ELLEN

Making Queer Television History

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When a television broadcast is hailed as a "first," when it alters the flow of the network schedule, when it is described as television history, you know you are in the realm of the media event. This was certainly the case with *Ellen*'s coming-out episode on 30 April 1997. The historic status of this program was cemented by some linked observations that cropped up, in different forms, throughout the extensive coverage of the broadcast. The first was the perception of the show's lesbian character and star as a first, as something that had never before occurred in television. But the second observation, which often followed on the heels of the first one, was the somewhat contradictory assertion that gay characters and stars had existed on the small screen for a long time. Writers in the gay press and in mainstream entertainment news would affirm the status of the show as a first, then generate long lists of the queer people of all sorts who had appeared on television in decades past. Such moments often turned into genealogical recitations of milestones in the liberalization of the sitcom's representational politics. In April 1997 a writer in the *Denver Post*, for example, awarded *Ellen* a place on the liberal all-star team of sitcom firsts:

> In bringing her character out of the closet, DeGeneres joins the ranks of other TV "firsts." She'll be in the pop pantheon with the first black dramatic co-star in a regular series (Bill Cosby in "I Spy," 1965); the first black sitcom star (Diahann Carroll in "Julia," 1968); the first Hispanic sitcom (Norman Lear's "A.K.A. Pablo," which came and went in 1984, starring Paul Rodriguez); and the first unmarried woman allowed to have a sex life in prime time (career gal Mary Richards in 1970's "The Mary Tyler Moore Show"). TV already has dozens of gay supporting characters; the numbers have increased steadily since Billy Crystal played TV's first

GLQ 7:4
pp. 593–620

> openly gay character in 1977's "Soap." At the end of this month, TV will count a gay lead in a regular series, too.[1]

This litany of firsts is interesting because of its errors (why no mention of *Beulah*, or Desi Arnaz?) and because its length unintentionally diminishes the significance of the firstness of *Ellen*'s coming-out episode. In keeping with the characteristics of coming out as a speech act, the episode had "nothing to do with the acquisition of new information"; rather, it was a largely ceremonial first, an occasion we were all supposed to remember as the moment when queer lives finally became part of mainstream television.[2] In other words, the event was a *formal* one, in both the textual and the ritualistic sense of the word, within television as an institution. Queer fictions and characters could now permanently and officially shape the structure of American sitcom narrative (as opposed to haunting its edges conspicuously, as Tony Randall's Sidney did in *Love Sidney*, or lasting only temporarily, as Crystal's character on *Soap* did).[3]

There were good reasons to be ambivalent about this moment of mainstreaming in television as an institution. As comic Lea Delaria pointed out, not only was the firstness of the coyly named "Puppy Episode" highly manufactured, but its celebration as a historic moment in lesbian and gay political circles reflected assimilationist celebrity worship that devalued the work of entertainers like herself, "butch dykes . . . drag queens or nellie fags" who defy heteronormative conventions of stardom.[4] Indeed, DeGeneres rejected any connection to defiantly queer forms of publicity. Eric O. Clarke notes that DeGeneres's media statements about the coming-out episode only enforced normative ideals of representative gay citizenship, most notoriously when she denounced "Dykes on Bykes" as queer extremism in a *Time* interview. Transforming the name of a venerable pride parade contingent into a rhyming sound bite, this slam on "scary" homosexuals echoed another homophobic celebrity rhyme: the "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve" quip attributed to Donna Summer. As Clarke argues, such moments made DeGeneres fully complicit with the homophobic sense of normativity that lies at the root of the public sphere as a political category. Structured by a "subjunctive" ideal, in which all subjects and alliances must perform "as if" they were interchangeable to qualify for civic participation, the public sphere requires that queer subjects make themselves known through "homogenized proxies . . . lesbians and gay men who are just like everyone else."[5] DeGeneres appeared to seek this proxy status for herself as an activist. When she compared herself to Rosa Parks during an interview with Diane Sawyer, she offered a view of social change based on a subjunctive sense of identity in which race- and sexual-

ity-based oppressions are commensurable with, or at the very least analogous to, each other.

Racial analogies like this one largely structured the public discourse on *Ellen*. What enabled them to take hold, despite the fact that visibility on television is not particularly comparable to civil rights activism? One factor was surely the historiographical voice of television as an institution. As several media critics have noted, a sense of historical consciousness structures American television's forms of textuality.[6] The medium's address to the viewer is characterized by a seemingly compulsive urge to narrate its flow of programming as historical, eventful, and truthful. Professional and popular discourses on media events use signifiers of history to connect television broadcasts with broader moments of national reckoning, even when—as with *Ellen*—the news in question is entertainment news, emerging entirely from within television as an institution. These spectacular television events in turn exist in an interesting dialectical relationship with another mode of mediated history: the unremarkable, ordinary flow of the regular television schedule. As Mary Ann Doane notes, it is through the rupture of its own routine that television appears to have "access to the momentary, the discontinuous, the real."[7]

The journalistic impulse to place *Ellen* in a long list of sitcom firsts can be seen as part of the diverse historiographical operations performed by television, encompassing both the banal familiarity of the sitcom as an enduring entertainment format and the spectacular punctuation of this banality by the previously unseen media event. Moreover, the obsession with firsts reveals a key element in popular and professional understandings of the history of the sitcom: the idea that the genre is a barometer of social change. Indeed, DeGeneres's self-fashioning as a gay Rosa Parks affirmed such visions of what might be called the liberal-progressive narrative of television history. This narrative often consists of Whiggish tales in which the sitcom became more socially responsible thanks to pioneers like *All in the Family* producer Norman Lear, who, this story goes, not only retooled the sitcom's demographic but changed its cultural politics.

The rise of gay television as a genre recently might tempt us to accept this narrative as an accurate rendering of the way same-sex relations enter into television history. From this perspective, *Ellen* was a failed experiment, while Emmy Award–winning *Will and Grace* was a success, and now gay television is no longer controversial. However, the distinction between success and failure rests on some suspect assumptions. *Failure* is a term that can mean many different things in the rhetorics of network programming. For one thing, the fact that so many unaired shows are pitched, developed, and shot during a production year means that any series that makes it into the network schedule should be considered a success.[8]

Moreover, as Ien Ang points out, ratings are best approached not as accurate markers of audience desire but as discursive structures through which networks, sponsors, and advertisers reach an economic and institutional consensus.[9] Furthermore, as explained below, the "failing sitcom" is itself a recognizable subgenre, with distinct characteristics of its own. In short, a "success-versus-failure" model of gay television obscures more than it reveals.

Seeing *Ellen* solely as a failure, whether one attributes its downfall to its being "too gay," as Chastity Bono claimed, or not gay enough, prevents us from looking more closely at the kind of show it was. Perhaps we can learn something new about the political possibilities for, and constraints on, queer historiography that exist in popular culture and its commercial institutions by revisiting *Ellen*. Rather than try to adjudicate once and for all whether the show was or was not "progressive," it seems more rewarding to explore the moments when *Ellen* might have registered ambivalence about the politics of television representation and television history and to ask how such moments opened up a space for thinking about television's obsessive, multilayered historical consciousness as a kind of queer discourse. I take on this task in this essay, suggesting that some key contradictions in the liberal model of television history became visible during the show's post–coming-out engagement with the televisual past and with the structural limits of the sitcom form. The significance of *Ellen* for queer media studies, I argue, lies in the way it became an arena in which questions about the representational forms and durationality of queerness—in the sitcom and in prime-time television in general—were staged. In even broader terms, *Ellen* teaches us a great deal about how the institutional forms of popular culture, like the sitcom's narrative structure, shape the conditions under which queer historiography can emerge in public life.

