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**STRAIGHT MEN COME OUT: QUEER EYE AND THE PATH TO A MORE  
MINDFUL MASCULINITY**

by

**Eli Roush**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree**

of

**MASTER OF SCIENCE**

in

**American Studies**

**Approved:**

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**Utah State University  
Logan, Utah**

**2020**

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ABSTRACT

Straight Men Come Out: Queer Eye and the Path to a More Mindful Masculinity

by

Eli Roush, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2020

Major Professor: Dr. Keri Holt  
Department: English, American Studies

My thesis explores the culture surrounding the 2018 reboot of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* in relation to contemporary arguments in masculinity studies about the costs of hegemonic masculinity, performance, and identity. This paper examines how *Queer Eye* carefully creates space where heteronormative men can safely express emotional vulnerability and embody a more functional masculinity that expands beyond the bounds of hegemonic performance. The bulk of the analysis involves close readings of specific episodes and scenes from *Queer Eye* that introduce and examine the strategies the Fab Five use to redefine their subject's engagement with masculinity, explore the effectiveness of these strategies, and evaluate their potential to be used as a model to create spaces for struggling heteronormative men. This analysis, along with a theoretical framework provided by scholars in the field of masculinity studies, provides insight into and better define terms like "crisis of masculinity" and "toxic masculinity," which oversimplify deeper issues of shifting gender norms and privilege that are affecting American society. I hope that this work can contribute to solving our current "crisis of masculinity" by providing insight into potential methods that enable men to embody an

unconstrained, individualized, masculinity and deconstruct the source of toxic expression that limits them.

(67 pages)

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Eli Roush

## **Prologue**

I have always felt anxiety around my “maleness.” My natural state is hypercritical. The person I tend to focus the most on is myself. At no time was this criticism more intense than when I was 12. I noticed that changes were occurring. I was growing taller, fast, and, like most pre-teen boys, I looked weird as hell. Fully grown, I am six foot four inches, and I was already close to that height at that age. I stood out like a sore thumb. I was already different than most of the kids that went to my rural middle school in Muncie, Indiana. I came from a different background with two college-educated parents. In our area, most kids who were as fortunate as I was went to a private school. That class difference had already put a target on my back. My thin frame combined with my height and my perceived weirdness, being one of three Mormon kids in a school full of Baptists and other “Christians” who genuinely believed I was the spawn of Satan and a member of a cult, was a formula for teen disaster. These factors, along with the midwestern, rural, ethos of maleness, perpetuated the disaster. Kids’ fathers had told them the best way to establish dominance is to find the biggest dude in the room and deck him; dominate him to prove your status. Unfortunately, I was usually the biggest kid in the room. The problem was, I was not prepared for the onslaught and far too sensitive to handle the threat of constant violence.

On top of all that, I was pimple-faced, with bright red cheeks prominently displayed on my oversized head. This unholy combination gave me a somewhat boyish, cherubic appearance. In my teenage mind, those combined characteristics seemed to be the furthest thing from the ideal picture of masculinity. I remember, one day, seeing one of those old paintings of cupid - bow, and arrow in hand, with flushed cheeks. I felt

revolted by the sight. The image reeled in my mind, flagrantly flouting the things I hated most about myself. Like most kids that age, I did not want to look the way I did. I had terrible skin and could not handle it. I would have given anything to change my image.

So, naturally, I put on my mom's makeup. I had seen her magically cover her flaws, so why not do the same. I thought if everyone was going to stare at me, I might as well be comfortable. Unfortunately, I had no idea how to apply makeup and had no idea how ashamed it would make me feel. Did this compulsion mean I was gay? No thought could be more horrifying for a kid growing up in a religiously conservative household in rural Indiana during the early 2000s. That shame came to a head in a moment that still haunts me to this day. The day I dropped the make-up I brought to school (you know, for touch-ups).

While changing my gym clothes, the make-up fell out of my gym bag and onto the floor of the locker room. I remember the noise, a sharp pinging off the concrete ground – a horrifying bell ringing for all to hear. I was surrounded by my peers. Someone saw, picked it up, and read the label. Before he could out me, on my feet, I made up a story. I could feel my cheeks getting flushed red as I told him I was planning on planting it in someone's locker as a prank. "Why else would I have it there with me? I'm no fag!" I spouted. I almost blacked out from embarrassment. My story didn't work.

I have blocked out a lot of what came next. I remember him running around the locker room, yelling, "Eli is a fag!" I vaguely remember a fight, a frantic struggle. I tackled him and grabbed the makeup out of his hand in front of half of my gym class. I desperately ran to the bathroom and hid it in the trash can under a mound of paper towels.

I remember being terrified that the whole school would find out the truth: that I was either so insecure or so gay that I wore makeup.

Looking back, I realize an underlying mental disorder, OCD drove my compulsion. I was obsessed with every single blemish, every zit, anything that disturbed the perfect façade/illusion/delusion of what I thought I was supposed to look like in my head. I picked and scraped and tried to cover up my imperfections because I couldn't bear to see them. I couldn't accept my imperfect self. I still can't. At a certain age – I can't remember when – I had to make a decision to stop trying to cover up my acne/imperfections with makeup. I want to say the decision had something to do with a big realization that I was enough, but that would be a lie. I stopped because more people were getting wise to it, and I was going away to a camp with girls where the fear of being found out outweighed the need to feel flawless.

I had compartmentalized this moment until I was watching *Queer Eye*. In the first episode, there is a moment when the Fab Five are helping an older man (Tom) cover up his lupus by showing him how to apply redness-reducing make up, referred to as a “Green Stick.” With empathy and acknowledgment of his pain, they guide him through a quick routine he can do every morning. Seeing the look of joy and relief on his face as he realized this condition he had lived with his whole life was fixable through something as simple as a two-minute makeup routine, brought me back to when I was twelve; covertly applying makeup, stolen from my mom, in a dimly lit bathroom in the wee morning hours. All that shame and confusion and joy came rushing back. I found myself in front of the mirror again, staring at those same red cheeks, grieving for that little boy, all alone and scared, just wanting to be pretty.



## *A New Queer Eye*

**Give a man a makeover and you fix him for a day; teach a man that masculinity under late capitalism is a toxic pyramid scheme that is slowly killing him just like it's killing the world, and you might just fix a sucking hole in the future.**

- Laurie Penny "The Queer Art of Failing Better"

This paper explores how the first season of the 2018 reboot of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* carefully creates spaces where heteronormative men can safely express emotional vulnerability and embody a more functional masculinity that expands beyond the bounds of hegemonic performance. The television series primarily focuses on heteronormative men who struggle with their conception of manhood. Specifically, these men are often suppressing emotion and rejecting self-care, leading to isolation and loneliness. To address these issues, the show presents a group of five queer men—the "Fab Five"—who work together to help the subjects incorporate their emotions into their sense of masculinity. Some of the specific strategies utilized by the Fab Five include the use of touch and self-affirming language. My thesis will explore the effectiveness of these strategies and evaluate their potential to be used as a model to create spaces for struggling heteronormative men whose "unifying emotional subtext . . . involves never showing emotions or admitting to weakness" to engage with their emotional vulnerability (Yang "Nasty Boys"). The shows' emphasis on enabling heteronormative men to express their emotions, as well as its comparative dimensions, provides a new and useful framework for examining the limitations and rigidity of heteronormative masculinity. Ultimately, I hope that this work can contribute to solving our current "crisis of masculinity" by providing insight into potential methods that enable men to embody an unconstrained, individualized, masculinity and deconstruct the source of toxic expression that limits them.

The 2018 series of *Queer Eye* is a reboot of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, which initially ran on Bravo between 2003-2006. For the sake of brevity, in this paper, I will refer to the two iterations of the show as *QE1* and *QE2*. Although the reboot operates on the same premise-- five fabulous gay men makeover the lives of heteronormative men who are stuck-in-a-rut, the first season of the reboot has some important differences, particularly regarding its representation of heteronormative masculinity. The reboot also operates in a very different cultural context as cultural attitudes toward homosexuality have changed considerably since 2003. These changes require us to examine the reboot with an entirely different critical lens. In her article, "The Queer Art of Failing Better," Laurie Penny writes that "the original *Queer Eye* was catty and consumerist, with a side-order of snide eye-rolling and dreadful puns. The gimmick, the selling point, was that gay men are actually fun and fabulous, and it's safe to let them in your homes, because they might redecorate" (Penny 2018). In contrast, the newest iteration of the show is more empathetic regarding the lives of the heteronormative men on the show and far less superficial, focusing more on the emotional transformation of its straight subjects than improving their fashion, hairstyles, or living spaces. These differences are reflected in the scholarship that examined the first run of the series, which focused more on the show's portrayal of the original Fab Five, than the men they were making over.

Studies of the 2003-2006 version of the series focused almost exclusively on a queer studies approach, concentrating primarily on issues related to homosexual performance, gay identity, and the groundbreaking nature of the show's power structure. In "We're Here, We're Queer--And We're Better Than You," Kylo-Patrick R. Hart argues that the show inverted the traditional heteronormative power dynamic by representing gay

characters as role models to their straight counterparts. In another paper, titled "Seeing 'Straight' through *Queer Eye*," Robert Westerfelhaus and Celeste Lacroix argue that *QEI* has a more conservative agenda, concluding that the show functions as a "mediated ritual of rebellion that domesticates queers, contains queer sexuality, and places straight men at the sociosexual center" (426). In another study, "Contesting Masculinity's Makeover," Jay Clarkson analyzes how the show engages with conflicting and competing discourses about gay masculinities, focusing specifically on "*QEI*'s normalization of consumer masculinity, which rejects aspects of traditional masculinity and depends on vanity consumption" (235). Other studies of the show focus on its engagement with sexual performativity and processes of queer world-making, as evident in Kyra Pearson and Nina Maria Lozano-Reich's "Cultivating Queer Publics with an Uncivil Tongue," and David Weiss's "Constructing the Queer 'I.'"

