

ELLEN DEGENERES

Public lesbian number one

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Introduction

Ellen DeGeneres is arguably the most famous lesbian in America. She is among the first mass mediated lesbians in history. Certainly, there are other well-known lesbians on television, but her position as an accessible, likeable lesbian, is a relatively unique one in the politics of gay and lesbian representation. She is accessible because she is a fixture on television. The last ten years have included two sit-coms, hosting duties on network awards shows, stand-up specials on HBO, regular appearances on talk shows, and now her own very successful daytime talk show, which won four Emmys in its first season. She is a fixture on television, in part, because she is so likeable. She is a perfect television personality. She is easily consumable, funny, and nice to be around. There seems to be nothing threatening about her. But lesbians are supposed to be a threat to the most basic organizing principle of hegemonic social structures. What does it mean, then, for gay and lesbian representational politics to have Ellen DeGeneres as the most visible, the most famous, and the most loved lesbian in America?

It is not news at this point to say that Ellen DeGeneres made television history in 1997 when she came out as a lesbian—in both her incarnations as a public person and as the character, Ellen Morgan, on *Ellen*—her sit-com on ABC. Not the first lesbian on television, the history making was in the creation of a life for a lesbian as the star of the show. Although the series was cancelled after only one season of Ellen as a lesbian, it was indeed a significant cultural moment for many viewers, for many reasons.

By the time Ellen came out, the show was at the end of its fourth season. It had been a show adrift for much of its run, largely because the lead character, Ellen, did not have a sexual identity. This was clear to the producers of the show for some time. In an interview with *The Boston Globe*, one of the show's producers Mark Driscoll, makes the point, "Everyone knew the series was missing something at its core ... The problem was not that the writers weren't writing good scripts, it's that there was no center to the show ... Ellen whose character is 35 was an asexual character who hung out with friends, really exhibiting behavior more suited to 20-somethings" (Frederic Biddle 1997, p. D1).

Throughout the fourth season, the show began dropping hints that Ellen may be gay. (And "gay" is the word Ellen eventually used most often to describe her own sexuality.) With the hints on the show, there was plenty of speculation in the press. It was an open secret that depended not so much on whether Ellen really was gay, but when she would come out. This was not about a single television series. It was more of an epic drama. It was an intertextual media event. Whatever happened, or what was going to happen on the television show was commented upon or speculated about in other media: news articles in

magazines and newspapers, including polls asking what people thought of her coming out, talk shows with Ellen DeGeneres doing the talking, talk shows with semi-serious news figures like Charlie Rose and Larry King interviewing experts about the possibilities of Ellen coming out, and entertainment shows creating a buzz about Ellen and then reporting on the buzz. Certainly, the meanings made by Ellen's saga of coming out and creating a lesbian life, and then getting cancelled, were created at least as much in the mass media's discussion about it as the actual series itself. And in this case there was yet another layer of mass media reporting and speculation about DeGeneres' personal love life with Anne Heche and their subsequent break-up. Taken together, this was a particularly public time for lesbian identity in the person of Ellen DeGeneres. And it made Ellen an irreversibly public lesbian.

The unfolding of this epic in mass media, of course was the beginning of a shift made in the movement of gay and lesbian representational politics, performance, and identity. And because it was all performed in mass media, mostly television, it is an opportunity to ask what it has meant to both the possibilities and limits of liberal pluralist acceptance among those viewers for whom gay and lesbian people are "others," and for the possible meanings made for gay/lesbian/queer viewers. The strength and significance of DeGeneres' public life as a lesbian lies in that dual address.

Mass media is where public life happens at this point in Western history. And television in particular can be seen as the most productive place to make this shift, if we see it as a place where viewers learn about "others." According to John Hartley in *Uses of Television*, television is a "teacher in the best sense," (1999, p. 32) through its use of cross-demographic communication, or "teaching people from 'they' communities how to operate successfully in institutions, from school to 'life,' not of their own making" (1999, p. 31).

For Hartley, television teaches in the "anthropological," not "schooling" (1999, p. 45) sense of the word, as it can explore "the way in which different populations with no necessary mutual affinity do produce and maintain knowledge about each other, communicate with each other, stay in touch" (1999, p. 32). In fact, the teaching that happens on television is the most influential teaching that allows us to cohere as a society. For Hartley, television "teaches the formation of identity and citizenship in a society characterized by the unknowability of its nevertheless sovereign populations" (1999, p. 46). It is the primary way we understand the differences between us. And more importantly, it is the place we learn how to behave toward each other as fellow citizens. Again in Hartley's words, "cross demographic communication is more important than identity, although the effort to communicate respectfully and equitably is a recognition of identity and difference" (1999, p. 32). The point here is that the actual differences that are represented are less important than learning to deal with difference "respectfully and equitably."