Ellen's negotiation of the queer place in television history was set in motion by the "historic event" of the coming-out episode, but it did not end there. In the episodes that followed, as the show became branded a "failure," historiographical voices multiplied in it and in its production context. One notable example was the explanation of the show's failure offered by ABC's president, Robert A. Iger. Evincing a curious durational sense of identity, Iger explained that *Ellen* "became a program about a character who was gay every single week, and . . . that was too much for people."[10] This statement is noteworthy for the way it opposes queer identity and televisual seriality, as if the ongoing flow of situations and character development that defines the contemporary sitcom could not accommodate a same-sex world of desires and identifications. The fantasy of queer identity as something that can be switched on for special occasions—for sweeps week, per-

haps—voices something more than an institutional concern that the show would now be "about" the character's identity as a lesbian and her relation to queer culture. Its fear of a quotidian, ongoing lesbian life on television suggests that, although the network could support queer television as a spectacular media event, it could not sanction a lesbian invasion of serial television's more modest form of history making, the regularly scheduled weeks of televisual flow. Queer TV, in short, could make history as event television but not as what we might call "uneventful" television.[11] Tensions between queer history as an interruptive event and queer history as part of television's repertoire of unremarkable techniques of narrativizing the everyday emerged in a number of ways in the final season of *Ellen*. They became visible in the show's narrative structures and forms of intertextual reference, calling attention to the ways that same-sex narrative possibilities enact a crisis on the formal, structural level of television texts. *Ellen* demonstrated that the problem of queerness on television is not simply a matter of difficult "adult content." Rather, same-sex desire plays a deeply agonistic role in the unfolding of temporal structures associated with television's modes of (auto)historiography—the media event, the television schedule, the season run, the final episode.

For this reason, we cannot grasp the full range of implications for queer media studies by focusing solely on *Ellen*'s coming-out episode. Indeed, my focus is on the rhetorics of history and historiography that arose and became intertwined in the show's *post*–coming-out episodes, in which these distinctions between interruption and continuity were negotiated week by week, and in a second "media event" that occurred during this period of the show's life span: the final episode. A parody of cable television star biography programs such as *E! True Hollywood Story* and *A&E Biography*, this episode set in motion a sustained analysis of the queer politics of television's historiographical narratives. In its final season and in its finale, the show articulated in the quasi-complicit, quasi-ironic voice of the 1990s auteur sitcom the institutional and textual constraints surrounding "everyday queerness" on television.

Serial versus Episodic Homosexuality

In this final season of the show, as Iger's remarks indicate, ABC assigned *Ellen*'s writers an impossible task: to produce an episodic rather than a serial sense of queer life. Beleaguered executive producer Tim Doyle plaintively phrased the narrative problems that arose from this absurd situation in terms of televisual historicity and temporality: "Are we going to write stories about her getting locked in a meat

locker?" His reference to a stock sitcom plot, in which two characters get stuck in a meat locker and comedy, or a meaningful interpersonal breakthrough, ensues, is familiar to all Brady Bunch fans and is parodied in the cult sitcom *Get a Life*.[12] Doyle's disparagement of this sitcom staple is worth noting because it belies the fact that, as the clock ticked toward its cancellation, the show exhibited a fetishistic, almost compulsive interest in sitcom conventions. The season's narratives, situations, and punch lines revolved around knowing citations of programming practices and textual ciphers in American television history. It may not have had a meat locker episode, but it had a dream episode, a vacation episode, a car crash, and a parental funeral—all stock ingredients of late-period sitcom narrative.

This kind of historical awareness may be routine in the dense intertexts of contemporary television, but it takes on particular significance in the context of the sitcom, especially the gay sitcom. One of the many curious aspects of the sitcom as a television genre is that its historical consciousness is itself a historical development. The distinction between episodic and serial narrative that Iger referenced was a paradigm-shifting moment in the development of the genre in the 1970s. During this period, in contrast to the Paul Henning "rural" sitcoms of the 1960s, sitcoms began to take on the characteristics of serial narrative, as part of the overall serialization of prime-time television. This development was popularly explained as a transformation in the sitcom's audience and in American society, although, as Jane Feuer notes, this explanation obscured factors such as shifting patterns in markets, and in network relations with production companies, in favor of a liberal tale of progress in which the medium became more socially responsible.[13]

This narrative of the sitcom's development and liberalization is not as simple as it seems. It at once brings history, in the sense of historical struggles for social justice and ongoing serial development, into the textual repertoire onscreen while erasing the institutional history and politics that shaped this process. The emergence of seriality and, with it, ongoing character and story arcs was thus overdetermined as a moment when history started to figure prominently in the sitcom. But if seriality marked a transformation in the sitcom's relationship to history, it was a partial transformation at best. Gay and lesbian characters were certainly part of the supposed liberalization of the sitcom, as in a key late episode of *All in the Family* in which Edith discovers that her recently deceased cousin was a lesbian who left a precious family heirloom to her lover. However, they were not generally part of the formal shift from one-off, static reiterations of the basic comic setup to full-fledged seriality. Indeed, narrative development in sitcom was arguably a

hetero privilege. Feuer's primary example of this trend is, tellingly, the development of Sam and Diane's relationship on *Cheers*; this foregrounds the extent to which sitcom seriality seems to revolve around romance plots and couples. In this respect, the developmental path of television comedy, in which the form appears to grow into seriality, mirrors normative developmental narratives of sexuality: queer desire gets left behind as the genre "matures."[14]

Thus, before *Ellen* queerness was an interruptive, marginal force in the sitcom, its duration limited to one-off figures in "very special" episodes and supporting characters.[15] Indeed, serialization and the "adult" retooling of the sitcom actually limited queer possibilities in the sitcom, as it involved the elimination of the fantastic as a sitcom subgenre. Patricia White identifies a firmly established role for queer visibility in the 1960s fantasy sitcom when she notes the "gay subculture" of wizards and warlocks who thronged at the narrative margins of the show *Bewitched*. As she astutely points out, Agnes Moorehead's character, Endora, "literally cast a dark shadow over heterosexual relations each week when her credit . . . appears on a black cloud of smoke blotting out 'Derwood' and Samantha's embrace."[16] With the rise of the serialized sitcom, rooted in some sense of the everyday, queerness became increasingly a matter for narrative management. As Lynne Joyrich notes, *Roseanne* thematized this very state of affairs in a famous 1994 Halloween episode in which Dan, Fred, and Jackie conspire to make Roseanne think that Fred is gay. After she catches Dan and Fred in bed together, she produces a detonator and blows the house up. Queerness here destroys not only the narrative arc but the very fabric of the domestic sitcom's diegetic universe. But not permanently: next week, home life will resume as usual.[17]

Ellen's coming-out episode was momentous because it promised to make queer life something other than an interruptive force, something potentially *assimilated* (and I use the word advisedly) into the repertoire of romantic and personal situations replayed weekly on the prime-time sitcom.[18] But the logic through which this occurred was a heteronormative one. Although it may have inaugurated a queer developmental moment in the sitcom, the coming-out episode did so via conventions particularly associated with shows based on romantic *heterosexual* tensions, for example, the domestic-help romance subgenre exemplified by *The Nanny* and *Who's the Boss?* In these shows, frequent hints, one-offs, and missed connections abound from season to season. They set up romantic tension that can last for years, with the implicit promise that it will be resolved at the end of the series. Similarly, the affective revelation of the "Puppy Episode" was anticipated via ongoing hints, winks, and "almosts" that communicated the impending devel-

opment.[19] Although this technique was self-reflexive and ironic in its references to the publicity that the show was getting, it was simultaneously structured in conventional sitcom terms, of which it seemed to have no awareness.

