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Author(s): Lynne Joyrich

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Epistemology of the Console

Lynne Joyrich

Outbursts? Exploding Closets and Epistemological Crises

The 1994 Halloween episode of *Roseanne* exhibits the Connor family and their friends playing a series of Halloween tricks on one another, each attempting to outdo the others. The plot focuses in particular on two extended pranks, both of which are referenced by the episode's title, "Skeleton in the Closet." The most elaborate involves a ploy to persuade Roseanne that her brother-in-law Fred is gay: Roseanne "accidentally" witnesses Fred's apparent familiarity with several gay men at a beauty salon and then at a costume party (in which he appears as Batman to his wife's Robin); notes his discomfort at male attention that seems to allude to a secret history; and is spurred to recall her own memories of Fred's past that include his hairstyle experimentation and a desire to see the film *That's Entertainment*. After this series of coded references allows Roseanne to "recognize" Fred as homosexual, the prank reaches its climax when Roseanne and her sister Jackie storm into the bedroom, only to find Fred in bed with Roseanne's own husband Dan. Jumping out of the bedroom closet, family friends Leon and Nancy, two of the program's queer characters (and here dressed as Hillary Rodham Clinton and Marilyn Monroe, respectively), shout "we are everywhere" as Roseanne (dressed as Prince) runs off to find a camera with which to capture this sexual surprise. An interwoven subplot—articulating a connection between anxieties over the uncertainties of sexual bodies with anxieties over the uncertainties of aging bodies—provides the material for the second prank. After having

been an object of coiffeusorial scrutiny throughout the episode, Roseanne's mother uncovers her own "secret," whipping off a wig to reveal a balding head. In a joke that may hint at the death drive underpinning television's illusion of liveness, all members of the Connor family then remove wigs or file in bald-headed, a group of TV's talking heads transformed into talking skulls. Faced with these two Halloween tricks (one metaphorical and one literal unmasking), Roseanne resorts to the only thing that might top such stunning pranks: she removes some dynamite from underneath the kitchen sink and blows up the house.

I start with this anecdote from *Roseanne* because I believe that it dramatizes in an especially instructive way the dynamics—explosive yet banal—that I would like to discuss: the way in which U.S. television both impedes and constructs, exposes and buries, a particular knowledge of sexuality. While *Roseanne* had been at the forefront of queer representation throughout its network run (as indeed this episode—with its assorted cast of gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, and straight characters—indicates), the episode nonetheless demonstrates the stakes of such representation: discovering that Dan is gay would be tantamount to exploding the familiar and familial TV diegesis. That is, bringing what typically exists outside TV's representational space into its very core creates an epistemological crisis that threatens, both literally and figuratively, to blow this space up. Or does it? After all, though Nancy announces "we are everywhere," the episode actually assures us that "we" are not; the outing of such central characters can only function as a successful prank because of its patent absurdity. And though Roseanne really does seem to blow the house up at the show's end, suggesting a final limit to its ongoing flow, she and the rest of the family return the next week as usual—domestic as well as epistemological and sexual spaces intact. Marking a difference that is promptly forgotten through a gag that is equally daring and trite, the homosexualization of television is here, as I will argue it is in much recent programming, both envisioned and erased.¹

In this way, "Skeleton in the Closet" exemplifies a peculiar logic of knowing (or not knowing) sexuality. In interrogating this logic—that is, in considering the ways in which the televisual apparatus attempts to

1. My analysis of "Skeleton in the Closet" (which aired on ABC on 26 Oct. 1994) is indebted to discussions with the graduate students in my fall 1994 course titled Seminar in Mass Culture: Sexuality and Representation, especially to insights provided by Amelie Hastie and Jeff King, and to King in his paper "'Skeleton in the Closet': *Roseanne* on the Limits of Gay and Lesbian Representation" (unpublished manuscript, 1995).

Lynne Joyrich is associate professor in the department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University. She is the author of *Re-viewing Reception: Television, Gender, and Postmodern Culture* (1996).

know sexual (particularly, though not only, homosexual) subjects and the ways in which we, as viewing subjects, come to know sexuality through television's scanning look—my emphasis may at first seem atypical for those exploring epistemologies of television. For rather than analyzing the construction of knowledge in television studies, I am attempting to analyze a construction of knowledge in television itself. This construction is what I have termed the “epistemology of the console,” a term obviously indebted to Eve Sedgwick's remarkable study of the “epistemology of the closet,” itself indebted to Michel Foucault's study of the disciplinary effects of discourses of knowledge. Arguing that sexual relations are inextricable from those questions of knowledge that drive and discipline modern culture, Sedgwick considers how sexuality constitutes a privileged but fraught epistemological field—indeed, how sexuality (particularly the hetero/homosexual binary) is fully entangled in what now registers as knowledge. According to Sedgwick, the division imposed between heterosexuality and homosexuality is central to our very conceptual universe, acting as a structuring device—albeit an unstable one—in our culture's epistemology; it is used, for instance, to mark such divisions as same/different, inside/outside, public/private, secrecy/disclosure, health/illness, life/death.² Given this defining relation to founding conceptions of truth, identity, and knowledge, the hetero/homo division is then not just relevant to a select few (those identified under its regime as homosexual) but to everyone because we are all catalogued according to these contested axes. In fact, it is precisely because these categories *are* contested that such enormous (though often contradictory) efforts are made to police their borders.

Coding and Mediation: Framing Film and Television

In cinema studies, such border crossings and policing have been explored in readings of a number of films that, as D. A. Miller says of *Rope*, allow “homosexuality to be elided even as it is also being elaborated.”³ This is particularly the case in films made during the era of the Motion Picture Production Code when explicit reference to “sex perversion” and “aberrations” was forbidden.⁴ Unable to be denotatively presented, ho-

2. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, 1990); hereafter abbreviated *EC*. On these points, see especially pp. 2–3, 10–11, 33–34, 44, and 71–73.

3. D. A. Miller, “Anal *Rope*,” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York, 1991), p. 124. See also Patricia White's essay in the same volume, “Female Spectator, Lesbian Spectre: *The Haunting*,” pp. 142–72, and Novid Parsi, “Projecting Heterosexuality, or What Do You Mean by ‘It’?” *Camera Obscura* 38 (May 1996): 162–86.

4. These descriptions from the Motion Picture Association of America are quoted in Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, rev. ed. (New York, 1987), pp. 120–21.

mosexuality came to be connotatively played (and vice versa, as knowing allusion came to signify not just secrets in general but this particular one, not just an attitude of suggestive innuendo, but a specific gay sensibility). While this strategy may have allowed code-era Hollywood to maximize audience address, accommodating both “knowing” and “naive” viewers at once (because some might easily find meanings that others might just as easily deny), it minimized the possibility of epistemological certainty. Held “definitionally in suspense” through connotation, homosexuality became impossible either to confirm or to disprove, with the unsettling (or heartening) effect that heterosexuality itself could no longer be absolutely guaranteed.⁵

Even after the production code was dismantled in favor of an age-based rating system that segmented the audience according to degrees of expected understanding, the logic of the closet—in which sexuality is always suspect—did not simply fade away;⁶ if anything, Sedgwick suggests, its drama was even “heightened in surprise and delectability . . . by the increasingly intense atmosphere of public articulations of and about the love that is famous for daring not speak its name” (*EC*, p. 67).⁷ In the postcode era, then, this epistemic/erotic nexus has continued to construct homosexuality as both desired and disavowed. By setting up gay characters as foils for straight ones even as it closes down possibilities for their narrative development, recent Hollywood film seems to require representations of homosexuality no more and no less than it requires their effacement or dismissal.⁸ How we supposedly “know” that we are seeing homo, bi-, or even heterosexuality, how exactly these sexualities are made to appear: these remain questions that demand attention. Certainly, they appear and disappear differently for different subjects; that is, what is knowable and unknowable about men and women is not the same. For example, while historically film and television have approached gay men’s sexuality through connotation—making male homosexuality uncertain in any specific case but presumably knowable as a general category—they seem to have approached lesbianism in almost a reverse fashion. Here, particular women may explicitly be shown engaging in same-sex eroti-

5. Miller, “Anal Rope,” p. 125.

6. The code was abolished in favor of an age-based rating system in 1968.

7. Fuss discusses the entanglement of “in” and “out” and the way in which even “the first coming out was also simultaneously a closeting,” in her “Inside/Out,” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, p. 4.

