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## WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?

### *The Politics of Ellen's Coming Out Party*

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The controversy over Ellen's coming out episode was largely a media-created event. Josh Ozersky called it "one of the most publicized pseudo-events in TV history" (Ozersky 80). And it worked. The audience was the third largest for a single series episode in the history of television (Steyn 80), even though the show's popularity had been declining. The advertising spots went for premium rates, some for as much as 20% more than *Ellen's* usual \$170,000 fee for a thirty-second commercial (Grover 6). Gay and lesbian organizations throughout the country organized "Come Out With Ellen" parties on the night of the episode, and the *Miami Herald* called Ellen DeGeneres "a gay Jackie Robinson" (Steyn 49). Not everyone was taken in by the hype, however. Lesbian comedian Kate Clinton pointed out the overblown quality of the controversy by writing about a supposed friend who had come to believe that "Ellen's coming out will usher in not only the end of homophobia but also the end of racism, sexism, and ageism" (Clinton 46). On the contrary, Ellen's supposedly

controversial attempt to push the limits of acceptability actually reinscribes conventional sexual politics.

Yet, the controversy over Ellen's coming out reveals a lot about homophobia in the United States. Organizations associated with the Religious Right took out a full-page ad in *Variety*, calling the show "a slap in the face to American families" (Steyn 80). The Reverend Jerry Falwell referred to Ellen DeGeneres as "Ellen Degenerate" (quoted in Handy, "Roll Over" 83). "Falwell . . . wrote to *Ellen* advertisers warning of Moral Majority retaliation" (Grover 6), and "the Rev. Donald E. Waldmon's American Family Association also issued barely veiled threats to boycott Ellen's advertisers" (Handy, "Roll Over" 83). Two major advertisers, Chrysler and J. C. Penney, cancelled their sponsorship of the show, and an ABC affiliate in Birmingham, Alabama, refused to broadcast the controversial episode (Steyn 49). The taping of the final segment of the show was disrupted by a bomb threat (Handy, "Roll Over" 81), and, months after, the episode was broadcast, DeGeneres was harassed at a concert by a man who called her "an embarrassment to Jesus" (De Vries 29). These incidents reveal the level of hostility directed toward gays and lesbians in American society today.

However, homophobia was also apparent from the "inside." Disney Television, the producer of *Ellen*, wanted to be cautious. The script had to be approved, and the first script was rejected, reportedly because it focused too much on the reaction of Ellen's friends (Martin and Miller 66). Plans to have the show open with Melissa Etheridge singing a serious song about coming out were changed. As one of the writers remarked, "There were so many fences to walk. If we go one way, someone will get offended" (Rice 41). The episode was geared to the entertainment and political tastes of American moderates and progressives. Several popular figures made cameo appearances to sanctify the episode for

television viewers, and the program excluded anything that might alienate its intended audience. Ellen DeGeneres did the talk-show circuit to publicize the show and to test audience reaction. "It was depressing, that song and dance she did on the talk shows," said Camille Paglia. "She was asking America, 'Is it O.K.? Will you still like me if . . .?' It was wimpy. It robbed the act of any courage" (quoted in Bellantre 91). DeGeneres has also made a few unfortunate remarks, such as saying that she uses the word *gay* more often than *lesbian* because *lesbian* "sound[s] like somebody with some kind of disease" (Handy, "Roll Over" 79).

A major component behind the complexity of the show is DeGeneres herself. Perhaps it's easy for her to reject the claims of conservatives and progressives, because she appears to have no political commitments at all. Despite the enthusiasm of gay and lesbian activists, DeGeneres's motivation was not political. "I didn't do it to make a political statement," she said. "I did it selfishly for myself and because I thought it was a great thing for the show, which desperately needed a point of view" (Handy, "Ellen Degenerate" 86). At the same time, DeGeneres had other reasons for coming out. One of her aims is to counter media stereotypes of gays and lesbians. "Unfortunately," DeGeneres says, "the people who get the most attention on the news [are] dykes on bikes or these men dressed as women" (Handy, "Ellen Degenerate" 86). She claims that "the whole point of what I'm doing is acceptance of everybody's differences" (Handy, "Ellen Degenerate" 86). Although it is important to portray the diversity among gay and lesbian communities, the problem with Ellen's approach is that oppression is not merely the result of a lack of tolerance. Heterosexism is deeply imbedded in American culture, and the structures of social injustice must be confronted.

In addition, it can be just as harmful to ignore differences between people as it is to focus on them. *Ellen* tries to ignore the

differences. The coming out episode portrays an apolitical gay woman who is "just like" heterosexuals and fits right into mainstream American society. Ellen's sexual orientation turns out to be practically inconsequential. As Ozersky writes, "Throughout the episode, the point is made over and over: why should anyone care about Ellen's sexual orientation?" (Ozersky 80). The show also avoided any association with gay and lesbians politics. The scene at a woman's coffeehouse, for instance, parodies performances by lesbian-feminist singers. k.d. Lang closes a song about lesbian sisterhood by making a fist, and, after Audrey gets the men to participate in a rousing chorus, one of them says, "You should have been here for 'Sister, Sister, O My Sister.'" Dean Valentine, president of Disney television, said, "I told Ellen, I'm not interested in standing on political soap-boxes" (Martin and Miller 66). Apparently, there was no problem with making fun of lesbians who do care about politics.