This double voice, simultaneously conventional and self-aware, is a technique through which sitcoms often signal their relationship to their own history and to the broader history of the form. As a mode of address, it connects *Ellen* to other auteur comedies of the 1990s, such as *The Simpsons* and *Seinfeld*. But this connection itself suggests a broader context for thinking about the place of *Ellen* in television history. As loyal viewers will recognize, the tone of both of these writerly, adult sitcoms changed as time went on. The formal and narrative elements that signaled their ironic relationships to the conventions of the sitcom, and particularly to the genre's "mature," post-Lear interpersonal politics, remained, but the shows began to succumb to the conventions of the form they were ridiculing. In the eighth season of *The Simpsons*, for example, the scripts managed both to be highly ironic and "self-aware" and to recycle stock plots; there was even a meat locker episode in which Homer and Mr. Burns were trapped in a hut buried in an avalanche. Other story lines—including the addition of a new character to the Simpson family, a "clip show," and a spinoff show—borrowed *and* exhibited the formal attributes of a series that is starting to lose steam.

Such moments are forms of historiographical representation. What they both lampoon and display is an interesting historical effect of sitcom seriality: the messy, baroque narrative style that defines the late-season show. It should be obvious to even the most casual viewers that when sitcoms reach the end of their runs, they start to display extreme textual artifice, reversing their previous ideological and interpersonal rifts and accelerating character development. No longer oriented toward attracting new audiences, they start to reward loyal viewers by resolving narrative tensions and referencing their histories in ways that only a longtime fan could appreciate. The frictions that originally animated a show's comedic situations get played out, and the story lines increasingly replace comedy with drama and pedagogy. We witness cloying rapprochements between characters formerly at war with each other or with "the system," and new settings suddenly appear: the *Bosom Buddies* guys start their own ad agency, Hotlips and Hawkeye become allies, Fonzie becomes dean of students at the high school, Roseanne delivers an unironic monologue to God outside Dan's cardiac-ward room. Interestingly, as sitcoms reach this point of narrative exhaustion, their promotion often starts to invoke the discourse of the media event. Developmental speedups and "issue shows" are frequently marketed as special episodes, "very special" episodes, and season finales. These late-season moments of sudden character devel-

opment often index changing relations between talent, production companies, and networks. In this sense they illustrate the tangible pressures that institutional machinations can exert on the shape of the text. An extreme example of the institutional context impinging on narrative development is what happened to the character of Richie on *Happy Days*. After the actor Ron Howard left the cast, shortly after Richie's marriage to Lori Beth, the program's dialogue would ritually devote several minutes per episode to updates on Richie's exploits in the army in Greenland; he even managed to father a child during the season following Howard's last appearance on the program.[20] This double-voiced textuality, mixing sentiment and irony and striving to balance narrative integrity and institutional pressures, can be seen as the defining characteristic of the waning sitcom.

Closure and the Closet

The sitcom's ability to make its history and its institutional struggles visible in extreme ways, an ability increasingly relied on as a show approaches cancellation, provided *Ellen* with a context in which to explore queer television history that was ultimately more fruitful than DeGeneres's celebrity activism. After the "Puppy Episode" *Ellen*, operating under institutional doubts about its sustainability, exploited the conventions that characterize sitcoms in this stage of their life cycles. The season's incoherence, a product of the behind-the-scenes struggles over whether to make Ellen "gay every single week," was symptomatic. Some episodes featured no references to lesbianism at all; others, like the one titled "Emma," in which British actress Emma Thompson plays herself as a drunken lesbian celebrity, were forthright queer tales. Others, still seeming to want to rectify the nondevelopmental positioning of queers in serial situation comedy, attempted to represent a normative, familial, interpersonal world for Ellen as a gay woman involved in ongoing relationships and conflicts. And, of course, character development proceeded at an amphetamine pace: we witnessed Ellen get a girlfriend, break up with her, get back together with her, and negotiate family pain in episodes in which humor was subordinated to sentiment and climactic moments featured silent hugs followed by outpourings of applause. Such moments were much maligned for their preachiness, but it would be wrong to dismiss these conventions without noting that they dramatized, in structural, narrative terms, the dynamics of normativity that DeGeneres had been unable to address as a public figure. The program achieved this perspective on normativity largely through sustained attention to the ways that television history is perceived and written within multiple discursive sites, from the official rhetorics of network programming chiefs

to the routine forms of citation and intertextuality that characterize prime-time "quality TV" fiction today. The sitcom's temporal and historical form—its modes of development, disclosure, pedagogy, and institutional referentiality—emerged as the richest, most elastic mode of discourse for this process of negotiation in *Ellen*'s final season.

Consider, for example, the episode "The Breakup," which aired on 17 December 1997. It is one of the episodes in which a bumper bridging the program and the commercial break features DeGeneres talking directly to the camera. Her hair is slightly longer and styled differently; combined with the mode of direct address, this makes the bumper seem to occupy a more "present-tense" temporality than the episode in which it appears. Photographed on the set with production activity behind her, DeGeneres speaks not in character but as a representative of the show. She squirms and seems uncomfortable as she says, without evident humor, "Come back. And so will we. On ABC." "Coming back"—as opposed to "coming out"—was of course the big question surrounding *Ellen* for the network at that moment. In October ABC placed a TV-14 rating on episodes that showed same-sex kissing and, it was subsequently revealed, requested that the writers focus on issues other than "gay themes."[21]

The appearance of this bumper in this particular episode is interesting, because it raises the question of what the breakup in the title refers to. Was there a connection between the episode's narrative exploration of commitment (between Ellen and her girlfriend, Laurie) and the idea of television networks committed to establishing a permanently queer television? As a narrative event, the breakup emerges from a stock plot involving misunderstandings over a gift, although in this case the misunderstanding leads not to comedy but to melodrama.[22] Ellen and Laurie celebrate their one-month anniversary by going out to dinner and exchanging gifts. Laurie is nervous that her gift is presumptuous; she has bought Ellen tickets for *Rent* four months ahead of time. She is shocked when Ellen gives her a key to her house, mistakenly interpreting it as an invitation to move in. This leads to a painful discussion of their respective levels of commitment to each other. As they talk, Laurie speaks only as a mother. She tells Ellen that her last girlfriend broke her daughter Holly's heart when she "walked out" and that she is at a stage in life where she needs stability and permanence.

One might cynically note that the episode's staging of a breakup conveniently supports the network's official discomfort with same-sex kissing, a discomfort manifested in the decision to run warning labels in front of episodes in which kissing takes place. Yet as the narrative unfolds, the breakup takes on allegorical dimensions. In asking how long lesbian relationships last and what they do to chil-

dren when they enter the home, the episode articulates the historical question of the *program*'s permanence and its relation to viewers, particularly child viewers. It frames this question in a way that signals a canny awareness of the fraught institutional politics of *uneventful* lesbian representation. At the very beginning of the broadcast, at the moment when the warning label appears onscreen, a snippet of dialogue conveys the broader implications of the producers' protest against the network's warning label policy. Holly and Laurie are at Ellen's house, and Holly asks if she can watch TV. Laurie says yes but tells her not to channel-surf because "you never know what's on." Ellen retorts, "Oh come on, if there's something objectionable on, I'm sure there'll be a warning." This institutional in-joke makes Holly the proxy child viewer referenced in the institutional battle over the nature of same-sex kissing as a television event. Its political objective is to reinforce the activist schema through which DeGeneres negotiated with network executives over what was, effectively, the possibility of coding queer romance as an everyday event.

