

MG Episode 3, Queer Eye X Cruel Optimism

SPEAKERS

Marcelle Kosman, Hannah McGregor

[*Material Girls* Theme plays: "Shopping Mall" by Jay Arner and Jessica Delisle]

Hannah McGregor 00:30

Hello, and welcome to *Material Girls*, a scholarly podcast about popular culture. I'm Hannah McGregor.

Marcelle Kosman 00:37

And I'm Marcelle Kosman. And, Hannah, I have a question for you.

Hannah McGregor 00:41

Go right ahead.

Marcelle Kosman 00:42

Okay, a few listeners have asked very, very reasonably, what exactly we mean when we say that we are doing a materialist critique of something. So I'm gonna put you on the spot. Could you just explain that in a nutshell, please?

Hannah McGregor 00:56

So, materialist critique at its simplest possible level is a form of cultural critique. So that's kind of like scholarly engagement with a cultural text of some kind. Critique is not like saying it's bad. It's just like thinking about it. And talking about it. And writing about it. You know, that stuff. So it's a form of cultural critique that is specifically interested in things like modes of production. So like, how the thing was made, contexts of reception, so like, what people made of the thing that was made, and the larger historical and ideological contexts for stuff like production and reception.

So you would distinguish it as a scholar from formalist critique, which is, like, really interested in close textual analysis of the thing itself, regardless of its particular moment of context. But materialist critique is really interested in the question of why a particular cultural work or practice emerged at a particular moment. Yeah. So like, a materialist critic might look at a pop culture phenomenon and ask, for example-

Marcelle Kosman 02:17

Why this? Why now?

Hannah McGregor 02:20

Yeah, yeah, that's a real classic materialist question. And what a fun coincidence. That's also the name of our first segment where we introduce our object of study, and start to think about what historical and ideological conditions underpin its popularity. Doesn't that sound like fun?

Marcelle Kosman 02:40

That does sound like fun, and also ten out of ten on that segue.

Hannah McGregor 02:44

Thank you. Thank you.

Marcelle Kosman 02:45

You are welcome. So would you like to introduce us to our object of study?

Hannah McGregor 02:53

Yeah, I really, really, really would.

[Upbeat interlude music plays]

Marcelle Kosman 02:57

Okay, Hannah, time to answer the question. Why this? Why now? Starting, I assume with the “this” that we're going to talk about? What's the “this”?

Hannah McGregor 03:08

So in our pilot episode, you introduced us to the concept of masculinities. Plural. As in there can be multiple masculinities, rather than a single masculinity. And then you framed contemporary tender masculinity as, in part, a response to the #metoo movement before arguing that the widespread desire for an acceptance of tender masculinity finally created a media landscape where we could see Prince Harry as a person.

Marcelle Kosman 03:38

Mhm. That's so true.

Hannah McGregor 03:39

Mhm. That was like your thesis.

Marcelle Kosman 03:43

Like a thesis! And then you came along and complicated the whole thing by asking, in the classic materialist critique move, who's getting rich off this new articulation of non toxic masculinity?

Hannah McGregor 03:57

I sure did. It's an important question. And I want to keep asking questions about contemporary masculinities and their commodification via pop culture, which is why today I want us to look at a key example of the commodification of tender masculinity. Say that 10 times fast.

Marcelle Kosman 04:18

No.

Hannah McGregor 04:19

[Hannah laughs] So we're going to be talking about Queer Eye.

Marcelle Kosman 04:25

[Marcelle gasps] Oh, they're so nice!

Hannah McGregor 04:28

They're so tender. They're so, so tender. So Marcelle, tell me about your relationship to the Netflix series, Queer Eye.

Marcelle Kosman 04:39

So I was a late adopter of Queer Eye. I never watched the original series, but I knew of it. And so when it was relaunched, I didn't really care, I guess. And it was a friend- you know who it was? It was friend of the podcast, Sylvie Veenu, who specifically was like, I hear what you're saying, but they're just so kind. There's such lovely, such lovely people and I was like why would I want to watch a show about five lovely masculine people? [Marcelle chuckles] And then I did and I was hooked immediately, obviously, because it's a show that really gives you a lot of opportunities to have a good cry. [Marcelle laughs]

Hannah McGregor 05:30

Oh yeah, it's a real successful tear jerker. If you just are like, I need to cry. I need a cathartic weep. There are some real go to episodes in there.

Marcelle Kosman 05:42

And one of the things that I think is really sort of fascinating about this show as a series, and like, the different ways that people who like it respond to it is that different episodes will make different people cry for different reasons. And, like-

Hannah McGregor 05:59

[Hannah laughs] That's just a fact.

Marcelle Kosman 06:01

As a show, it's almost as though the premise is, okay, which tender wound are we going to prod with this episode? [Hannah laughs] And so as a viewer, you're like, Oh, I feel nothing about complicated relationships with step parents. But then in another episode, you're like, Oh, I feel so much about lonely men! [Hannah laughs]

Hannah McGregor 06:31

Yeah, yeah. And sometimes it's hard to predict which ones will hit you. And some of the real, some of the real fan favorites are ones that I'm like, really? That one? Really, that's your favorite? But like...

Marcelle Kosman 06:41

Tender wounds.

Hannah McGregor 06:45

[Hannah laughs] It can sometimes feel, I think, like from a distance, it's like, oh, that's kind of manipulative. Like this is a show that is really tugging on your heartstrings. But it doesn't feel like it when you're watching it.