8. See Scott Paulin, “Sex and the Singled Girl: Queer Representation and Containment in *Single White Female*,” *Camera Obscura* 37 (Jan. 1996): 32–69. See also Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* (New York, 1993), and the essays in the collections *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle, Wa., 1991); *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men, and Popular Culture*, ed. Paul Burston and Colin Richardson (New York, 1995); *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, ed. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Durham, N.C., 1995); and *Immortal, Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image*, ed. Tamsin Wilton (New York, 1995).

cism (typically framed, to be sure, for the benefit of a presumed male spectator), yet lesbianism as a sexuality in and of itself remains unimaginable and hence an unknowable desire (raising the classic question, What do lesbians do in bed?—other than wait for a man to join them). Despite these distinctions in erotic and epistemological categories, it nonetheless can be politically and theoretically useful to consider them in tandem because within mass culture the two are often made to stand in for one another—as demonstrated, for instance, by the mass-mediated paranoia displayed around both gay men and lesbians at the dawning of the age of AIDS.

As that example suggests, an analysis of the lingering logic of the closet is no less relevant for contemporary television than for film. In fact, given the U.S. TV industry's recent move to rate and regulate its adult content so as to avoid outside regulation, it might even be more relevant. At just about the same time in television history that viewers were endlessly speculating about when, how, and why (or why not) the title character of ABC's situation comedy *Ellen* would come out of the closet, the television industry initiated the first in a series of stages in such self-regulation, adopting a ratings system that, though age-based, was more likely to reproduce the connotative uncertainty of the Motion Picture Production Code than the denotative alternative, initially rejected by programmers and distributors, of designating and quantifying TV's sexual and violent acts. More recently, amid discussion over standards (both technical and moral) for the V-chip (a technology designed to give parents the ability to block programming deemed "harmful" due to its language, violence, or sexual content), the industry has moved toward just such a denotative content code, displaying notations during program title sequences that, in addition to giving age guidelines, also warn of potentially troublesome dialogue, images, and situations.⁹

9. Federal Communications Commission, *Commission Finds Industry Video Programming Rating System Acceptable; Adopts Technical Requirements to Enable Blocking of Video Programming*, 12 Mar. 1998, Rept. GN 98-3, p. 2. The television industry first submitted a proposal for a television rating system to the Federal Communications Commission as a result of the 1996 Telecommunications Act. This was a voluntary agreement—forged, however, under the threat of mandated rule if the industry and the FCC could not agree. In 1997, program producers and suppliers were employing a code that demarcated age-appropriate viewing: shows could be rated TV-Y (children's programming deemed appropriate for kids aged 2 and above); TV-Y7 (programs made for older children); TV-G (shows not specifically made for children but still appropriate for a general audience); TV-PG (recommending parental guidance); TV-14 (recommending guidance for children under 14); or TV-MA (suggested for mature audiences only). After some debate initiated by citizen and children's advocacy groups, representatives of the television industry submitted a more detailed proposal, approved by the FCC in March 1998, that included the content indicators: FV (to indicate fantasy violence in children's programming); V (violence); S (sexual content); L (adult language); and D (suggestive dialogue). These codes are designed to work in conjunction with the V-chip, which will allow viewers to block programming based either on age or content indicators (or some combination of both). Television set manufacturers were required to

Yet this system also fails to provide anything like “full disclosure” or epistemological clarity. It is unevenly applied across television’s output; the symbols are not clearly defined nor explained; and, most important (and obviously), such content evaluation necessarily depends upon textual and contextual interpretation.¹⁰ How one perceives a television episode (if even paying much attention to it) depends upon the reading strategies, intertextual references, and extratextual discourses brought to bear upon the show, and these of course vary for different viewers—or even for the same viewer at different moments or in different aspects. Writing on classical cinema, Richard Maltby has argued that the production code functioned as an enabling mechanism to allow Hollywood films to speak simultaneously to both “the innocent” and “the sophisticated,” thereby promoting, as previously noted, the industry’s presumption of a universal audience (unlike the later film rating system that divided the audience into age categories).¹¹ I am suggesting that something similar occurs in television, though rather than personifying the “sophisticated” and “innocent” readings in distinct viewers as Maltby does, I would argue that television’s particular epistemology often allows the same viewer to assume both positions at once, so that, for instance, a viewer might be expert at decoding TV conventions without necessarily being particularly “knowing” about the stakes and implications of this very decoding (that is, one might be a “clever” viewer but not a “critical” one).

Thus encouraging viewers to defer their judgment (however the in-

include such blocking technology in at least half of all thirteen-inch or larger sets by 1 July 1999; all models that are thirteen-inches or larger must have had the V-chip by 1 Jan. 2000. For those who want access to V-chip technology without purchasing a new TV, there are set top converter boxes that can be hooked up to older models.

10. As of this time, NBC and the cable channel BET are still displaying the suggested age categories, not the content indicators, while movie channels simply use the film rating system (also age-based, but involving a slightly different set of symbols); news and sports programming is unrated. (The irony of this—at a time when reference to oral sex and other “salacious” material has become a staple of news reports since the Clinton sex scandals—no doubt goes without saying). Adding to the problem of a lack of uniformity is the fact that it is the program producers/distributors themselves who determine their shows’ ratings (though, in theory, this is overseen by a monitoring board); an oft-cited example of the ensuing inconsistency is that David Letterman’s late night talk show on CBS is rated TV-PG while Jay Leno’s NBC show (airing during the same time slot) is rated TV-14. Finally, there is the question of viewer comprehension (how many people, for instance, understand the distinction between D, for suggestive dialogue, and L, for adult language?). *TV Guide* provides the ratings for most programs in its schedules (though very inconsistently; the notations are sometimes included in program advertisements, “close-up” features, and/or actual schedule listings, but they do not always appear), but it does not include a key code that defines them; such a code is available from cable services if requested by subscribers.