This version of a normalization argument aligned history making on television with the banal rather than with the spectacular, an alignment confirmed as the dialogue continues. More references to television's institutional forms emerge, presumably to locate the show and its ongoing situations in a mundane televisual world. Ellen's father arrives, and Holly describes him as "the perfect retro dad. Hey no, you know what it's really like, it's like he's from one of those sitcoms on Nick at Nite." Through this child's view of adult relationships on television, we are told that the syndicated "classic television" lineups of basic cable networks like Nick at Nite are the ancestors of Ellen's gay familial everydayness.

The reference to Nick at Nite links Ellen's television family to the aesthetic economy of citation that Mimi White locates in cable programming practices: although they repackage historical television shows and in a sense rewrite them, they make "previously devalued and hard-to-see material . . . increasingly valuable for stations seeking programming. However, the effect of recirculating this material offers an opportunity for historical re-vision."[23] Locating itself in a Nick at Nite genealogy, *Ellen* attempts a kind of revision that affirms the sitcom as a kinship setting populated by characters both odd and familiar, eccentric and normative, a space both queer and familial. The mechanism of citation that sustains both cable programming and the alienness and familiarity of the television past becomes, in this episode, a field of codes that contains (i.e., both holds and holds back) same-sex possibilities in *Ellen*'s generic future. Later in the episode, when Ellen and Laurie discuss moving in together, Ellen's response involves a nervous, wisecracking invocation of a previous same-sex living arrangement on television:

> Laurie: "What is so crazy about us living together?"
> Ellen: "Obviously, you've never seen a little program called *Laverne and Shirley*."

Is Ellen's fear of intimacy really the network's? Obviously, we can offer no definitive answer to that question; we can only note that the expression of this fear in the form of a television history citation reinforces the fact that the episode's commitment troubles work on some level as a parable of those staged behind the scenes, within the network as an institution.

But this parable ultimately rests on a "family values" foundation. When Ellen decides to ask Laurie to move in despite her fears, Laurie asks whether she really understands what that would entail: "You move us in, it's instant family. . . . Is that what you want now? I mean, you've just come out. The whole world is open to you." Laurie shrinks from serial lesbian monogamy because she is afraid that it will damage her child. Positioned as the protector of the children, she is unwilling to be part of a queer household without some kind of familial contract. Thus, although the episode promotes lesbian parenting and offers hints of a queer reading of sitcom history, it advances under a neoconservative gay agenda based on moralistic censuring of queer couple formations in the name of heteromorphic stability. Familial affirmation continues in the last scene, when Ellen's father grieves the loss of Holly as a surrogate grandchild in the breakup.

With this normalizing emphasis on family, "The Breakup" sought to bring mainstream(ing) gay and lesbian politics into alignment with the conventions of the sitcom. Its subject matter may have confirmed the feeling of some critics that the show had become too serious in its final season, but its sermonizing was absolutely in line with the late-season sitcom's tendencies. What is perhaps more noteworthy about *Ellen* in this period of its run is that its sermons were consistently delivered with an awareness of television programming as an everyday historical archive. In linking its representational politics to the television past, evidenced in shows like *Laverne and Shirley*, the program addressed a familiar queer position in popular culture: that of a readership set against the grain and focusing between the lines, oscillating idiosyncratically between extreme obviousness and deep textual archaeology to recover the textual traces of same-sex desire. The fact that the final season was marked by the network's desire for an inconsistent sense of part-time lesbianism meant that such heterogeneous, contradictory modes of reception were crucial for sustained viewerly engagement. Episodes like "G.I. Ellen," in which lesbianism is not directly mentioned, required a different viewerly position from ones like "The Breakup" and "Emma." These "closeted" episodes

were not a form of repression; they did not eradicate queer references from the program. Rather, the queer voice shifted from the level of character to that of the author function. That is, such "closeted" programs seemed deliberately staged in performative settings where political allegories about the nature of television's modes of representation could circulate: a radio broadcast, a Civil War reenactment camp, a television pilot audience focus group.

In many of these episodes, *Ellen* attempted to call televisual norms and conventions into question through visually presented, semi-ironic comparisons between the acceptance of racial diversity and the acceptance of queerness. These comparisons tend to hint at a double standard, as in "G.I. Ellen," where a Chinese American Robert E. Lee scoffs at the idea of women playing soldiers. However, the racial analogies remain only partially articulated—visually coded rather than verbally stated. Because they communicate their polemic through implication, these moments seem offered up by the show's producers as tutelary examples of how to make sitcom history in a "quiet" way—not through lectures but through allegory. In suggesting that being gay is just like being a person of color and, by extension, that racial minorities should consider their own histories as public subjects before denying public status to gays and lesbians, the producers affirmed the subjunctive model of public visibility through which DeGeneres could characterize herself as a gay Rosa Parks.[24]

These episodes go farther, however, in that they are also statements about television history. The Chinese American Confederate general may communicate a spurious analogy, one that unravels when you ask how queerness on television can be comparable to color-blind casting, but the character nevertheless seems to serve on some level as a parable for the progress of the sitcom. The polemic he supports is that the genre is on a path to increasing liberalization, based on the widening of the roster of minoritarian subjects available as stock characters. This idea locates queer television within the normalizing logic of representational equivalency that defines the progressive narrative of television history. However, the fact that this sense of history is not stated directly but hinted at through comedy marks these allegorical episodes as convoluted, quasi-closeted political speech acts that replicated the institutional and textual conundrum of queer representation in serial prime-time television more than they resolved it.

The episode "Ellen in Focus" rewards closer examination because of the way it advanced the racial analogy through an insistent engagement with the criteria that determine whether television shows succeed or fail. It allowed for a more explicit articulation of the liberal-progressive model of television history in which *Ellen* sought a place, although it simultaneously narrowed the range of possibili-

ties for queer political speech in the sitcom form. In this episode Ellen and her friend Joe join a focus group to discuss a pilot written by Ellen's friend Paige. The pilot, a detective program, features a short male lead, because Paige wants to curry favor with her short male boss; Ellen's covert mission is to enter the focus group and swing people's opinions in favor of the show. The choice of setting is significant. Staging the action in a key institutional scenario in the test marketing of television programs is an obvious allegory for the show's behind-the-scenes battle over ratings. What is interesting about the pilot, however, is the way its allegorical political speech is uttered: via a discussion of the history of the sitcom and the political stakes involved in its representational codes. As in the Civil War reenactment episode, the allegory is advanced by a nonwhite character. One focus group member complains that a short cop character is not "realistic." Another adds that short actors are meant to be funny, not heroic, on television. Ellen and Joe try to change their minds, but finally a focus group member called Emily, played by black actress Marcia White, gets frustrated and blurts out, "I just prefer characters that are normal." In a parodic, lecturing tone, Ellen responds, "What is normal? I mean, come on. If we put different characters on TV right now, in twenty years our kids won't think it's so weird to be different. I mean, before *The Beverly Hillbillies* people used to think it was weird to eat dinner off a pool table." A long discussion of the history of sitcoms follows, using examples drawn from the preserialization history of the form (the group discusses, for example, the actual locations of Petticoat Junction, Mayberry, Hooterville, and Mount Pilot).

Classic sitcom history thus becomes the means of delivering broad messages about the role of queer people in television, affirming the liberal narrative of television history that positions programming as a pedagogical form that will raise better, more tolerant children. That a black woman, Diahann Carroll, occupies a central position in this liberal tale suggests that the casting of a black woman as the prompt for Ellen's humorous lecture is a form of ironic commentary on the changing nature of norms in television. It is ironic in the sense that this black female character appears to have no historical knowledge; she is unaware that characters like her were once largely excluded from sitcom casts. This, presumably, is to communicate how far the genre's casting practices have come and to caution viewers to be alert to the dangers of historical amnesia. We can read in this moment an echo of post–civil rights era activist anxieties, a concern that the present generation (viewed as complacent and, by implication, fully enfranchised) is ignorant of the struggles of the past and, by extension, in danger of losing political consciousness in the future. As a rhetorical move, this casting strategy seems intended as a call for a (somewhat incoherent) coalitional politics of representa-

tion; it is as if the writers were trying to show black viewers that they should be invested in the idea of gay and lesbian characters on television because the situation of gay and lesbian viewers today is analogous to that of black viewers in decades past.