While these studies all explore noteworthy aspects of the show, they focus almost exclusively on homosexual identity, and the space gay men occupy in American culture. There is very little critical attention paid to the experiences of the heteronormative men that the Fab Five make over in each episode. This critical focus on the show's representation of homosexual men rather than heteronormative men makes sense given the cultural context of the original show, which appeared at a time when homosexuality was less visible on television. In 2003, when *QEI* premiered, seven shows on American television featured an openly gay character. "Will & Grace" had just ended its fifth season, "Queer as Folk" was a cult hit on Showtime and "The L Word" and "Nip, Tuck" were about to debut. HBO would air three shows that year, "Six Feet Under", "The Wire," and "Angels in America" that featured gay characters in prominent roles. "Gay programming

was seeing a steady upswing, but the word ‘queer’ still carried a stigma” (Jacobs and Radzimski 2018). Many of those who talked about the show were afraid to even use the word “Queer” because of its cultural connotations (Ibid). The show debuted at a time that was not far removed from an era where just airing gay programming on your network was a big risk. Just seven years earlier, Ellen DeGeneres came out on her show, *Ellen*. In response, “the episode was boycotted by advertisers like JCPenney and Chrysler, who pulled their ads rather than be associated with the show. Ellen was canceled the next year as ratings dropped. Speaking to, *Out*, she described the aftermath of that experience: ‘I wasn’t sure if I was going to work again...I was at rock bottom and out of money, with no work in sight’ (Bendix 2017).

Given the lack of openly gay people on television and network concerns about public responses to openly gay characters, it makes sense that critical studies of *QE1* were primarily focused on the show’s representation of homosexuality. *QE1* was groundbreaking for putting five gay men front and center as the main characters of a reality tv show. This is not to say that there are not some problematic issues involving the show’s representation of homosexuality. As many critics have noted, the original featured a Fab Five who were caricatures of homosexual men and did not really reflect queerness as a whole (Penny). Rather, they represented a queerness the general public could accept. And this is despite the fact that they were on a network (Bravo) that was already catering to an audience of predominately queer people and women.

In contrast to the cultural context that surrounded and impacted the focus of *QE1*, *QE2* operates in a different cultural environment, which is much more accepting of homosexuality. In the years since *QE1* first aired, public attitudes toward homosexuality

have shifted in the United States. In 2003, most Americans (59%) opposed same-sex marriage, while 32% favored it. Today, those numbers have completely flipped, and support for same-sex marriage is at its highest point ever. Based on polling in 2017, a majority of Americans (62%) support same-sex marriage, while 32% oppose it. (Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, 2018). As public acceptance of homosexuality has grown, it is now far more common for American viewers to see gay characters on television in 2018.

According to GLAAD's annual TV diversity report, in 2018, "LGBTQ representation on the television hit a record high, with 8.8 percent out of 857 series regulars on broadcast TV openly identified as on the gay, trans, or queer spectrum." Gay men made up the majority of the 113 total regular and recurring LGBTQ characters at 42 percent for a total of 47 characters. This shift in public acceptance for representations of gay people on television is evident in the expanded media presence of *QE2*, which has moved from a relatively small cable network (Bravo) to a streaming behemoth (Netflix). The series is now accessible to the millions of people around the world who subscribe to Netflix, and the fact that one of the preeminent media companies in the world promotes *QE2* as one of its flagship shows is a telling indicator of how far society has progressed with regard to acceptance of homosexuality on television.

Within this new cultural context, *QE2* is no longer primarily defined by its representation of gay men and has become much more than "flashy makeover show that relies on a clash of cultures for laughs." (Nicola 2018). Free from the pressures of having to represent gay men in positive and productive ways for a potentially resistant audience, the new iteration of the show can now explore other issues related to representations of

masculinity, particularly regarding the identities and perspectives of the heteronormative men that the Fab Five choose to makeover in each episode. This is not to say that *QE1* was not invested in exploring the issues and challenges facing heteronormative men—it was. The focus was always there, clearly laid out in the show's original title: *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. *QE2*, however, is able to draw more attention to these issues because of the normalization of gay men on American television. Fashion guru Tan France neatly explains the difference between the eras of the show. “The original show was fighting for tolerance.” “Our fight is for acceptance” (“You Can’t Fix Ugly” 00:00:03 -00:00:09). That fight for acceptance is not just limited to gay men. The show extends that message of self-acceptance by preaching its redefinition of masculinity and sharing its message of radical self-love with heteronormative men. In turn, this revelatory concept creates space where they can be more open and honest with their feelings and true to their core personalities by freeing themselves from the restrictions of heteronormative performance.

*Queer Eye* has never really been about queerness. “It’s actually about the disaster of heterosexuality—and what, if anything, can be salvaged from its ruins” (Penny). The key difference between the reboot and the original, is that now, culture has come to a place where the expectations of heterosexual men are clearer. They are expected to change. The first season of *QE2* primarily focused on heteronormative men who are struggling to adapt to a society that seems to have shifted faster than they can adjust. This shift has been labeled as many things but is most commonly referred to as a “crisis of masculinity.” The main driving force behind the show and the question that defines the crisis are one and the same. Namely, how do we get straight men to embrace “a kinder, gentler heterosexual masculinity demanded by emotional capitalism?” (Sender 38).

While many articles written about the show have praised and recognized how the show is responding to and exposing this crisis, (*Queer Eye* ' Maps a Cure for Our Masculinity Crisis" ) ("Netflix's *Queer Eye* Is Here to Try To Save Masculinity") none have been able to define it (Lloyd 2018) (Kuchera 2018). Depending on who you ask, they will have a different answer: Some call it an outgrowth of toxic masculinity - others, the old way of doing things. In her article for the Atlantic online, 'The many possible meanings of the 'masculinity crisis.', Alia Wong surveyed some of the nation's leading academics on the subject:

For Michael Kimmel, an author, and professor at SUNY Stony Brook, where he founded the Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities, the crisis involves one type of man—heterosexual, white ones—who feel like their power “is slipping.” Tristan Bridges, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, agreed with Kimmel, adding that the crisis affects men who are now contending with “unchallenged entitlement.” For the writer Thomas Page McBee, the crisis involves men who are hurting in the face of society's stereotyped expectations that they should be more inhumane than humane, more violent than empathic. For Joseph Derrick Nelson, a senior research fellow with the Center for the Study of Boys' and Girls' Lives, the crisis is hitting black boys who need support and the kind of unconditional love necessary to help them break free of certain damaging norms (Wong 2018) .

I think the crisis is a combination of all these factors but could be described simply as the pain many men are feeling trying to shift their performance of gender to more accurately

reflect societies expectations. Whatever you want to call it, change is happening, and many men are having trouble adjusting to a new reality.

These changes necessitate an updated analysis of the show that accounts for societal shifts and expands the scope of study beyond a queer studies perspective. Although my thesis will briefly touch on how the show engages with issues associated with homosexuality, it will not be my primary focus. Instead, my study contributes something new to the academic discussion surrounding *Queer Eye* by specifically focusing on heteronormative masculine performance. The bulk of my analysis will involve close readings of specific episodes and scenes from *QE2* that introduce and examine the strategies the Fab Five use to redefine their subject's engagement with masculinity. My analysis will include specific details of the interactions between the members of the Fab Five and the subject of their makeover during the scene, along with a detailed description of the place, setting, and situation that led to the interaction taking place. I will examine how these strategies are being implemented. I will also explore the dialogue from the scenes, including statements made by these men that indicate their stunted emotional state and subsequent growth. My close readings will focus on these men's emotional responses and actions, which will support my claim that their experience on *QE2* allowed them and the viewers the opportunity to embrace a different model of masculinity that involves more emotion and vulnerability.

Specifically, my study will help better define the type of masculinity the heteronormative contestants are performing, paying close attention to how the framework of the show allows them to be freer to express their emotions. Building off the work of R.W. Connell and Michael Kimmel, my thesis examines the reboot of *Queer Eye* in relation

to contemporary arguments in masculinity studies about the costs of hegemonic masculinity, heteronormative performance, and identity. I will be relying on these authors to introduce key concepts and theories in the field of masculinity which should provide a theoretical framework for examining masculine performance on the show.

To be clear, I do not think *QE2* holds all the answers for solving the limitations of heteronormative performance. Nor, do I think it alone will solve the “crisis of masculinity.” It is also important to recognize some of the critical limitations of the show regarding the representation of masculinity. One limitation, for instance, concerns the staged and artificial nature of the show. No contestant or ‘hero’ is picked at random; all have to at least be open to five gay men making over their life before agreeing to be on the show. Many men who are a part of this “crisis” would not respond with the same openness. The fixes to their home, life, and sense of self, are temporary and the Fab Five leave the “hero’s” life as quickly as they entered it. Real change takes more than spending a week with five fabulous Queer men and all issues of sexuality, class, and gender cannot be neatly resolved in an hour episode. It is worth examining whether the show is just acting as a placeholder that provides temporary and imaginary comfort to its viewers; instead of providing solutions that can begin to start solving the problems associated with heteronormative masculinity.

Another limitation to consider concerns the gap between the show’s intended audience and the people who are actually watching. *QE2* provides a useful model for heteronormative men to cope with and address an ongoing crisis in masculinity.

Unfortunately, the group that could benefit the most from watching the show: heteronormative men, seem to be the least interested in watching it. Katherine Sender

initially identified this issue in her analysis of *QE1*, writing “If the audience for the show was predominantly made up of women, not the straight guys who were the putative subjects of *Queer Eye*’s address how did the show reform men’s wayward behaviors? Was this a kind of two-step flow, where women watched the show to browbeat their male partners into better behavior? If men are learning the lessons from the show indirectly, does it still have value?” (Sender 38). I think these same questions are still worthy of exploration for anyone examining the reboot. While Netflix does not release its numbers, fan sites and social media seem to indicate that the main demographic watching the show is still straight women, not heteronormative men.

In her article “The Queer Art of Failing Better,” Penny writes about her own experience watching the first season of the show, and explains the factors that may account for why it is so appealing to straight women:

There is a reason straight woman love this show: It’s the pornography of emotional labor. The work that the Fab Five are doing ...is girlfriend work. It is emotional labor, domestic labor, the work that anyone who has ever dated a straight man will recognize...This canny reversal of cultural power is cathartic to watch if you’re a woman who dates men: here are men gleefully doing for one another what some women and girls have spent our lives being pressured or cajoled into doing for them (Penny).

Critics might say this is not a show that tries to pose a new and more effective model of masculinity but, rather: a show that is a fantasy about masculinity made for the wrong audience, where potential conflicts about shifting cultural expectations for straight men are not directly addressed. A less sympathetic analysis of the show may argue that it

creates the false expectation that healing toxic masculinity can be cured by exposure to “the gays”, a little makeover, and a new living space.

It is important to recognize that just like any other “unscripted” television series, there are elements of *QE2* that are performative and unrealistic. By no means is the show perfect, it is not going to solve the crisis of masculinity on its own. Ultimately, though, I believe this show is a productive attempt to assert a useful, effective new model of masculinity. It so clearly exposes the limitations of heteronormative masculinity by picking subjects who have been the most damaged by them. These subjects are then paired up with men: the Fab Five, who are completely unbounded by those same expectations and restrictions, creating a third space where the contestants are also free to be themselves. I see little harm in a show whose core driving force is empathy and improvement. The potential of the show for teaching emotionally repressed men that vulnerability is the place where connection starts cannot be discounted. In fact, I think it is understudied.