Another problem with the politics of the episode is the way the show tries to make parallels between homophobia and racism. In a session with her African American therapist, played by Oprah Winfrey, Ellen asks, "You mean I have to drink from a separate fountain?" There are other echoes of racist rhetoric. For instance, in the coffeehouse scene, one of Ellen's friends asks, "What do you people drink?" Although such lines bring to mind the African American struggle against societal injustice and individual prejudice—a struggle that continues to this day—the association between racism and heterosexism doesn't succeed in a depoliticized television show. Moreover, there is a racist edge to such careless parallels between racial oppression and heterosexism. When an interviewer remarked that "it must be odd having your sexuality a subject of national debate," DeGeneres responded affirmatively and said, "That's why I want to get beyond this . . . let's get beyond this, and let me get back to what I do. Maybe I'll find something even bigger to do later on. Maybe I'll become black" (Handy, "Ellen Degenerete" 86).

Even with all the publicity and a large television audience, Ellen Morgan's sexuality is divorced from the public realm of political activity. At the same time, though, the blurring of the lives of Ellen Morgan and Ellen DeGeneres also mixes the private and public spheres. The coming out scene at the airport mimics the dual meaning of the event. Ellen inadvertently steps in front of a public address microphone just as she says to Susan, "I'm gay." Ellen DeGeneres's mother plays one of the airline customers who are present when Ellen comes out not only to Susan but also to the entire airport. In addition, ABC followed the show with a special segment on Ellen DeGeneres, in which she and her parents talked about her sexual orientation and the struggles they'd had over it. Try as she might to claim that sexuality is a private affair, the personal begs to become the political.

Despite all these factors, Ellen doesn't really allow the personal to become political. The two Ellens are supposed to be in different places. One magazine finds it significant that DeGeneres's character isn't comfortable with her sexuality, claiming that "her show's new direction will be groundbreaking not only for having a gay lead character, but for having a gay lead character who is not yet entirely comfortable with her sexuality—a departure from the normal run of things in the '90s, when gay characters on TV tend to be proud, assertive and more or less uplifting" (Handy, "Roll Over" 85). DeGeneres herself says that "Ellen Morgan and I are in very different places in our lives: She has just discovered she's gay, but I've known this for a long time, and believe me, I can go a whole day without having a single gay reference" (De Vries 24). Ellen Morgan might not be comfortable with her sexuality, but Ellen DeGeneres doesn't appear to be comfortable with the political aspects of being openly lesbian.

The confusion between the public and private spheres also placed the audience in a voyeuristic position. However, despite the curiosity of some viewers about gay and

lesbian sexuality, the show did not contain any intimations of same-sex activity. In fact, the most sexually explicit scene involves Ellen's unsuccessful encounter with an old boyfriend. As Ellen recounts the incident, she is encouraged to embellish the tale for her heterosexual friends' voyeuristic pleasure. Her friends even allow her to revise her description of the incident without questioning the credibility of the story. (Ellen tells about enjoying a post-sex cigarette, but changes her story when it is pointed out to her that she doesn't smoke.) The fantasized sex scene is dramatized on the set as Ellen's voice-over tells the story.

That the most explicit sex scene involves heterosexuals is a jab at the Religious Right, which is so concerned to keep "immorality" off television. The scene is typical of sitcoms, which often present sexual situations, and these portray heterosexuals and not same-sex couples. The toaster oven joke also pokes fun of the fears of the Religious Right. The gag consists of Susan winning a toaster oven for her role in Ellen's coming out and makes fun of the idea that gays and lesbians recruit heterosexuals by trying to convert them to the so-called homosexual lifestyle. At the end of the episode, Melissa Etheridge awards the toaster oven to Susan as Ellen once again proclaims her sexual orientation.

However, the blatant asexuality of the relationship does follow the unspoken rule that gay and lesbian sexuality must remain in the closet. In some ways, the two women seem as innocent as the children. Farwell wants to protect. The failed sexual encounter between Ellen and her old boyfriend is juxtaposed with Susan's faithfulness to a committed, monogamous relationship. Susan's relationship with her partner, and her faithfulness to that relationship—despite her apparent attraction to Ellen—reflects an element of so-called family values. Despite her sexual orientation, Susan's relationship could be

described in terms of such "traditional" values as fidelity, commitment, and responsibility.

Indeed, the two lesbians aren't so different from the heterosexuals on the show. Ellen's heterosexual friends are, for the most part, supportive, and the point is made that she is, after all, the same person. The jokes bring home this point through the superfluous use of the word *gay*. When Ellen learns that Susan is not available, her friends talk about the situation by saying, "Susan dropped her like a gay hot potato." And, when Ellen misinterprets an interaction at the women's coffeehouse, Audrey calls it Ellen's "first gay faux pas." The superfluous use of "gay" in these lines points out that such incidents are not "gay" at all but the kind of situations that happen regardless of sexual orientation. As co-writer Jonathan Sark said, "We didn't want it to be so much of a gay story as a human story. She meets someone she cares about and it doesn't work out" (Rice 41).

Ellen's coming out episode provides a good measure of what the entertainment industry considers to be both within limits and off-limits for prime-time television portrayals of gays and lesbians. Political statements, expressions of sexual attraction between members of the same sex, and anything that might acknowledge that human sexuality encompasses far more than romance and sexual activity are off-limits. Television shows about gays and lesbians try to be consistent with the perceived consensus of moderate Americans. To return to Kate Clinton's joke that "all will be well" after Ellen comes out, it's important to take a close look at the episode before joining the party. Instead of challenging homophobia and racism, the episode and its rhetoric might even contribute to homophobic and racist attitudes in American society. Despite the media hype, Ellen's party has a limited guest list, and the celebration might have had more to do with the show's ratings than anything else.

♦ *References*

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