This analogical approach to identity politics in the sitcom, an approach that structures many episodes of *Ellen*'s final season, has important consequences. It requires that the show's moments of activist speech be confined to the representation of aspects of homophobia that are easily rendered analogous to race—like internalized homophobia, treated in several episodes. What we see only rarely is the direct representation of difficult aspects of queer daily life, including the fact of having to negotiate oppressive straight behavior. This really happens in only one episode, where we see Ellen and Laurie get "the treatment" when they try to rent a hotel room with a double bed. Interestingly, in this episode we see a more complex understanding of the relation between sexual politics and racial politics, as Ellen and Laurie end up bonding with an interracial couple, who, like them, are waiting endlessly for a table in a restaurant. But this episode is exceptional. In the context of a show's developmental leap into queerness, striving toward serial homosexuality, the continuing need to find analogies for same-sex desire in other modes of social identity remind us how difficult an issue—institutionally, formally, politically—the representation of queer everyday life on television can be. And it forcefully communicates the fact that making queer television history in the prime-time sitcom is inevitably an act of making do. These closeted, allegorical episodes of *Ellen*'s final season were historically self-aware and very much in step with the intertextual and ironic strategies of the auteur sitcom of the 1990s. But they failed to challenge the analogical models of identity and political change that structure official histories of the sitcom form.

Making Queer Television History

As if in response to the constraining conditions that the sitcom form posed for queer history making, in particular the fact that political speech in the genre must be uttered in closeted or double-voiced ways, the final episode of *Ellen* explored other possibilities for examining television's politics. A fictionalized documentary parodying star biography as a television genre, the episode seemed to seek out these possibilities in the conventions of the nonfiction cable programming form it parodied. Unlike most series finales, it did not tie up loose ends. Nor indeed did it try to turn into a final, singular statement the season's fragmented, ambivalent attempts to make visible the conditions under which queer voices and ways of

reading can enter the textual universe of entertainment television. In fact, the season did not crystallize in this episode at all. An unsentimental break with the narrative of Ellen Morgan's life, it abandoned the narrative arc of her relationship to Laurie to explore the possibilities of nonnarrative television as a site for queer historiography. In this break from narrative, the finale articulated a more heterogeneous field of practices as forms of television history making than the network's Whiggish model. Its lack of allegiance to story arcs, coupled with a camp interest in the known conventions of cable and network television formats was absolutely in step with the sensibility of 1990s auteur sitcoms. Yet this abandonment of closure was also a reversion to the older idea of queer television as an interruption. In linking these two historical moments in the development of sitcom's narrative codes, the episode managed to be that rare thing, an interesting series finale, and one that, moreover, exhibited a knowing sense of television form and the challenges that queerness poses in it.

The humor of the episode, which narrates Ellen's fictional lifetime in show biz, lies in the way it places DeGeneres at the center of the entire history of the sitcom form. She appears as a shape-shifting historical subject similar to movie characters like Forrest Gump and Zelig, who are miraculously present at key moments in the visually rendered national past. In this case, the past in question is the television past, and its protean subject is a sitcom's main character. We learn about fictional Ellen's life and decades-running show via the conventions that increasingly define American cable documentary: clips from (fictionalized) eras of the show, recycled stock footage, celebrity interviews, and promotional "behind-the-scenes" entertainment news. In a clip parodying the popular 1950s panel show format, for example, we see DeGeneres as an urbane, cigarette-smoking host of a *What's My Line?*–like show called *Spot the Commie*, cracking Groucho-style jokes. In another clip, presented as a segment of the original, "unaired" pilot of her sitcom, she is the witty, martini-drinking wife of a businessman played by Woody Harrelson. In yet another fragment from the "classic" era of the show she is incarnated as a pregnant Lucille Ball type, grinding coffee beans with her feet in a giant vat—a tribute to an *I Love Lucy* episode in which Lucy and Ethel stomp grapes. Interwoven with the clips and celebrity testimonials is an on-the-set interview with DeGeneres and Linda Ellerbee.

"*Ellen*: A Hollywood Tribute" presents a queer view of this conventional recycling of the television past and its modes of stardom, trading both on popular knowledge of the history of sitcoms on television and on more mainstream "lesbian and gay" versions of this history. It offers a rewriting of the liberal narrative of progressive television history, a rewriting in which racial analogies continue to

play a problematic and, in some cases, an undermining role. The episode's awareness of this liberal narrative is signaled in the humorous attribution of a number of firsts that the show has achieved during its fictional forty-year run. In one interview with Ellerbee, DeGeneres notes: "We were the first show where characters got trapped in a meat locker. Where someone has two dates on the same night. . . . Where someone learns a valuable lesson." Over the course of the show her innovation is described, variously, as the first appearance of a single woman on television, the first appearance of a pregnant woman on television, and also—following the replay of a climactic moment in the "Puppy Episode" in which Ellen agonizes about being a thirty-five-year-old in the closet—"the first time on television somebody was honest about their age."[25] But among the firsts attributed to DeGeneres in this episode, the lesbian plot of *Ellen* is strikingly absent. As a polemical strategy, this purposive elision both complies with the closet's programming politics, which would deny any screen time to queerness, and asserts the problem that queerness poses for television's representational politics: the difficulty of making same-sex desire uneventful, serial, everyday. Elsewhere, indeed, the episode's rhetoric suggests that this can happen only in a queer television future. When Ellerbee asks DeGeneres why she is not making a big deal out of the fact that she came out on national television, DeGeneres jokes that the "gay thing" was "just the spin the network put on it. They're gay crazy over there." She then reiterates the official lesson of this particular, final episode: comparing queerness to saying the word *pregnant* on television, and echoing a line of dialogue from the allegorical episode "Ellen in Focus," she says, "I mean, twenty years from now it's going to be one fat 'so what.'"

Instead of the racial analogy of previous episodes, this moment offers up an analogy based on similarities between the representation of reproductive status and the representation of same-sex desire. In fact, this pregnancy analogy serves as the dominant framework for the episode's understanding both of the formal transformations of the sitcom and of the popular reassessments of the genre's politics that accompanied these changes. In the *Lucy* clip, which we see first, the dialogue calls attention to Ellen's pregnancy via euphemistic references like "a bun in the oven" to underscore the absurdity of sitcom morals and to expose the structure of open secrets on which they are often based. This readily understood indictment of the network's ambivalent treatment of queerness on *Ellen* is supported by a clip from the "later season" of the program. This clip, which parodies Lear-era sitcom codes, seems intended to remind us that certain shows, like *All in the Family*, have always generated controversy. In this clip a discussion of Audrey's abortion and her "right to choose" is followed by a scene in which Ellen delivers a

shock to her grumpy, Archie Bunker–like father, introducing him to her large family of newly adopted children: a troupe of black kids in Afro wigs who deliver wisecracks over funky 1970s urban sitcom theme music.