My hope is that my analysis of the first season, along with a theoretical framework provided by leading scholars in the field of masculinity studies; will provide insight and better define terms like "crisis of masculinity" and "toxic masculinity", which seem to overly simplify deeper issues of shifting gender norms and privilege that are affecting American society and the men who are a part of it. Ultimately, my goal is to examine whether strategies used in *QE2* can provide a model and start a dialogue that can begin to address the problems that are endemic with heteronormative performance and began to start teaching those men how to operate in a world that “no longer values their skill-set above all others” (Penny).

In closing this introduction, I want to address why I have chosen this show to examine the limitations of heteronormative expression, as opposed to one of the many other shows that also engage with representations of heteronormative masculinity. First, as previously stated, its comparative dimensions (contrasts between queer, heteronormative men), provides a new and useful framework for examining the limitations and rigidity of heteronormative masculine performance. In addition, *QE2* represents a form of masculinity that differs from “mainstream masculine media culture, which tends to emphasize, both thematically and visually, darkness and detachment” (Hautakangas, 113). The emphasis on empathy and connection creates a clear distinction between *QE2* and the way that masculinity is typically presented on television.

While other reality shows, like RuPaul’s *Drag Race*, play with these issues of identity and performance. None are so hyper-focused on solving this “crisis” in the same way. From the beginning, the show has addressed “this crisis” head-on in a way that others did not by placing heteronormative men at the center. Factoring in the cultural context and the shows renewed focus, this reboot of *Queer Eye* lends itself to deconstructing toxic masculinity. No other show focuses on exploring and dissecting masculinity and its nuances so specifically. Crucially, it accomplishes all of this while appealing to a mainstream audience. This mass appeal establishes a clear distinction between *QE* and programs like *Drag Race* that are more narrowly focused on attracting a queer following. Men on the show are so clearly struggling - while the fab-5 are so clearly thriving. How do we reconcile this role reversal? A reversal which to some men, like the ones on the show, and the ones in crisis, seems to be particularly destabilizing. By teaching through example that “there is no right, acceptable framework for a man to

fit in”, the “Fab Five” themselves reinforce the concept (Malshe 2018). More than that, there is something universal about the show's message. “*Queer Eye* is not just for a distinct audience. It’s accessible for anyone looking for some type of motivation to pursue a personal renaissance” (Ibid.). That universality is what makes *QE2* so appealing while also keeping the narrow focus that makes it unique. These problems involving identity and performance are not limited to heterosexual men. They just seem to be the most affected by them at this moment.

### **Crisis of Masculinity: Foundations and Theory**

**We’ve got a generation of young men who believe that they are victimized, because they’ve been promised the world. That’s a poisoned chalice, because now there’s a gap between what the cultural narrative is and what their experience is. Looking back, I think it’s done me more good than harm to be promised absolutely nothing. That’s why I haven’t responded to the more brutal aspects of my life with violence or bitterness.**

- **Hannah Gadsby, *Nanette***

*QE2* exposes and responds to a crisis of masculinity, which is a result of the shifting attitudes and cultural norms that have required men to adjust to the new cultural expectations around masculinity. The current crisis often gets blamed on the increasing demands of neoliberalism “defined by more independent and precarious working conditions, paired with a free-market economy... individuals must now display themselves as self-reliant and highly employable” (Duguay 2018). While the pressures of neoliberalism can help explain the detachment and helplessness many men currently feel, these economic conditions cannot fully explain the current crisis alone. Rather, these feelings are indicative of a more significant historical trend regarding men’s perceptions of gender roles. There is a long history of people talking about a crisis in masculinity. In *The*

*Descent of Man* (2017), Grayson Perry presents a thorough breakdown and historical timeline of past crises:

History throws up many moments when the accepted vision of what it was to be a man was questioned and adapted. The mass occurrence of ‘shell shock’ during the First World War forced mental health professionals to reappraise the idea that men were born with a natural emotional resilience. Before that came the fear that white men were being physically emasculated by the rise of machines and the Industrial Revolution, only for the working man two hundred years later to feel emasculated by the decline in those same industries. Even earlier... ideas of masculinity took a knock from civil war, growing capitalism and colonialism and nascent female emancipation. (41-43).

In recounting the way these different forms of “crisis” change in focus over time, Perry pushes us to see these varied forms of masculinity crisis less as a specific historical event and more as a cultural continuum. In "Men are Interminably in Crisis," historian Judith Allen suggests that the notion of a "crisis of masculinity" is actually just the "rhetoric of crisis."

The most current crisis is best defined through a lens of abundance vs. scarcity. In this light, men see themselves as losing their agency and authority, which they used to have in abundance, as those who are not male or who do not represent conventional masculinity gain greater rights, authority, visibility, and agency in contemporary culture. Promoters of this “scarcity and abundance” model of masculinity follow the pattern of crisis rhetoric, which calls for men to return to their “primal” nature and act in ways that are animal-like -- dominant, authoritative, and assertive. They imply that these are the behaviors that are

“naturally” associated with masculinity. Their movements are stoked by fear, an underlying paranoia that something is going to be stripped away (Connell, *Masculinities* 84). We see this rhetoric referenced by Connell as “crisis tendencies,” and Kimmel refers to such tendencies as “cult of masculinity” that is a manifestation of a part of a larger “American social character” (Kimmel, *The History of Men* 91).

This fear of a loss of freedom is seen in the rhetoric of the political right, who portray shifting gender norms as an imminent threat. One of these figures is popular radio host Rush Limbaugh who popularized the term “Femme Nazis” in reference to modern feminists, whom he alleges are a group of radicals on a “quest for power” and believe “that men aren't necessary”( Moi 1736-1737). This rhetoric makes it easy for an uninformed person to see the feminist and gender equality movement as nothing more than organizations committed to destroying men’s freedoms. This fearmongering bolsters the arguments of those who want to return to traditional gender norms and stokes anger in men who fear that they may get left behind as gender expectations and roles change. Limbaugh’s reference to “Femme Nazis” and the erasure of men rhetoric exemplifies the logic of “scarcity.” However, this crisis rhetoric rooted in the concepts of loss and scarcity is hardly a novel occurrence.

Framing masculinity as an identity threatened by outside forces of social change is nothing new, just the most recent incarnation of a larger historical trend that promotes a version of “Masculinity bound to nostalgia” (Perry 43). Any time there is a shift in cultural expectations and perceptions, crisis rhetoric seeks to undo those changes by invoking some older, more traditional, or more primal model of masculinity. R. W. Connell, one of the founders of the field of masculinity studies, explains how masculinity studies emerged in

response to the crisis rhetoric of the late 1970s and 1980s. In an interview, Connell explained the origins of her interest in masculinity studies, noting that “At the time, there was a whole genre of books about masculinity... that claimed men were suffering from a crisis of masculinity and needed to recover ‘true masculinity.’” They were totally unscientific but very popular. I came to think of them as masculinity therapy, books to reassure men so they could function as patriarchal once again” (Nascimento and Connell 3977).

Connell’s comments that men felt they needed to be “reassured” that they can return to patriarchal norms once again illustrates this logic of scarcity. This is a thought process that leads traditionalists to propagate “crisis rhetoric.” It seeks to halt the wave of progress towards a less gendered society by calling for men to return to their “true” essential nature. Gender theorists, on the other hand, challenge this crisis rhetoric by deconstructing the essential nature of traditional gender norms. They promote an inclusive, abundance philosophy decoupled from and unconstrained by traditional male values.

It is crucial to address some of the central concepts and foundational arguments in the field of masculinity studies to be able to develop an understanding of the endemic problems in male culture, particularly how masculinity has been defined in terms of social construction and performance. In her foundational book *Masculinities* (1995), Connell synthesized concepts from "feminism, gay liberation, psychoanalysis, and sociology," to define how masculinity is socially constructed. She defines masculinity as "simultaneously, a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices on bodily experience, personality and culture"

(71). Connell's theories reflect core concepts within the field of gender studies, most notably Judith Butler's assertion that all gender is performance.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argues that being born male or female does not dictate gendered behavior. Instead, individuals learn to behave in particular ways to fit into society. Her theory of performativity posits that gender is learned behavior, socially constructed through speech and nonverbal communication. In *Masculinities*, Connell reflects Butler's concept, describing gender as a "social practice," promoting the idea that within the role's men perform, there are multiple subordinate and dominant forms of masculinity that vary across culture and time.

Connell's theoretical framework of multiple masculinities and hegemonic masculinity have developed into bedrock principles masculinity scholars use as a reference point to understand western society's relationship with different types of masculine behavior. The origins of the term hegemonic masculinity can be traced back to studies of Australian schoolboys in the early 80's (Kessler et al. 1982). The term was then refined and "integrated into a systematic sociological theory of gender" in Connell's book *Gender and Power* (1987), which became "the most cited source for the concept of hegemonic masculinity" (Connell and Messerschmidt 831-832). It has been used and applied to studies "in fields ranging from education and antiviolence work to health and counseling" and papers which use or "refer to 'hegemonic masculinity' in the text, run to many hundreds" (Ibid 830). It is important to note that the concept is not universally accepted. Connell is one of many that has reconsidered its use,<sup>1</sup> noting that it has "attracted serious criticism

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<sup>1</sup> Connell suggests "reformulation of the concept in four areas: a more complex model of gender hierarchy, emphasizing the agency of women; explicit recognition of the geography of masculinities, emphasizing the interplay among local, regional, and global levels; a more specific treatment of embodiment in contexts of

from several directions: sociological, psychological, poststructuralist, and materialist” (Ibid).

Hegemonic masculinity is “distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities,” defined as “the culturally idealized form of what it means to be a man, which typically takes the form of a hypermasculinity that is strong, virile, and aggressive,” adding the caveat that “the versions of masculinity we culturally idealize shift over time and in response to various contexts” (Zimdars 278). The other masculinities defined by Connell are subordinated, complicit, and marginalized masculinities, which all interplay with each other and are related to other “structures such as class and race.” (*Masculinities* 80). “Hegemonic and subordinated masculinities relate to each other in terms of dominance and subordination. Complicit and marginalized masculinities mainly regard the authorization of the gender order” (Gottzén 230). Subordinated masculinities consist of men who fail to meet the “an idealized, dominant, heterosexual” hegemonic standard of “masculinity, constructed in relation to women and to subordinated masculinities, and closely connected to the institution of marriage” (Morettini 2016). Historically the prime example would be gay men who Connell writes are “the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity”, the cultural association with femininity being the key factor (Connell, *Masculinities* 78).

