

# It's Not About the Sex

## Racialization and Queerness in *Ellen* and *The Ellen Degeneres Show*

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*Cette auteure examine les analogies raciales et les juxtapositions employées dans la représentation de Ellen Degeneres comme vedette de télévision lesbienne. Il y eut au début une sortie du placard hyper réaliste du personnage Ellen Morgan à la télévision en 1977 et comme conclusion elle analyse les gestes qui sont la marque de Degeneres, quand elle anime son émission « The Ellen Degeneres Show ». L'auteure voit à travers l'histoire de la représentation des lesbiennes, des images très racistes quand la normalité est invoquée.*

Oprah: *Okay, so you saw Ellen across a crowded room...*

Anne Heche: *I fell in love with a person.*

Oprah: And felt, what, some kind of sexual attraction, you felt sexually attracted to her.

Anne Heche: *I don't think it was, immediately, a sexual attraction ... you know, souls connect and there is a time when souls come together and they are just meant to be. I was no more surprised than anyone else, I mean, it was just incredible, my soul was meant to be with hers and that was all that mattered. I looked beyond the sex. In love there is no sex, there is no segregation, there is no anything, there is just love.*

—Interview with Anne Heche and Ellen Degeneres on *Oprah* April 28, 1997

When a blonde, female Hollywood star, speaking to a television audience of millions, says love is not about sex, she's speaking from a long and durable tradition. The fact that she's just come out as a lesbian, however, creates some interesting twists to her story.

This essay will examine the hyperreal coming out of Ellen Degeneres and her sitcom character, Ellen Morgan, on broadcast television in 1997, and the significance of the racialized analogies employed in that narrative. I will also trace the continuing trajectory of Ellen Degeneres as "gay"

star, whose latest television incarnation is as host of NBC daytime talk show, *The Ellen Degeneres Show*. I will discuss the ways in which, throughout the history of lesbian representation, excessively racialized images mark narrative junctures where normalcy has been put into question. Further, the projection of sexuality onto racialized figures is a way for whiteness to represent, yet also dissociate itself, from its (abnormal?) desires. Indeed, as the opening quote to this paper implies, a leitmotif of Degeneres' and Heche's (her then new love interest) media interviews during the coming-out period was a bizarre denial of the sexual nature of their relationship. Historically, white femininity has frequently been represented as that which transcends the sexual "fallibility" of the body itself (Dyer). Richard Dyer writes that white women's "very whiteness, their refinement, makes sexuality a disturbance of their racial purity" (29). Or, to repeat Heche's comments: "My soul was meant to be with hers and that was all that mattered. I looked beyond the sex."

From nineteenth-century painting to twenty-first century television, the representation of lesbianism has been dependant on *other* signifiers of otherness—race, class, the grotesque—for its visibility. In the ABC series *Ellen*, and particularly in the narrative of her "real-life" and televisual coming out, these contradictions were played across the sexualized body of the black woman and the desexualized white lesbian body.

The dialogic relation of sexuality and race has a long history within representation. Sander Gilman examined the history of the iconic Black servant figure in nineteenth-century painting, who appeared at the margins of the white bourgeois imaginary and functioned to sexualize the culture that surrounds her. Similarly, James Snead has written about a recurring motif in Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and '40s in which Black female servants dress or groom white women. In particular, he locates this motif in the films of Mae West, who "achieves much of her sex-goddess stature with the complicity, even

encouragement, of Black women. Swarthy and elemental, black women can elevate by contrast West's white and ethereal beauty" (67).

Gilman argued further that mid-nineteenth-century sexology made certain assumptions about Black female sexuality: that the "overdeveloped" genitals of Black women (based on autopsies of the Hottentot Venus and others) led to sexual excess: "the concupiscence of the black is thus associated also with the sexuality of the lesbian" (237). Similar studies of the prostitute in the late nineteenth century linked the prostitute, the Black woman, and the

devotee, a heterosexual. Ellen's sitcom character was the bearer of discourse, upsetting the equilibrium of the plot, usually by posing as something she wasn't. As Frank Krutnick and Stephen Neale have written: "Gags are suited to the articulation of ineptitude and frustration, because they are suited to the articulation of failure" (59). Like Lucy Ricardo's fictional failure at being a star, Ellen's failure at gestures of heteronormativity produced laughter at anticipation of their inevitable failure. In comedy, the comic's body is structured as the site of dis-ordering and re-ordering of the symbolic order. Ellen's implicit queer-

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lesbian through "physical abnormalities" and "mannishness" (245). Judith Mayne was one of the first film theorists to write about this issue in the context of feminism and queer theory. In an article about the work of Hollywood director Dorothy Arzner, she discussed certain scenes from Arzner's *Dance Girl Dance* which illustrate how

racial stereotypes occur when the sexual hierarchy of the look is deflected or otherwise problematized ... the racial stereotype affirms the distinction between white subject and black object, just when the distinction between male subject and female object is being put into question ... [indicating] a disturbing fit between sexual and racial codes of performance. (195).

