

# Review Essay

## Yep, They Won: *The Ellen Show* and the Loss of Cultural Space

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Ellen DeGeneres. *The Ellen Show*. CBS, 2001-2002.

It is fair to say that Ellen DeGeneres has TVQ. She is funny, she can act, and she can act funny. She is an appealing TV personality: attractive, just self-conscious enough to be charming, smart in a quick but not too cerebral way, and able to perform physical comedy reminiscent of Lucille Ball.

So, DeGeneres got another chance at a sitcom bearing her name. In the fall of 2001, *The Ellen Show* appeared on CBS. Like *Ellen*, on ABC for five seasons until it was cancelled in 1998, DeGeneres was both star and executive producer of the show. *Ellen* made TV history when the character, Ellen Morgan, and the star, Ellen DeGeneres, both came out as lesbians. The coming out spanned two seasons: one in which big hints were dropped on the show and rumors about it swept the press, culminating in the season ending coming out episode, and the second in which Ellen Morgan lived as a lesbian, dating and developing a relationship with a woman. Rather like a bad break up, ABC cancelled the show at the end of that season in a clear and public rejection of the show's strategies at creating the first lesbian life on TV. Ratings were down, ABC said. They blamed it on poor quality. DeGeneres and her supporters blamed it on a lack of support from ABC.

The first season in the coming out saga was the easier one to make funny, with

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winks to the audience, innuendo that is always funny to some (and effective largely because there is an inside joke happening). That season was the best of the series. Ellen became her own character that season, finally, as the show poignantly pointed to her inability to fit in the world around her by foregrounding heterosexuality in consistently thoughtful and funny ways.

That season made visible what materialist feminist Monique Wittig calls the “heterosexual contract.”<sup>1</sup> For Wittig the social contract itself is the heterosexual contract. In her words, “For to live in society is to live in heterosexuality. In fact, in my mind social contract and heterosexuality are two super-imposable notions” (40). The power of heterosexuality lies in its complete and mostly unquestioned normativity. Wittig explains, “Because even if they, if we, do not consent, we cannot think outside the mental categories of heterosexuality. Heterosexuality is always already there within all mental categories” (43). It just is. Thus, it is invisible. The season of the hints mostly made heterosexuality visible as heterosexuality. There still was no lesbian presence, but interestingly, it was more effective as a critique of the normative power of heterosexuality than the next season was.

The project for the next season was to create a lesbian presence. It was the first show to create a life for a lesbian. There was the vexing question of how to represent lesbian sexuality and culture to a dominant culture at best uncomfortable with the whole idea. There was an obvious problem of address. To whom was the show speaking? Was the show trying to win over mildly homophobic viewers or appeal to a gay audience? It was clearly hard to do both as Ellen found her way as a lesbian in the world. The coming out narrative itself creates this dilemma. It automatically “others” the character on her own show. Jill Dolan, materialist feminist, makes the point that “The only viable positions for lesbian characters within realism appear to be as heterosexuals-in-transition, as they are ‘coming out’ stories, or as observers, women who can *see* within the limits of the form but who still cannot *act*” (137). Indeed, this was precisely Ellen’s position at the beginning of the season. But then she started to act on her sexuality. She started to date, to desire another woman, and to act on it. It was bound to be awkward. And at times it was. At other times it soared. The show was carving out lesbian subjectivity within the terms of the heterosexual contract and the confines of network television. Within these terms, the show could not succeed. On the one hand, it took the coming out narrative too far and exceeded the limits of the heterosexual contract. On the other hand, by trying to remain within the dictates of realism on network television, it lost its ability to offer the critique of the heterosexual contract that was possible in the first season. Caught in this ideological bind, the show still pushed its limits and worked toward creating lesbian subjectivity on mainstream TV.

In a real retreat from the cultural work DeGeneres was able to do with her coming out seasons on *Ellen*, *The Ellen Show* backed off from that mission entirely. In this new incarnation, DeGeneres so desexualized herself, so depoliticized herself that she evacuated the cultural space she created with *Ellen*. *The Ellen Show* brings the lesbian home and puts her right back in her place. In fact, the concept of place is a displacement used to move sitcom’s most famous lesbian back to “where she belongs.”