Marcelle Kosman 06:59

That's right. And I think that might have been part of why I was kind of reluctant to start watching it because I feel like the premise of it sounds like hyper manipulative reality TV. So this show is designed to prod your tender wounds and then make you feel better about the world at the end of it.

Hannah McGregor 07:22

Yeah, yeah. And I think you know, when people talk about the success of this reboot, they really emphasize the chemistry between the new Fab Five. Marcelle, can you name all five of them?

Marcelle Kosman 07:37

Yes. JVN, Jonathan Van Ness. Karamo Brown. Antoni.

Hannah McGregor 07:44

Yeah, he doesn't need a last name. Just Antoni.

Marcelle Kosman 07:46

Did you know, he's Canadian?

Hannah McGregor 07:48

I did know that. Yeah, that's one of my greatest shames. **[Hannah laughs]**

Marcelle Kosman 07:54

Okay, okay, Bobby, and Tan. Tan, aka Tani. **[Hannah laughs]** Tan France.

[Sound bite of crowd cheering plays]

Hannah McGregor 08:04

Okay, so it is a reboot. As we mentioned, it was rebooted in 2018 from the original 2003 to 2007 run. The original show was originally called Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, but they actually shortened the original one to Queer Eye after a couple of seasons, and the reboot was only ever called Queer Eye. And the premise of the original was really like, it's in New York. And it's about like a bunch of cool, fashionable gay men helping straight men to be more fashionable. You might associate it with kind of that historical moment when we all started using the word metrosexual. Do you remember?

Marcelle Kosman 08:41

Oh, my God. **[Hannah laughs]** I do. I do. And I was thinking about that term recently, because I saw a meme on Instagram or something that was like, Y'all the early aughts were brutal. A man showered and we called him a metrosexual. **[Hannah laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 08:59

Truly. And that's the premise of the original show so much, is like, have you considered a shower? And there were some, I think, quite valid critiques of that original run like, particularly from queer critics who were like, Okay, this is like, pretty dehumanizing of the gay men involved who are falling into this quite stereotyped role of servants for straight people, and who's like, we never get any sense of that original run. And in that original run, they give you very little sense of the lives of these gay men outside of their providing the service for straight men.

So the reboot, sort of, I think, in some interesting ways, takes on those critiques. And it has also had, I think, a more significant cultural impact. It certainly won a bunch more awards. The Fab Five have become, I think, more significant and mainstream celebrities than the original Fab Five were. And it's been renewed for more seasons. And it's made some other really interesting structural changes to the original premise, including the cast is much more diverse. And-

Marcelle Kosman 10:12

Cis-er?

Hannah McGregor 10:13

The original cast was definitely cis-er, you know, JVN is an out non binary person. And there were definitely no conversations about, you know, non binary and gender fluid people in the original run. They also don't stay in New York.

Marcelle Kosman 10:31

[Marcelle gasps] What?

Hannah McGregor 10:33

Yeah. So like the first season, they're in rural Georgia. So there's like a really interesting shift of like, what part of American culture they are intervening into.

Marcelle Kosman 10:46

Okay, Georgia, was one of the like, hotly contested states that went Democrat when Trump lost the 2020 election. So did the influence of the Fab Five have that kind of cultural impact, Hannah?

Hannah McGregor 11:06

I don't know if we can make that claim. But I think the recognition that seriously engaging the South is a really vital part of current liberal American politics is part of the show's shifted focus. And then the other sort of really significant thing is that there is way more emphasis on the personal lives of the Fab Five, that they actually use their personal experiences as a way to connect with the quote unquote, "heroes", which is what they call the people they're making over in the episode.

So Marcelle, here's our question, our Why This, Why Now question: what was happening in 2018, that made this reboot hit so well, and has made it continue to be so successful? So hey, Marcelle, remind me what we were saying about 2018?

Marcelle Kosman 11:58

Okay, so in our last slash, first episode, I argued that 2018 was the year that we saw this surge of tender masculinity and other soft expressions of masculinity in mainstream media, and that it was at the same time that the #metoo movement had really reached a boiling point.

Hannah McGregor 12:17

Mhm. Yeah. So that, I think, is a piece of the cultural context that we absolutely have to bring forward into this conversation. But there's a couple of other pieces that I want us to keep in mind. One is that between 2007 and 2018, right between the end of the original run and the reboot, there was quite significant progress in terms of gay rights in and beyond the US. So in 2011, Obama repealed Don't Ask, Don't Tell in the American military.

Marcelle Kosman 12:50

Quick reminder of what that means?

Hannah McGregor 12:53

Don't Ask Don't Tell was a policy that essentially said it was illegal to be gay and in the military. But they wouldn't check.

Marcelle Kosman 13:03

Yeah, as long as you don't, you know, brag about it.

Hannah McGregor 13:07

They couldn't ask you if you were gay. But if you told somebody, like, if you came out in the military, you were not allowed to be in the military anymore. So that was repealed in 2011, Wild! The UK legalized gay marriage in 2014. And 2015 is the year that the Gallup polls in the US found that support for same sex marriage had finally tipped over 50%. It hit 60% support in 2015. So we do have like a significantly different world of gay rights and a significantly different understanding of gay people, as people who are married and in relationships, who are maybe raising kids, you know, that's a big part of the context that the Fab Five, or are now people who have lives outside of the show.