*Ellen*, which premiered on ABC in 1994 as *These Friends of Mine* was conceived as a star vehicle for Ellen Degeneres, who had by then achieved moderate acclaim as a stand-up comedian with a *Seinfeld*-esque interest in everyday situations, and a Lucille Ball-like talent for physical comedy. On TV, she played a naive, idealistic bookstore manager with a circle of kooky friends and, like Lucy Ricardo in *I Love Lucy* (to whom she was often compared), a knack for getting into trouble. Initially, the series had her friends and family constantly setting her up with a man. For example, the synopsis of episode three (April 6, 1994) ran thus: "Ellen answers a personal ad and meets the man of her dreams. But when it comes to kissing, Mr. Right is all wrong" (*Ellen*, Previously *These Friends of Mine*).

Until her coming out project became more explicit, the running gag in *Ellen* was her pretense: pretending to be a gourmet cook, an animal rights activist, a health spa

ness provided the disequilibrium; the failure and self-deprecation restore the equilibrium—the hierarchy of bodies—heterosexual over queer, classical over grotesque. Ellen's and Lucy's ineptitude, expressed via physical movement, was a gag that spoke where the (gagged) mouth couldn't—the plot, turning on these bodily attributes, turned also on silent rage, grotesque excess, and a kind of productive disequilibrium, a constant and contradictory shifting of the female comic's bodily integrity and balance that creates a moving target of her stardom. Like Lucy Ricardo's "avoided emotion" expressed via the body, the running gag of Ellen's social awkwardness managed to interpellate a range of audiences.

The lead-up to Ellen Degeneres' coming out episode on May 30, 1997 was lengthy and full of campy innuendo. It was the mid-1990s, high point of lesbian chic. The period was inaugurated by a June 21, 1993 *Newsweek* cover, with the heading "Lesbians: Coming Out Strong," accompanied by an image of two women embracing. By 1997, k.d. lang had finally come out; Melissa Etheridge and Martina Navratilova were following suit.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of a homophobic smear campaign directed at public arts funding in the U.S.,<sup>2</sup> and cutbacks to Canada Council's arts funding, the narrow cultural space afforded queerness was a decidedly pop cultural one. Ellen's physical comedy expressed the absurdities of closeted celebrity at the same time that it reinforced cultural fears of a homosexual menace.

As Sigmund Freud has pointed out, jokes can open the door to that which is repressed (182). The naïf "enjoy[s] a liberty that they would otherwise not be granted [...] pleasure arises through the lifting of internal inhibitions" (184-185). The audience's laughter is produced through a process of empathy with, and superiority over, the child-like comic, whose excessive physical activity disarms us:

The answer to the question of why we laugh at the clown's movements is that they seem to us extravagant and inexpedient. We are laughing at an expenditure that is too large. (Freud 190)

Indeed, representations of Ellen as she publicly announced her lesbianism became more and more childlike. On an April 14, 1997 cover of *Time Magazine* she was photographed from a high angle, the perspective of an adult looking down at a child. Ellen was in a crouched, rather than standing position, and smiled up at the

"left-handed," or, "there's a guy named Les Bian". Interestingly, since the word lesbian is rarely used in mainstream culture, the metonymic equivalents served a purpose, like Freud's naif who mispronounces a word and creates uninhibited laughter, thus saying what the adults couldn't. But the Lebanese references were only the beginning of an increasing number of analogies to race. Degeneres ended her *Time Magazine* interview by saying: "Maybe I'll find something even bigger to do later on. Maybe I'll become black" (50). On the TV show *60 Minutes*, Degeneres compared herself to civil rights activist Rosa

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camera. The heading was redolent of innocence and naivete: "Yup, I'm gay." Since childhood and white femininity are desexualized in this culture, Ellen, in order to come out, had to both disavow and claim hers.