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

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

It is not that she is returning to the closet. She is playing a character who (she actually says to the roomful of TV critics) "just happens to be gay." DeGeneres says repeatedly in interviews that she just wants to be funny again, presumably in a way that does not challenge any of the dominant culture's ideologies. It seems that to be gay is OK on television at this point, in part because of the work her earlier show did and others continue to do now, such as *Will & Grace*. But she does not want to emulate that show. Indeed it is too gay for her. In an interview in the *New York Times* discussing her new show she says that *Will & Grace* "is just gay, gay, gay all the time . . . I like that show, but in my daily life I very rarely talk that way. I don't go to the gas station and say, 'fill it up with unleaded, and I'm gay'" (3). She sees herself more in the tradition of Bob Newhart. At the same press conference with the TV critics, but reported by the *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, she goes on to say that "Now I think life can be funny without talking about sexuality. On Bob Newhart's show, he was married, but the show was not about him being married. It was just observations about his life. That's what I want to do" (2). This is a classic assimilationist move, and it reminds us that indeed the social contract is the heterosexual contract. Bob Newhart's marriage was not an issue because it was simply "life," and all of his observations about his life are inextricably intertwined with the very *naturalness* of his marriage.

A lesbian cannot be represented as just making observations about her life without either challenging the heterosexual (and thus social) contract or blending in, assimilating using the strategy of *The Ellen Show*.

The premise of the show is that the character, Ellen Richmond this time, is a big dotcom mogul in Los Angeles. The first show opens with Ellen leading a meeting, acting the insensitive and self-important boss with her staff. She then returns "home" to a little town called Clark (in a non-identified state) to receive the Spread Your Wings award, given to successful Clarkians. While there, her company folds and she goes bankrupt. She decides then to simplify her life and move back to Clark. This lays the foundation of the show for the rest of its short season. It becomes about Ellen fitting into life in the small, quaint, slow-paced, decidedly uncool town of Clark. The appeal of Clark to Ellen is that it is all of those things. She is burned out on big city living. It is too fast-paced, too stressful, too much

(too gay?).

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

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

DeGeneres is fairly straightforward about replacing sexuality with place—urban vs. small town—as the marker of difference. As reported in *The Record*:

Asked whether the character will have a love life, DeGeneres says, 'I don't think it's necessary. There are so many stories that don't involve dating. Maybe—if it's going to be funny. But when you look at the shows I grew up watching—I'm thinking of Andy Griffith—it's just the town. (2)

This convenient shift then allows the show to sidestep the challenge that lesbian subjectivity makes to the heterosexual contract. We get the lesbian without the lesbian. One more materialist feminist, Kate Davy, makes the point:

[A]s we describe lesbian resistance, the multiple and heterogeneous possibilities her narrative spaces, positionalities, and subjectivities present, it is imperative to inscribe the ways in which these possibilities are enacted or performed so as to retain the specificity of, if not lesbian desire, then lesbians desiring; if not lesbian sexuality, then lesbians as sexual. (63)

In other words, without lesbian desire, there is no lesbian. Under the all-encompassing force of the heterosexual contract, the lesbian is lost, devoured into its terms if she does not perform her own desire. These are the terms that *The Ellen Show* set up.

The third episode is instructive. The major theme is that a chain called PJ Knockers is coming to town. It is characterized as a Hooters-like restaurant. Most of the people in Ellen's circle are happy about this. They are starved for some good chain restaurant food and entertainment. Ellen is horrified on two levels. At least her horror gestures toward these levels: there is an anti-corporate thrust to her concern, as well as a feminist concern for the knockers reference. She gets so incensed that she starts a petition among her co-workers to stop it from happening. "Don't let this happen to Clark," she says. "Stop PJ Knockers." No one at work is willing to sign the petition. And beyond that, no one can even understand her