It is important to understand these terms do not refer to “fixed character types.” (81). Complicit masculinity refers to the way men benefit from the patriarchy, while marginalized masculinity is related to issues of class and race, referring to “marginalized groups who give authority to hegemonic masculinity without threatening its

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privilege and power; and a stronger emphasis on the dynamics of hegemonic masculinity, recognizing internal contradictions and the possibilities of movement toward gender democracy” (Ibid 829).

dominance”(Gottzén 230). To illustrate these distinctions, Connell uses the example of “Black Athletes” who may be the “exemplars” of the hegemonic ideal, but whose fame and wealth do not help black men in general (81). This concept of marginalization is an essential part of Connell’s framework, but will not be a significant part of my analysis.

There is a general acceptance among men that successfully embodying hegemonic masculinity is normal. “This stereotypic notion of masculinity... shapes the socialization and aspirations of young males” and defines the lives of many older ones (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). Hegemonic masculinity is “not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. It was certainly normative and currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men” (Ibid). This inherent contradiction is key to understanding the dysfunction of men depicted in *QE2* and the current masculinity crisis. This dichotomy, combined with the demands of hegemonic performance, end up wreaking havoc on the lives of many men. Terry Kupers, an academic psychiatrist, describes hegemonic masculinity as including, a “high degree of ruthless competition, an inability to express emotions other than anger, an unwillingness to admit weakness, devaluation of all feminine attributes in men, and homophobia” (Kupers 716). These attributes prevent many from reaching their full potential as comfortable, vulnerable, emotionally healthy human beings.

Unfortunately, this “idealized” version of masculinity is just that, ideal, and no man can live up to all that the definition entails. In *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (1996), Kimmel argues that the quest for manhood— achieving success to prove your masculinity— has been one of the formative and persistent experiences in American men’s

lives. Starting in the early nineteenth century, this idea of proving one's manhood became central to American men's conception of the self. This idea led to structural changes in the workplace, family, and politics. This conception of manhood helps to perpetuate gender inequality, solidifying walls between genders and between men. Kimmel argues that this idea of proving one's manhood still resonates with many men today, even though the "male role is a set of conditioned feelings and behaviors, and that its defining characteristics and boundaries have always been shifting" (Perry 43). He sees hegemonic masculinity as particularly damaging. Like many other scholars I've referenced, he is a promoter of a more mindful masculinity, a new type of manhood based on the content of a man's character and the depth of his soul; instead of "the size of their biceps, wallets, or penises" (254). In spite of their work, "Men still continue to position themselves in relation to this ideal, and therefore internalize personal codes of behavior that contribute to its reproduction". The pressure to conform and relate to this perfect dominant masculinity perpetuates this structure of gender-based hierarchy in society (Morettini 2016). Often, this toxic form of performance leads to situations where men have to restrict and control their emotions in unhealthy ways. Those changes have psychological and social consequences that affect not only American men but also every group in which they come in contact.

The toll of failing to meet this hegemonic expectation of performance is no trivial matter for men and the society of which they are a part. The consequences can be dire. Since 1982 there have been at around 119 mass shootings; women have committed only three (Follman, et al). Almost all these men fit a similar profile. They are often isolated, mentally ill, and most crucially, fail to meet the expectations of hegemonic performance. These subordinated men end up acting out violently, punishing others for their failure to

reach an unrealistic standard. This acting out is defined as “Aggrieved entitlement,” a “gendered emotion, a fusion of that humiliating loss of manhood and the moral obligation and entitlement to get it back” (Kimmel and Kalish, “Suicide by Mass Murder” 454). We most clearly see this dynamic in the “Incel” community.

The term "Incel" is short for "involuntarily celibate," and it represents a community birthed out of a movement that started on popular online forums like Reddit and 4chan. Incels are usually self-described “beta males” who share the belief that they "can't have sex despite wanting to.” They bond over their perception that their subordinate status leaves them with “no possibility of finding a partner, either to get validation, love, or acceptance from” (incels.me). Instead of subverting or trying to find ways to live outside of hegemonic society, their subordinated masculinity is the center of their worldview. The community has developed its own vernacular. They rail against "Chads," who represent the hegemonic ideal: charismatic, tall, good-looking, confident, muscular. “Stacys” are the “Chads” female equivalents, attractive women who reject Incels. Misogyny is a central part of their ideology which places most of the blame for their loneliness and isolation on women. Through this scarcity lens, they see the world as a place where they are systematically discriminated against because they are unattractive or socially awkward. As a counterbalance to this innate unfairness, many on the forums believe they should be provided with women to have sex with from the government, with others going so far as to advocate more extreme measures like rape or resorting to violence<sup>2</sup>. The Incel community

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<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, this rhetoric has turned into a real-world force in the form of mass shootings that specifically target women. The most famous of which was perpetrated by a man who many within the community see as their “Patron Saint;” Elliot Rodger, A 22 year- old, self-described Incel, who killed six people and injured eleven others as a direct act of retribution against a society that had forced him into an unwanted subordinate role. Before his rampage, he posted a video in which he rails against women who

and the violence it has inspired are indicative of a more significant trend. This inherently violent and exclusionary way of seeing the world is not just a male or even subordinate male problem. It's a more significant societal problem.

While the Incel subculture illustrates the violent extremes produced by hegemonic performance, hegemonic masculinity has a much larger range of negative impacts on American men, who are often individuals suffering in silence, internalizing the messages of toxic masculinity which tells them they don't measure up. This growing problem has a name, Gender Role Conflict (GRC), "a psychological state in which socialized gender roles have negative consequences for individuals. It occurs when rigid, sexist, or restrictive gender roles result in personal restrictions" (Levant and Wong 75). While mass shootings seem to capture the imagination of the public, this internal battle playing itself out in the quiet corners of men's souls is often overlooked and ignored.

Ultimately, this belief that hegemonic performance is the norm leads to isolation. A premium is put on competition instead of connection. For most men, the limitations of this type of masculine performance seem to outweigh the benefits and may help explain the problems of intimacy and vulnerability that plague heteronormative male culture. These restrictions become magnified in a society where gender roles have become more fluid and open. There seems to be a rigidity within male performance, tied to living up to the hegemonic ideal that is more extreme than other gender expressions. This brings us to *QE2*, a show which tries to create spaces where men can express their masculinity precisely in terms that are more fluid and open. "What Queer Eye in its modern incarnation makes clear

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"would have all rejected me and looked down on me as an inferior man if I ever made a sexual advance towards them, while they throw themselves at these obnoxious brutes" (Beyond the Veil, 2014, 2:34). In the case of Elliot Rodgers, his rage, and subsequent violence was a direct result of not living up to ideal gender norms. He believed his alpha status would only be restored through killing others.

is that for a great many straight men, their designated comfort zone is a miserable place to be. Given permission to step outside of it—permission to fail with grace and dignity and a new sectional into the bargain—they all fall into line with something like relief” (Penny). This “queer art of failure” modeled by the Fab Five is best described by Judith Halberstam in her book of the same name, where she argues it “turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable” and presents an “alternative to the punishing model of hegemonic success imposed by the straight world.” (Halberstam 88). Instead of “striving relentlessly for the brutal, perfection”, this queer ethos and flexibility of thinking are an essential part of the *QE2*’s success (Penny). There is a freedom in queer performance that enables the Fab Five to model behavior that allows the subjects on the show to see that there are other ways to define themselves beyond the role’s society forces on them.

### ***QE2*: Reimagining Masculinity**

*QE2* is different from other makeover shows that shame and bully people into change, disparaging the “before” to praise the “after” and placing a singular focus on changing a person’s outward appearance. Instead, *QE2* employs a more holistic approach by striving to transform the subject’s perceptions and enactment of masculinity to embrace a more affirming sense of self and embody a masculinity that is functional and operates outside the bounds of hegemonic performance. The Fab Five use affirming language along with touch to enact this transformation, providing the “heroes,” as they are called on the show, with a sorely needed sense of connection. The Fab Five rely on these strategies to create a destigmatized space, where emotions (affection in particular) and intimacy are expressed openly. This openness produces an environment where the subjects can feel safe enough to bring themselves out of isolation, embrace challenges, and access their

vulnerability while working towards the end goal of empowering them to feel confident about their interests, emotions, and identities.

The use of the term “heroes” exemplifies this holistic approach. Affirming language is a crucial strategy the Fab Five employs to help these men transition out of their self-defeating mindset. The term “heroes” attaches a sense of agency, implying that the subjects are responsible for the positive changes they are making to improve their lives. This use of language re-frames their transformation as a heroic act that they have achieved, instead of representing them as the passive recipients of a last-ditch effort to save them from the limitations of their current existence. This affirmation is often used in tandem with touch to create an emotional bond between the Fab Five and their subjects. This affirming language builds a sense of trust, confidence, and connection necessary to empower them to take charge of their futures. Affirmation creates an opportunity for the Fab Five to gently ease their subjects into a headspace where they are more emotionally open to the kind of experiences that offer them a level of confidence necessary to assert more control over their lives.

Touch is another key strategy the Fab Five use as part of their holistic affirming approach. This contact reassures the subjects, providing them with desperately needed physical affection. The Fab Five use various forms of touch such as sitting close together, hugging, friendly taps, and reassuring touches on the face, back or shoulder. This use of touch is key to creating a space that allows for the emotional freedom necessary for the Fab Five to further solidify their emotional bond with their subjects. Transitioning out of this space of hegemonic performance and into an environment that allows for more physical intimacy between men is a crucial part of freeing them from the type of

historical-cultural expectations that has made disconnection endemic among straight men. Touch is destigmatized from the moment the subjects and the Fab Five meet. They make it clear to the subjects that touching is going to be part of their transformation, and constant contact is a theme throughout each episode. There is no minding the gap that traditionally has seemed to separate men – especially gay and straight ones. The no-contact bubble and emotional walls that many heterosexual men have built up for protection are purposely ignored. Personal space is intentionally and lovingly violated to create a mutual emotional space.