The hour-long coming-out episode was given the (also childlike) code name, "Puppy Episode." In it, Ellen got together for dinner with ex-lover Richard (Steven Eckholdt), who brought along his co-worker, Susan (Laura Dern). Susan's revelation that she is gay propelled Ellen, who was attracted to her, on her own voyage of self-discovery. In true lesbian style, Ellen began seeing a therapist (Oprah Winfrey), and eventually came out, not only to her friends, but, unintentionally, to an entire airport via a public address system. A dazzling cast of celebrities, including Melissa Etheridge, Gina Gershon, k.d. lang, Demi Moore, Jenny Shimizu, Billy Bob Thornton and Dwight Yoakam, appeared in cameo roles.<sup>3</sup>

While "gay" was heard several times in the episode, the word "lesbian" was used only once, in a dream sequence featuring the comedic but nightmarish repetition of the word by zombie-like supermarket employees. In her *Time Magazine* interview, Ellen unconsciously linked lesbian to its disease-ridden archetypal twin, the prostitute. "Until recently I hated the word lesbian ... [it] sounded like somebody with some kind of disease" (Handy 45).

On several talk shows, Degeneres grappled for a racialized analogy, uttering quips like: "I'm coming out as ... Lebanese." Like so many of Degeneres' jokes, this one is an intertextual reference to an earlier TV show, *The Golden Girls*. Jean comes to visit and develops a crush on Rose. By way of explanation, Rose tells her roommate Blanche that Jean's a lesbian. "So," says Blanche, "isn't Danny Thomas one?" Rose replies: "Not Lebanese, Blanche, *Lesbian!*"

Degeneres also quipped that she was coming out as

Parks. In the coming out episode itself, a recurring therapy scene with Black talk-show host Oprah playing the therapist, played an iconic role:

Ellen: *Do you think that I want to be discriminated against? Do you think that I want people calling me names to my face?*

Oprah/Therapist: *Have people commit hate crimes against you just because you're not like them...*

Ellen: *Thankyou!*

Oprah: *To have to use separate washrooms and separate water fountains, and sit in the back of the bus....*

Ellen: *Oh man, we have to use separate water fountains?*

What makes this scene funny is that Ellen doesn't "get" Oprah's/the therapist's very liberal point—that the oppression that Ellen fears is exactly what Black folks have been experiencing for quite some time. While the therapist is deeply aware of both Black and gay oppression, Ellen sees only what gays experience, and seems oddly oblivious to the entire span of Black civil rights history in America. Here, Ellen's whiteness reappropriates and consumes the Black gaze as part of its re-expansion—made necessary in order for her white femininity to incorporate an excessive lesbian sexuality.

Oprah also served a secondary function on the *Ellen* show (and in her talk show interview with Degeneres and Heche). By playing a therapist, a version of what Sharon Willis has called "the ubiquitous African American judge or police chief, a peripheral figure granted limited screen time and almost no point of view" (5), Oprah represented

the other side of the criminalized Black body. Oprah was heavily marked as African in this scene through clothing, jewellery and decor. While the background for single shots of either Oprah or Ellen were neutral, two-shots of this scene revealed furniture with vivid African markings almost splitting the screen. "The nation has to have something to delineate itself against," writes Sally Munt (36). Oprah's body was situated at the permeable boundary of national representability. Her Africanness made Ellen appear, by contrast more white, but her body size had a function as well. As a large woman whose extradiegetic struggles with weight are infamous, Oprah's body was unruly and grotesque in relation to Ellen's, Anne's, and Susan's uniformly slender, classical bodies. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White point out that fear of bodily excess, or fat, is also a fear of the lower bodily stratum (185). In this case, Oprah stood in for that fear.

Finally, Degeneres' coming out was also resolved by an appeal to the abject. Just as stories about Lucille Ball's difficult, poverty-stricken childhood were trotted out during her rise to stardom and corporate power, Degeneres, in her *Oprah* appearance, managed to dredge up some equally sad stories of her own, responding to what Kathleen K. Rowe has called "the cultural preference for women's tears over their laughter" (214).

Ellen: *Finally I told [my father that I was a lesbian]—well, actually, he told me—and then they asked me to move out of the house.*

Oprah: *Because....*

Ellen: *She had two little girls and they worried that it would influence them....*

Oprah: *So you moved out of the house—and moved where, Ellen?*

Ellen: *They co-signed a loan to get an apartment and you know, still everything was fine except they didn't want me living in the house with the two little girls which, y'know, really hurt cuz I loved 'em. But ... I understood it. I understand people not understanding [lesbianism]. I'm fine with it.*

Abjectness is here embellished with an unspoken cultural charge: that lesbians prey on young girls. Degeneres' coming out was also juxtaposed with child suicide. Several times during her one-hour show focusing on Ellen's coming out, Diane Sawyer of *60 Minutes* repeated extremely high (and unattributed) statistics on the suicide of gay and lesbian youth. Whiteness, the colour that is really no colour, is immaterial, weightless, death-like. As Dyer has pointed out, associations with whiteness dating back to Victorian conventions of photography include a macabre romance surrounding the death of children (208).