For Hartley, television is a key teacher of citizenship, a kind made possible, in part because of mass media: what he calls "cultural citizenship" in a classic liberal formulation of citizenship (1999, p. 155). In Hartley's view, citizenship "needs to be seen in historical rather than categorical terms; it is an evolving and cumulative concept adapting to changes in western development" (1999, p. 157). Citizenship has developed since the Enlightenment period from civil citizenship, involving individual freedoms, through political citizenship that centered on voting rights especially, to social citizenship issues like rights to social welfare. Cultural citizenship is the fourth step in this process and is dependent on mass media. It also applies mostly to "the disenfranchised or unenfranchised so-called

"minorities," (1999, p. 163) and is the citizenship that recognizes distinct identities. He writes:

Oddly enough, these great unknowable masses that have stalked the pages of social and media theory, government legislation and cultural criticism since the nineteenth century have themselves been the locus of the development of the form of citizenship based not on sameness (undifferentiated mass), but on difference. The so-called masses . . . are historically the site whence the fourth type of citizenship has arisen, taking *difference* to the point where it can be claimed, and increasingly recognized, as a human right. (Hartley 1999, p. 164)

Hartley's insight here is not about the development of the politics of identity—that is not new—but his point about its facilitation through television raises several important questions about the meanings made through these depictions of difference. For Hartley, television, and mass media more generally, has cultivated a cultural citizenship among the marginalized, including gays and lesbians, along with many others, that "allowed such communities among the 'masses' both to participate freely as audience along with all the other people in the mediasphere, and to observe an official culture that was not comfortable with their presence"(1999, p. 170).

This seemingly optimistic view, though, immediately bumps up against the limitations of liberal multiculturalism. Television notoriously does not challenge dominant ideologies very much or very well. And when it does, it usually works to absorb the meanings of those differences in a variety of assimilationist moves that reinscribe the dominant as normative, and "others" as "different." But at the same time it is impossible to dismiss the potential power in representing in mass media identities that have been marginalized, denigrated, or invisible. And certainly, it is true that it is never an either/or formula. Ellen DeGeneres' work offers moments of challenge to the dominant, and opens spaces for the marginalized to occupy. This is precisely her strength.

There are important implications in the discussion of the depiction of differences here then. It is a question of address in part. If we assume, as Hartley does, that DeGeneres as lesbian is addressing a non-lesbian literate spectatorship, where the lesbian is the other who needs to be explained, understood, accepted, his are the questions to ask. That is, are the differences that lesbian represents "communicated respectfully and equitably"? And we can examine whether these series "Take difference to the point where it can be claimed, and increasingly recognized as a human right"? These are not trivial matters, and I think DeGeneres' work is in fact productive here. And so much of that work is made possible from her oft-mentioned charm.

But it is not the only work that she is doing. If the address is to other gay and lesbian spectators, DeGeneres is performing a different kind of difference. That is, she is not only performing lesbian as the difference from heterosexuality, but has been performing different ways of being a lesbian in the mainstream in three eponymous television shows.

The first show, *Ellen*, is the one in which she came out and was cancelled the following year. *The Ellen Show* debuted on CBS in September 2001, and was cancelled before the end of the first season. In September 2003, NBC premiered *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, a daytime talk show that has so far been very successful. In all of these incarnations, DeGeneres has performed a lesbian persona corresponding to a distinct set of terms and strategies in the socio-performative politics of same-sex desire. That is, each season of these shows has corresponded to separate, identifiable moments in the politics of the representation of same-sex desire: each with different labels, for good reason.

Each possible label: gay, lesbian, queer, homosexual carries with it the histories and politics of meanings, and each speaks most closely to the discourses, histories, and goals of separate, identifiable moments in the creation and assertion of spaces in the dominant culture for identities constructed around same-sex desire. And each can thus be part of a politicized conversation among queer viewers about the possibilities opened up by these representations. Since she can be seen as speaking to two distinct groups of spectators (at least), the question of teaching cultural citizenship becomes more complex. There are at least two possible conversations going on at once, all the time.

For queer literate, or at least queer friendly spectators, the climate created by the hints on *Ellen* combined with the speculation in the press in the months leading up to the coming out episode provoked the interest the producers undoubtedly wanted. The hints and rumors worked very well to get us to watch for what would come next. The excitement was inseparable from our unconfirmed knowledge, our assumption that Ellen DeGeneres was herself a lesbian. Taken together, this created a very queer atmosphere. It was based mostly on the open, secret, the wink, the anticipation—and it played itself out both on the show and in the media about the show.