Before moving into an analysis of these strategies, it is essential to understand the overall structure of each episode, which echoes the holistic approach toward helping its subjects become more functional, vulnerable, and emotionally open. Each episode begins with a montage of scenes that introduce the audience to the subject being made over. The opening consists of a quick summary that gives a sense of who they are, how they live, and the problems that led to the dysfunction of their current situation. Over the course of a week, the Fab Five use their specific skill sets (Antoni Porowski, cooking; Tan France, fashion; Karamo Brown, interpersonal development; Bobby Berk, interior design/construction; Jonathan Van Ness, grooming) to teach the subjects valuable skills that will aid their transformation into a more functional person. Each member of the Fab Five take the subjects on a series of adventures and in which they employ affirming language and touch, as well as different modes of “treatment” related to their specialty. The episode culminates with a coming-out scene that shows of their new look. They then transition into a final montage in which they show off the subjects’ self they have learned to embrace.

The Fab Five's purpose is to transform the attitudes and behavior that have led the subjects' loved ones to request a dramatic intervention. They accomplish this by introducing their subjects to new routines like getting a haircut at a fancy salon or going to a clothing store that will aid in their makeover into a more presentable person. They also engage the subjects by making them participate in activities that present them with different opportunities to build up their self-esteem, rebuild relationships, and clarify and reconnect to the goals they have for their lives. Each activity allows a different member of the Fab Five to model behavior, teach valuable lessons, and forcibly get the subjects out of their comfort zones. This learning process, combined with a complete overhaul of their relationships, wardrobe, and living space, are the essential parts of a typical episode of *QE2*.

This section provides a close analysis of two subjects, Tom and Neal. It examines the methods the Fab Five uses to help the subjects become more comfortable expressing emotions, showing vulnerability, and reframing those qualities as "masculine." Specifically, I will be focusing on moments when touch and language are used by the Fab Five to establish and facilitate connection. I chose these two subjects because they represent a range of ages and experiences. These men are from different generations and raised with different cultural expectations of how to interact with other men. Tom is a 57-year-old white man who lives in a small basement apartment in rural Georgia; Neal is a 36-year-old Indian American programmer, who lives in a more urban environment and is more familiar with modern culture. Both live alone and work solitary jobs that enable them to maintain physical separation from others. Tom drives a dump truck and Neal is an app developer.

The effects of this isolation go beyond the physical and create emotional distance with others as well which seems to exacerbate preexisting emotional issues, resulting in a lack of intimacy in their lives. Confronting and resolving issues around intimacy and connection are pivotal parts of their transformations. The Fab Five accomplish this through helping them to reconnect with the outside world by re-framing their self-image, changing the way they presented themselves, and restoring previous relationships. In Tom's case, the Fab Five encourage him to get to a place where he has the self-esteem to feel confident rekindling his relationship with his ex-wife. With Neal, the Fab Five's primary focus is getting him to a place where he is no longer self-isolating by teaching him to become more comfortable expressing his vulnerability and establishing closer connections with people from his work life and family life.

Beyond their lack of emotional intimacy, both men also struggle with engaging in self-care and expressing vulnerability, which signals others to keep their distance. The subjects sport a sloppy and disheveled look. Tom prefers "jorts" with a tucked-in t-shirt. Neal's primary concern is comfort and simplicity. He readily admits that he "never goes shopping in fancy stores." Instead, he prefers to wear the same outfit for weeks on end. They also hide behind their facial hair. Tom and Neal have matching oversized, unkempt, beards that seem to accentuate their slovenly appearance. This shared trait of putting little effort into their appearance is an integral part of these subjects' performances of gender—reflective of a more general internalized homophobia that many straight men have. This trait equates getting "dressed" up or caring about your outward appearance as feminine: the anthesis of the primal (hegemonic) ideal most men are striving to meet.

The Fab Five transforms their subjects through teaching them a new way of living devoid of the complications brought on by the burden of hegemonic performance. Men experience stress in “situations that prompt them to feel pressure to conform to masculinity stereotypes and rigid cultural norms of masculinity. Fear of performance failure” is “associated with guilt, a tendency to blame others, and to experience shame” (Levant and Wong, 142-143). A rejection of these cultural norms is necessary for the subjects to fit more comfortably in modern society and live a more fulfilling life. Affirming language and touch are a vital part of changing the subjects self-defeating mindset, dismantling their defense mechanisms, fear of emasculation, and fear of non-acceptance. The free and supportive environment these strategies create is responsible for these subjects feeling safe enough to access the vulnerability needed to make the change into a more functional person. In the close analysis, I will delve deeper and analyze scenes from the first two episodes of *QE2* in which touch and affirming language are used to establish and enable connections between the Fab Five and their subjects. I limited my analysis to the first and second episodes of the first season of *QE2* due to limitations of time and length, as well as the insight they provide into the establishment of the show’s ethos and guiding principles.

### **“You Can’t Fix Ugly”: Getting the Beast to See His Beauty**

The first episode in the first season of *QE2* features Tom, a 57-year old dump truck driver whose lack of self-value, isolation, and helplessness is immediately evident in the opening montage that depicts Tom’s daily routines.<sup>3</sup> A self-described “dumb, old country boy from Kentucky” who “doesn’t do a whole lot, other than getting up going to

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<sup>3</sup> “You Can’t Fix Ugly.” *Queer Eye*, season 1, episode 1, Netflix.

work and coming home,” (“You Can’t Fix Ugly” 00:02:08 -00:02:29). Tom is portrayed as a creature of habit, with a monotonous, isolated existence. He eats at the same Mexican restaurant every day, ordering his usual, a jumbo margarita with fried food. We see him in his natural habitat: a small basement apartment attached to a colonial-style home in rural Georgia. He is shown engaging in his “favorite activities”: concocting, then drinking his signature “redneck margaritas” (consisting of Mountain Dew and tequila) and chain-smoking cigarettes outside while watching his tv through an open door (00:02:17-00:02:45).

Although he is isolated, we soon learn that Tom has some relationships. Tom’s daughter, baby grandson, and ex-wife Abby seem to be the most meaningful connections in his life. His daughter is worried about how his lifestyle is affecting his health and concerned about him being lonely. She was the one who nominated him for the show, hoping the Fab Five would have a positive effect on his ability to form meaningful connections and lead a healthier, happier lifestyle. She describes him as a “hot mess” whose style – “jorts” and a tucked in shirt and calf length white socks— hasn’t changed in 27 years” (00:02:25-00:02:45).

Tom’s primary issue is that he does not value himself, which is manifested in his sloppy, unkempt appearance and poor health. One would be hard-pressed to call Tom conventionally attractive. His weathered face and stilted gait make him seem much older than 57. He is overweight and struggling with a host of health issues, including a bad back, and lupus, which gives him rosy, pocked, cheeks that seem to accentuate his sickly appearance. This combination gives him the look of “a guy who got fired from being Santa Claus at the local mall because he spent too much time telling the kids about the

war.” Tom speaks with a certain level of self-awareness when describing how he looks, which is apparent in his pervasive negative self-talk. He repeats a negative mantra about himself, telling the Fab Five: "You can't fix ugly"(00:03:10-00:03:13). He always laughs as he says this, making use of affect display (appearing one way, when you feel another), to deflect from the emotional pain his perception of how he looks causes him. Tom repeats this phrase multiple times throughout the episode, So much so, that "You can't fix ugly" becomes the title, illuminating his sense that there is something fundamentally broken about his appearance and that he cannot do anything about it.

Tom’s continual assertion that he is ugly and, more importantly, that he cannot change his appearance creates a self-defeating cycle in which he is unwilling to engage in self-care. This lack of self-care is not just limited to Tom. It is a consistent theme that affects both subjects in my analysis and could be applied to many men. Like Tom, many men struggle with how to care about their appearance because they are fearful it will make them seem feminine or compromise their masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity does not prioritize self-care because “men” are supposed to view self-care as a frivolous, feminine pursuit. Instead, they should embody actions that prioritize “strength (both physical and emotional), power, resiliency/robustness/toughness, emotional inhibition, rationality, stoicism, invulnerability, independence, self-reliance, control, and aggression.” (Perkins 48). In response to not living up to those values, men like Tom and Neal withdraw from society, sacrificing interaction for the safety of not being judged for their weakness. Weakness would display vulnerability contrary to these ideals. These expectations of hegemonic performance end up limiting their ability to access the connections that could help them heal.

The Fab Five do all they can to disabuse Tom of these hegemonic views of self-care and recognize that he doesn't have to hate his appearance. They supply him with the necessary tools that teach him self-care and help him feel more pride in his appearance. Addressing Tom's issues during a taped confessional in which he speaks to the audience directly, Johnathan (style and grooming expert) echoes the sentiment, stating that "how you take care of yourself is how the world sees you." He adds that "he's not taking care of himself"(00:10: 46 -00:10:51). Put simply, getting him to a place where he can value himself and care for himself is the goal the Fab Five are trying to achieve. They accomplish this by using affirmational language to build his confidence, challenging him whenever he uses negative self-talk. This language is strategically combined with touch to forge new connections, empowering him to make the necessary changes to fulfill his needs and express his desires.

The Fab Five begin using their strategies of affirmative language and touch early in the episode when they all head to Tom's basement apartment. After assessing his living space, trying on pieces of his wardrobe, and making jokes about the stains on his ratty-old-beloved recliner, the Fab Five get to work on clearing out the junk in his house. Johnathan (grooming expert) makes his way to the bathroom and proceeds to shift focus from the state of his living space to his appearance and self-care routine. Tom and Johnathan are situated face to face in his crowded bathroom, and Jonathan begins to address Tom's appearance using affirming language, followed by reassuring touch, which results in a moment of connection. Johnathan starts by praising "a few things that" he "likes" about Tom's appearance, specifically, Tom's beard, emphasizing how much "he loves the color of it," theatrically expressing his love by making a dramatic Italian chef's

kiss, bringing his hands up to his face with a dramatic flourish, and making a smooching sound with his lips (00:10:20-00:10:30). This gesture makes Tom smile. It is clear by his reaction that he is not used to positive attention. This compliment is just one example in which the Fab Five communicate something they value about his appearance, using affirming language first before they address aspects of his appearance that he is more insecure about. Throughout the episode, the Fab Five make it a priority to compliment his face, the source of most of his insecurity, making a note of its beautiful structure and reminding him that he should not hide his pretty eyes.

Johnathan continues to use affirming language and touch as he shifts from complimenting Tom's beard into addressing more sensitive parts of Tom's appearance. He points out that he notices "a bit of dryness in your cheeks." He then touches the part of Tom's face; his inflamed, red cheeks which is a characteristic of lupus. His touch is not clinical, instead cupping his face in his hands in a soft, almost motherly way. His body language communicating to Tom that this part of his appearance does not scare or gross him out. The intimacy of the act stood out to me. Precisely, how Johnathan did not shy away from the emotional pain that Tom's condition has left him in. Tom replies, acknowledging "That's my Lupus" (00:10: 30-00:10:34).