This parody of 1970s sitcom realism exemplifies the way this final episode approaches the act of historical rewriting, namely, via the familiar sitcom logic in which irony and sincerity comfortably coexist. In this scene a discussion of women's reproductive rights is meant to foreground the centrist liberal politics of the sitcom's lessons and, it would seem, to support them at the same time. It begins with Paige telling Audrey that she and Ellen have burned their bras. Audrey responds, "Well, sisters, while you were out burning symbols of the white, patriarchal establishment, *I* got an abortion." As the laugh track echoes incongruously, Paige hastily adds, in a serious, lecturing tone, "—which I'm sure was a hard choice, but ultimately yours to make." Audrey makes a peace sign, and the scene ends. Affirming reproductive rights and at the same time parodying their gradual inclusion in the liberal political spectrum of (the fictional version of) *Ellen*, the clip offers one official account of the way queerness might be allowed to enter the sitcom. According to this version, lesbian desire can be thought of as parallel to the historical narrative of female reproductive (hetero)sexuality—appearing first via innuendo and suggestion, then via the episodic "issue-based" narrative structure of the Lear era.

However, alongside the official analogy between queerness and pregnancy, "*Ellen*: A Hollywood Tribute" gives voice to other, queerer ways of imagining a homo presence on television, as well as some analogies that throw the liberal-progressive view of television history into question. The first possibility, that of other queer television histories, emerges from the fact that the episode's fictional version of the past is articulated in the wider context of an assumed viewerly familiarity with television history—not only with particular moments in the history of television but with the ways they are revivified in contemporary cable television programming. The queer histories that these clips reference are not hard-to-find, "absent" images on television. Rather, they are constantly available on cable; indeed, the episode's historiographical voice depends on a knowing viewer who recognizes the genres and references onscreen from a lifetime of cable viewing. It is through this familiarity not only with television history but with the commercial institutions that (re)present it today that other, less official queer historiographies come into play.

How is this possible? One segment in particular, the *Spot the Commie* clip, offers a compelling example. The clip stands out from the others, because the television genre it parodies, the panel show, was recently "resurrected" and put into

circulation via cable programming, specifically, via the small Game Show Network, launched in 1994, which features an archive of Goodson-Todman quiz programs, like *What's My Line?*, *I've Got a Secret*, and *To Tell the Truth*. These parlor games replicated the interrogative structure of the panel inquiry—a mode of political spectacle that, in the case of the army-McCarthy hearings, increased the visibility of both queerness and homophobia in 1950s America—and involved members of the public in guessing matches with a regular, or rotating, panel of minor celebrity guests and a moderator. In both parodying and introducing the panel show to a network audience, this *Spot the Commie* segment suggests that cable television, because of its function as a gigantic archive of television history, might be a more fruitful place for queer visibility than prime-time network programming. Specifically, it calls attention to two forms of same-sex identified relations and modes of visibility that emerge in the rebroadcast of panel shows on the Game Show Network. First, there are the panelists themselves, representatives from various categories of literary or cultural fame. There is always a queer place on the panel, whether held down by bachelor grumps like Henry Morgan of *I've Got a Secret* or odd persons like Broadway columnist and fag hag Dorothy Kilgallen, or by the sundry members of the intelligentsia, from poets to arts patrons, who appeared on Goodson-Todman panels over the years.

In addition to these regular queer "slots," which it could be argued are queer primarily in their incongruous display of modes of paracelebrity, like the intellectual, panel shows provide access to a larger archive of queer celebrity. As part of a commercial publicity machine, panel shows always involved celebrity guests who would appear to promote a recent film. Rebroadcasts of these routine celebrity appearances occasionally create strong forms of queer historical spectacle, for example, when stars like Judith Anderson face the probing questions of the panel. Channel surfers in markets where the Game Show Network airs might be lucky enough to catch such notable television moments as the 1960 episode of *I've Got a Secret* in which a young Anthony Perkins announces directly to the camera, "Hi, I'm Anthony Perkins, and I've got a secret!" Such accidental, "uneventful" media events, located in the ongoing flow of television programming, are nevertheless routine ways for queer subjectivity and same-sexiness to become immediately and obviously visible on television, both in the past and in the contemporary cable universe.

But citation is not the only historiographical mode available for history making in "*Ellen*: A Hollywood Tribute." The racial analogy also resurfaces in covert ways, adding to the sense of ambivalence and rupture that haunts the official history told in the episode. This analogy reemerges through the parodic use of

two hoary conventions of cable biography programs like *E! True Hollywood Story* and *Inside the Actor's Studio*. The first is the interpolation of celebrity testimonials, excised from interviews conducted in the minimal mise-en-scène of a dark, setless studio, between the historical "clips" of *Ellen* and DeGeneres's interview with Ellerbee. The second is the use of stock footage and photographic stills to break up interviews. In keeping with the spoof aesthetic, the episode introduces stock footage somewhat randomly into the interview segments. When DeGeneres mentions having slept with the Kennedys, for example, we see a brief shot of JFK and RFK that seems meant as an ironic send-up of the decontextualizing visual strategies of History Channel documentaries. Both of these parodic uses of convention serve as potent reminders of the limits of identity analogies in activism and in historiography, and in this respect they undermine the liberal narrative of progressive television history that "*Ellen*: A Hollywood Tribute" seems to promote. This is because the episode, while it finds an analogy between pregnancy and queerness acceptable, also displays a marked inability to speak its racial analogies directly, resorting instead to an incoherent, visually conveyed language of hints. The hesitancy with which it invokes racial analogies might signal a half-awareness of the problems that such analogies pose, not only as ways of thinking about the politics of identity but as historical statements about television, given that segregationist programming strategies, casting standards, and narrative situations continue to define the prime-time television lineup.

In the first instance, the rupture occurs through Diahann Carroll's presence among the celebrities, major and minor, who testify on the topic of DeGeneres's importance in television history. The humor running through these testimonials derives from the fact that the celebrities are often unable to recall who she is. This fits in with the show's larger theme, namely, that the goal of queer representation on television is to allow gay lives to appear as banal and unremarkable as the lives of other sitcom characters, that the most groundbreaking queer television is television that does not seem groundbreaking. In her interview Carroll gives a heartfelt speech of admiration that, when she finishes it, is clearly about Ella Fitzgerald. When the producer interrupts from offscreen and says, "No, no, Ellen DeGeneres," she looks blank: "Who?" Using Carroll to enjoin this idea that queer television should *not* be considered historical and anomalous places her in a paradoxical speaking position. After all, she herself is a fragment of television history, one often both forgotten and resurrected in the same rhetorical instance, as in the *Denver Post* passage quoted at the beginning of this essay. Carroll's appearance in this episode asserts the historicity that she is asked to deny verbally, namely, that there are limits to the principle of equivalent identities on which official sitcom history

advances. Furthermore, her presence encourages us to reflect on the whiteness of gay television as represented by *Ellen* and by the "gay television" craze of the 2000–2001 season, in which, despite numerous shows with gay characters, only one is not white (Carter on *Spin City*).[26] This sense of television's continued representational homogeneity, despite the supposed progress made by decades of black visibility in the sitcom, can only halt optimistic historical narratives of the queer television future, or at least force them to incorporate a more complex view of identity.

We can discern an awareness of the limits of such narratives in the episode's use of the other convention of cable television historiography: stock footage. This footage is often but not always used parodically, and the moments when it is used differently are notable. In one instance, recognizably momentous historical footage appears as a seemingly straightforward kind of "truth-bearing" evidence. In the lead-up to the fictional clip of the sitcom *Ellen* in its Lear-era incarnation, Ellerbee asks DeGeneres if she remembers that the 1960s were also a "dark time" for America. She speaks over snippets of footage edited together in a manner immediately recognizable from televisual narratives of national history. As Ellerbee intones, "This was a turbulent era. War, racism, unrest: difficult topics for humor," we see images of Vietnam War demonstrations and of civil rights protesters hit with water sprayed from hoses. The latter footage, blurry and degraded, appears to have been lifted from a video copy of *Eyes on the Prize*, the 1987 Blackside documentary of the civil rights movement. Its anachronistic use alongside images of Vietnam War protests, only confirming the damning view of television history as an amnesiac fiction, comes as a shock and undermines, in its undigestible realness, the narrative of progressive sitcom politics that it is invoked to support. Although the episode's ongoing comparison of pregnancy and queerness signals an acceptance of the idea that analogies for sexual identity are a form of political speech, this civil rights footage communicates the problems with using analogies as ways of thinking about identity politics and social change.