Ellen went on the talk show circuit to promote her CD, *Taste This*, released right at the time the rumors were in full swing. She did interviews on *Good Morning America*, *The David Letterman Show*, *The Rosie O'Donnell Show* and others in which she was asked about her character coming out. In all of those interviews she played with the interviewer and the audience, but would not answer directly. The interviews with David Letterman, and Rosie O'Donnell made for great television. She is a comedic match for both of them, and the banter back and forth was not only very funny, it added to the queer mystique. She never uttered the word "lesbian," but did say that her character might reveal herself to be Lebanese later in the season with hints along the way. "You've seen her eating baba ghanoush, hummus . . . She's got Casey Kasem posters on her wall."¹ The exchange with Rosie O'Donnell was particularly queerly productive, since O'Donnell too at that time was widely believed to be a lesbian, and has of course, since publicly come out. At the time though, they were two not-quite-all-the-way-out nationally famous lesbian comics, discussing being out on a national daytime talk show, without saying the word. Rosie replied to Ellen, "you know, I think I might be Lebanese too," and Ellen agreed that she did seem kind of Lebanese to her.

Operating in the liminal spaces of straight society this way created a "queer discourse" that allowed for a "queer reading," as defined by Alexander Doty (1993) in *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*. His succinct definition of queerness "is a quality related to any expression that can be marked as contra-, non-, or anti-straight" (Doty 1993, p. xv). Doty, like other queer theorists, emphasizes the idea of queerness not being any particular category. It is, in his words "an open and flexible space" (1993, p. xv), marked only by "a range of nonstraight expression in, or in response to, mass culture. This range includes specifically gay, lesbian, and bisexual expressions; but it also includes all other potential (and potentially unclassifiable) nonstraight positions" (1993, p. xvi).

Ellen opened up nonstraight positions during this year, and the positions from which she operated were unclassifiable. She was not straight and she was not lesbian. By refusing any particular category, and in so doing, by foregrounding heterosexuality as a social institution, DeGeneres was able to do the most queerly productive work of her career thus far. The hints on the show, that started very early in the season, along with the narrative changes that occurred, and the rumors that saturated all of the national entertainment

news that year combined to make it impossible to not know that something queer was going on here, and not just for queer readers.

The hints made their way onto almost every episode. One of the first was when she was sitting on the H of the Hollywood sign mourning her parents' break-up. They find her there and try to explain what has happened, and she says, "What if I told you something about me that just shocked you? Like what if I told you I was Illleeeft-handed?" Another occurred when she was looking at a house to buy and came walking out of the closet. Her real estate person says, "Oh, you were in the closet." And Ellen replies, "Yeah, I wouldn't want to spend too much time in there." There are well-placed pictures of kd lang above her bed, there is a moment when Paige holds up boxer shorts in a pile of laundry, thinking they are Ellen's male roommate's, but Ellen grabs them, indicating that they are hers. These kinds of hints happened all season long and proved to be the cleverest jokes of the entire run of the show. They were knowing, pointed, and ironically enough, the creation of such liminality gave the show some focus.

The narrative structure also became more focused, even as Ellen clearly had no solid place to be in the social milieu in which she existed. Many of the plots for each episode developed around the fact that Ellen just did not fit. For example in "The Pregnancy Test," which aired in November 1996, Ellen and her friends Paige and Audrey get together for a girls' night at Ellen's apartment. Paige brings pregnancy tests because she thinks she might be pregnant. The jokes in the scene revolve around the fact that Ellen is not really one of the girls. For instance, Audrey has a new boyfriend that everyone knows about but Ellen. Ellen is hurt that Audrey did not tell her about the new boyfriend; and Audrey explains that she did not want to make Ellen feel bad because she is alone. Audrey suggests that they all take the pregnancy tests, in support of Paige who is afraid about finding out if she is pregnant. The ensuing jokes center on the impossibility of Ellen's "circle turning blue," or of her being pregnant. It is clear that it is not just that Ellen does not have a boyfriend at the moment that is funny (that is not really that funny), but that she is just not part of the economy in which pregnancy occurs. Ellen is excluded from the fundamental elements of their lifestyles as straight women. In fact Paige and Audrey bond over the possibilities of being pregnant, discussing how it would change their lives and identities. This is noteworthy because they are not friends. They have nothing in common except that they are both friends with Ellen. They usually do not engage with each other at all. This scenario, impending, unplanned pregnancy brings them together over what they do have in common: straight womanhood. Throughout their exchange, Ellen performs her increasing hurt and frustration at her increasing invisibility. Ellen tries to take part in the conversation but she is pointedly ignored and talked over. It is a very effective comedic bit and ideologically even more significant.