Instead of avoiding the issue, Johnathan proposes some solutions to minimize the effects of the disease on Tom's skin. He tells Tom that "One thing I know about Lupus is that it's all about SPF...we have to protect your skin from UVA and UVB rays because sun actually can cause inflammation and flare-ups for people with Lupus" (00:10: 35-00:10:46). By referring to the scientific terms for solar rays and protection levels, Jonathan uses clinical language that emphasizes the health benefits and utility of self-care

in terms that seem practical, rather than cosmetic. Affirming language and gentle touch are used effectively in tandem here to create a moment of connection. This moment of forced confirmation through a gentle confrontation results in the subsequent clearing of shame, which indicates the emotional work that is performed by the Fab Five on *QE2*. The interaction in the bathroom ends with Johnathan using what he knows about Tom to speak to him in a language he understands. He explains that the ingredients used in his shampoo are the same ones they use to clean car engines. In observing this discussion, it was clear that no one, much less another man, had ever talked to Tom about the importance of self-care.

Later in the episode, Bobby and Johnathan take Tom to the mattress store where they use touch to reassure him that he belongs and is a part of a community. Through touch, they show him that he can enjoy being around people and participate/play with them, which is something he has been avoiding by isolating himself. It is revealed that this is the first time Tom has bought a new mattress, preferring hand me downs, and used mattresses purchased off Craigslist. Both men are horrified to find out about this and communicate the potential danger (bed bugs, etc.) of buying used furniture. This admission is also another example of Tom refusing to treat himself with respect. Johnathan, after skipping down the aisle of the showroom floor, gleefully throws himself on one of the mattresses, right after being told that it was the most expensive one in the store. He is then joined by Bobby, who, in a mock-sexual embrace, throws himself onto Johnathan. Tom, observing from the sidelines, wants to join in on the fun, exclaiming, “Hey guys, I’m joining!” (20:08- 20:10). Then he jumps/falls on top of both, embracing them in a hug that creates a dogpile on the bed. After, they all end up laughing.

In a demonstration of his growing comfort, Tom remains open to anything and everything, including Jonathan's subsequent, seductive invitations to bed. Tom has no hesitation jumping from bed to bed with Johnathan and Bobby, cuddling each other and sharing physical intimacy for which Tom is starved. Lying next to each other in the same bed, all three men seemed unfazed. The type of stigma often seen between gay and straight men seemed absent from the room. These shameless, "humorous exchanges of sexual innuendo," are a holdover from the first series, that "makes it clear to the straight subjects, as well as to straight viewers at home, that gay men do not really pose actual threats to their sexuality or well-being." Rather, this messing around more closely resembles the type of playful frivolity you see with younger boys.

The importance of this open and free physical and emotional expression of affection gets lost, stigmatized in the journey from boyhood into the hegemonic model of manhood. Around the time they start going through puberty, many boys transition out of a place where their emotional bonds and physical intimacy with other boys their age is viewed as acceptable. Young men view this as a necessary detachment, due to a need for physical contact between men being an indication of homosexual desire (Wester, et al. 195-208). This perception could lead to a boy suffering from the negative consequences of being relegated to a subordinated masculinity (Connell 79). This aspect of performance is indicative of a scarcity mindset, referenced in Kimmel's and Connell's work which is defined by a commonly held belief. It posits that failing or meeting the demands of hegemonic performance could very well determine future success (Kimmel, *The History Of Men* 29). As a result, close, emotional, intimate relationships get replaced,

with a premium put on “ruthless competition” for female attention and limited resources (Kupers).

Later in the show, the Fab Five return to Tom’s appearance, showing him how he can do more than simply protect his appearance in the interest of health. His concerns surrounding his appearance can expand beyond the practical and medical to the cosmetic. Rather than simply responding to a problem, he can take action to transform himself; take pride in his appearance, rather than feel like he must hide it. In this scene, Jonathan pushes for Tom to take on more agency regarding his appearance. He does not have to accept the way he looks when they first met. There are ways in which he can accentuate the positive features of his appearance and minimize the negative. They both return to a newly remodeled bathroom in which Johnathan models a new morning routine, explaining that these steps will help him to reduce the inflammation caused by lupus and improve his overall appearance.

The routine starts with a sunscreen regimen and placing a frozen facemask on his face. Then, Johnathan pauses and carefully explains to Tom that he is going to show how to apply concealer. He describes the process by using the masculine moniker “Greenstick.” He assures Tom that this is going to be “the only makeup thing” he’ll show him. He emphasizes he doesn’t have to use it but can if he “ever is going to a major night and wants to calm some of his redness down.” After the necessary qualifying and positive reinforcement, he stands over a seated childlike Tom on the toilet and proceeds to gently dab the makeup directly on his nose. Again, he lightly cups Tom’s face, rubbing concealer into his red cheeks inflamed as a result of his lupus. While doing this, he

models to Tom how he can do this himself. He explains that if he notices the concealer on his face, he has applied too much.

After applying the makeup, Johnathan encourages him to look at himself in the mirror and uses language that helps affirm the positive change exclaiming, “can you believe!” Tom looks at himself over in the mirror, moved, he reflects Johnathan’s excitement “Damn, it looks good!” (00:33:00-00:33:52) Without this specific intervention, Tom would have never thought that reducing the appearance of his lupus was a possibility. In this potentially fraught interaction, (a gay man applying makeup to a straight 57-year-old dump truck drivers face), we see the effective use of language that allows the subject to be open to a new experience, touch to assure, followed by affirmation that celebrates his ability to engage in self-care without shame. Towards the end of the episode, the Fab Five’s effect of Tom’s confidence was evident when compared him to the way he was initially portrayed. His appearance was noticeably transformed, aided by a new self-care routine, wardrobe, haircut, and neatly trimmed beard. Tom was more confident in his presentation, even taking pleasure in his new look. His body language, energy, and outlook noticeably changed for the better. During their goodbye, Tom expresses his appreciation for all the Fab Five had done. He admits to the Fab Five that “y’all have fixed ugly,” and he breaks down and cries and hugs each of them (00:37:54-00:37:56).

After they leave, we get to see Tom putting into practice all he has learned. He is armed with newfound confidence and a more robust sense of self. Tom reunites with his ex-wife, taking her on a date and showing her his new place. They have a discussion in his renovated outdoor patio area. She asks him, “What did you like most about being with

the five guys?” Tom responds, telling her, “I love their personalities. I’ve never hung with gay guys before, and they were great. They were so open with me, and I was open with them” (00:44:30-00:44:39). Their engagement, gentle guidance, and openness of expression had a positive effect on Tom. His experience on *QE2* allowed him to embrace a more open and functional type of masculinity modeled by the Fab Five. His views of “men” had changed. He was no longer bounded by the strictures of hegemonic expression. He embraced the concept that community, fun, and attention to self-care are an acceptable expression of masculinity. The Fab Five made space for him to be confident in how he presented and carried himself, facilitated by something as simple as touch and encouragement - a rejuvenating dose of human connection.

#### **“Saving Sasquatch”: Getting Him Out of the Cave**

The adverse effects of a lack of human connection are on full display in Neil’s episode, “Saving Sasquatch.”<sup>4</sup> It is an appropriate title that accurately describes Neil’s appearance and way of living. Neil is a 37-year-old application (app) developer who is somewhat pudgy and has wild, long, unkempt hair and a long, unruly beard. These characteristics emphasize his lack of care about his appearance and contribute to his unwelcoming closed-off vibe. He spends almost all his time in an apartment covered in dog hair, actively avoiding contact with the outside world by creating a life that ensures his social isolation. At one point, he admits that he has not had friends over in his apartment in “over ten years” (“Saving Sasquatch,” 00:09:06-00:09:08). The years of isolation have taken a toll on Neil, who is visibly uncomfortable with touch and is noticeably awkward in his interactions with members of the Fab Five. Like Tom, Neil

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<sup>4</sup> “Saving Sasquatch.” *Queer Eye*, season 1, episode 1, NETFLIX.

uses nervous laughter to hide his discomfort with physical intimacy. Throughout the week, he also uses humor to maintain and justify the distance he creates between himself and others.

Tom struggled with isolation, but Neal has an even harder time connecting with others and maintaining personal relationships. For Neal, isolation and lack of intimacy are a much bigger source of anxiety than his physical appearance. Once again, these issues are tied to the restrictions imposed by hegemonic masculinity which makes him feel he needs to be disconnected and stoic, resist touch and community, and prioritize isolation and safety over connection. Compared to Tom, Neal is much more closed off when it comes to touch, and almost seems to have a pathological resistance to it. Once again, the Fab Five use touch and affirming language to help him develop connections, become comfortable with intimacy, and reduce his isolation. Getting Neal comfortable with touch is the biggest hurdle the Fab Five face in trying to create space for him to feel confident enough to access the vulnerability needed to be less isolated. In his case, they use a sledgehammer approach to get over his touch aversion or in other words, overcoming Neal's resistance through more aggressive forms of physical contact.

Neal's aversion to touch is made clear from his very first interaction with the Fab Five. After spilling out of their truck, they sprint towards Neil, accosting him during a walk outside with his dog. Initially, he half-jokingly runs away. They try to envelop him, huddling around him, hugging him, and touching his long hair. Understandably, Neal is a little overwhelmed and taken aback. His tensed up, closed off body language and scrunched up face demonstrate his anxiety with the situation. Immediately, his reticence is noticed by Bobby, who comments, "You don't like being touched." Neal confirms his

discomfort with this forced intimacy, sarcastically remarking how “It’s so cool, you guys are just touching me willy nilly” (00:03:21-00:03:30). Battling to overcome Neal’s unwillingness to be touched and engage with others becomes a central theme of the episode.

We see this conflict in an exchange with Karamo during a discussion about Neal’s personal life. The full scope of Neal’s isolation becomes clear when he reveals to Karamo that “he has not had anyone over to his apartment in over ten years”(00:09:06-00:09:08). This lack of connection is not uncommon. According to a YouGov poll carried out by the Movember Foundation, “Twelve percent of men in the over the age of 18 don't have a close friend they would discuss a serious life problem with” (Bingham 2015).“During their conversation, Neal’s body language is closed off, arms folded, reflecting his embarrassment about his situation. Karamo, touches him and forces open his arms to make a point. With this simple act, a physical, forced opening, he makes Neal aware of how his body language is communicating the wrong message and creates an opportunity for him to confront his situation. This action leads to a discussion about Neal’s tendency to create emotional distance between himself and others.

