human and machine, identify labor as source of hybridization (because much labor takes place through the computer). That the film locates his depthlessness, or the exteriorization of subjectivity, not merely in the instability of language, but also in the transnational flows that shape the lives of *Fresh Kill*’s characters is illuminated by the illness-inducing effects of the Yamakazoo fish; the radioactive effects incite a heightened form of schizophrenic speech.

Not only does his schizophrenic speech, produce his subjectivity as mere affectation, but his consumption patterns reveal an interest in consuming depthless
"concepts." He is both the primary consumer of Naga Saki’s Yamakazoo fish and he celebrates (by buying) objects from the “Neo-Depressionism” art movement which is "the visionary’s metaphor, all surface, the most obvious art of our time." He only fathers a child because “babies are the obsession of the decade.” The figuration of the film’s icons of white heteronormativity as exteriorized consumers whose subjectivity is a vacuous, nonsensical collection of signifiers of hipness, indicates a recognition of the polyvalence of gendered, sexualized, and racialized subjectivities that both Lowe and Sears predict. As a form of sexuality which amounts to buying sex and buying babies, in which difference is reduced to purchasing, the boundaries and regulations of sexuality are diminishing.

Despite the film’s assertion of the emergence of a polyvalence of subjectivities through difference-based consumption within a late capitalist economy, Fresh Kill maintains an important critique of the ways in which access to capital effects relationships to both symbolics as well as material conditions. This argument is produced in part through the parallel positioning of the characters Stuart Sterling and “Mother Mary.” A homeless schizophrenic woman who wanders through the dump clad in imitation New Testament costuming fashioned from discarded scraps, she represents a failed imitation of ideal (white) motherhood, incited, in part through her homeless status. “Mother Mary,” as the film’s characters identify her, is no one’s mother. Inasmuch as economic formations have left her homeless and family-less, she is “Mother-less Mary.” Much like her costume which references iconic signs of motherhood, but ultimately fails in its replication, Mother Mary’s schizophrenic communications reference normative gender codes, but do so in a mode which utterly disturbs them, figuring her finally as an
unsuitable mother. For example, in one monologue describing motherhood, she notes “You got two sacks. You have a sack in the back; you have a sack in the front. You put the baby in the back and you get the frog and you bite its head off. And you throw the head away.” She follows this speech by violently screaming “I can’t believe she has a baby.” In this disorienting diatribe treating the subject of motherhood, Mother Mary reduces a symbolic system linked to embodiment to mere materiality: “a lump in the front and a lump in the back.” Mixing codes in a schizophrenic form of communication, normatively gendered conceptualizations of motherhood as caring and nurturing become violent, non sequitur cues. While Stuart Sterling and Mother Mary share many characteristics of exteriorized subjectivities produced within the visual and geographical logics of late capitalism—in particular, “homelessness” and schizophrenic speech—it is only Mother Mary’s which results in loss. While Sterling can buy himself a baby, Mother Mary’s poverty results in the impossibility of maintaining both the symbolic status of motherhood (much as in the case of Claire and Shareen) as well as its economic conditions. Confirming this idea in one scene, she fishes in the sewer, presenting her cats (which she thinks are children) with imaginary fish for their dinner.

**Political Possibility**

Because *Fresh Kill* locates destabilization and exteriorization in geographical crossings and the visual logics of “the surface” and not merely language, these forms of subjectivity are figured as part and parcel of late capitalist operations, rather than overwhelmingly subversive forces. As the discussion above has illustrated, exteriorization is both subtly destabilizing and easily appropriated for consumptive
pleasure. Rather than nostalgically celebrating interiority as a mode of political resistance, however, the film suggests that late capitalism’s networks of production and consumption, and the technologies which sustain them, also become the modes through which political resistance is possible. Technologies, like the internet and television, are both spaces of communication and public deliberation, and paradoxically, spaces that have become isolated through discourses of individualism in an increasingly interconnected transnational context.