Marcelle Kosman 13:57

But like lives that are, like legible to straight viewers.

Hannah McGregor 14:00

Correct. Another really significant piece of the context of the reboot is the Trump presidency. So Trump was elected in 2016. And it's a moment of sort of really public shock for a lot of

particularly white liberals, who, whether or not they were actually shocked, certainly are expressing a huge amount of shock, especially in like, mainstream sort of centrist to left leaning media. And particularly, that performance of shock is then accompanied by the sense of, oh, there are much deeper divisions in American culture than we realized. Like, how can we have been so shocked in the first place? It must be because we truly do not know how many people have really homophobic, white supremacist, political opinions.

And that we start to get a lot of sort of mainstream discourse around the idea of reaching across the aisle, or needing to just like, sit down and have a conversation with a Trump voter. Do you remember that moment, like everybody was like, We need to stop dehumanizing each other, we need to stop furthering this political polarization and the way that we're going to do that, it's just like, sit down and try to understand why somebody might have voted for Trump.

Marcelle Kosman 15:26

I don't like it.

Hannah McGregor 15:27

Nor do I. But do you remember it?

Marcelle Kosman 15:28

I do. I do. I do. Yeah, it was an uncomfortable time.

Hannah McGregor 15:32

It was a real discourse of the moment. And that sense of like, we need to seek to understand one another as people, has, I think, one of its most iconic representations in the episode of Queer Eye, where Karamo Brown has to like, sit down and have a real frank conversation with a white Trump supporting cop. Karamo was like, Yeah, you know, my sons are afraid to learn how to drive because they are afraid they will be murdered by police officers.

And then the white cop is like, well, it makes me sad that people assume I'm racist because I voted for Trump. And then that supposed to be like, wow, we really are understanding each other better by having a conversation. You can tell from my tone that I don't buy this particular aspect of it. But it's a real moment. And the show really participates in this sort of idea that like social transformation isn't about the transformation of structures, but like, individual interactions, that we can really change things by just sitting down and talking to each other and understanding each other better.

Marcelle Kosman 16:35

It is kind of like the television equivalent of door knocking. It's like why politicians go door to door.

Hannah McGregor 16:41

You know, and there is some evidence that suggests that it is actually sometimes an effective way to change people's political stances is to be like, well, you are treating this idea like a totally sort of theoretical voting topic. But if you actually knew somebody who was impacted by this legislation, you might think differently.

Marcelle Kosman 17:01

Yes, yes, for sure.

Hannah McGregor 17:03

So the third sort of context that I want us to keep in mind as we're looking at Queer Eye, is neoliberalism.

Marcelle Kosman 17:13

Okay, Hannah. Neoliberalism is one of those terms that I hear all the time. And I, bless my own soul, I use it. And I honest to goodness, don't actually know what it means.

Hannah McGregor 17:27

Neoliberalism, aka neoliberal capitalism is a particular manifestation of capitalist thinking, that is a characteristic of late capitalism. So it was not a characteristic of early industrial capitalism, right? It's a characteristic of late aka, like, sort of starts to bubble up post World War Two. And like, really takes a hold at the end of the 20th and into the beginning of the 21st century. And it's basically the expansion of the logic of capitalism to every aspect of our lives.

So rather than capitalism being exclusively an economic concept, capitalism becomes the structuring logic of how we think about every relationship and every institution. So the logics of productivity, cost benefit, efficiency, optimization, become deeply incorporated into every aspect of everything that we do. And because that logic expands into every institution, every industry, we get both a sort of widespread deregulation happening across lots of industries. So a sense that, like, the market should get to run everything.

Governments should not have any say, there's no value in government, say, managing, like public services, right? Like we don't need the government to be managing our electricity grid. Deregulate it, privatize it. In universities, we experience this all the time, right, the university stops being sort of a public good and begins to be treated as a business that is expected to be

making a profit in order to justify its existence. The privatization of prisons, the privatization of hospitals, right, all of these industries get privatized. And that logic begins to sink into, you know, how we think about our day to day lives and how we think about our own value as human beings.

Marcelle Kosman 19:36

So we've talked in Witch, Please about ideology and discourse and how discourse functions to circulate ideological lessons, basically, right? So, is this why we might say something like if you are feeling really unwell for a few days, and you stay home, you're in bed, you watch a lot of TV or whatever. And you say, Oh, I haven't been productive at all. That's neoliberalism.

Hannah McGregor 20:05

Yes, absolutely, like a function of neoliberalism is that it turns all of our time into potential units of productivity. And so you are constantly thinking, Am I using my time productively? So we get this constant optimization, the sense that like, I want to do a one hour high intensity workout that will optimize my possible fitness. Jia Tolentino has this great essay about the culture of optimization, where she talks about the rise of chopped salads as like the ultimate optimized food. **[Marcelle laughs]** Because you can eat it over your desk, you don't have to worry, you don't have to look at it because it's already in bite sized pieces.

And one of the interesting characteristics of neoliberalism is its embrace of a particular kind of self care discourse that is about buying your way into happiness, one. And two, about reframing self care as another form of optimization, that you take time off, so you can be more productive when you get back. You take time off, you know, you treat yourself because it will make you a better worker in the long run.

Marcelle Kosman 21:19

I hate it. Do you have some examples of self care tools or self care activities that might kind of relate to Queer Eye as our object of study?