reasons for not wanting the restaurant in town. Even the other lesbian character is so mystified that she cannot even seem to follow the logic. The lesbian gym teacher here is reduced to a pre-verbal moron. This then cuts off any possibility of dialogue about reasons to oppose something like this. Even if the dialogue could take place between the two lesbians, and thus be easily bracketed and perhaps then dismissed by those who need to dismiss it, it would air some ideas. But that is not allowed to happen. Opportunities for political commentary on two levels are cut off before they can happen. Since no one can even return a comment, there isn't a possibility for even cursory political commentary or the kind of wink-at-the-audience sort of political recognition that is possible on mainstream sitcoms.

A subplot of this episode is that Ellen's sister, Katherine, feels exploited and oppressed in her job at the town pharmacy and has been too afraid to leave the job or make any demands to make it better. Ellen has tried to encourage her sister to stand up for herself. When Ellen goes into the newly-opened PJ Knockers to register her complaint about their existence, she runs into her sister as a waitress, dressed in shorts and a plunging tank top. Her sister tells her that she took her advice, stood up for herself and quit the pharmacy. Ellen immediately disapproves of her sister's new job, and her sister is hurt by the disapproval. This is a device that keeps Ellen in the restaurant, discussing the matter with her sister. She needs to "protect" her sister in a chivalrous move that could arguably represent her lesbian identity.

But this is where it falls apart completely. In a conversation with her mother, who disapproves of Ellen's disapproval of her sister, her mother says, "support your family no matter what your principles. You want small town values, those are them." Alas, this gets to Ellen and she goes to the restaurant again to apologize to her sister. She gives up her self and her principles in order to fit in with her family, like so many lesbians before her.

Once Ellen goes into the restaurant this time, she is sucked into the atmosphere. Trying to steel herself against the place she says to herself, "keep your anger." But it doesn't work. She can't help but start singing the song in the background, "Celebration," by Kool and the Gang, dances around a bit and ends up doing a table dance with her sister.

This is Ellen's story. The self she may have once had is safely put away in support of the apolitical, very comfortable, straight people around her.

The next episode is another that offers an opportunity to play the lesbian difference, but falls short of actually enacting that difference. Ellen is going to be photographed and interviewed by the magazine *Vanity Fair* in a profile about people who have opted out of the fast lane for the simple life. When Ellen gets this news, the people in her life all ask her what she is going to do about her hair. On one level this seems like a funny way to point to her lesbian style in contrast to the straight aesthetic around her. But the performance of it does not allow for that reading.

In continuous banter with every character Ellen encounters, her hair is the subject of concern. Her sister, her mother, her male co-worker, and a student she is counseling all comment on the fact that her hair needs help. Tina, the student who is a punk rocker going through an identity crisis, says, "Well, I wish I could be more

like you and not care what people think. It's just your hair. I mean, it's obvious you don't spend more than three minutes on it." There is never one moment, one response from Ellen that suggests any kind of lesbian sensibility or reaction or consciousness at all. She looks blankly, acts stunned, a bit insulted, but she has evacuated herself.

After pressure from all the straight women and men around her, she agrees to go have her hair done. She goes to the town salon, which is a typical small town beauty shop, with pictures of big hair all over the walls. Not surprisingly, Ellen gets a big hairdo. When she is unveiled to the audience, it is funny, not because it is a dyke being straightened out, but because it is so clearly not her style. It is a big, teased-up, hair-sprayed, middle-aged, straight, small-town woman's hairdo. Ellen looks horrified, but cannot really bring herself to tell the stylist, who asks, "Do you like it?" Ellen replies in horror, "Do I *like* it?" The hair stylist gets it, though, and says in an offended tone, "Not hip enough for you?" This is the way the show talks about Ellen's difference from the rest of the people. It is not that she is a lesbian, it is that she is urban, and thus hip.