11. See Richard Maltby, “‘A Brief Romantic Interlude’: Dick and Jane Go to 3 1/2 Seconds of the Classical Hollywood Cinema,” in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison, Wisc., 1996), pp. 434–59.

dustry deems to judge itself through self-determined ratings), television operates, as Judith Mayne has described it, as “a door that swings both ways” (a closet door perhaps?).¹² Indeed, television is a crucial site for the exploration of the logic of the closet not only because of its central role in establishing (and suspending) knowledge in postmodern culture but also because U.S. television itself is located at the intersection of many of the same conceptual divisions that Sedgwick has described. By both mediating historic events for familial consumption and presenting the stuff of “private life” to the viewing public, the institutional organization of U.S. broadcasting situates television precisely on the precarious border of public and private, “inside” and “outside.” Here it constructs knowledges identified as both secret (domestically received) and shared (defined as part of a collective national culture).¹³

The resulting epistemological structure may make even banal sexual situations—commonplace, if sometimes unsavory, heterosexual exchange—appear scandalous. Take, for instance, the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings in which television’s intercrossings of the public and the private produced the all-too-familiar allusions to sex, not to mention sexism, as somehow strange and shocking, bringing suspicion on the one who dared disrupt the open-secret structure rather than on the one who simply disavowed it. A more recent example of television’s activation of this structure is, of course, provided by the Clinton sex scandals. This political “crisis”/media boon provoked endless TV talk and an equally incessant demurrals about just what sex is (or, more accurately, how exactly one defines sexual relations). While not the only issue at stake in the scandal and its coverage, that question of sex came to be seen as both origin and obstacle, and as such it was both omnipresent and deflected through televisual diversion—at work within each joke or press debate, yet not quite posed as such. Skipping back in time to a more fantastic instance of media diversion (here, literally a diversion from real politics to television fantasy), another example of how television both constructs the explicit as unsayable and authorizes an excess of talk about that which is ostensibly beyond what we should know is furnished by Dan Quayle’s 1992 attack on TV character Murphy Brown’s decision to have a child outside of marriage. The widespread news coverage of this condemnation of an imaginary newscaster for her (lack of) sexual and family values again demonstrates the twists of a tele-epistemology that imbricates not only the public and the private, the domestic and the social, but, more comically here, the fictional and real. Indeed, it is only appropriate that, in

12. Judith Mayne, “L.A. Law and Prime-Time Feminism,” *Discourse* 10 (Spring–Summer 1998): 30–47.

13. Lynn Spigel’s work has contributed a great deal toward tracing the historical negotiations around television’s place within the public/private divide. See her *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago, 1992).

preparing an interview with a recently out Ellen DeGeneres about her life and show, *20/20* attempted to get a statement from Quayle.¹⁴

Real Queer: Playing the Roles

As the previous examples indicate, U.S. TV's location within and between conflicting social and psychic spaces imbues its representations of sexuality (even presumptive heterosexuality) with a certain ambivalence; this is all the more noticeable in television's representations of gay and lesbian sexualities. It is no surprise then that the aforementioned tension between the fictional and real, the live and the recorded, is particularly noteworthy in television's treatment of queer subjects. This might be suggested by another example literally (that is, temporally in TV's flow) contiguous with that of *Ellen*. On the *Grace Under Fire* episode that aired on ABC immediately before *Ellen's* (in)famous coming out show on 30 April 1997, there was a moment of rupture between television's always already tenuous line between the fictional and real, the diegetic and extradiegetic, when the program's narrative was cut short by a "real live" marriage proposal from one of the show's actors to one of its camerawomen. Such a public announcement of heterosexuality—coming moments before *Ellen's* much more critiqued public announcement of homosexuality—both demonstrates the ways in which the relationship between these textual registers has historically been more fraught for television's queer than straight subjects and serves as a graphic reminder to the many critics of the (supposed over-) attention given to the events on/around *Ellen* that homosexuality hardly has a stranglehold on media recognition.

Indeed, how narrative attention is televisually orchestrated reveals that it is often heterosexuality that is in fact realized through such "recognitions." As in many films, it is not unusual for television programs to establish characters who, diegetically, are "really" gay in order to establish (not always successfully) that the other characters are not. Ironically, it is television's own logic of the closet that requires this realization; the televisual production of sexuality (even in its heteronormative forms) may rely less on portrayals of love, desire, and erotic behavior (which threaten to exceed TV's domesticated space) than on practices of oppositional location and defense, however self-defeating. This, for example, is what Sasha Torres argues about the short-lived *HeartBeat* and its predecessors *Kate and Allie*, *The Golden Girls*, *Cagney and Lacey*, and *L.A. Law*, all of which have introduced specific gay or lesbian characters so as to "localiz[e] the homosexuality which might otherwise pervade these homosocial spaces."¹⁵ A

14. Diane Sawyer, interview with Ellen DeGeneres, 25 Apr. 1997, *20/20*.

15. Sasha Torres, "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, 1993), p. 179.

similar, though more vertiginous operation occurs in shows, as in a recent episode of *Spin City*, in which a straight character masquerades as gay for the benefit of the “real” queer, inverting the dynamics of the closet in order (supposedly) to mark the differences between hetero and homo, identity and role, but of course always threatening to erase these very partitions.

The ambiguity of the situation becomes even further pronounced when moving between textual and extratextual levels. TV may attempt to employ “diegetically real queers” to assure audiences of the distinctions between gay and straight, identity and mask, yet “nondiegetic real queers” (that is, gay and lesbian actors) may simply provoke epistemological crises along these same fault lines. There are countless cases in which actors cast in gay roles strive to create an unassailable division between the person and the part; in the case of *Ellen*, the situation is reversed. Here, television meets the demand that we recognize the difference between straight and gay precisely by refusing to allow us to recognize the difference between character and actor. By having Ellen DeGeneres come out of the closet just shortly before Ellen Morgan did, television assures us that we can recognize homosexuality through and through when we see it, that it can’t be faked—despite the competing corollary admission that this conflated Ellens’ sexuality had been faked until this point.

Of course, there is something particularly odd about the idea that one can “out” a fictional character in the first place—as if this character might have been sneaking off to the bars or parks during commercial breaks when our attention was otherwise diverted—that both plays on and further produces television’s spiraling dynamic of the fictional and real. Though Ellen the sitcom character bears a striking resemblance to Ellen the sitcom actor, to ask, as *Time* magazine among many others did, whether Ellen Morgan was “really gay all along,” even before DeGeneres and the writers knew it, suggests a level of autonomous televisual existence that proves TV’s epistemology to be much “queerer” than that of other media forms.¹⁶

Needless to say, television does not always play this out; the example of *Ellen* demonstrates particularly well the potentially bizarre permutations of a tele-epistemology that mixes fact and fiction, inside the text and out, more so than, for instance, those moments of disclosure about figures who have an historical existence beyond TV, as in the made-for-TV movie *Breaking the Surface: The Greg Louganis Story*, or, though this example itself points to television’s oddities, *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*’s “outing” of Walt Whitman.¹⁷ Of the many both facile and difficult aspects of the latter example, consider the case of *Dr. Quinn* actor Chad Allen, who himself

16. Bruce Handy, “Roll Over, Ward Cleaver,” *Time*, 14 Apr. 1997, p. 82; hereafter abbreviated “RO.” (This is the magazine issue in which DeGeneres announces, “Yep, I’m Gay” in bold letters on the cover.)

17. See “The Body Electric,” 5 Apr. 1997, *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*.

was outed not long before this episode and who appears in it as one of Whitman's few supporters. At key points in the narrative, the camera cuts to his concerned and empathetic face, bearing silent witness to the town's condemnation and to Whitman's persevering spirit. In a double displacement (from current issue to historical drama, and from the fantasy of bodily activity to the contemplation of a face in halting close-up), the episode thus positions Allen precisely at the point of its erotic/epistemic collapse. His very silence is itself suggestive of the way in which television's construction of the fictional and real may create a closet door that swings both ways, on the one hand entrapping gay actors in a redoubled logic of the closet (for how can this in-character actor speak out?) and, on the other, opening a space (however small) for them to stand in visible if unvocalized condemnation of this logic.