Hannah McGregor 21:32

Marcelle, I've got so many, I actually think that's a perfect segue into getting some of the theory that we need to understand this better.

Marcelle Kosman 21:42

Oh, yes. I love it. I love it. Let's do that. Let's do it right now.

[Upbeat interlude music plays]

Hannah McGregor 21:50

I originally thought that I was going to use this episode to dive even deeper into masculinities. And you will notice in this segment that I end up taking what was, to me, a surprise pivot. But I started with what I think is a very smart article by Naveen Minai, called “All Things Keep Getting Better: Queer Eye and the makeover of American masculinity.”

Marcelle Kosman 22:14

Ah, that's the song in the intro!

Hannah McGregor 22:19

All things keep getting better. Yeah, yeah, optimization, the song.

[Soundbite plays from “Things Keep Getting Better” covered by Betty Who]

And in it, Minai, I don't know if this is how you pronounce their name. So if anybody listening does, let me know. So in it, Minai offers us some useful definitions and reminders that really resonate with how we've already talked about masculinities. So I am, Marcelle, going to ask you just to read a couple of excerpts.

Marcelle Kosman 22:51

Oh, goody. Okay. All right. First, let's start with the definition of hegemonic masculinity. Quote, “hegemonic masculinity in the United States is defined through hetero patriarchy and whiteness, as settler colonial and inherently anti black technologies of power. Compulsory heterosexuality and whiteness are co constitutive of each other, and intersect to produce hegemonic masculinity in the United States. This is the default definition and standard for personhood and citizenship in the United States.” End quote.

Hannah McGregor 23:29

So, we've got a definition of hegemonic masculinity as based in compulsory heterosexuality, patriarchal power and white supremacy, as settler colonialism and anti-Blackness.

Marcelle Kosman 23:42

Mhm. Checks out.

Hannah McGregor 23:43

Minai then goes on to argue that the emotional and physical intimacies displayed by the Fab Five in the Queer Eye reboot, offer a point of disruption into hegemonic masculinity. So, I'm gonna ask you to read one more quote.

Marcelle Kosman 23:59

Great, I will do that. Quote, “The Fab Five are friends, yet their friendships do not adhere to the rules and forms of friendships between men in American popular visual culture. Their relationships are not mediated by professional or personal crises, paternal and or fraternal frames or heterosexual romance. Their relationships do not center pain, competition, hierarchy, anger, pride, guilt or shame. Instead, the Fab Five offer us masculinities, reworked and queered to center tenderness, playfulness, care, and joy.” End quote.

Hannah McGregor 24:41

Amazing, Thank you. So what do you think of Minai’s framing of Queer Eye thus far?

Marcelle Kosman 24:46

I think it is an idealized interpretation of the show because I don't think it's quite right to claim that their relationships aren't mediated by professional or personal crisis, right? Like, their relationships are literally professional. They are co-workers.

Hannah McGregor 25:05

Mhm. They’re co-workers. Famously, there were these multi day, like chemistry tests for the casting process where they just kept shuffling the groups until they found a group that had really good chemistry. So like, literally their friendship was engineered by a casting process.

Marcelle Kosman 25:22

Like, I know that Minai is saying “professional crisis or personal crisis”. But like, as you're saying, Hannah, they are an engineered, professional group, and like maybe, you know, in another universe where they all just happen to be in a coffee shop together, and a song that they all like comes on, and they become friends that way, maybe, maybe they would have been friends anyway, who knows? I don't know. I can't predict the future or the alternate history.

Hannah McGregor 25:46

That's not the future. That's another multiverse.

Marcelle Kosman 25:50

That is the future that liberals want. But they are professionals who are a crisis management team. That’s what they are. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 26:01

Yeah, yeah, like, they might not be in crisis with one another, but they are professionals, and they are constantly mediating crisis. And, you know, it's a friendship that is mediated through the logics of the market, like they're there to make a TV show that makes money. This is where I got kind of caught up in trying to read this show simply as a celebration of tender masculinity. Because, yes, there are real intimacies being worked through on the show between the Fab Five, and between them and the heroes. But also, those intimacies are constantly being mediated through this neoliberal logic that actually arguably opposes the thriving of the very communities that we are encountering.

Marcelle Kosman 26:55

[Marcelle gasps] Are we going to talk about Lauren Burlant?

Hannah McGregor 26:59

Oh, we're gonna talk about Lauren Burlant. Listen, okay, Marcelle and I, huge, Lauren Berlant fans.

Marcelle Kosman 27:07

Stans, if you will.

Hannah McGregor 27:08

If you are not a stan, let me just give you a couple of just high level Berlant fun facts before we get into some key concepts that I think are going to be useful for us here. So Berlant taught at the University of Chicago for their whole career from 1984 to 2021. They died in 2021 at the age of 63, which fucking sucks. They died of cancer, and right up to their death, they were still doing astonishing work. And I feel personally shortchanged by the early death of Lauren Berlant. They were a scholar primarily of American popular culture. Their New York Times obituary called them the critic of the American dream, and, you know, they have this amazing, expansive, complex body of scholarship, but I want us to focus on two key ideas. So, idea one: intimate public. So the concept they came up with in their 2008 book, *The Female Complaint*. Now, Marcelle, will you please remind us what a discourse public is?

Marcelle Kosman 28:16

Well, we actually have an episode of *Witch, Please*, where we talk about discourse publics. But for the uninitiated-

Hannah McGregor 28:23

Or people with memory holes as deep as ours.

