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Insurance Plan for the Gay Man: Who benefits from media stereotypes?

By Meghan A Burke

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The popularity of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* seems to be a testament to the growing acceptance of LGBT people in the media and in daily life. But below this surface, trouble lurks.

The Emmy award-winning *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* has been a hit since its dashing entrance onto the reality TV scene. But this entrance came at a politically fragile time for LGBT rights in the United States. On what seems to be the surface, the popularity of the show is a testament to the growing acceptance of queer people in the media and in daily life. But below this surface, I think there's trouble lurking.

Before I'm accused of killing the mood, let's have some fun. And what's more fun than role reversal? After all, that's an important part of what happens on the show. The Fab Five are five gay men who suddenly are the bosses over some poor (though not economically poor) dude who can't seem to button his shirt correctly, let alone choose a proper wine for dinner. No pun resisted, the queer guys are on top for the night. Gone from the lens is homophobia, which is still the basis for denying human rights to, and inflicting violence on, queer people. At worst we see some discomfort. And change is never comfortable. Yet even in the responses of some home viewers, this discomfort doesn't seem so hateful. "After all, the gay guys do have a good sense of style, and they sure straightened this slob out." That's right: *Who da man?*

But role reversal does not a revolution make. In fact, it could slow progress for queer people in the United States. Part of the reason for this is that while grooming, shopping, and designing, we're also defining what it means to be gay and straight. "Gay men *do* have a better sense of style" becomes an uncomplicated polarity to "Straight men *don't*." As with any production like this, there is also a simplification. Here we see what gay men have to offer (style, attitude, yuppie food), and what straight men have to gain. In that process, we learn what gay is, and what straight is. This is especially apparent when the object of design is another gay man, as was the case on a recent episode. In this episode the perspective became one of correction instead of valuing diversity within the gay male community (or the straight male community, for that matter). In the end, where do gay men belong? We learn they belong in the kitchen, in the malls, but never in pleated khakis, and certainly never the streets, holding hands and asking for equal rights.

And let's not forget about those kitchens and malls. In a major way, and like the entire genre of decorating and design reality TV out there, the right look does not come free of cost and always needs updating. Part of what goes on, especially for the viewers at home, is this element of shopping. Anticapitalism rants aside, this large, perhaps central element of the show, doesn't get us very far. Even if we shop with the spirit of acceptance and multiculturalism in purse, the real benefit is not to us, nor to the gay men whom we have taken as the shopping and culture dropping angels on our shoulders. The acceptance in the media somehow feels co-opted, sold out, or itself turned into a commodity for purchase. Suddenly it's not the LGBT community any longer that stands to profit from this show. And it's not really the straight guys either, even with all the new products.

So who really gets the goods? Any real way to value (beyond the price tag) those who don't identify as heterosexual or marriage bound in the United States is missing from the picture here. We have a queer plan for the straight man, but what about an insurance plan for the gay man? How about a political climate where our realistic choices for president are not represented by either an amendment to the constitution or an anything-but-marriage policy? How about an end to acts of violence against men and women who seemingly threaten the fragile security of heterosexuality in straight individuals? How about medical visits to sick partners, validation as a family in benefits plans, and better funding for HIV and AIDS research and prevention? And again, how about something more than that gay TV friend, there to take you shopping and tell you whether your butt looks fat in those jeans? How about a broadened idea about what it means to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or straight? How about something that's about queer people, and not for straight people; and this time, something that's not fiction or comedy?

I'm not arguing that these issues should be front and center on shows like *Queer Eye*. Perhaps they shouldn't be present at all in such a format. After all, most people watch TV, and design shows in particular, for relaxation, for fun, for distraction. But we run into a problem as a culture if our distraction sets in too deeply. Especially if we take some level of playful role reversal or simplified identity as progress we can tune out and purchase. It's not that the revolution will not be televised. It's that it hasn't been, because with a TV show as our trophy, there is no revolution to speak of. We're not seeing diversity in sexuality. We're not seeing a meaningful change in how we value queer people, especially in practical ways that make their lives easier. And we're definitely not seeing an outcry—on the same scale as the mass media which brings us this show—to the radical politics of the Bush administration. Of course there's an exciting social movement going on for LGBT rights, but it's nowhere near the level of popularity of *Queer Eye*.

Until we get beyond the point where this show serves as a “normal part of a healthy diet” for a still homophobic culture and political climate, and until it presents to us the possibility for queer life beyond the multiple choice diversity staple so present in our culture, we can't be satisfied with even the small amount of progress it has carried with it. After all, if this is reality TV, we should at least feign some concern for reality. We can't let ourselves get so distracted or appeased by what seems like a good thing that we're too busy to look at that reality once we turn off the TV. Once that happens, we can agree with *Queer Eye*'s Carson and truly proclaim: *What a difference a gay makes!*

Meghan Burke is a Ph.D. student in sociology at Loyola University Chicago with a focus on critical theory and racism. As such, she resisted the urge to also criticize the proposed Hip Eye for the White Guy, saving such parallels for her academic life.