Paige and Audrey perform normative heterosexuality and in so doing point to Ellen's outsider status. One of the most significant things this did is foreground what materialist feminist Monique Wittig (1992) calls the "heterosexual contract."² For Wittig the social contract itself is the heterosexual contract. In her essay, "On the Social Contract," she writes: "For to live in society is to live in heterosexuality. In fact, in my mind the social contract and heterosexuality are two super-imposable notions" (Wittig 1992, p. 40). The power of heterosexuality lies in its complete and mostly unquestioned normativity. Wittig explains, "Because even if they, if we, do not consent, we cannot think outside the mental categories of heterosexuality. Heterosexuality is always already there within all mental categories" (1992, p. 43). It just is. Thus, it is invisible. Ellen's performance of her outsider status, though,

made it visible as the normative, dominating institution that it is simply by not being a part of it. This denaturalizing of heterosexuality is part of what queered Ellen that season.

She queered herself in a slightly different way with her overperformance of “woman” in one episode called “Not-So-Great Expectations,” which also aired in November 1996. This episode finds her at a dating service with her mother. Through a series of sit-com-type events, Ellen is forced into making a video to try to get a man. Ellen ends up in full feminine regalia with big hair, full make-up and plunging neckline that can barely hold her voluptuous bosom. As she is unveiled to the audience there is immediate laughter simply at the sight of her. In fact, she used that image of herself in a promo of her show saying, “This is what I meant by coming out.” With some coaching from Paige, she works at heterosexual feminine sexuality, and it is hilarious to watch because it is so obviously a performance. She is clearly in drag here. This foregrounded performance of “woman”³ points to the performance of heterogender⁴ itself, and is thus another move toward the denaturalizing of heterosexuality.

Later in that episode, Ellen shows up at a country/western bar dressed as a cowboy, looking for her mother to “save” her from whom she sees as a lecherous man. Ellen is all boy here, right down to her chaps. Moving from femme to butch in the same episode, again, denaturalizes heterogender, and provides a queer discourse to be read by those who can read that queerly. Ellen takes herself out of the heterosexual economy also by not playing by the rules.

Taken together, these strategies worked to denaturalize heterosexuality and create a queer text that was hard to miss by any reader, but were especially savored by queer readers. By placing Ellen outside the norms of heterosexuality, but not placing her in any other sexual category, the show was able to mine the political potential of queer. The foregrounding of heterosexuality as not a natural state of being, but a social institution is a radical move in mainstream media. Further, to queer a character for an entire season allows us to conceptualize “outside the relatively clear-cut and essentializing categories of sexual identity under which most people function” (Doty 1993, p. 15). This also allows us out of the confines of realism imposed by most sit-coms. Queer readings do not have to correspond precisely to lived identity. This is part of its liberatory potential. As Doty states:

[Queer] positions, readings, and pleasures also suggest that what happens in cultural reception goes beyond the traditional opposition of homo and hetero, as queer reception is often a place beyond the audience’s “real-life” definition of their sexual identities and cultural positions—often, but not always, beyond such sexual identities and identity politics, that is. (Doty 1993, p. 15)

The season allowed much of that shifting in identification, and slipping of categories. We could not stay there long, however. *Ellen* was a sit-com created within the terms of realism. Alas, Ellen finally came out. On April 30, 1997, the historic episode was shown to parties and gatherings all over the country. It truly was a culturally historic moment for many queers, lesbians, gay men, straight allies, and right-wing heterosexuals committed to the unquestioned righteousness of their own lifestyle. It was a momentous occasion. But then the show had to deal with Ellen as a lesbian.

Ellen marking herself as “gay” was productive in new ways by making her sexuality visible, and difficult to represent on network television for the same reason. Coming out, claiming the so long (and still) shamed identity gay or lesbian has been a cornerstone of gay

and lesbian politics since Stonewall. Simply by adopting the label and the identity, one is taking a stand against the hegemony of heterosexuality, and the shame used to maintain its hegemonic power. This action alone claims not only some level of dignity for the one coming out, but more importantly, has worked collectively to create gay and lesbian subject positions in the public sphere. "Gay Pride"—one of the most important slogans of the gay and lesbian political movement since the early 1970s—has been a direct challenge to the shame of same-sex desire. Not until this moment, when Ellen came out, had the gay and lesbian movement experienced such a public and well-publicized coming out.

But it was happening on prime time. As a network television sit-com, *Ellen* was defined by the terms of realism. And as a realist text, it is trapped in the terms of heterosexuality. Jill Dolan, materialist feminist performance theorist, makes this point succinctly: "The heterosexual assumption of realism also marginalizes lesbians and gay men, since it presupposes a traditional nuclear family arrangement" (1993, p. 139). Dolan elaborates on the possibilities for lesbians caught in realist texts:

The only viable positions for lesbian characters within realism appear to be as heterosexuals-in-transition, as they are in coming-out stories ... The personal, local conditions of their concerns somehow mire them in the domestic drama of heterosexuality. The lesbian is posed as singular, alone on the margins of what is really a heterosexual drama. Her community, which might allow her to *act* ... is absent, repressed by the exigencies of the realist text (Dolan 1993, p. 137).