Marcelle Kosman 28:27

Eheh, especially mine... Michael Warner is an American theorist who talked about discourse publics as a group of strangers who understand themselves to be part of a public- this is different from *the* public, okay, *the* public is this sort of amorphous like everybody outside. A public is a community of people who are unconnected to one another, they're strangers, but they are brought together, where they are connected by virtue of being addressed by something. And for Warner, this is usually a text. So for example, it might be fans of Queer Eye, right? So like, I don't know anybody who lives in Georgia. But if there's a Queer Eye convention, and we all go, we all feel like we have something in common, like we are with our people, that kind of feeling.

Hannah McGregor 29:25

By virtue of recognizing ourselves as being addressed by say, additional texts about Queer Eye. Berlant and Warner actually collaborated. And so Berlant is, you know, engaging and building on some of Warner's work here when they conceive of what they call intimate publics and intimate publics are a kind of discourse public. So they operate in the same way. Intimate publics, in particular, come together via mass media that represent what Berlant calls a quote, "broadly common historical experience," end quote, that consumers can identify with whether or not they share the actual details of that experience.

So the idea of an intimate public is that it represents something that feels emotionally true to the people who identify with it, whether or not it's literally representing something that's happening to you.

Marcelle Kosman 30:25

Can you give me an example?

Hannah McGregor 30:26

Yeah, absolutely. Like, think about the intimate publics that emerged around the *Twilight* books, that despite the fact that those are stories that are operating in a fantasy genre, a big part of the appeal, is that they, for readers of romance, YA romance, supernatural romance, the intensity of the emotions feels emotionally true and resonant, whether or not it has anything to do with any experiences they've ever had. And so the public that organizes around something like *Twilight*, is a public that is characterized by a sort of intimate emotional resonance with what is happening in those texts.

Marcelle Kosman 31:16

So like Team Edward, Team Jacob, is like, it's not a joke. Like when people say that they're on Team Edward or Team Jacob, they are like, emotionally invested in a couple that does not exist.

Hannah McGregor 31:31

Yeah. And they're emotionally invested in the kinds of romantic and intimate relationships represented by those couple formations. So Berlant writes that an intimate public operates, quote, "when a market opens up to a block of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people's particular core interests and desires and flourishes as a porous effective scene of identification among strangers, that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline and discussion about how to live as an X." End quote.

So Berlant uses x here, because there are many intimate publics that form around many different kinds of identities. But you know, the example that I often go to is romance novels, and that the intimate public generated around romance novels, is identifying with the experience of how to be a woman, and particularly sort of taking comfort in the way that particular intimate desires are simultaneously represented and disciplined by these texts. So they sort of simultaneously tell you what you can expect, they offer you a fantasy that you might desire, but they also frame for you what is an allowable desire?

Marcelle Kosman 33:13

Interesting.

Hannah McGregor 33:15

Mhm. So what's really key about how Berlant is thinking about intimate publics is that they are different from, say, sort of like politically radical publics. Berlant often calls them juxta-political, by which they mean that they are certainly about politics, but they're not explicitly political because they are so fixated on the sort of emotional level. It's about how we feel and what we want. And they write, and I quote, "That intimate publics are a case study in what happens when a capitalist culture effectively markets conventionality, as the source and solution to the problem of living in worlds that are economically, legally, and normatively not on the side of almost anyone's survival, let alone flourishing." End quote.

So that for me is like a really effective explanation of why, despite really significant progress in women's rights, romance only becomes more and more popular, because it offers an emotional solution. Again, it's not about readers then going out and trying to live romance novels. It offers an emotional solution in which conventionality, ie heterosexual reproductive romance is marketed as a solution to the problem of how fucking awful it is to be a woman in the world.

That ultimately is like the solution is going to be the exact conventionality that was served to you in the first place, but it's going to be framed for you as a protection, like a site of protection from the impossibility of thriving under patriarchy.

Marcelle Kosman 35:14

Whew. Okay, well, we're going to have an episode about romance novels, that's for goddamn sure.

Hannah McGregor 35:19

Oh yeah, absolutely. So that's concept one: intimate public's. **[Hannah laughs]**

Marcelle Kosman 35:23

[Marcelle laughs] Concept one! Okay. All right. And so how about concept two?

Hannah McGregor 35:26

Concept two, luckily emerges directly out of concept one. It's basically Berlant taking up this idea of really wanting the exact thing that is standing in the way of your flourishing, and then writing a whole book about it.

Marcelle Kosman 35:40

And now I know that they're not talking about gluten, but I just I gotta say that like-

Hannah McGregor 35:44

But they're not not talking about-

Marcelle Kosman 35:46

They're not not talking about gluten.

Hannah McGregor 35:48

They are talking about food. **[Marcelle laughs]** They explicitly reference food as an example. So the concept is cruel optimism, which is, in fact, the name of their 2011 book. And it is sort of an extension of this thinking about, like how we get attached to objects that offer as a solution to a problem, more of that same problem. So I'm going to ask you, Marcelle, to read for us the opening paragraph of *Cruel Optimism*.

Marcelle Kosman 36:19

Why thank you. What an honor. Quote, "a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love. It might

be a fantasy of the good life or a political project, it might rest on something simpler too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially.” End quote.