In Couched Terms: Television and Therapeutic Discourse

This display of an erasure (or, conversely, the erasure of display) is indicative of the epistemological spiral provoked by television's treatment of the "reality" of homosexuality both in its texts and in the information that circulates around them. Yet, as stated above, the effects of revealing the true sexuality of fictional characters is, if less poignant, even more perplexing. The suggestion that a character like Ellen Morgan was gay before anyone creating her was (at least consciously) aware of this—her broadcasting family is indeed the last to know—perhaps only makes sense in the light of another aspect of television that reinforces its link to the logic of the closet: the dominance of therapeutic discourse in and for TV, across both its real and its fictional forms.

As Mimi White has demonstrated, therapeutic and confessional strategies centrally figure in U.S. television, providing not just subjects for narratives but TV's very mode of narrativization.¹⁸ In this light, it is only fitting that, in the season-long prelude to *Ellen's* coming-out episode, Ellen's inability to fix on her sexuality would be matched by an equal inability to fix on a therapist, a gag that helped drive the program's (and its lead character's) "progress" toward sexual revelation. Making this perfectly clear was the opening to the episode "Bowl, Baby, Bowl" (4 December 1996) in which Ellen, reclining on a therapist's couch, states:

Well, um, the first time, I was, um . . . I was with a man, and then I was with a woman for a little while. And then I was with a man again, and then with another man, and let's see, then woman, woman, man,

18. See Mimi White, *Tele-Advising: Therapeutic Discourse in American Television* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1992).

woman, and then another man. And you know, lately I'm beginning to think it doesn't really matter if it's a man or a woman, you know? It's the person that counts. But one thing I know for sure . . . I can't keep going from therapist to therapist like this.¹⁹

Coming a few months into the 1997 season, this joke not only perpetuated the program's continuing gag of (barely concealed) hints and clues but displaced the sexual mystery supposedly behind this set of clues onto a therapeutic one, fully collapsing object choice onto analyst choice. Is it then any wonder that the shrink on whom Ellen finally settles, the one who actually helps her uncover the "truth," should be played by none other than Oprah Winfrey, the exemplar of TV's therapeutic regime?

What follows from this analytic equation is that sexual indecision is treated in such couched terms, the stakes of which are circled around but not yet quite named. Given its institutional determinants, U.S. television's therapeutic discourses have been wedded to familial and consumer ideology, but, as Foucault has shown in his analysis of confessional strategies, it is precisely sexuality as an "implantation of perversion" that their deployment produces as the secret of the self.²⁰ Homosexuality—the mark of diacritical sexual difference in our society—would thus be both an effect of and obstacle to television's confessional, familial, and consumer regime, the sexuality produced precisely *as* obstacle, necessarily inside and outside the televisual domain. If then, as White argues, television not only transmits but transforms our understanding of confessional and therapeutic relations, it also not only transmits but transforms our understanding of sexual relations.²¹ That is, U.S. television does not simply reflect an already closeted sexuality but actually helps organize sexuality as closeted, as positioned in the epistemic centrality yet fraught with an incoherency that I am attempting to map here.

It is therefore not surprising that the epistemology of the closet is such a notable structure in recent television, even—or especially—in an era of more detailed articulation. With sexual disclosure seemingly compulsory yet forbidden, demanded yet contained, television constructs illicit sexualities ambivalently as both known and unknown; in the epistemology of the console, some things are apparently better not really apprehended even as this ignorance is maintained and betrayed by an attitude of smug knowingness about things supposedly beyond our need to fully comprehend. Thus, whether by making homosexuality *the* secret knowl-

19. "Bowl, Baby, Bowl," 4 Dec. 1996, *Ellen*.

20. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1978).

21. White argues that "the television apparatus modif[ies] and reconfigure[s] the very nature of therapy and confession as practices for producing social and individual identities and knowledge" (White, *Tele-Advising*, p. 7; see also pp. 8–9).

edge to be gleaned or difficult seriously to entertain, television typically creates a classic epistemic double bind. In other words, though narratives that explicitly deal with the closet are marked as exceptions, for reasons I've given, the closet becomes an implicit TV form—a logic governing not only the ways in which gays and lesbians are represented but also the generation of narratives and positions on and for TV even in the absence of openly gay characters (or gay characters at all). The dynamics of the closet for TV's queers must therefore be read alongside television's ambivalent construction of sexuality in general. Because it exceeds television's domesticated world, sexuality, even in its heterosexual varieties, can only appear as such—as sexuality—through assorted impasses and inversions (for instance, all those romantic reversals in television drama and humorous mismatches in television comedy). Rather than focus, then, on only one example—*Ellen's* manifest story of self-discovery and coming out—it is interesting to consider some of the permutations of television's ways of “knowing” sexuality, which might be schematized as in the following “case studies.”

Test Patterns: Broadcasting It

1. Inferring Sexuality

One example from our not-too-distant TV past often claimed by those interested in queer representations—though the program itself never made any such claims—is the prototypical case of *Love, Sidney*. This early 1980s program typifies the “Who knows?” brand of homosexual (non)performance.²² Though lead character Sidney Shorr (played by Tony Randall) had what one directory of television programs calls the

22. *Love, Sidney* ran on NBC from 1981 to 1983. This was not, however, the first prime-time television series to feature a regular gay character. Jodie Dallas (played by Billy Crystal) appeared on ABC's *Soap* from 1977 to 1981. Of course, given the way in which (as its title indicates) that program was modelled (comically) on a soap opera, Jodie was not the lead character nor was he the only one to arouse scandal; the show received numerous complaints before it even aired. Though Jodie's identity as “a homosexual” was explored (satirically, as with everything else on the show), *Soap* conflated issues of sexuality with issues of gender (as in a story line involving Jodie's desire to change his sex), and, like *Dynasty's* later treatment of its “homosexual” character Stephen Carrington (introduced on ABC in 1981), *Soap* had Jodie flip-flop in his sexual orientation. Other early representations of homosexuality on television include: *CBS Reports: The Homosexuals*, the first nationally aired documentary on the subject (CBS, 1967); *That Certain Summer*, the first made-for-TV movie with a gay theme (ABC, 1972, dir. Lamont Johnson); *All My Children*, which featured daytime television's first homosexual character (the child psychologist Lynn Carson, who was introduced to the ABC soap in 1983); and *An Early Frost*, the first TV movie about AIDS (NBC, 1985, dir. John Erman).

“distinctive trait” of being gay in the TV movie on which the situation comedy was based, the series itself refrained from ever mentioning homosexuality, though, as this same directory put it, “it could have been inferred.”²³

More recent television texts, aiming for new material and audiences, may no longer depend on such consummate evasion, but a structure of hints and allusions—an articulation of the unarticulated—often still prevails. Indeed, by shifting the site of elision from identity to the eroticism it supposedly names—if *gay* or *lesbian* is established as description but not desire—evasion might still be the operative strategy even when a gay man or lesbian is labelled as such. In this way, homosexuality might be known but not as sexuality; it occupies a position in the narrative but one that entails no cultural performance.²⁴ (Another way of putting this would be to restate the obvious point that sexual identity is different from sexual desire—and perhaps nowhere are they more different than on television, given the industry’s attempts to define sexuality as product while retaining its simultaneous anxiety around sexuality as practice.) This method of holding queer representation at a distance (a kind of tele-containment, if you will) was evident, for instance, in the treatment of the character Matt Fielding on FOX’s *Melrose Place*, the only character in the early days of this steamy prime-time soap not seen engaging in a string of scandalous affairs. Though one of TV’s first long-running gay characters, Matt seemed to hold this position (at least initially) precisely by desexualizing it. Other examples of desexualization are even more dismally provided by television’s treatment of people with AIDS, indicatively linked in the media—again, often through allusion—to homo- and bisexuality.²⁵

23. These descriptions of *Love, Sidney* are quoted in Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network TV Shows, 1946–Present*, 5th ed. (New York, 1992), p. 527.