Ellen's journey as a lesbian certainly was defined by the coming out experience, as a heterosexual-in-transition, for the entire world to witness. It, by definition, marginalized her, made her the "other" on her own show. As understanding, sympathetic, tolerant, and accepting as the other characters were, they were the reference point for normal. And as such, they were the representatives for most of the audience. And like any good teacher, television cannot afford to alienate its audience. There was a real challenge in the issue of double address here because it was all so straightforward. There was no real possibility of speaking to two different audiences with the wink of queer or camp representation.

The obvious tension that *Ellen* had to negotiate this season was how to represent a lesbian character to a heterosexist society. The address could not be a gay/lesbian/queer literate audience *only* because, to revisit Hartley's ideas, television "is teaching audiences about cultural distinction, the expansion of difference" (1999, p. 45)—and gay/lesbian/queer is the difference to be learned about here. If coming out is an Othering process, the challenge for Ellen was how to create a lesbian life that did not keep her in that Othered position. It was, after all, her show. Or was it? Ellen struggled against alienating her heterosexist audience, at the same time she tried to create a subject position for a lesbian character.

Given the enormity of the project of challenging consciousness itself, Ellen had to define her character as a lesbian, or as a "gay" person, in her words. This public and unitary subject position corresponded to gay/lesbian identity and politics. Again, the emphasis here is on claiming the identity, not hiding or passing as heterosexual, since to be anything but heterosexual, one must explicitly claim it. This puts a sit-com on network television in an awkward ideological position. To claim the identity is to confront the heterosexual imperative and hegemony in the society, and that is to confront the normative structure of the society itself.

Ellen spent the season moving through the developmental stages of creating a lesbian identity. The episodes alternated between dealing fairly directly with her newly developing self, and the old Ellen when she was anywoman, dealing with some situation having little to do with sexual identity in an explicit way. The tone was not stuck in getting a straight audience to accept gayness; it assumed that the audience at the very least was not hostile to the idea. It assumed a liberal acceptance. So other than having to confront the heterosexual imperative, the show was not explicitly confrontational.

Ellen moved along quickly in the season from trying to date her spinning class instructor by going on a rock climbing trip with her, only to find out the instructor had a girlfriend, to learning how to cruise in a grocery store and dealing with the discomfort of her best friend Paige, to finally meeting Ms. Right. Ms. Right was Laurie, another tall, thin, white, middle-class conventionally attractive woman to match Ellen very well. The shows that developed Ellen's relationship with Laurie took us out of the relatively easy jokes about gay and lesbian culture to actually representing lesbian desire and intimacy.

Their relationship moves from a confused first date, to a kiss, to meeting Laurie's daughter, to the first time they sleep together. In "Like a Virgin," which aired in November 1997 we see Ellen dealing with her fear about sleeping with a woman for the first time. It is a particularly poignant episode that has Ellen making excuses to leave Laurie's apartment on the night that Laurie has planned a romantic evening and invited Ellen to spend the night. Ellen does leave abruptly, and then through the counsel of her gay friend Peter, knows she needs to go back and fix the mess she has made. By the end of the episode, in a gallant gesture, Ellen is luring Laurie into the bedroom by dropping the petals of a plant saying, "she loves me, she loves me not." There is nothing explicit shown, but it is a very sexy scene, that ends with Ellen grabbing Laurie's hand as they disappear into the bedroom.

Ellen and Laurie become a couple quickly—following lesbian tradition—and deal with some typical couple issues. In a particularly lesbian situation, Laurie mistakenly thinks that Ellen is asking her to move in—on their one-month anniversary in "The Break Up." When Ellen clears up the misunderstanding, Laurie breaks up with her, afraid she does not want a real commitment. Ellen is devastated, and they eventually get back together, to go on to a few more adventures together, before ABC interrupts the show for six weeks to give the midseason replacement, *Two Guys, a Girl, and A Pizza Place*, a try. The title alone reinstates heterosexual hegemony, in a gesture that made it clear to all that *Ellen's* days were numbered.

Ellen was cancelled at the end of her first full season that Ellen was an out lesbian. ABC blamed a decline in ratings due to a decline in quality. Given the political project of this show, its awkward moments were inevitable. Even so, decidedly funny scenes, snappy jokes, and witty dialog matched the awkward moments of the season. In terms of quality TV, it was as good a show as it ever was, and often better than it had been.