Hannah McGregor 36:58

So Berlant gives us some examples of, like, what are some of the fantasies that we might be attached to, that are not possible, that our attachment to is going to be cruel? So they say that those include, quote, “upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively durable intimacy,”

Marcelle Kosman 37:26

Oh, boy...

Hannah McGregor 37:27

“As well as meritocracy, the sense that liberal capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair, and that foster life as a project of adding up to something and constructing cushions for enjoyment.” End quote.

Marcelle Kosman 37:44

What a bummer. [Marcelle laughs]

Hannah McGregor 37:46

So they're basically describing here the American dream.

Marcelle Kosman 37:51

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And how the inexhaustible effort of scrambling for the American Dream is precisely the thing that holds one back from just living a joyful life.

Hannah McGregor 38:07

Yeah, that attachment to the sort of optimistic idea of upward mobility, meritocracy, carving out a meaningful life within capitalism, our ongoing attachment to that idea, is actively standing in the way of our collective thriving.

Marcelle Kosman 38:25

My golly.

Hannah McGregor 38:26

So cruel optimism might include say, like, you know, attachment to certain narratives and outward signifiers of upward mobility or capitalist success as a comfort in the midst of crisis. So like, maybe life is hard, and I'm in a constant state of crisis, or I'm depressed because the world is horrifying, but I am able to get this really nice meal for myself, or like, get myself a treat, or like, get a nicer piece of home furnishing or refresh my wardrobe for the new season. Right? That I can sort of surround myself with these trappings of success and pleasure, that comfort me, in the face of a constant state of crisis, despite the fact that it is capitalism itself and it's emptying out of social relations beyond the market that has spurred these crises in the first place.

Marcelle Kosman 39:23

Right, right. So like Berlant isn't saying, the reason young people can't afford to buy a home is because they go to Starbucks and eat avocado toast.

Hannah McGregor 39:33

[Hannah laughs] No.

Marcelle Kosman 39:34

Berlant is saying that the idea of home ownership as a marker of success and prosperity is itself an illusion.

Hannah McGregor 39:45

Yeah, I mean, think about it this way, right? Like the fantasy of home ownership as a sign of a particular kind of success stands in for what we actually need, which is housing security. Right? Like, what do we actually need as a society? We need people to have a safe place to live, right? But because capitalism has turned housing into something you earn, rather than something that we all have an inherent right to, we become fixated on a fantasy of earning housing security via a particular kind of success or hard work. So what we are attached to isn't the idea of like, I would like to live somewhere where I can't be unexpectedly evicted. I would like to live somewhere where I don't have to pay so much in rent that I can't afford groceries, I would like to live somewhere that is, like, safe, and my kids are okay. And it's hygienic.

It's basically like, I would like to have a human right, and the market is like, have you considered money, though? Have you considered money in lieu of rights? And cruel optimism is us basically saying, Yeah, I'll get attached to the idea of money even though, you know, success in the logic of capitalism only builds more momentum behind capitalism and thus contributes to a world in

which we are not collectively thriving. A fixation on like, well, I just need to achieve this thing, as opposed to how about we collectively advocate for housing justice, right?

And it's that sense that like, I suspect somebody is having right now, where they're like, How the fuck do you expect me to be advocating for housing justice, I'm so tired, is part of the effective relationship of cruel optimism. It's like, we're all exhausted. And we've been functionally in many ways, isolated from our communities, again, isolated from real, rich, nourishing, communal connection as a function of late capitalism. And so instead, the prospect of doing a thing for your community, for many people is like, I am too exhausted. And that is by design.

Marcelle Kosman 42:10

Yeah, yeah. But I could get these new sheet sets.

Hannah McGregor 42:14

Exactly.

Marcelle Kosman 42:15

100% percent cotton. So soft.

Hannah McGregor 42:19

Oh my god, speaking of comforting yourself with sheet sets, I think it's time to get back to Queer Eye.

Marcelle Kosman 42:30

Great idea.

[Upbeat interlude music plays]

Okay, Hannah, time to get on your soapbox.

Hannah McGregor 42:33

All right. The 2018 reboot of Queer Eye deploys the genre of the reality show makeover, to create space for new forms of intimate masculinities that are refracted through the neoliberal logics of self care as conspicuous consumption, thus allowing viewers to participate in a collective fantasy, whereby the very systems that are causing ever deepening political rifts can also offer the cures for those rifts. In this essay, I will...

Marcelle Kosman 43:09

Hey, Hannah, though, Let's talk about Queer Eye, though. Okay? Please, please.

Hannah McGregor 43:14

Yeah, I don't disagree that we've got beautiful displays of tender masculinity happening throughout the show. I think that it is a really effective intimate public, in the sense that it creates this space of emotional truth, in which, even if the lives of the heroes aren't exact representations of things that have happened in my life, they feel emotionally true in a way that resonates really profoundly with me, and makes me feel seen.

Marcelle Kosman 43:56

It's so difficult to talk about something that feels so good, and at the same time is also so very bad. [Marcelle laughs]

Hannah McGregor 44:12

Oh yeah. Oh, yeah. Now we're in the space of materialist critique. Yeah, that's how you know you're doing it.

Marcelle Kosman 44:21

We kind of touched on this in the Why This, Why Now section because of all of the ways that queerness has been made legible to a straight audience has like paved the way for the show that absolutely would have been radical and probably even unthinkable-

Hannah McGregor 44:41

Unthinkable 10 years ago.

Marcelle Kosman 44:45

Unsafe to make in some places, honestly, even today.