While screens are the primary apparatus through which the GX corporation communicates its hypocritical message “we care,” provides false news information about the state of the environment, communicates its plans to dump waste in Zwaziland through its broadcast subsidiary ACC, covers up its involvement in the disappearance of radioactive cats, and dismisses the company’s involvement with the missing radioactive child by denouncing Claire and Shareen as “unfit, unsettled, and immoral,” they are also the form of communications through which these struggles are linked and resisted. Early episodes of Mimi’s television program, “Yours Truly,” raise concerns about the state of Staten Island’s pollution. Yet, as the scope of GX’s involvement in many of the narrative’s problems come to light, primarily through other visual communications, the scope of her own critical project expands to include the international pollution of the fish in the waters off Orchid Island, the US dumping in Zwaziland, the GX-engineered disappearances of the contaminated “evidence,” and finally acknowledgment and advocacy of queer parentage of her own daughter. The expansion of the scope of Mimi’s activist project and televisual communications are informed by Jiannbinn’s own strategies of information gathering and the networks he has established through his
computer. Jianbinn’s attempts at surfing the web are sabotaged by the political interventions of the African Unity Network. Interrupting the internet’s myriad of product advertisements, the image of African Unity Network’s icon, an African woman who appears in technicolor graphics in staccato imaging disturbed by network feedback, is mobilized to narrate historical and present colonial intervention and exploitation, to solicit assistance in boycotting various goods, and finally to announce the organization’s refusal to have their land used as a corporate dumping ground through staging the torture of an American hostage. Even while these visual strategies are the film’s primary political tool, the status of their “reality” is always in question, a move which situates these tactics in the realm of the performative.

It is also through computer hacking that Jianbinn learns of GX’s involvement in the “disappearing” of Fresh Kill’s cats. Incorporating this new information into the larger scope of her critique, Mimi expands her narration of their connectivity as well as their circulation through her program. Ultimately, Mimi joins her daughter Claire and her lover Shareen in their own sabotage of an ACC news broadcast in which they announce the list of GX’s numerous forms of exploitation and violation. Because each of these forms of visual communication is so highly regulated by GX, these activists must not only struggle for air-time, but engage in direct action tactics to spread their message. Much as these activist’s sabotage communications to disrupt the news program, they disrupt the neoliberal corporate narrativization of the many violent events that they have engendered. These disruptive communications not only provide the public with secret information, but actually generate active public interventions.
The characters of *Fresh Kill* take action as a response to the group's endeavors, searching for Honey despite the "illegitimacy" of her queer mothers and by generating a widescale campaign advocating green goods. But even as "victory" is achieved, it is recuperated as a desired product into late capitalist consumption. GX too invests in the new trend, making it a profitable commodity. This cynical, rather than utopian, ending to the film is illustrative of *Fresh Kill*’s refusal of "pure solutions" and insistence upon seriously considering the intricacies of capitalism, resistance, and subjectivity. Just as its subjects are largely hybridized, and modes through which subjects become exploited also become channels for resistance, resistance itself is absorbed into capitalism’s project.

Released in 1994, *Fresh Kill* narrates connections between queer and hybrid subjectivities and both the logics and laboring that characterize late capitalism which have only recently begun to surface as issues that require sustained investigation. Indicative of queer theory’s privileging of linguistic-based conceptualizations of subjectivity, the film *Fresh Kill* was overlooked in both queer and academic cultural arenas. Favoring the more flamboyant and performative representations of queer subjectivities to those subjectivities engaged with capitalist critiques, features such as Jennie Livingston’s *Paris is Burning*, received both widescale viewership and extensive treatment in queer scholarship. Despite its fairly tepid reception, *Fresh Kill* offers important ways of redressing shortcomings of queer theory and the performance-based politics that have emerged from it. Refusing a neo-liberal discourse of individualism, which queer performance-based politics have in many ways adopted, *Fresh Kill* actively remembers and renders visible relationships between exteriorized racialized and sexualized subjectivity and networks of late capitalist consumption, and the often
racialized labor that makes it possible. Perhaps most significantly, the film mobilizes those same networks, in which new subjectivities are produced, as forms of connectivity that engender political possibility.
CONCLUSION
“A Virus in the System”:
Gay Shame and Queer Futures

*We seek nothing less than a new queer activism that foregrounds race, class, gender and
sexuality, to counter the self-serving “values” of gay consumerism and the increasingly hypocritical left.*
--Gay Shame Manifesto

Throughout this project, I have endeavored to interrogate queer theory and its
mobilization in political practice by situating it within a framework that gives attention to
both historical materialism and racial logics. I have argued that the methodological
frameworks traditionally employed in queer theory have isolated its theoretical
foundations from the material conditions that make them possible. While queer theory
conceptualizes the politicization of destabilized subjectivity from linguistic theorizations
of the relational production of meaning, a number of scholars have located these same
operations within the hegemony of exchangist practices that characterize late capitalism.
Shifting the methodological approach to queer theory to one which considers the
racialized conditions of production and consumption has a number of implications. First,
it challenges typical celebratory iterations of “queering” that consider sexuality in terms
isolated from economic and other cultural networks in which they are produced. As my
investigation of the film *Bound* has demonstrated, such perspectives have obscured
the reliance of queer performance on imaginaries of racialized essentialism and a global division of production and consumption. Attention to these intersections illuminates not a deeply troubling queer force, but instead, the promotion of a neoliberal discourse. Second, situating sexual subjectivity within the analytics of late capitalism and racialization interrogates the extent to which the staged exteriorization of subjectivity is effective as a political strategy. In late capitalist conditions in which moral boundaries substantiate the organization of the economy less and less, queer subjectivity is mobilized to promote whiteness and heteromasculine consumption, an effect which the television program *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* materializes.