24. Demonstrating the struggles around this is the case of *thirtysomething*; in 1989, it showed a gay male couple in bed talking. Although the performance of their relationship consisted of nothing more than a presleep discussion, this visual acknowledgement of a gay relationship (as opposed to simply naming the characters as gay) itself was considered scandalous enough to incite a boycott of the program, and ABC pulled the episode so that it would not appear in reruns.

25. For discussions of television and homosexuality that elaborate these strategies of desexualization and/or nonperformance (and offer additional television examples), see, among others, the essays by Emile C. Netzhammer and Scott A. Shamp, Darlene M. Hantzis and Valerie Lehr, Marguerite J. Moritz, and Larry Gross in *Queer Words, Queer Images: Communication and the Construction of Homosexuality*, ed. R. Jeffrey Ringer (New York, 1994); Gross, “Out of the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and the Mass Media,” in *Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power*, ed. Ellen Seiter et al. (New York, 1989), pp. 130–49; and Rosanne Kennedy, “The Gorgeous Lesbian in *L.A. Law*: The Present Absence?” in *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*, ed. Charlotte Brunson, Julie D’Acci, and Lynn Spigel (Oxford, 1997), pp. 318–24.

2. *Detecting Sexuality*

While nonheterosexual subjectivities may now be named on television, this does not mean that a logic of detection and discovery—in which hints of sexuality are offered as clues to be traced—has simply been eclipsed. This may be best demonstrated today by the hermeneutic of suspicion found in several cop/detective shows that are characterized by their direct enactment of the drive to know. In this epistemological exercise, solving the mystery of sexual ambiguity and/or identification may overtake even the drive toward solving the crime. For instance, in some episodes of *Homicide*, *Law and Order*, and *New York Undercover*, locating homosexuality (usually in the crime victim) is posed as *the* key to “case” closure (in both senses of the term).

The 17 November 1995 episode of NBC’s *Homicide: Life on the Street* is particularly instructive in this regard.²⁶ In this episode, homicide detectives Tim Bayliss and Frank Pembleton investigate the death of a man killed outside a gay bar, apparently the victim of a gay bashing. Early in the episode, they discover who the murderer is but continue the investigation, merely, it seems, to discover if the victim was, in fact, gay (a “charge” disputed by his college buddies and one that leads the victim’s father to believe that his son is better off dead). The mystery of sexual orientation seems most to disturb Bayliss, who questions his partner about how and at what age a homosexual knows that he is gay. “Age twenty-six,” Frank matter-of-factly replies. “At twenty-six, every man determines his sexual preference,” he continues before at last concluding the conversation by pointing out that the very question is “nonsense.” Nonetheless, the question seems to obsess Bayliss; he insists against Pembleton’s wishes on prolonging the investigation and so turns his attention to the “clues”—not of criminal, but of sexual, behavior (as occurs, for example, when he visits the home of a family friend of the victim and, noticing the guests at a Thanksgiving celebration that the cops have interrupted, interrogates a woman about her lesbianism).

In the end, the detectives discover that the victim was not gay—that, as Bayliss tells the father, the gay bashing was “a mistake.” This double-edged assessment of mistaken identity is refined through Bayliss’s final understanding of the situation, and it is clear that the moral of the story is that any such confusion doesn’t matter: a crime is still a crime. But the amount of narrative energy that has gone into reaching this conclusion seems to belie it, perhaps suggesting (as Pembleton has suggested all along) that any way of asking—and attempting definitively to answer—a question of sexual identity leads to its own absurdities, undoings, and erasures (even if these are not always as dramatic as the literal erasure of a life or the symbolic erasure of what the media like to refer to as a lifestyle).

26. See “Hate Crimes,” 17 Nov. 1995, *Homicide: Life on the Street*.

Interestingly, in a later season of *Homicide*, Bayliss begins to question the mystery of his own sexuality and erotic identifications, spurred on by the knowledge of past amorous mistakes. Yet however much the program might play with and/or critique policing procedures of “suspect identification” (by, for instance, reversing the roles of suspect and victim or suspect and cop), the very narrative drive of the detective program incites a desire to solve its enigmas, be these criminal or sexual—or frequently, as elaborated above, a conflation of both.

3. *Conferring Sexuality*

In contrast, more comic texts may make no effort whatsoever to follow such sexual “clues” to a conclusion; rather, by holding the question in permanent suspension, these texts encourage an epistemology (and erotics) of “knowing viewers.” I’m thinking of a program like *Xena: Warrior Princess*, whose creators acknowledge the centrality of sexual ambiguity to that show’s campy fantasy appeal. In commenting on lead character Xena and her sidekick Gabrielle, the couple whose emotional and eroticized bond defines the tenor of the program even though some episodes feature them in narrative and/or sexual clinches with men, producer Liz Friedman has stated, “I don’t have any interest in saying they’re heterosexuals.”²⁷ That she also shows no interest in actually saying that they’re lesbians or bisexuals while still providing numerous teasing opportunities for just such readings is equally as clear.

Another notable example of a program that cheerfully permits viewers to prick at its ostensibly heterosexual surface is the sitcom *Frasier*, which features straight characters created and performed by a number of out writers and actors, leading to a sense of humor that, if not out-and-out campy, has been seen by some fans as expressing a gay sensibility through its wit and “knowing” style. Indeed, the style of these two otherwise quite different programs has been the subject of much debate on, for instance, internet newsgroups devoted to television or showbiz gossip. The discussions often stress the “gay feeling” that pervades the shows even—or especially—in the absence of denoted gay characters. In other words, it is precisely the keen and artful presence of a certain absence in the texts—and the accompanying logic of undecidability, incongruity, and allusion—that seems most to mark them as somehow queer. Their queerness is external to these shows in another way as well. That is, as my reference to gossip forums indicates, finding evidence of marginalized sexualities within the episodes may rely as much on intertextual knowledge and extratextual context as it does on the texts themselves; bringing them out depends on what audience group (or set of intertexts) the

27. Liz Friedman, quoted in *Reuters/Variety Entertainment Summary*, www.clarinet.com, 13 Apr. 1997.

viewer (or program) is in. Watching *Xena* alongside an uproarious crowd at a lesbian bar or enjoying *Frasier* in tandem with writer Joe Keenan's comic gay novels focuses attention onto certain charged moments in the programs that seem to nod to those viewers in the know.²⁸ Such viewers are then reinforced in their interpretations, spurred on to ever more imaginative (or perhaps much more plausible) explanations of the characterological and narrative dynamics.