When DeGeneres did return to prime time, it was not as a queer, nor was she a lesbian in the context of lesbian and gay politics. Her character was gay and out, but in a post-gay kind of way. That is, in a way that said, "I'm gay, but it doesn't matter." *The Ellen Show* debuted on CBS in the fall of 2001, and did not last an entire season. Just like on *Ellen*, DeGeneres was both star and executive producer. The lead character was named Ellen, but this time her last name was Richmond.⁵

The premise of the show is that the character, Ellen Richmond, is a big dotcom mogul in Los Angeles. The first show opens with Ellen leading a meeting, acting the insensitive and-self-important boss with her staff. She then returns "home" to a "little town called

Clark" (in a non-identified state) to receive the Spread Your Wings award, given to successful Clarkians. While there, her company folds and she goes bankrupt. She decides then to simplify her life and move back to Clark. This lays the foundation of the show for the rest of its short season. It becomes about Ellen fitting into life in the small, quaint, slow-paced, decidedly uncool town of Clark. The appeal of Clark to Ellen is that it is all those things. She is burned out on big city living. It is too fast-paced, too stressful, too much, (too gay?).

Certainly, the trajectory of the show implies just that. She moves in with her mother and her single, younger, heterosexual sister. She goes back to her old room, left intact from her teenage years. She gets a job as a guidance counselor at her old high school. Her life becomes peopled by wacky, simple, earnest, small town, straight folks. And most of her life in Clark becomes defined by the tension between its charms and its irritations.

Ellen is introduced immediately as a lesbian on the show. In fact the first episode does a few funny scenes with her sexuality. In her aforementioned old bedroom, she walks in with her mother to posters of Wonder Woman and Charlie's Angels on the walls, and says, "Didn't have a clue, huh, Ma?" There is mention of her last girlfriend, and there is a promising scene in which Ellen meets the high school gym teacher, the other lesbian on the show. Unfortunately, these scenes only serve to introduce her as a lesbian and then drop it.

In this incarnation, there is a real shift in address in that the Ellen character on *The Ellen Show* is a lesbian for mostly a straight audience, and for a perhaps gay right audience. For any queer-literate spectator this is at the very least, disappointing. In a real retreat from the cultural work DeGeneres was able to do with her coming out seasons on *Ellen*, *The Ellen Show* mostly backed off from that mission. *The Ellen Show* brings the lesbian home and puts her right back in her place. In fact, the concept of place is used as a displacement to move sit-com's most famous lesbian back to "where she belongs."

It is not that she is returning to the closet. She is playing a character who (she actually says to the roomful of TV critics) "just happens to be gay." DeGeneres says repeatedly in interviews that she just wants to be funny again, presumably in a way that does not challenge any of the dominant culture's ideologies. It seems that to be gay is OK on television at this point, in part because of the work her earlier show did, and others have continued to do, as for example, *Will and Grace*. But she does not want to emulate that show. Indeed it is too gay for her. In an interview in the *New York Times* discussing her new show she says that *Will and Grace* "is just gay, gay, gay all the time . . . I like that show, but in my daily life I very rarely talk that way. I don't go to the gas station and say, 'fill it up with unleaded, and I'm gay'" (Jesse Green 2001, p. 3).

Ellen DeGeneres' explicitly stated intent was to abandon any kind of politicized identity. One can hardly blame her. She took a beating in the press in the year that her character tried to develop a lesbian identity. As she did the press for her new show she seems almost on the verge of apology for her last show when she says to a roomful of TV critics, quoted in the *Dallas Morning News*:

I think what happened with the last show is it got to be too issue-oriented, and I take responsibility for that . . . That was something that I felt I needed to do. I did a show for four years, and then suddenly I did something that kind of overshadowed everything else. So now I just want to be funny again. I think people want to sit at home and turn on their TV and just laugh. That's all they want to do. And I understand that now. (Ed Bark 2001, p. F6)

The problem with this position, from a more radical queer perspective is that a lesbian cannot be represented as just making observations about her life without either challenging the heterosexual (and thus social) contract, or blending in, assimilating using the strategy of *The Ellen Show*. This is the strategy of, what Richard Goldstein (2002) calls, the “homocon.” Homocons, according to Goldstein, “claim to represent a ‘new gay mainstream,’ and armed with that contention they’ve ensconced themselves in the liberal media” (2002, p. 28). It is worth quoting Goldstein here at length:

They [the gay right] speak directly to the contradictory climate of our time. Theirs is a conservative philosophy that appeals to liberals. It may reject the concept that gays are a people, but it advocates their integration into civic society. This is a deal liberals have always offered the other. It summons up the Enlightenment and it doesn’t frighten the horses. As agents of this accommodation, homocons carry the imprimatur of liberal society. That is their special strength—Liberals are no less fearful than conservatives when it comes to homosexuality, but they see us in a different light. The right regards gay people as emblems of sinful culture that is undermining the nation and the family. Liberals don’t feel unduly threatened in that respect; indeed they are willing to welcome us into full citizenship, as they have other pariah groups. For them, the issue isn’t our sexuality but our sensibility and the distinctiveness it generates. Liberals fear for their place in the world true pluralism would create. And so, the bargain they set requires us to deny our difference, thereby affirming the bedrock principle of liberalism: that all people are fundamentally the same. (Goldstein 2002, p. 29)