As Ellen's queerness became more visible, first through heavy-handed innuendo, and finally through a literal ontological claim, the audience's epistemophilia, or desire to know, was placed in crisis, for "disavowal and the desire to know are always coextensive" (Neale 42). The audience was caught between these two opposing drives. Ellen's closeted lesbianism had by now become the "necessary secret" within the classic structure of narrative—the secret which the audience wanted, and didn't want, revealed. In order to produce narrative suspense, the secret must be equally distributed among and between characters and spectators. Once the secret is found out, the narrative ends. "The comic is plural, unfinalized," (244) writes Murray Healy, following Bakhtin. By completing her character, and filling in all the holes of knowledge and narrative desire, Ellen's character became unfunny—the comedic structure had been lost. In one of the few critical commentaries to emerge out of the gay press (and later reprinted in the *Globe and Mail*), Toronto critic Rachel Giese wrote:

The ironic truth is that Ellen (either one) was more interesting before she was out. Her tomboy clothes, her disdain for the conventions of heterosexuality and her charming nebbishness were much more of a sly critique of straight TV properties—in which single women must be obsessed with men and traditionally pretty—than the tepid, positive role model that the new, out Ellen promises to be. (C2)

In the reverse logic of neo-liberal conservatism, Ellen's coming out functioned as a valorization of the normal, recruited to the service of class hegemony. While Clinton demonized welfare mothers and ended "welfare as we know it," Ellen Morgan was simultaneously coming out and buying real estate: her two actions were narratively presented as inextricable. While unprecedented cutbacks to the National Endowment for the Arts and the Canada Council for the Arts shrank already meagre resources for queer independent cinema, Degeneres used her considerable cultural space to decry "the lisp thing," "dykes on bikes or those men dressed as women," declaring on the pages of *Time*: "I don't want them representing the entire gay community" (Handy 50).

The 1997/98 season of *Ellen* that followed was perhaps, as Anna McCarthy has claimed, more interesting than the coming out episode itself. While the actual fact of being a lesbian on TV is not as singular as *Time Magazine* would have had us believe, it was the very ordinariness, indeed blandness of Ellen Morgan-as-lesbian that was a first for the small screen. Less Rosa Parks than Ward Cleaver, the post-coming out narrative of Ellen was determinedly domestic, and included a girlfriend, a kid, a supportive family and friends. If, as McCarthy points out, the coming out narrative functioned (as have many a queer TV moment) as a ceremonial interruption of television flow,

the episodes that followed were significant for their self-conscious attempt to fold a queer Ellen back *into* the flow of everyday television and its domestic schedules on and off the screen. McCarthy calls this “an impossible task: to produce an episodic rather than a serial sense of queer life” (597). Conventional sitcom situations on post-coming out *Ellen* were harnessed in an ironic, self-conscious way. It was this very doubleness—the everydayness, coupled with an awareness of its absurdity—that signified a moment in queer TV that has not occurred before, or since.<sup>4</sup>

Ten years since the premiere of *These Friends of Mine*, Ellen Degeneres has endured as queer TV’s last remaining relic of the ’90s lesbian chic era. In 2000 she appeared in an episode of the HBO special *If These Walls Could Talk 2* with Sharon Stone (directed by Heche), playing a lesbian in a relationship with a woman (Stone) who is trying to get pregnant. 2001/2002 saw a failed sitcom (*The Ellen Show*) in which she played a queer character who returns to live in her home town. Real-life Degeneres remained in the news as the noble, courageous spurned lover of the mercurial Anne Heche