4. Enlightening Sexuality

Shows that aren't based on a logic of detection (whether tragic or comic, with solvable mysteries or not) may partake in what I see as one of the more interesting permutations of the epistemology of the console, that of the "knowing character." Several television shows today feature "openly" gay or lesbian secondary characters—characters for whom homosexuality is so matter-of-fact that they divest viewers of the self-satisfying pleasure of figuring it out by reading the codes.²⁹ What they offer instead is their own positioning as repositories of knowledge; we may never know too much about them (after all, they're only secondary characters), but they seem to have privileged access to information or wisdom that other figures lack. Inverting the trope in which gay characters are introduced only as questions and problems for straight ones to deal with, today's queers may be known without mystery, and this, in fact, seems to make them the most comfortably centered in knowledge of all.³⁰

A relatively early (and therefore somewhat fraught) example of this relationship between homosexuality and knowledge is suggested by Sasha Torres's reading of the lesbian character on *HeartBeat* (the first continuous lesbian character in U.S. prime time, introduced in 1988).³¹ As

28. See Joe Keenan, *Blue Heaven* (New York, 1988) and *Putting on the Ritz* (New York, 1991).

29. Cindy Patton makes a similar argument about the lesbian character in the film *Internal Affairs*. See Patton, "What Is a Nice Lesbian Like You Doing in Film Like This?" in *Immortal, Invisible*, pp. 20–33, esp. pp. 28, 31.

30. The trope of the gay character as a question or problem for the straight one may be most pronounced in TV movies about sons with AIDS; see, for example, John Leo, "The Familialism of Man in American Television Melodrama," in *Displacing Homophobia: Gay Male Perspectives in Literature and Culture*, ed. Ronald R. Butters, John M. Clum, and Michael Moon (Durham, N.C., 1989), pp. 31–51.

31. Another early example is provided by daytime television's first lesbian character, *All My Children's* Dr. Lynn Carson, a therapist who served as the wise and caring advisor for many of the show's other characters—in particular, the confused Devon McFadden. The description of the Lynn and Devon characters and plot offered by a commemorative volume put out to celebrate *All My Children's* twenty-fifth anniversary perhaps best suggests how complex and fraught TV's strategy of the "knowing character" can be. Found in a section of the volume titled "Issues and Answers: Homosexuality," the description goes as follows: "In 1983, Devon McFadden was drawn to her doctor, Lynn Carson, daytime's first admitted

Torres explains, the program generally took a “universalizing” view of lesbianism, linking Marilyn’s homosexuality to the homosociality of the women’s clinic at which the characters all worked. In the one episode that did explore Marilyn’s “difference” from the others, however, this difference was displaced “from her sexual status as a lesbian to her professional status as a nurse practitioner”—a displacement that I would name as precisely the one from sexuality to knowledge because, as Torres elaborates, it involved Marilyn’s positive valuation of midwifery as a form of “women’s ways of knowing” over the patriarchal knowledge of conventional medicine.³² Other examples of TV’s treatment of such characters are less conflicted, demonstrating a smoother shift from positioning queers as enigmas commanding some sort of spectatorial curiosity to positioning them as educators (of the viewer as well as of other characters) who need make no such demands.

Consider, for instance, the use of queer men and lesbians on shows as different as *Mad About You*, *My So-Called Life*, *Murder One*, *Party Girl*, *The Real World*, *Dawson’s Creek*, *All My Children*, *Party of Five*, *Spin City*, and *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*. *Spin City*’s Carter Heywood, a black gay man, was hired by the mayor to inform him on “minority issues,” but because of his own sensible perspective among a senseless crowd he’s inevitably ignored. Schoolteacher Michael Delany, *All My Children*’s only character in possession of a Ph.D., acts as the wise confidant for everyone else in the town of Pine Valley, but his own life is never narratively elaborated—not because it’s marked as exotically unknowable but precisely because it’s presented as already known. It’s as if we simply understood the smooth progression of his relationship with his lover, as opposed to the events in the lives of heterosexual characters that are deemed so surprising that they require detailed explication (again suggesting the complications provoked by *any* performance of desire).

In this way, these “knowing” gay characters of the 1990s are comparable to many African-American characters of the 1980s and still today; though they may have power *within* their narrative worlds, they lack power *over* them, the ability to command narrative attention. Indeed, one of *Ellen*’s producers observes that homosexuals “have become the new stock character, like the African-American pal at the workplace” (quoted in “RO,” p. 80). An almost identical observation is offered by Rob Epstein, codirector of the documentary film *The Celluloid Closet*: “It’s become a

lesbian character. The doctor/patient relationship grew complicated when a confused Devon declared her feelings for Lynn. The doctor proved to be an understanding friend as she gently helped Devon realize she was heterosexual” (Gary Warner, “*All My Children*”: *The Complete Family Scrapbook* [Los Angeles, 1994], p. 79). In other words, the way that this “admitted” lesbian demonstrated her wisdom and “understanding” was precisely by convincing a woman interested in dating her that this potential lover was, in fact, heterosexual.

32. Torres, “Television/Feminism: *HeartBeat* and Prime Time Lesbianism,” pp. 181–82.

stock character—like what blacks were on television 15 years ago. . . . It seems mandatory to have a gay sidekick.”³³ Yet these are not just any sidekicks; the particular roles that these secondary characters play reveal something of the complex and crisis-ridden ways in which race and sexuality signify in the American imaginary. The 1980s and early 1990s initiated a number of crime dramas in which blacks and Latinos were presented as police chiefs, minor characters with institutional though rarely narrative authority. In this way, programs like *Miami Vice*, *21 Jump Street*, *N.Y.P.D. Blue*, *Law and Order*, and *Homicide: Life on the Street* have maintained an association between people of color and criminality despite the reversal of positions within the media’s usual equation.³⁴ Overseeing, instead of surveilled by, the cops (though the latter position has hardly disappeared, merely existing alongside this new permutation), such characters do not exactly redouble but rather double back on television’s discourse on race.

Similarly, television’s queer characters may not necessarily play the (still often common) role of obscure objects, loci of mystery, scandal, and uncertainty; instead, they may be figured as devoid of all mystery (and thus potentially of all dramatic interest), more pedagogic than puzzling. But whether enlighteners or enigmas, knowing readers or riddles to be known (however impossible this task is taken to be), TV’s gay characters are constructed as epistemological nodal points—crucial in some ways to the production of knowledge if not to the dramas that drive the TV productions. Their position might then even be compared to the problematic place of queers within critical theory itself: as those who most embody a disruption in the logic of binary sexual division, queers can function, to borrow Katie King’s term for another context, as a “magical sign” of theoretical (particularly deconstructive) knowledge—even if gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people are still disempowered in the actual halls of academe.³⁵

5. *Disclosing Sexuality*

Finally, there is the previously mentioned case of *Ellen*, whose breakout lesbian character seemed to be “the last to know.” Though there is

33. Rob Epstein, quoted in A. J. Jacobs, “Out?” *Entertainment Weekly*, 4 Oct. 1996, p. 21; hereafter abbreviated “O.”

34. Most (but not all) of the characters in the above-mentioned programs are men; a related phenomenon involves the prevalence of, in particular, black female judges on law shows. This also articulates a connection between people of color and criminality, but here the terms of reversal might be seen more specifically as judgment/lack of judgment (the latter, of course, defining the common stereotype of the sexually active teenage girl and/or the unwed crack mother, both standard media images of women of color).

35. See Katie King, “The Situation of Lesbianism as Feminism’s Magical Sign: Contexts for Meaning and the U.S. Women’s Movement, 1968–1972,” *Communication* 9 (Fall 1986): 65–91.

much more to be said about this case than I can say here (and so I'll engage in a bit of epistemic elision myself and presume that most readers already know at least some things about one of TV's most talked-about shows), I'd argue that the most fascinating thing about this program is the way that it took TV's underlying logic of the closet and actually narrativized it across its (in)famous season. It is then not surprising that, even in its "uncloseting," it enacted a return to the epistemology of allusion governing earlier TV texts (in this, it might be seen as a return of the repressed). Indeed, in a replay of many of the tropes outlined above, the series teased viewers with an elaborate game of catch-the-queer, or at least the queer references, long before the lead character's homosexuality was ever explicitly designated or displayed.