The overriding goal of the gay right ideology is to make gay people seem normal, or just like straight people. Ellen, on this show, achieved that very well. Again, her difference was marked only by place. DeGeneres was fairly straightforward about replacing sexuality with place—urban vs. small town—as the marker of difference. As Virginia Rohan (2001) reports in *The Record*:

Asked whether the character will have a love life, DeGeneres says, “I don’t think it’s necessary. There are so many stories that don’t involve dating. Maybe—if it’s going to be funny. But when you look at the shows I grew up watching—I’m thinking of Andy Griffith—it’s just the town.” (Rohan 2001)

This shift then allows the show to sidestep the challenge that lesbian subjectivity makes to the heterosexual contract. She is a lesbian without being lesbian, or a post-gay lesbian.

The displacement of Ellen’s difference residing in her urban style and sensibilities, living in a provincial small town, among small town people is made the most clear in the episode when her stuff finally arrives to her mother’s house. Two things go on in this episode. One is the actual stuff. It is the stuff that young urban professionals use. She has a high-tech chair that her mother cannot even identify as a chair. All the jokes are Ellen’s mother and sister making fun of the expensive, useless, pretentious stuff that Ellen seems to need. This concretizes the difference between her and them. And that difference is urban vs. small town. It is worldly vs. provincial. It is ambitious professional vs. no-ambition-small-town-job.

This is related to the other plot line in this episode. Ellen feels left out. Her mom and sister have a comfortable, settled-in kind of relationship in this episode, and Ellen feels

outside of it. They have their routines, their TV shows they watch, and a shared set of references they understand. Ellen wants to be part of that. She wants to feel a part of them. She spends this episode trying to create a family that all three of them can participate in. She tries to join them, changing the routine a bit, but basically just trying to fit in to what they have. Ellen is going home again. In Ellen's case this is particularly disturbing, since it clearly means becoming one of them. She has to be recuperated back into the family to be there. For Ellen to be absorbed back into the family is to give up her real difference, her sexuality. And she does.

There are a few promising jokes that gesture towards the enactment of her sexual difference throughout the season. But they are not enough to create an actual space for that difference. The very structure of the show absorbs those references into the dominant form of reference: heterosexuality. The assimilation strategy here threatens to erase the lesbian, and allows the heterosexual contract to remain undisturbed. This is precisely the homocon strategy. She can be gay, but being gay cannot infringe on heterosexual life. This is the perfect gay person for straight liberal America, and for the gay right that just wants to fit in. This is the moment that the dual address threatens to collapse into one: one that depends on an assimilationist impulse. There is no question that this was the direction of this show and seemed to be the orientation of her next show.

Her daytime talk show, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* was a success from the start, in September 2003. In this show, DeGeneres is supposed to be "herself," interviewing celebrities and ordinary people, as well as occasionally talking to the audience and finding ways to involve at home viewers in an hour-long daily show. On the face of it, the show seems to address stay-at-home moms and other people who are at home during the day, and thus is not exactly queer. This then seems to continue DeGeneres' move toward assimilation. On the one hand, that certainly is true, and can be seen as unfortunate for radical political intervention. On the other hand, the cultural work she is doing here, in part through the cumulative effect of her presence as a lesbian on television is allowing her to carve out space for lesbian subjectivity. With her trademark appeal she is able to communicate to multiple spectatorial communities—at the same time that her very presence challenges heteronormativity.

A typical example of this appeal and how she uses it was on a show when she first, showed a videotape from a man holding a baby who sent it to her asking her to attend his wife's birthday party. Explaining that she didn't have time to go to them, she flew the couple to Los Angeles, showered them with gifts and had them on the show. When she asked the husband what made him send the tape, he explained that his wife was home with their brand new baby, watched the show everyday, had watched DeGeneres' sit-coms, and was a huge fan. He said that his wife said to him often that she wished she could have some "fun-loving friends," like Ellen. He went on to say that "You seem like a really nice person," so he figured he'd try. This couple was clearly thrilled to meet Ellen DeGeneres and like so many fans, think of her as a friendly presence, if not a real friend. This is perhaps the important cultural citizenship work DeGeneres is doing on television. She is beloved to a wide-ranging community of viewers, as a lesbian.