In 2003, *The Ellen Degeneres Show* premiered on NBC. Its website uses the following adjectives to describe the user-friendly nature of Degeneres and her show: “accessible,” “approachable,” “relatable,” “everywoman.” In it, Degeneres once again speaks in a double voice, for the show constantly comments on itself in a self-deprecating manner by going behind the scenes, profiling production assistants alongside Hollywood stars, and inviting audience members to dance in the aisles or give Ellen a makeover. It’s a bit like the early days of *Ellen*, and the destabilizing, running gag of her ineptitude. Thus, in a kind of reality-show-meets-talk show hybrid approach, Degeneres performs herself as an endearingly inept host, with a supporting cast of enthusiastic audience, zany crew members, Hollywood’s top celebrities, cutting-edge musical acts—and Tony Okungbowa, a Black British DJ. Instead of the usual band leader, it is Tony who appears on every show as the standard talk show host foil. After a short, usually autobiographical stand-up routine (in which her gayness is never mentioned), Ellen asks Tony to spin a tune. Degeneres dances to the music for a minute or two, later critiquing her dance moves in friendly banter with Tony. This is, I would argue, the show’s defining (and only) lesbian moment. As the music, usually hip hop, is played, Ellen’s body is on display in a manner that is decidedly *not* heteronormative. Here, Degeneres displays the grace and confidence that her accessible, self-deprecating “kook” act disavows. Degeneres looks like a butch lesbian dancing alone, in a club. Dance, a celebration of the body in performance, is, I would argue, analogous of lesbian subtext. It is an implicitly *sexual* ritual behaviour which enlarges public sexual space. It’s one of the reasons lesbian cultures are still so centred around the bars. But here, Degeneres dances, not with another woman, but with Tony. In a shot-reverse-shot construction, shots of

Degeneres dancing always cut away to a shot of Tony, who is also dancing. More recently, the show has had Ellen moving into the space of the audience while she dances, but it is the Black DJ, and Black cultural space, defined by music, that allows this liminal moment, halfway between public and private, to occur,

As pleasurable as this moment is, it is deeply coded. It’s almost like Degeneres, for the length of her talkshow, has gone back into the closet, and some may argue, given the straightness of explicitly gay shows like *Will and Grace*, that that codedness produces better queer TV. Indeed, it now seems extraordinary that *Ellen*’s televised and literal ontological claim to lesbianism could have happened at all. I would argue that the *Ellen* show’s particularly lesbian interpellation occurred during a privileged moment, when lesbians were not yet a target for corporate marketing. Consider, for example, Degeneres’ recent foray into advertising, as a celebrity spokesperson for American Express. In a 60-second ad, Ellen is shown dancing: in her home, and on the street. In voiceover, Ellen says, “My life’s about dancing to my own tune. My American Express card always backs me up.” The tagline reads, “My life. My card.” Here, gay lifestyle and economic lifestyle are completely interchangeable, as Degeneres’ seemingly spontaneous dance moves become branded as part of corporate expansion into the lesbian market.

In the end, neither *Ellen* nor *The Ellen Degeneres Show* are a satisfactory site for mimetic queerness. More important are the obscured technologies of representation that produce, contain, delimit, and unpack the normal. Judith Butler has said, “I think that crafting a sexual position always ends up becoming haunted by what’s excluded. And the more rigid the position, the greater the ghost” (qtd. in Osborne and Segal n.p.). *Ellen* and *The Ellen Degeneres Show* become more interesting, then, in their liminality for the shadows and ghosts of race, class, and sexuality that produce an apparitional lesbian narrative space on TV.

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<sup>1</sup>African American writer Barbara Smith has written critically about lesbian chic: “No one would guess from recent stories about wealthy and powerful white lesbians on TV and in slick magazines that women earn 69 cents on the dollar compared with men, and that Black women earn even less” (81).

<sup>2</sup>In 1990, the National Endowment for the Arts denied

funding to four artists whose work was considered obscene. Three identified as lesbian or gay. Linda Hart argues that this decision was “explicitly concerned to police displays of the body” (90). The censoring of the “NEA Four” can be seen on a continuum with the public panic around the work of other artists like Robert Mapplethorpe and Marlon Riggs. By the end of the ’90s NEA funding for artists (as opposed to art institutions) has virtually disappeared.

<sup>3</sup>Roland Boer has written about the transference between media figures that occurred at Princess Diana’s funeral via the presence of Donatella Versace, Elton John, and others. In a similar way, Degeneres has always maintained a practice of being surrounded by pop cultural icons more famous than her. They legitimate her queerness while she provides them with a certain counter-cultural cachet.

<sup>4</sup>Showtimes’s *The L Word*, which premiered in 2004, does similar work to *Ellen*, in terms of domestic lesbian-centred drama that appears regularly in the weekly flow of the television schedule. I would, however, argue that *Ellen*’s detached irony, in part a result of its comedic structure, produced a much more self-reflexive relation to television’s heterosexual economy.

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