Given that its use is not only a decontextualization but a somewhat desecrating lack of engagement of the issues of representation that come with historical footage, however, this footage more likely reflects an unthinking desire to find a shorthand way of signaling awareness of the conventions of the cable documentary while borrowing the economical mode of storytelling associated with it. Immediately preceding *Ellen*'s imaginary Lear-era incarnation, this footage suggests a view of political justice via civil rights and the diversification of character types on television as equivalent forms of social change. The footage encourages us to think that representation on television is an indication that equality has been achieved.

At this moment in the episode, the final season's clearly undecided relation to the politics of racial analogies opens up some cracks in the official story of the sitcom. Along with other moments in this final episode—the anachronistic queer world glimpsed in *Spot the Commie*, for example—this use of stock footage speaks the double-voiced desire for complicity and irony that characterizes the sitcom form.

This double voice ultimately defines how political alternatives can be imagined and uttered in the sitcom. Perhaps the most direct example is the moment in the final episode when Steven Gilborn, who plays Ellen's father, manages to narrate sitcom history from a glib, cynical perspective while engaging in direct political speech. In his interview segment Gilborn describes himself as a lifelong liberal but discloses that when DeGeneres wanted his character to "change to a conservative dope," he agreed because she explained that "doing so would unmask the political Right for what they are: reactionaries with a secret agenda to curtail our freedom." Here Gilmore parodies the pat arguments that seek to recuperate characters like Archie Bunker for progressive politics in histories of the sitcom form, arguments that ignore the possibility that such characters also put hate speech into wider circulation; at the same time he exploits this retelling of sitcom history as an opportunity to voice a progressive stance against the Right.[27]

Conclusions

The episode, and the series, ends with a montage of funny clips and character portraits drawn only from the final, "out" season of *Ellen*, as if to suggest that the preceding seasons were part of another sitcom that ended at the coming-out episode. This move brackets the final season from the flow of television history as a kind of experiment, but it does so by closeting the entire "pregay" identity of the character. As a fantasy of queer identity reborn with the act of coming out, it offers a therapeutic model of queer self-fulfillment, reinforced by the new theme song, sung in a somewhat improvised manner by Clea Lewis (the actress who plays Audrey) as the clips play. Its melody and arrangement recall sitcom musical themes of a previous era, making its first use of the word *gay* in the lyrics sound anachronistic: "Who's bright and kooky and gay? Who goes a different way?" But the word *gay*'s ambiguity is recoded in the following lines of the song, which includes one of the few actual uses of the word *lesbian* on the show and which, in its forthrightness, invites us to interpret it as a way of signaling what a utopian, and anachronistic, queer future on television might sound like: "Who finally came out to her friends?

Ellen! . . . Who's got a lesbian style? Who's got a lesbian smile? Who's happy and healthy and gay? It's Ellen! Ellen, you groovy gal!"

Many in the industry would hold up the example of *Will and Grace*'s 2000 Emmy sweep to argue that even though *Ellen* "failed," it won a place for everyday, serialized leading gay characters at the sitcom table, a place toward which this theme song seemed to gesture. I have tried here to shift the fulcrum of debates over the show's success and failure, debates that would seem to insist that cultural representations always either open up or close down political possibilities—rather than render, or redraw, the relationships between different political narratives. My argument has been that the show succeeded not so much at its stated goal of broadening the representational horizons of the sitcom as at exploring the terms of queer representation in prime-time serial television, and it did so through an interesting, if not entirely worked-out or cognizant, relationship to television history, to identity politics, and to the televisual modes of historiography in which both are often narrated. As the culmination and definitive statement of this search for a queer future in the television past, the final episode raised, without resolving, the conundrum of queer visibility on television. It was not "in control" of its ability to reconfigure relations of continuity and interruption, of eventfulness and uneventfulness, of commensurable and incommensurable identities, by any means. Rather, *Ellen*'s final season seems to suggest, these contradictions can be played out in the narrative, and historiographical, voices of prime-time network television.

The incoherence of *Ellen*'s double-voiced representational politics, relying on and disavowing identity analogies as the basis of future network policy, suggests that queer network television appears more readily through practices of reading the television past, like camp, or the familiar "between-the-lines" stance of the queer reader than through official moments, like the manufactured interruptions of media events.[28] Does this mean that cable television, the nation's television attic, is some kind of homo heaven? It certainly calls our attention to the parallels between repurposing and camp, the latter a very familiar, well-developed logic of queer historiography. But a queer history written only through the cable repurposing of prime-time television's fictional narratives is inevitably based on closets and open secrets, on identifications signaled indirectly.[29] It would be nice to see a documentary like *Before Stonewall* on cable channels like the History Channel occasionally, but gay and lesbian lives are rarely programmed here or in any other "basic cable" package. Even as we feel excitement about the spaces for queer authorship and reception that are opening up on pay cable channels like Showtime

and HBO, we must note that they mark the commodity status of gay and lesbian audiences in firmly middle-class, largely white terms. What I would like to remember about *Ellen* is that even as it helped establish these marketing categories, it also achieved an uncommon queer metadiscourse on television's programming history, if only because of its beleaguered, precancellation status. In so doing, it set an interesting agenda for queer media studies, one that goes beyond positive and negative images of gay characters. As television keeps regenerating and recycling its queer histories in different sites and genres, through nonfiction shows like *E! True Hollywood Story* and behind-the-scenes docudramas like Fox's *Growing Up Brady*, the task for television critics is close to the task that the writers of *Ellen* seemed to take on in its final season: to provide a glimpse of the ways the figure of the desiring queer subject intersects with, and challenges, television's structures of representation. The structures that I have discussed here are temporal frameworks like the serial and the episodic and cable programming strategies like the mundane, never-ending recycling and repurposing of the past. But there are surely many more structures; after all, one thing *Ellen* did teach us is that there are numerous ways to make queer television history.

Notes

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1. Joanne Ostrow, "Will 'Ellen' the Show and Ellen the Star Outlast TV Buzz?" *Denver Post*, 8 April 1997, E-01.
2. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 4.
3. This is a nationally specific phenomenon. Perhaps because of the legacy of the music hall, the queer possibilities of the sitcom in Britain seem quite different. Queer characters in shows like *Are You Being Served?* did not enter the realm of national controversy. See Brian Finnegan, "Nowt So Queer as Sitcoms," *Irish Times*, 29 July 2000, Weekend section, 63; Murray Healy, "Were We Being Served? Homosexual Representation in Popular British Comedy," *Screen* 36 (1995): 243–56; and Janet Woollacott, "Fictions and Ideologies: The Case of Situation Comedy," in *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, ed. Tony Bennett et al. (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), 206–18.