Considering the critiques that this theoretical framework integrating an economic and racial analysis animates, I have looked to conceptualizations of destabilized racial and sexual subjectivities imagined in Shu Lea Cheang’s *Fresh Kill* in order to present possibilities for rethinking queer theory and new models for political intervention. Interrogating more traditional iterations of queer theory, *Fresh Kill* narrates the destabilization of subjectivity through late capitalist flows, geographical crossings, and its emergent spaces of visual technologies. The active citation of the networked operations between late capitalism’s globally organized racialized labor and production of a new depthlessness and the hybridization of racial and sexual subjects also provides a way of re-imagining linked struggles. The communications technologies of late capitalism that engender new forms of exploitation also become the very site through which struggles are linked and racism, heteronormativity, and capitalism are resisted.

Despite *Fresh Kill*’s complex narration of the imbrication of the forces of late capitalist operations, racism, and heteronormativity, queer activism took a very different
route throughout the 1990s. As the drag king image introducing this project evidences, queer politicization has focused largely on performative practices that disrupt heteronormative symbolics. Not only has this generated strategies that analytically isolate sexuality, but it has done so in a mode that resulted in both commodity fetishism and racialized fetishism that mobilizes race merely as a sign to confer masculinity. Recently however, scholars and activists have returned to analysis which simultaneously considers the relationships between capitalist exploitation, racialization, and sexuality. Perhaps most notable is the organization “Gay Shame.”

Denoting not an internalization of heteronormative values, but rather a shame about the current operations of queer culture and politics, Gay Shame announces “a new queer activism that foregrounds race, class, gender and sexuality, to counter the self-serving “values” of gay consumerism and the increasingly hypocritical Left.” Like its predecessors, such as Queer Nation, Gay Shame mobilizes activist strategies such as “direct action” and “astounding levels of theatricality.” Yet, the ways in which these strategies are put to use differ markedly from actions such as the “Queer Shopping Networks” popularized by Queer Nation. While “Queer Shopping Networks” used theatrical techniques such as public displays of affection to mark queer presence in these spaces of consumerism, it also aligned itself with a white consumerism. Much as in the case of Shu Lea Cheng’s film, however, Gay Shame articulates relationships between sexual, racial, and capitalist exploitation.

In one action, entitled “The KKKutest of the Castro,” Gay Shame members staged a counter-performance to the Castro’s annual gay male beauty pageant calling attention
to both the white and consumerist underpinnings of the contest. In an advertisement for the protest, the group encourages activists to

dress to absolute, terrifying, ragged, devastating excess and bring... Blackened teeth, low-carb Iraqi crude (looks good, feels better), video head cleaner, botox damage, extreme collagen makeovers, creatine muscle madness, tina, Kimberly's coke, diamonds anything camouflage, the now-legal AK 47, blood (just in case the police or pride monitors aren't present), decaf Grey Goose applethins, more diamonds Tiffany's wedding bands, liposuction leftovers, photo-facial blush, sweatshop swimsuit couture (for the talent segment), depth, inner beauty and charm.

In both their advertisement and the mock-pageant protest, Gay Shame illuminates the intersecting operations of racism, consumerism, and sexuality. The logics compelling the display of white consumerist beauty standards that the Cutest of the Castro competition represents—hyperbolized here as “liposuction leftovers,” “botox damage,” and “creatine muscle madness”—are the same logics that compel “sweatshop swimsuits,” “blackened teeth,” and the pursuit of “Iraqi crude.”

Certainly, the activist endeavors of Gay Shame do not represent the extent of the possibilities for queer engagements with race and late capitalist operations. Indeed, the advertisement’s call for “depth and inner beauty” ironically contradict both the organization’s performative political strategies and their articulation of queerness as a radically destabilizing force. Yet, Gay Shame represents encouraging new possibilities for the future of queer activism. Refusing an isolated analysis of queer sexuality, Gay Shame articulates the complex networks between sexuality, race, and capitalist operations and declares its mission to be a “virus in the system.”
BIBLIOGRAPHY