The metaphor of a wall provides a way for Karamo to illustrate his ideas and pinpoint the source of Neal’s problems, explains to him that that “when people build up walls, they end up keeping other people out. But they’re also keeping themselves in” (00:09:54-00:09:59). This scarcity mindset is indicative of the negative emotional restrictions imposed by hegemonic masculinity. Neal admits the difficulty the transition into adulthood has been for him, relating to Karamo that “It’s weird now that his friends grew up and moved on,” During their discussion, Neal admits that his behavior is

creating distance between him and others and attempts to get to the root of his apathy: “I don’t know why I have a wall. I just know I have one. I feel like I’m protected, I’m safe.” Karamo responds by challenging Neal on why he believes this form of protection is necessary, asking a crucial question that reframes the discussion. “Do you think it’s (this wall he is putting up) is keeping you from happiness?” (00:09:10-00:09:59). In identifying the restrictions that Neal has put himself under, Karamo also neatly summarizes the source of the plague of loneliness, fear, and depression that is endemic among men --- particularly, young straight men.

Men like Neal tend to overemphasize the potential consequences of not measuring up to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, while ignoring the damage trying to reach them can create. One of the critical areas of dysfunction among these men is prioritizing emotional protection and independence over connection. “The fear of dependency is fear of being a less of a man” (Kipnis, 196). Unfortunately, to be in a relationship with another person, one must give up some independence and let down emotional walls. These mismatched priorities not only limit opportunity for connections, they can lead to significantly reduced personal health outcomes among men. “Greater social connection was associated with a 50% reduced risk of dying early, while loneliness increased the risk of dying younger as severely as obesity” (Holt-Lunstad, et al). The epidemic of loneliness results in broader societal issues as well. Isolation and disconnection from society can lead to lashing out in anger against it. In its most tragic and destructive manner, manifested as violence perpetrated from lone male shooters in the form of mass shootings, the whole of society is traumatized. This anti-social behavior is fostered by

online communities that replace vital social connections like the aforementioned “Incel” movement.

The Fab Five work to assuage Neal’s fears around connection and get him to realize that his wall is also a form of limitation and entrapment is an important step in the healing process. They try to show him his limiting beliefs are related to the expectations of hegemonic masculinity, which are rooted in a learned scarcity mindset that holds that a need for emotional reassurance and connection is weak. This form of education is doing him much more harm than good in his journey toward acceptance. While he thinks his wall is protecting him, it is actually slowly chipping away at his self-worth, and preventing him from meaningful connections. Karamo and Neal’s conversation ends with a hug, which Neal is still not entirely comfortable with. Karamo does not let Neal’s half-hearted complaint, “You’re a toucher too!” stop him from initiating contact. Instead, he doubles down, explaining that “We are all going to touch you, because we are going to get you out of this space.” (00:10:08-00:10:13) This acknowledgment supports my assertion that touch is not only an intentional strategy, but it also plays a central role as a tool to get the subjects to a more vulnerable, functional, and healthy place

In addition to this forceful but gentle prodding, there are also moments in which touch is used more aggressively to get Neal to access his vulnerable side and engage more with others. Antoni and Karamo use this strategy when they take Neal to a boxing gym for a sparring session where Neal learns how to punch, and exchanges blows with the trainer. Towards the end of the session, Neal is struggling to keep his gloves up and is covered in sweat and panting. He asks to stop, but Karamo and Antoni spout words of encouragement and implore him to continue: “You got it!” “You’re not tired” (00:25:50-

00:25:54). After receiving their affirmation, he gathers the strength he has left, punching until all his energy is exhausted. After the session, the three of them end up talking on the boxing ring floor.

The strategy of physically breaking him down to open him up creates an opportunity for connection. Neal looks at Karamo and explains that the experience made him realize how little he has exercised over the last few years. Karamo expounds on the value of physical exercise as a positive coping mechanism. Antoni, observing their interaction, points out to Neal that “the amount of time you spent looking him in the eye, is more than I’ve seen you engage in eye contact for our duration together.” “You are forced to have this contact and share this moment with this person. --- and look at what it does” (00:24:34-00:24:55). Antoni’s comment illuminates the amount of progress Neal has made with connection over their time together. The interaction ends with Neal engaging Karamo with a flurry of forceful high fives. Reciprocated intimacy, a critical moment of connection, which revealed the effectiveness of their strategy. Aggressive touch facilitated an environment where they could break through his defenses and help him access his vulnerability enough to reach out.

Later, Neal keys in on one of the limitations of hegemonic performance - emotional restriction. He admits that part of the reason he puts on this sullen, withdrawn persona is that “especially as a dude, it’s always like, the weirdest thing to go around and be upbeat and happy,” implying that happiness and joy are frivolous, feminine, (non-masculine) pursuits. Tan replies with a level of credulity, which highlights the differences between the way the subjects and the Fab Five interact with the world: “What’s wrong with being happy?” (00:35:54-00:36:00). This stoic, unemotional, John Wayne like

character, is a role that both Neil and Tom try to perform and fall short of replicating. The negative effects of this performance are neatly explained by Johnathan later in the episode, “You can’t selectively numb feelings. So, if you try to numb the vulnerability, you also numb joy, happiness, connection. You can’t have connection and joy and happiness without vulnerability” (00:35:35-00:35:46). It is hard to be an emotionally whole person without feeling anything and closing yourself off to the risk of connection. Striving for the hegemonic ideal has ended up coming at the enormous personal cost of separating them from their emotions.

Allowing Neal to give voice to emotions— through modeling and forcing him to get in touch with his language of emotion-- was key to the Fab Five’s goal of getting him to express his vulnerability. At the end of the week, they allow Neal to show his progress. He gives a speech while standing in front of the Fab Five, sitting on the couch. He reflects on his transformation over the course of the week. He describes it as “a completely weird and beautiful experience.” Then proceeds to thank the Fab Five for their help. In a moment of vulnerability, he confesses that, before this experience, he was “in a big down spell, a really dark place.” He admits that in “the past couple months, I’ve been super comfortable being in that dark place” and “for some reason, I didn’t fight my way out of it.” This apathy was born out of loneliness and isolation, and he “didn’t have anyone to talk to about it” Now, though, since the Fab Five entered into his life, “For the first time in a long time I’ve just been, like, joyful. Genuine joy, right, that was bred, from like pain.” The interaction ends with each member of the Fab Five hugging him. Neal, in a display of his growing comfort with touch, lets them know that “I’m doing two-arm hugs now.” Tan reminds him “When we first met you wouldn’t let us touch

you” (00:36:07-00:36:52). Neal’s transformation into a person who lets others in was complete and on clear display in that moment.

This idea that caring or showing affection is not masculine comes from a misguided belief that many men have internalized. It tells them that if you are not living up to the hegemonic ideal, which is that “real” men should not be dependent or ask for help, your value to society is negligible and you must do everything in your power to preserve whatever status you do have. Their constrained belief systems result in them isolating themselves and not receiving the much needed emotional and physical intimacy that all human beings crave. This state is a damaging notion that results in many men ending up like the before versions of the subjects I have analyzed. Neal reflects this mindset in describing the transformation, acknowledging that “when I started out the week, I felt like it (his experience on the show) was just highlighting what was wrong in my life.” Instead, He now sees that “It was showing me like, how good my life would be if I just cared” (00:36:54-00:36:59). We also see this change in Tom, admitting to the Fab-5 that they had “fixed ugly” and reuniting with his ex-wife. These men now have access to so many more emotional resources than they started the week with. The sense of security and community they receive by embracing newfound aspects of their revamped sense of masculinity ends up energizing and empowering them. Traits that are supposedly the antithesis of proper masculine expression-- openness to connections, intimacy, and vulnerability-- are the key to becoming happier, more functional men. A balance of isolation vs. connection is recalibrated in *QE2*. The Fab Five forced Tom and Neal out of their heteronormative space, which had boxed in their emotions in unhealthy

ways. They were shown a more open and fluid method of looking at the world that incorporates emotions and intimacy and concludes in a place of abundance

### **Towards a More Mindful Masculinity**

The fact that the subjects of *QE2* end in a state of abundance—feeling empowered and energized, ready to take action and exercise their own authority over their lives, with access to new and numerous resources—exemplifies the show’s effectiveness in responding to one of the most current manifestations of the masculinity crisis. Earlier in this thesis, I discussed how, in the present moment, the masculinity crisis is often represented in terms of scarcity and loss. I initially referenced Rush Limbaugh as an example of this rhetoric of masculinity as something under threat. I want to conclude by looking at an even more vocal and pervasive proponent of this scarcity model of crisis rhetoric, Jordan Peterson.

Peterson is a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto whose career took off when he refused to comply with a new Canadian law that would punish anyone who refused to call an individual by their preferred pronoun. Peterson has lamented that “The West has lost faith in masculinity” (“Jordan Peterson: “Truth in the Time of Chaos” 00:22:02-00:22:06). In his bestselling 2018 book, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, he writes that “Boys are suffering in the modern world,” and he argues that this suffering is due to a lack of sufficient models and resources to support traditional modes of masculine behavior and authority (Sanneh 70–75) . A simple breakdown of this concern can be found in one of his most popular interviews on YouTube:

The divine symbol of masculinity has been obliterated. So then, what do you expect is going to happen? ... masculinity is going to become weak and especially

if the symbol is also denigrated. which it definitely is... so what that means is that the ideal that man could aspire to is denigrated and well then with your ideal in tatters you're weak that's definitional!...I like the masculine spirit. It's necessary. It's not fundamentally carnage and pillaging. It's not fundamentally rape culture. it's not fundamentally world destroying, ..all of those things... all of those aspersions have been cast upon it... that's partly the guilt of Western society for technological progress... those are reasonable challenges to be set before men...But they're not reasonable accusations to swallow without criticism.

(Jordan Peterson: "Truth in the Time of Chaos" 00:22:22-00:23:51).

Peterson's narrative frames this current crisis as a conflict between men and society. He describes men's experiences through a story about loss as he mourns bygone eras when men were free to be themselves - primal, primates, without consequence. Notably, he sees this crisis, not just as an experience of loss, but an aggressive attack on men. To address this scarcity, Peterson lays out an elegant and simple solution to the problem. He encourages men to avoid and stifle emotions and eschew close relationships, advocating for more of the same principles that will separate them from the strategies that could lead to a more fulfilling life. These values and actions are reflected in the turns of phrase he uses as the sub-chapter headings in which he encourages boys to "Toughen up, you weasel" and see "Compassion as a vice" (Sanneh 70-75). These phrases represent scarcity principles reframed into traditional masculine values like grit, hard work, and the idea that personal growth can only be achieved through pain.