That this was a game—an enactment of familiar scenarios, even if its direct engagement with them made *Ellen* stand out as unique—was evident from the way that the program both recognized yet rehearsed the rules. In fact, among the 1996–97 season's many hints and allusions, *Ellen* also included moments that seemed to comment on its very deployment of hints and allusions—a self-reflexivity through which the text elaborated as well as narrativized its relation to the logic of the closet.³⁶ One such instance even occurred in the 1996 season premiere entitled "Give Me Equity or Give Me Death" (the episode that contains the frequently referenced opening in which Ellen sings to herself in the mirror, "I feel pretty and witty and . . . hey," when her morning ritual is interrupted by a plumbing problem in her bathroom).³⁷ Envious of her gay male friends, Peter and Barrett, who have purchased a home, Ellen is tempted to buy a house herself; to encourage her, Peter brings his realtor over to Ellen's apartment to show her pictures of houses for sale. The realtor sets up a slide show in Ellen's living room and provides a running narration for the images, including references to the realtor's own (hetero)sexual exploits, as Peter and Ellen watch on the couch eating popcorn. This home viewing experience (in both senses of the term) is thus set up from the very beginning of the scene as an analogue to television (also primarily a viewing of domestic spaces from within our own domestic space).

The comparison becomes even more pronounced when the realtor attempts to persuade Ellen of the possibilities of her place within this picture by acting out a scene with little dolls (enthusiastically described by Peter as "like a puppet show of your life"). To the realtor's, "Just think, Ellen; this could be you, walking up to your new home . . . and here's

36. Indeed, this self-reflexivity occurred even at the moment of coming out in "The Episode": after struggling to actually name herself as gay, Ellen finally does manage to get the word out—while unwittingly leaning into a microphone hooked up to an airport loud-speaker. Through this enactment of a different kind of public broadcasting, the program thus underscores the very public nature of Ellen Morgan's—and Ellen DeGeneres's—declaration. See "The Episode," 30 Apr. 1997, *Ellen*.

37. "Give Me Equity or Give Me Death," 18 Sept. 1996, *Ellen*.

your husband coming home from work . . .,” Ellen replies “oh, I think that puppet’s in the wrong show,” prompting the slide show’s author to toss the male doll aside. A miniature of a miniature (a puppet show of a televisual life), this show-within-the-show might be seen as mapping the trajectory that the rest of the season will take, from Ellen reconsidering her domestic/familial position to her act of coming out—in other words, a thematization of the text’s unfinished movement from implicit enactment to explicit thematization of television’s epistemology of the closet.

Yet even the culminating moment of Ellen’s self-identification does not fully overturn the tropes by which television’s treatment of gay subjects are managed; the explicit announcement does not erase TV’s implicit (sexual and spectatorial) contract. The episode in which Ellen Morgan comes out of the closet is officially entitled simply “The Episode,” suggesting that this one text epitomizes the entire *Ellen* epistemology. However, it is commonly referred to (even in some “official” ABC venues) as “The Puppy Episode,” supposedly a joke generated by the speculation over exactly what Ellen Morgan needed to give her life meaning (perhaps a puppy?). Although “The Episode” clearly indicates that what Ellen needs is not just a pet, in its evocation of warm and fuzzy affection, this title does hark back to TV’s typically desexualizing representation of gays and lesbians. This too then suggests the way Ellen’s uncloseting simultaneously advances from and retreats into television’s conventions for treating queer subjects—most notably through the very logic of suggestion.

Both commenting on and contributing to processes of connotation, *Ellen* thus demonstrated the power and the pathos of this logic of allusion. Before “The Episode” ever aired, the series of clues planted in interviews, publicity, and extraneous program gags threatened to overtake the identity they indexed along with the attention paid to the television series’ own storylines (most of which had to do with the heterosexual concerns of her parents and pals). Through countless hints, double entendres, and puns made both off and on the show (Ellen as possibly “a lefty” or maybe “Lebanese”), “lesbian” became an endlessly replaced and replaceable signifier. These innuendos—lines, as the *New York Times* stated, “repeated so often that they’re now familiar to people who have never watched ‘Ellen’”—made queer-themed “inside” jokes available to all viewers even when Ellen’s homosexuality still remained throughout most of the season “outside” the sitcom form.³⁸ Curiously, then, the knowledge of the lesbian inside the text was both largely extratextual (the intense search for clues prompted by press leaks, gossip, and finally the producers’ announcement that they were considering “going in [that] direction”)³⁹ as well as always already redundant (labelled, again by the

38. Frank Bruni, “It May Be a Closet Door, But It’s Already Open,” *The New York Times*, 13 Oct. 1996, sec. 2, p. 40, national edition; hereafter abbreviated “I.”

39. ABC Entertainment President Jamie Tarses, quoted in “ABC Holding Key to El-

New York Times, as an “anti-climax” undermining the program’s potential sexual and epistemic charge).⁴⁰

Of course, the “been-there-done-that feeling” that the *New York Times* (among many others) attributed to *Ellen*’s never-before-done treatment of this issue corresponds to the program’s general epistemological construction (or lack thereof) (“I,” p. 1). Often described as a *Seinfeld*-clone without even that show’s structuring cohesion, *Ellen* seemed to lack an epistemic center, a definitive identity for its lead to provide the program with an organizing principle. Yet, however indistinct, *Ellen* was the central character around which this text revolved, making the stakes of her sexual status different than those of the secondary queer characters previously named. The challenge—as well as the potential promise—for viewers may then have been found in learning how to accept a change in a well-known character, one who ironically was known for not really knowing herself.

However, this does not necessarily pose a challenge to the logic of the closet. There was still no coherent queer epistemology (whatever that might be) ordering the text; though some episodes in the last season did initiate new trajectories in *Ellen*’s life (and, arguably, in television’s treatment of sexuality), these existed in tension with the show’s already established focus on *Ellen*’s relations with her (probably needless to point out, insistently heterosexual) community of family and friends. As stated even by one of *Ellen*’s executive producers, *Ellen* thus became a homosexual in a “heterosexual situation,”⁴¹ the sitcom highlighting precisely (in an inversion of the trope of all those knowing gay sidekicks) an unsure, unsophisticated, unknowing queer. Still defined by an aura of confusion (though perhaps one now thematized rather than just acted out), *Ellen* marks an absent center within a field of knowledge, indeed marks the way in which that knowledge is always absent from itself.

For if, as Sedgwick compellingly argues, sexuality is inextricable from what counts as knowledge in our culture, then it is impossible simply to define a program of knowing sexuality.⁴² This, of course, is as true of television programs as it is of academic ones. The question of what exactly the viewers of queer TV texts know must thus remain an open one. In

len’s Closet, Taking Five Gay Characters Off Air,” *GLAAD Alert*, 10 Jan. 1997.

40. The comment that *Ellen*’s premise was already an “anticlimax” comes from Andrew Sullivan, quoted in “I,” p. 1.

41. “Ellen Morgan is still in a very heterosexual situation. . . . Almost all her friends are heterosexuals” (Dava Savel, quoted in “RO,” p. 85).