Hannah McGregor 44:49

I mean, it feels radical to watch Jonathan Van Ness wear high heels and a dress and talk to a pretty conservative white man about gender expression. Like, that feels radical because it is radical.

Marcelle Kosman 45:08

Yeah. And yet, this is what I find so difficult. I want Jonathan Van Ness's gender expression to be not radical. Do you know what I mean?

Hannah McGregor 45:18

I want it not to be their job to travel around the country convincing people that they deserve human rights.

Marcelle Kosman 45:25

Yes, yes. Yes. And I know, like we were talking about with respect to door knocking, that it is effective. One on one engagement and communication is effective. The show as a cultural text, though, is commodifying the acceptance of gender fluidity. And on the one hand, like we said, we want gender fluidity to be the norm, or at least to be so un-radical that it doesn't endanger the person whose gender expression is non-normative. And yet, I don't... do we have to do it through capitalism is what I'm saying. **[Hannah laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 46:14

I mean, like, we kind of do, because it's what we have available to us. I don't think... I mean, I know that Berlant is not saying everybody stopped taking comfort in mass market culture. That's not, they are trying to understand how it works. I got to see them speak one time in 2020 via a Zoom lecture. And in it, they were talking about intimate publics. And they were like, you know, the thing about an intimate public is that it might not be sufficiently political in and of itself. But it is an opportunity for people to show up for each other. And that can be a starting point for something.

So they're never saying, I'm sorry, you engage with this via capitalism, and thus, it is bad from the beginning. Right? They're saying like, we've got to think about the way that market logics frame our effective attachments. Their other thing that really stuck with me from that talk is they were like, you know, one of the whole ideas of cruel optimism is that it's our attachment to objects that ultimately sort of sours that, you know, that is the source of the cruelty. It's how we become attached to things. And they were like, of course, you know, as scholars, our favorite thing to do is to take our objects apart.

And I was like, Oh, that is kind of like, a really interesting characteristic of what we do as scholars and you know, as feminist killjoys is that we're constantly taking our objects of attachment and being like, Okay, but how is this actually working? But why, why, why, but why, and but what, you know, and I keep coming back to this, like, yeah, absolutely Queer Eye is giving us these models of gentle and non toxic masculinity, they are giving us representations of friendship between men that are intimate and playful. Without being, you know, refracted through the sort of acceptable set of relationships men are allowed to have. They let us see the possibility of political change happening in real time via conversation via the building of intimacy.

I am always so moved in episodes with straight men who at the beginning will not allow the Fab Five to touch them, and by the end are hugging them. And that idea that there is a subset of our shared culture and community who don't believe that they are allowed to receive comforting, intimate physical touch outside of a very narrow set of predominantly sexual relationships.

Like that is actually really heartbreaking. And it is really beautiful to watch people discover that they're allowed to be hugged, and that that's okay. And that they won't like, you know, catch gay from it. And it's a makeover show. It is about buying people things until their lives are better. Like, I want somebody to show me the fucking budget of an episode of this show, where they come in, and they're like, you know, in order to improve your relationship, you need to not be still sleeping in the bed that you slept in with your ex wife. You really need to get a new bed, and that's framed as like an emotional revelation. And they never mention the fact that they probably didn't get a new bed because beds are expensive. And these people are explicitly working class. How the fuck are they getting a new bed?

Marcelle Kosman 49:52

This is reminding me of one of the things that I really wanted to talk about, which is how they make the decisions for where they take the people shopping for the things, right? So like there's an episode and I can't remember what season it's in. But the hero is a tall Black woman who runs her own dog grooming business and it's like she has a van. And it's very successful, but she hasn't become, I guess, kind of like a brand yet or she's not as successful-

Hannah McGregor 50:24

She needs to take her small business to the next level. Voice over.

Marcelle Kosman 50:30

Yes, yeah. So they come in, Bobby makes over her van. Tan takes her shopping to Old Navy. And this was the first time that I noticed that they went to Old Navy. I'm not sure if it's the first time they go to Old Navy. But it's the first time that I noticed. And I was like, Why do some people get to go shopping at these high end retailers? But this woman is going to Old Navy? Okay, well, Tan does explain in the show, they have tall sizes and she's very tall. So like, Okay, but why Old Navy? What's the lie of living within your means?

Hannah McGregor 51:12

I think that that started happening in the second season, they started taking people to more quote-unquote, realistic places to shop. I think that there was some critique in the first season of like, well, yeah, absolutely, people can dress better if somebody walks up to them and is like, I'm gonna get you an unlimited wardrobe from a fancy store. But it's like, that's not, you know, if

we're trying to actually root this in the lived realities of our heroes, that's absurd. So let's take them to Old Navy. Let's take this working dad who needs to figure out how to clothe himself and his kids and feed them. Let's go to Walmart. Because that's like, actually where he might shop. So let's just show people that like, you can go to Walmart, and you can buy a vegetable. So here, that's great. So that is part of it. Definitely. Is this, like, let's show that hashtag you can do it. And I suspect that they are getting sponsored by these businesses.

Marcelle Kosman 52:14

Yes, I think that is like it's not their personal bank account. Like it's not the heroes, the heroes are not paying for those clothes. And Tan is not paying for those clothes.

Hannah McGregor 52:27

Absolutely not. But it's not just part of the show's budget. It's like, it's product placement. Like Old Navy is paying to be featured in this episode. And so we're gonna go to Old Navy.