4. Jeff Walsh, "Butch Dyke Comic Delaria Boasts New Album, Roasts Ellen," *Oasis*, April 1997. Oasis is an on-line gay youth site. This article may be found at www.oasis-mag.com/Issues/9704/cover.html.
5. Eric O. Clarke, *Virtuous Vice: Homoeroticism and the Public Sphere* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 7. On the legislative ramifications of categorizing homosexuality as a class of interests see Janet Halley, "The Construction of Heterosexuality," in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 95–98.
6. A sense of history is, as Mimi White notes, hardly a scarce commodity in television's everyday modes of address: "Across an array of genres and events of different orders, television invokes 'history' as a meaningful term. Yet it is obvious that the result of this process—of imputing historicity as part of a signifying operation—is not homogeneous or unified, and indeed, hardly conforms to the most common uses of the term history. . . . television designates event as historical without regard for the temporal order, grammatical tense, and/or referential weight . . . that guide conventional assumptions about history. Rather, television generates a dispersed, discursive field, subsumed under the label 'history,' which is fragmentary, multiple, and contradictory" ("Television: A Narrative—a History," *Cultural Studies* 3 [1989]: 282–83). See also White, "Indy and Dr. Mike: Is Boy to Global World History as Woman Is to Domestic National Myth?" *Film and History* 30 (2000): 14–23; and John Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994).
7. Mary Ann Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," in *Logics of Television*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 238.
8. White, "Indy and Dr. Mike: Is Boy to Global World History as Woman Is to Domestic National Myth?" (paper presented at the Console-ing Passions Conference on Feminism, Television, and Video, Seattle, April 1995).
9. Ien Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 50.
10. Richard Huff, "Who Killed 'Ellen'? Exec Blames DeGeneres," *Daily News* (New York), 6 May 1998, 77.
11. These issues are not limited to the sitcom. Joy V. Fuqua notes that similar concerns over the ongoing representation of homosexuality arose when gay characters first entered soap opera ("There's a Queer in My Soap! The AIDS/Homophobia Storyline of *One Life to Live*," in *To Be Continued: Soap Operas around the World*, ed. Robert C. Allen [New York: Routledge, 1995], 199–212). The narrative trajectory of Steven Carrington, the gay character in *Dynasty*, suggests one way the extremist plotting conventions of melodrama's serial form could prevent same-sex desires and identifications from being *ongoing* aspects of a series. After the murder of his lover, Carrington found a female partner, switched briefly back to a male partner, then fell in love with a woman again.
12. Brian Lowry, "Ratings, Not Sexuality, Steer Future of 'Ellen,'" *Los Angeles Times*, 11

March 1998, F1. Other versions of this plot include an episode of *Friends* in which Ross, Susan, and Phoebe get locked in a closet; an episode of *M*A*S*H* in which Hotlips and Hawkeye seek shelter in a roadside hut and end up sleeping together; and an episode of *All in the Family* in which Archie and Mike get locked in the storeroom of Archie's bar for the night.

13. Jane Feuer, "Genre Study and Television," in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 151–52.
14. My thanks to Ann Pellegrini for pointing this tendency out to me.
15. The interruptive status of queerness in narrative has a long history. As Jonathan Goldberg notes, the fact that queerness as an identity is a modern invention does not mean that there is no queer presence in premodern texts. As he observes in the introduction to his readings of sodomy in Renaissance literary culture, the agency of actual queer subjects—sodomites—may not be directly discernible in such texts, but we may certainly discern its integrally disruptive presence in them (*Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992], 20).
16. Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 192.
17. Lynne Joyrich, "The Epistemology of the Console," *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2001): 439–40. Lauren Rabinovitz notes a similar circumscribing logic of queerness as a temporary interruption in her reading of *Designing Women*'s treatment of a lesbian character. Taking issue with Alexander Doty's view of the character, and of the show in general, as a site for the enjoyment of "queer pleasures," Rabinovitz argues that the character, who appears in only one episode to administer a brief lesson in tolerance to Delta Burke's character, Suzanne, "cannot be integrated into the group of female friends. Her sexuality remains Other, inexplicable, only partially representable and beyond rational understanding" ("Ms.-Representations: The Politics of Feminist Sitcoms," in *Television, History, and American Culture: Feminist Critical Essays*, ed. Mary Beth Haralovich and Lauren Rabinovitz [Durham: Duke University Press, 1999], 151). Rabinovitz's interpretation is problematic, however. It seems intended to disprove the existence of the reading pleasures Doty describes, but instead it disciplines them.
18. It is interesting to compare the institutionalization of a queer lead character in a sitcom with parallel moments in other genres. The construction of a narrative and ideological place for lesbian characters in prime-time drama, for example, seems to take place according to a quite different set of constraints. Sasha Torres notes, in relation to the recurring lesbian character in the short-lived ensemble drama *Heartbeat*, that lesbian characters operate as figures of containment; they "localiz[e] the homosexuality which might otherwise pervade . . . homosocial spaces" ("Television/Feminism: *Heartbeat* and Prime Time Lesbianism," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin [New York: Routledge, 1993], 179).

19. The framing of the coming-out episode as an affective transition is evident in the fact that it was named the "Puppy Episode" in response to a network executive's request that Ellen Morgan, DeGeneres's character, find something to "care about"—like a puppy.
20. The sense of unseen institutional constraints generating textual artifice is illustrated in an extreme form in another late episode of *Happy Days*. Filmed after Howard had left the cast, it features Lori Beth on the telephone to Richie on his army base in Greenland. The phone call occurs in front of the camera rather than in "back story" to corroborate the fiction that Richie is still on the show, and the Cunninghams' strained dialogue is aimed at bolstering his continuing presence in its diegetic universe.
21. Among the networks, ABC was the most enthusiastic about placing warning labels on television programs when, in a moment of self-censorship unprecedented in the industry, ABC, CBS, and, reluctantly, NBC agreed to develop a ratings system designed to alert parents when programs with sexual content, violent dialogue, and the like came on.
22. In the first episode of *Who's the Boss?*'s final season, Tony and Angela celebrate the seventh anniversary of the date he moved in. She buys him a watch engraved with a message of love but decides not to give it to him when she discovers that his gift to her is a new set of car seat covers.
23. See Mimi White, "Television: Knowing History, Making History, Selling History" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Cinema Studies, San Diego, April 1998), 12.
24. On the problems posed by such analogies in gay and lesbian activism see Janet Halley, "'Like Race' Arguments," in *What's Left of Theory? New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory*, ed. Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2000), 40–74.
25. On the scandal of aging in the classic sitcom see Patricia Mellencamp, *High Anxiety: Catastrophe, Scandal, Age, and Comedy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).
26. I am grateful to perceptive audience members at the University of Texas at Austin for bringing this example to my attention.
27. In keeping with the tone of ambivalence, this forthright moment is deflated in the very next scene, in which Kathy Najimi ironically extols Ellen's deep commitment to political causes. She gives a list of Ellen's self-sacrificing acts, which include "meeting the president" (we see a picture of Ellen and Anne Heche talking to Clinton as she says this), "flying on the Concorde to Paris to discuss world hunger," and donating a broken-down car to Meals on Wheels. This is cheapskate humor in the spirit of Jack Benny, though it is also, cynically, quite accurate about what Ellen's political activism, and celebrity activism in general, actually involves. Its cynicism is cemented by a reference to "talking about the rain forest while sharing a hot tub with Sting."
28. Alexander Doty writes, "Queer readings result from the recognition and articulation of

the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along" (*Making It Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993], 16).

29. Cable does not hold much hope for historical inflections of the nonfiction queer visibility that Joshua Gamson locates in the daytime talk show (*Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998]). Not only is the latter a commodity that is not yet circulating widely on cable's networks of nonfiction repurposing, but its appearance in these contexts—most notably, on the talk show digest *Talk Soup*—is marked by such phobic repetitions of forms of class hatred that it is hard to know what kind of history it is capable of telling. For a comprehensive history of gay and lesbian visibility see Steven Capsuto, *Alternate Channels: The Uncensored Story of Gay and Lesbian Images on Radio and Television* (New York: Ballantine, 2000).