The next scene finds Ellen alone in her bathroom with a towel on her head. She reveals enough of her hair for us to see it is the same style. She seems powerless to do anything about the hideous hair style. Water would do the trick. But she cannot seem to make that step, to erase the straightness out of her hair. There is a knock on the door. She looks out the window and sees the man who she thinks is from *Vanity Fair*. Through a typical sitcom's series of misunderstandings, she thinks it is the hair stylist from *Vanity Fair* to do her hair before her photo shoot, but it is really the animal groomer from *Vanity Fur*. So the next scene features Ellen being groomed by a stylish, young, gay, white man. He treats her like he thinks she is a dog, and gives her a dog-do. She—being so hip and urban—thinks it must be a good haircut, even though she does not seem to know how to react to it, because the stylist from *Vanity Fair* did it. She spends the rest of the show in that haircut, being laughed at by the other characters.

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

This is related to the other plot line in this episode. Ellen feels left out. Her mom and sister have a comfortable, settled-in kind of relationship in this episode, and Ellen feels outside of it. They have their routines, their TV shows, and a shared set of references they understand. Ellen wants to be part of that. She wants to feel a part of them. She spends this episode trying to create a family that all three of them can participate in. She tries to join them, changing the routine a bit, but basically just trying to fit in to what they have. Ellen is going home again. In

Ellen's case this is particularly disturbing, since it clearly means becoming one of them. She has to be recuperated back into the family to be there. For Ellen to be absorbed back into the family is to give up her real difference, her sexuality. And she does.

At least the show does acknowledge, at times, that Ellen must be lonely. In the next episode, Ellen starts complaining that there is no nightlife in this town. She decides that she would like to go to the "fancy French restaurant" in town. She cannot find anyone to go with her. Everyone she asks says that they cannot go because it is a place for couples.

Ellen decides that she will just have to go alone. In this episode, there are a couple of references to sexuality. There is the Lebanese joke. And some reference to her not being in a relationship. At least it is a reference to her lack. And then as she is being seated there is a funny bit. The hostess asks where "he" is. Ellen says, "There is no he. I'm one." The hostess replies, "I hear there is a teacher at the high school who is a one too."

So Ellen finally sits and there are plenty of jokes playing on the fact that she is alone. But then she sees her sister and her best friend from school, Rusty, sitting at a table on a date. They have been sneaking around, and have now been caught. The three of them have a great time together and they all start going out together all the time. It becomes Ellen dating Rusty and Katherine. Ellen is very enthusiastic about it. But after a time, Rusty and Katherine want to end their relationship. Ellen is devastated, as if she were being dumped. They try to comfort her by saying, "you'll meet other couples." Ellen is again completely de-sexualized here. She occupies no space that allows her to be a sexual adult. She is existing through their lives.

One more episode does just those moves again. The plot revolves around Ellen's difference, this time manifested in the fact that she cannot find a decent cup of coffee anywhere in Clark. Her mother and sister of course are perfectly satisfied by the coffee that they have.

Through a nonsensical series of events Ellen ends up at an A.A. meeting, where she finally finds good coffee. She also sees her mother's new beau sharing a completely false story about his drinking past. This too is nonsensical, but it allows Ellen to hate him. This provides the fodder for the now familiar move of recuperation back into the family. The story ultimately becomes about Ellen protecting her mother and sister: her position in the family. There is no space in this heteronormative family for Ellen's self except in relation to them.

There are a few promising jokes that gesture towards the enactment of her sexual difference throughout the season. But they are not enough to create an actual space for that difference. The very structure of the show absorbs those references into the dominant form of reference: heterosexuality. The assimilation strategy here erases the lesbian, and allows the heterosexual contract to remain undisturbed.

It is not enough, it is not effective, to construct her difference as that of the urban outsider. What that really does is emphasize her outsider status. We have the price for being a lesbian here, without the lesbian. Lesbian qua lesbian needs to

occupy cultural space for it to exist. *The Ellen Show* refuses to allow that space to exist.

## Notes

1. The “heterosexual contract” is a concept that Wittig develops in several essays in her book *The Straight Mind*. Those essays are “One is Not Born a Woman” (9-20), “The Straight Mind” (21-32), and “On the Social Contract” (33-45).

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