Peterson's movement has proved to be a powerful force with an enormous reach. In addition to the book and YouTube videos, "he has lectured to more than 250,000

people across North America, Europe, and Australia.” (“About Jordan Peterson”). It is precisely this mindset, however, that *QE2* seeks to challenge. At the outset, *QE2* tries to show how encouraging men to be tough, and to distance themselves from emotion and connection is harmful. Instead of viewing these actions as disempowering and limiting, *QE2* shows them instead, to be energizing resources that lead to and enhance men’s sense of agency and authority, rather than limit it.

I agree with Peterson's assertion that men are not inherently toxic and not all the accusations levied against masculinity are fair. I share his fear that men checking out could be a fatal situation for Western culture. I believe the bulk of his success is due to his insistence in making men a part of the conversation about progress, instead of the enemy. Those who want to minimize the effects of the crisis and move towards a more functional equal society should take a hint from his success and incorporate an intersectional philosophy of abundance that includes men as part of the solution.

Peterson and others are misguided by what they perceive as a crisis. Their scarcity lens sees the movement towards a culture with less defined gender roles and updated expectations of men as an occupying force taking up already occupied space. Their fears are not unfounded. Men are losing the unrivaled dominance they once enjoyed. Instead of seeing new opportunities for growth, to live a life unburdened by gendered expectations, they chose to focus on that loss. Peterson dangerously veers off track when he steers the conversation towards his philosophy of obliteration and conflict. His fears are overblown and promote the kind of reductive, desperate thinking that could further divide men from society. Faithful subscribers to Peterson's school of thought believe that the only way to halt the march towards gender equality, or in their view annihilation, is to counteract the

infantilizing, feminizing, society that is enabling an erasure of traditional masculine values. This belief is directly in line with previous movements of the scarcity mindset rhetoric and fundamental tenants of reclamation through discipline, going back to base instincts, and recouping what has been lost.

Traditionalists like Peterson discount the experiences of men who never fit into the paradigm they want to preserve. Men like the subjects I analyzed on *QE2*, the ones lost in between, those who get left behind: the silent non-hegemonic majority who isolate themselves from a society they no longer feel part of. For these men, “masculinity might be a straitjacket that is keeping them from being themselves” (Perry 3). Traditionalists fail to see the source of our current “crisis of masculinity.” That men, “in their drive for domination, have neglected to prioritize vital aspects of being wholly human. In their drive to be “successfully masculine”, they are “preventing their greater self from being successfully happy” (Ibid 3-4). In more extreme cases, men lash out against society in acts of indiscriminate violence, taking out their anger on innocent bystanders. While these events capture the media’s attention, this crisis primarily plays itself out in less public ways. In quiet corners where men suffer silently; isolating and punishing themselves for not meeting an idealized and unreachable hegemonic standard which defines them by what they are not, instead of who they are. As a result, many men miss out on connections and relationships that can heal them.

How do we pull men away from this toxic mindset? Those who consider themselves part of the movement towards gender equality need to do a better job of articulating its benefits to men and start “unpacking the ‘invisible, weightless knapsack’ of male privilege, to see if it is as much a burden to some men as a boon” (Perry 4). In changing the focus

from discussions on privilege to conversations about the harmful effects of gendered expectations on men, we start taking our cue from the Fab Five, prioritizing empathy over demonization and seeing men as the solution, not the problem. Throughout pop culture, there needs to be better messaging: a means of introducing men to alternative models of masculinity that are more inclusive. Shows like *QE2* are a good start. Its universal message and mass appeal cut through the noise in a way that academic papers and siloed discussions among gender theorists cannot. It is accessible to a mass audience affected by the constraints and negative effects of toxic masculinity. The path towards a more mindful masculinity is reflected in the emotional work performed by the Fab Five on *QE2*.

A more considerate, societal, makeover of men and our expectations of them is needed. An inclusive approach modeled on the strategies used by the Fab Five in *QE2*. The Fab Five subvert traditional hegemonic ideals that disconnect men from their emotions through affirming touch and language. The effectiveness of these strategies is evident. We see it in the changes in the subject's behavior over the course of an episode. The freedom they feel is reflected in their body. How they carry themselves is transformed, displayed in their openness to touch, physical intimacy, and connection. The Fab Five and *QE2* make clear that one's performance of what it means to be a man is as multifaceted and unique as the outfits they put their subjects in. No man can fit into the constraints imposed by the hegemonic ideal because no man was ever meant to. Instead of this one size fits all solution, we should be working towards a solution that fits all men. The path beyond hegemony and perpetual crisis lies in all of us, creating space for men to embody a masculinity that makes room for who they are, instead of who they have been taught to believe they should be.

## **Epilogue**

Why have I turned my straight eye to these queer guys helping straight guys? I chose to write about *QE2* because it shows us the failing of a culture that I was never willingly part of but have contributed to and helped perpetuate. I have all the outer trappings of the ideal male: tall, relatively good looking, and educated. But in other crucial ways, I fail so completely at meeting that hegemonic ideal. I have mental illness. I obsess constantly. I am neurotic. I have a fragile sense of self and low self-esteem. Nevertheless, I have been fortunate in so many ways. I am privileged to look the way I do because it gives me access to many opportunities. Despite this, I often feel betrayed by the expectation's others have based on my outside appearance. Most of the time, I feel like George Costanza trapped in John Wayne's body. One place my maleness has been a barrier for me is my access to self-care and a sense of self. I have tried to meet expectations and failed to meet them. I am pursuing my degree in a field that is no longer seen as masculine by most the other men in my life and I've picked a topic for my thesis that exposes my fragile manhood to the world. Maybe I am just a glutton for punishment or self-humiliation? I'd like to think I'm one of the men brave/stupid enough to look a problem straight in the face, address it, and try to glean some knowledge from a staged reality show, in particular the Fab Five, representatives of a community of men that knows a thing or two about authenticity.

Writing this thesis was a process of self-discovery – an emotional one. I initially became interested in studying *QE2*, because a staged interaction between two men became something more and touched me enough to cry. The tenderness in the conversation between Tom and Jonathan in his bathroom triggered the emotion. A frank discussion about Tom's lupus – how to live with it - reminded me of a painful chapter

from my past. When I began this project, I saw a distance between me and the men I was studying. Eventually, I started to relate to their struggle. They reminded me of my own struggles with image, deeply gendered and rooted in my childhood. Specifically, the struggle of performing as who you want to be and losing who you are. This grappling with identity is one we can all relate to, regardless of our gender or sexual orientation. How do you accept who you are, stop the performance, and move forward with courage?

When I was 14, my father died. He was the person who I looked to for what it means to be a man. I think it is that event, along with other early teenage struggles (like my aforementioned makeup incident) that got me interested in this subject in first place. His death led me on a process of discovery. With no one to look to after my north star fell out of the sky, I had to find out alone what it means to be a man. My trauma was compounded by a “difficult” relationship with my stepfather whose rigid beliefs around who I should be, were based on outdated notions of manhood, informed by his experiences and patriarchal religion (Mormonism). His frustration came out as psychological abuse which further traumatized me and taught me that if I hid my emotions, I could protect myself. This protection mechanism came at a high cost, exacerbating underlying mental illness and closing me off from possibilities for connection and healing.

I was then shot out into the world with a lot to prove. I proved my manhood by becoming the poison king. I mistakenly demonstrated my physical prowess by consuming more alcohol than anyone else, by taking drugs that blunted my emotions; failing, but desperately trying to live up to the hegemonic ideal. Eventually that path led to failed relationships, broken friendships, and increasingly reckless behavior. After emotionally

breaking down, I was given a chance to redefine what it means to be a man. This project is a vital part of that process. One that will be an ongoing for the rest of my life.

In many ways, I am a perfect candidate for one of the Fab Five's makeovers. I am living in my nana's basement and I struggle with mental illness. A less sympathetic description would characterize me as an emotionally fragile man-child that has been overwhelmed by trauma and the responsibilities of being a man, a grad student, and a desirable mate. What my analysis cannot capture and what is missed in the show is what happened before we met the subjects of the study. The trauma that is responsible for these men's withdrawal from society is not fully divulged. Speaking from experience, I know it is enough to be a sensitive boy and go through the meat grinder of life that makes you into a man. But then, there is an expectation not to show our cracks. The spackling that we put over them, the stoicism that is supposed to be our strength. The strong silent John Wayne bullshit is clearly not working for the subjects on the show or men in the world.

I have worked on replacing the negative voices in my head with more positive ones. Due to this project, those positive voices often take the form of one of the Fab Five. Now when I look in the mirror, I hear Jonathan's voice screaming, "YASSS queen". Tan's reminder that dressing my age does not mean having to sacrifice showing off my personality. I hear Karamo's fatherly advice when I am debating whether to reach out to a friend. I still struggle, in maintaining relationships, with my body image and my self-esteem. I still find myself trying to fit into the rigid restrictions of hegemonic masculinity. Yet, I have tried to challenge myself to be more aware of the ways I am personally contributing to this current crisis of masculinity and expand my notion of who I am and what a man is supposed to be.

Here is what I have realized:

A man is a person who most closely resembles who he truly is internally. When performance fades, then existing “as is” starts happening—that is when you know you are becoming a man. That battle, to have the courage to be who you truly are is not limited to queer people. Straight men need to come out as well. Queer Eye shows us that vulnerability is the key to breaking through, becoming whole. Vulnerability leads to what many of us (men) need the most...Emotional Intimacy. The fear of it can overwhelm us, cause us to withdraw or lash out. We protect ourselves with this armor of performance which prioritizes hiding and masking our emotions. I/we do this out of a place of fear, of not meeting the unattainable hegemonic standard deeply embedded in male culture.

There is a “closing in” that happens to me whenever I cry in public; a “closing in” moment when the tears are dammed up and the faucet is turned off. This action is a physical manifestation of the restrictions of hegemonic performance. It usually happens when someone else is near. My fragility in those moments risks exposure I cannot contend with. This impulse is so strong that 5 minutes after being told my father died, I stopped crying. I bucked up and hid my emotions “like a man should”. The last few years, really my whole life since then, has been a slow unraveling of the pain that I hid behind my façade. Programming taught me to betray the most tender essential parts of myself and eliminate my exposure to pain, in turn, sacrificing joy. In pretending to be ok, I ensured I wasn't. We think our masks of invulnerability make us safe. When in reality, they close us off from all that may heal us. When we stop hiding behind these prescribed roles, and performance ---we have nothing to fear. A life full of possibilities awaits us.

Outside these artificial lines lies freedom. Freedom to cry. To feel. To be held. To be loved. To show our true self. To be the men we always wanted to be.

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