Hartley (1999) argues that even when television has not represented particular identities, or represented those identities particularly well, by making some differences visible it has created the recognition of those different from oneself, and what we learn is that differences exist in a pluralistic society, and even get some sense of what those differences are. Discussing the example of representing women's issues on television in

ways that have been less than satisfying for feminists, his ideas can easily be applied to the work Ellen has done on television for gay and lesbian representation. Hartley writes:

What I'm suggesting is that TV made visible the "culture" and condition of women to *others*, including those who didn't want to know, and this made certain kinds of assertions, assumptions and abjection simply unspeakable. Television . . . made women visible, their issues and "culture" normal; brought them into everyday conversations of the whole nation-audience-public. (Hartley 1999, p. 181)

For Hartley, this works to create "social cohesion based not on sameness but on difference, identity not shared with the whole population but nevertheless shown to them" (1999, p. 181).

Clearly, this is akin to the cultural work that *Ellen*, and to a lesser extent, *The Ellen Show* did to create the visibility of lesbians, especially for "those who didn't want to know." The coming out saga and the season of Ellen as an out lesbian on *Ellen* was especially productive for audiences who thought they didn't know any lesbians, or for those who held varying versions of homophobic ideas. The creation of lesbian subjective space on television was a public service in this regard, and did "work to create a social cohesion based not on sameness, but on difference." It was part of a discourse that insists on making lesbian or gay identity a human right, in the tradition of cultural citizenship.

It is from this position that DeGeneres continues to perform a specifically lesbian identity that speaks to gay and lesbian, or queer literate viewers as well, and thus must challenge heteronormativity at some level. This is part of the complexity of her address. She uses her power as the most likeable lesbian on television ever, as both a cultural ambassador to a liberal heterosexual spectatorship at the same time that she steps out of the bounds of heteronormative womanhood in a number of ways that are there to be read, if you can read them. She defines her style, outside of the male gaze. She wears trousers, jackets, vests, long sleeve shirts, and tennis shoes. She made the point early in the season that she got a lot of feedback from viewers who didn't like her clothes, so she allowed viewers to make her over once a week for a month. On these shows, she would wear whatever the viewers dressed her in. These outfits were always more feminine than DeGeneres' own look and made her look like she was in drag. The fact that she would appear like that also speaks to a slightly queer sensibility that she continues to perform. Mostly though, DeGeneres does not play up a queer identity. She is perhaps more a grown up and refined Tomboy. Part of that too is her physicality. She climbs on the furniture, does stunts with guests, and does her famous dance at the beginning of the show. This dance is solo and is not so much seductive as playful.

She makes very few references to her own sexuality, and none about her real-life relationship (even though she talks about her own life quite a bit) but her orientation towards her guests works to move her out of straight womanhood. She makes a point of honoring the television women who came before her. She sincerely thanked Mary Tyler Moore and Marlo Thomas for their early portrayals of single women that inspired her. She does things like kissing guest Ben Stiller passionately in a way that would be read altogether differently if she were read as straight. She reminisced with lesbian icons Melissa Etheridge—about their early struggles in show business and longtime friendship through it all—and with the Indigo Girls, even performing with them. In an interview with Kate Winslett, DeGeneres made a typical distancing move from identification with straight womanhood as Winslett talked about her experiences

as a mother and as being pregnant. Winslett made the point that her two pregnancies were very different from each other by saying that she carried her baby weight with her daughter in her butt. DeGeneres got a big laugh from the puzzled expression on her face as Winslett talked. It was clearly not a commonality they were sharing. When Winslett says that having babies is so great, that everybody should go have their babies, Ellen says, "You heard her. Everybody go have your babies." DeGeneres is clearly not in this loop. Winslett addressed DeGeneres as though they are both women, but DeGeneres does not react like a straight woman might be expected to.

From a queer, or more radical perspective, what is missing from DeGeneres' lesbian persona here is the performance of explicit desire. But from her position as everybody's favorite lesbian, DeGeneres continues to open up a space for queer moments, to perform her gender outside the terms of heteronormativity, and most importantly is the presence on television that prompts a cultural conversation among many different groups of people about what it might mean to be a lesbian.

NOTES

1. I have discussed this in a slightly different way, see Jennifer Reed (1998).
2. The "heterosexual contract" is a concept that Wittig develops in several essays in her book (1992). Those essays are, "One is Not Born a Woman," [1981] pp. 9–20; "The Straight Mind," [1980] pp. 21–32; "On the Social Contract," [1989] pp. 33–45.
3. For a more detailed discussion of the difference between "woman" and women, see Teresa de Lauretis (1987, pp. 1–30).
4. For a more detailed discussion of the term "heterogender" see Hilary Harris (1993).
5. I have discussed this season using many of the same episodes in a review see Reed (2002).

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