Marcelle Kosman 52:40

So that other young professionals will see it and be like, I'm tall, I could shop at Old Navy and look professional and do it on a budget.

Hannah McGregor 52:49

Absolutely. So it's literally selling you the idea of going and shopping at this business in order to improve your life. When, if we actually take a step back and say like, Okay, well, why was this person, like, with so many of the heroes it's like, why are they not dressing? Well, it's like, how, literally in this economy, like minimum wage in the US does not pay you enough to buy clothes. And so this is the sort of fascinating thing about the operation of the intimate public is that it is really emotionally resonant. And by really, I mean, both very and real, as in like, evokes something that is true about how we feel.

I don't think that it is a manipulative show in the same way that other conventions of reality TV are, in the sense that I think we are seeing moments of representations of human connection, that at least feel and this is really the important thing is how they make us feel, that feel true. So that's, you know, an intimate public, right? It's creating the sort of site via mass market text. It's creating a site of shared emotional intimacy through offering something that promises to solve an emotional problem that we are having. And remember intimate publics also market conventionality as the solution to the very problems that we are facing. And so what are the solutions that are offered in Queer Eye? They are spa retreats, new wardrobes, home makeovers, nicer food.

Marcelle Kosman 54:58

My one consistent complaint, like a handful of sessions of therapy, not described as therapy.

Hannah McGregor 55:08

And you get three filmed sessions with a former social worker.

Marcelle Kosman 55:13

So like, we're not going to call it therapy, and we're going to do it while rock climbing, so that nobody thinks it's therapy. But like, Why are these people not getting therapy? Well, one stigma, of course. Two, do you know how much therapists charge in this economy?

Hannah McGregor 55:30

Absolutely, yeah. Like the logics of the show itself means that they can, in no way tackle any of the structural issues that are actually underpinning the problems that we are seeing. Because it's not a show that is about legislation, or policy, or like, you know, that is about the things that actually need to change. So that people have housing security, and are paid a living wage and stuff-

Marcelle Kosman 56:00

So that they have time to cook, let alone like a handful of recipes.

Hannah McGregor 56:06

Yeah, yeah. But that final moment, like what really sticks with me when I think about a show like Queer Eye, is that final moment, which is always organized around community. So the final reveal is always some kind of community event, it's having your family over for dinner, it's launching your new business, it's something that is about bringing a bunch of people together, and then showing the way in which that relationship now has the capacity to be healed or improved or strengthened. And that possibility of community and connection is always being framed for us via the makeover transformation, which is always a material transformation. Right? And so what we are offered is a scene of renewed community connection that is made possible through conspicuous consumption.

Marcelle Kosman 57:08

Mm hmm. If a show as overtly dedicated to helping people live the life that they deserve can't do that without reproducing the same circumstances or normalizing and giving into the same circumstances that create those difficulties or those experiences of marginalization in the first place, if it's show like Queer Eye can't do that without reproducing those problems. How? How, how are we going to do it?

Hannah McGregor 57:51

I think one of the really key things here is not to mistake mass culture or popular culture for political solutions. Yeah. And that's a really important distinction. And it's a tricky one to make. I mean, that's why Berlant has written a series of incredibly complex texts about popular culture, because it's vital, like popular culture is so important to us collectively. And the way we think things through and it's not unrelated to political change. But it is not synonymous with political change. Like, think about the difference between the shift of how JVN, you know, like, embraces lives and represents their gender on the show, versus what's actually happening in terms of legislation for trans people in the US right now.

Marcelle Kosman 58:45

Yeah, definitely. Right.

Hannah McGregor 58:50

Pop culture matters. It does work. But the work that it does is not the work of changing the actual material conditions that make life unlivable for some people and understanding the relationship between pop culture and actual politics and understanding, with more nuance, how they are and are not related is kind of the project of this whole show when you think about it.

Marcelle Kosman 59:18

I dare say, you know?

[Clip of *Material Girls* Theme plays]

Hannah McGregor 59:25

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Marcelle Kosman 59:58

If you have questions, comments, concerns, or praise – especially praise – come hang out with us at [@ohwitchplease](https://www.instagram.com/ohwitchplease) on Instagram or Twitter, or on Patreon at [patreon.com/ohwitchplease](https://www.patreon.com/ohwitchplease). Special thanks to everyone on the *Witch, Please* Productions team, including our digital content maestro Gaby, **["BOING" sound effect]** our social media manager and marketing designer Zoe Mix, **[Record rewinding sound effect]** our sound engineer Erik Magnus, **[Chimes sound effect]**

and of course, our effortlessly patient executive producer Hannah Rehak, aka COACH! **[Sports whistle blowing sound effect]**

Hannah McGregor 1:00:40

Is it effortless? I mean, she makes it look effortless. At the end of every episode we will thank everyone who has joined our Patreon OR boosted their tier to help make our work possible. Our enormous gratitude goes out to:

Abby, Julia, Meay, Elizabeth, and Janine.

Marcelle Kosman 1:01:01

Thanks. Thanks, you guys! Thanks, friends.

Hannah McGregor 1:01:06

We'll be back next episode to tackle another piece of pop culture through a whole new theoretical lens. But until then...

Marcelle Kosman 1:01:13

Later, gators!

[Material Girls Theme plays: "Shopping Mall" by Jay Arner and Jessica Delisle]