42. As Sedgwick writes, “modern ‘sexuality’ and hence modern homosexuality are so intimately entangled with the historically distinctive contexts and structures that now count as *knowledge* that such ‘knowledge’ can scarcely be a transparent window onto a separate realm of sexuality but, rather, itself constitutes that sexuality” (*EC*, p. 44; see also pp. 2 and 34).

considering the effects of our—and television’s—pedagogical practices, however, it is nonetheless interesting to speculate on the epistemology that might govern future viewings of past *Ellens*—previous seasons that have already been sold to run on the Lifetime cable channel. For viewers of those shows, will knowing that Ellen will have already come out of a closet still closed in the rerun they’re watching alter the terms of TV’s epistemological contract, fully confounding the relationship between in and out? This question is difficult to answer, not least because of its formulation in the future perfect tense.⁴³ But this “televisually tensed” construction does not at all suggest that such mediated acts of coming out will guarantee a perfect future; however noteworthy in television history, Ellen’s revelation need not herald a new sexual nor even TV age.⁴⁴ Yet the very confounding of conventional logic that such an internally inverted formulation produces itself indicates the ways in which television might, if not actually discard, at least disturb some of the presupposed terms that delimit sexuality and our own means of knowing.

Epilogue: A Buy Out?

However much this last case may have begun to shift, or at least make explicit, the terms of televisual time and space, knowledge and sex, that incite the logic of the closet, there is one aspect of U.S. commercial television unlikely to be upset by this, or any other of the permutations that I’ve mentioned: the logic of the commodity. Indeed, the statement made above—that *Ellen* has “already been sold”—suggests more than just the fact that syndication rights to the series have been purchased; more generally, it points to the way in which the series and its star have been commodified and, from that, to larger issues of television commodification.

Despite the strange bedfellows thereby created, it is not unexpected that the intersection of *Ellen*’s/Allen’s drama of coming out and the television industry’s own drama of commodification was a matter of concern to a number of otherwise very different groups. An array of viewers and

43. The future perfect is defined as “1. perfect with respect to a temporal point of reference in time to come; completed with respect to a time in the future, esp. when incomplete with respect to the present” (*Random House Webster’s Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. “future perfect”).

44. The purpose of this discussion is thus not simply to suggest more “positive” modes of representing gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people on television (though it would doubtlessly be preferable to have queer characters that don’t just die from murder, suicide, or AIDS—often all equated in TV representation—and that don’t either just disappear from the screen or appear only asexually), but to analyze why and how TV’s queers are represented as they are at this particular time. In other words, it is to question what investments—in knowledge and in sexuality—current U.S. television has and how these investments might be transformed and/or differently performed.

critics presumed that the program's steady diet of clues leading up to the actual announcement episode was nothing but a bald marketing ploy on the part of *Ellen's* producers at ABC and Touchstone Television (both owned by the Walt Disney Company). From the initial leak to the news media ("conveniently timed," *Entertainment Weekly* stated, "to coincide with the sagging sitcom's Sept. 18 season premiere" ["O," p. 20]); through the long trajectory of publicity-generating buzz and speculation; across scheduling changes to ensure "safe" consumption of the show (a move to a later time slot); incorporating DeGeneres's own disclosure in the 14 April issue of *Time* magazine; and finally to the moment when character Ellen Morgan herself proclaims she's gay during the first week of the 1997 May sweeps period (in which advertising rates are set according to a program's Nielson ratings): to many this seemed like simply a season-long sales pitch for the series. And a successful one at that—with an estimated 42 million viewers watching, "The Episode" was said to have reaped the year's highest ratings of both any sitcom and any ABC show.⁴⁵

Yet there was payment as much as profit. As mentioned, the commodification of *Ellen's*/Ellen's yawning closet door elicited a range of reactions from a range of parties. Many people of varying political persuasions were troubled by what they saw as a harmful mix of consumerism and gay politics (either because of the harm caused by any consumption of a "gay lifestyle" or because of the harm caused by having such a serious issue sullied by consumer exchange).⁴⁶ DeGeneres herself seemed concerned about what this might do to her future earning power. Well aware of her own position within the TV industry, she remarked on more than one occasion that "I'm the one who's going to get the biggest boycott. . . . *I'm* the product here," and even went so far as to plead in her *20/20* interview, "Please buy me!"⁴⁷ As for others selling products, several

45. *Reuters/Variety Entertainment Summary*, www.clarinet.com, 1 May 1997.

46. "The Episode" itself made reference to the relationship between consumerism and gay politics, mocking in particular the fear of homosexuals as predators on—that is, untrustworthy consumers of—heterosexuals. In the story, Ellen meets Susan (played by Laura Dern), a lesbian colleague of Ellen's old boyfriend. Though growing more and more attracted to Susan across the episode, Ellen initially denies these feelings, becoming, in fact, quite defensive about their implications. When Susan assumes, from various "clues," that Ellen is also a lesbian, Ellen asserts, "I think I know what's going on. . . . It's not enough for you to be gay; you've got to recruit others." Susan wryly replies: "Well, I'll have to call National Headquarters and tell them I lost you. Damn, just one more and I would've gotten that toaster oven" ("The Episode," 30 Apr. 1997, *Ellen*). Taking aim at both sexual and commodity stereotypes, this joke thus plays on several levels, satirizing the notion of gay recruitment precisely by linking it to consumer desires—and especially to a consumable object typically associated with heterosexual marriage (the toaster oven, the classic example of a wedding shower gift yet here redefined as a reward for a kind of lesbian "consumption").

47. DeGeneres's comments about a boycott are quoted in "RO," p. 85; her plea to "buy me" was made in an interview on *20/20* (Sawyer, interview with DeGeneres, 25 Apr. 1997).

of the program's regular sponsors pulled their ads from "The Episode," including Chrysler (which set up a toll-free phone line to register reactions to their decision), General Motors, J. C. Penney, Johnson and Johnson, and Wendy's. Despite this ad soundbite-flight, ABC still refused some commercials offered in their place: a thirty-second antidiscrimination appeal from the Human Rights Campaign, and an ad for Olivia Cruise Lines, a business owned by and geared toward lesbians. The last case is especially peculiar: rejecting the ad in an apparently prophylactic segregation of TV's commercial spots from TV's (commercial) programs, ABC stated that "discussion about same-sex lifestyles is more appropriate in programming," thus disavowing the very fact of broadcast flow through this denial that television commercials are an intrinsic (indeed *the* most crucial) part of the programming schedule.⁴⁸

Yet what is missed, I would argue, by all of these reactions against the supposedly unnatural combination of *Ellen's* story of the closet and televisual consumerism/commodification is the way in which the logic of commodity is already related to the logic of the closet. In other words, there is no pure space of gay self-disclosure uncontaminated by relations of consumerism and commodification, just as there is no pure space of consumerism uncontaminated by what we might see as closet relations. For as Marx explains in his discussion of "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret," the commodity itself has a dual form, already exhibiting an inside/outside paradox much like the one associated with the epistemology of the closet.⁴⁹ Though it seems as if the commodity has a preexistent internal truth (its own self-generated identity and value), this sense of an inner reality is only created through its outer circulation, through the "external"—that is, social—relations of production and exchange. Indeed, the "secret" of the commodity is created precisely through what Marx calls the "intercourse" between objects made comparable to one another—"socially uniform," of "common character" and similar "semblance," that is, objects that are "homo" to one another—though this social relation must itself be disavowed (or might we say closeted?).⁵⁰ Thus, though DeGeneres stated near the beginning of the season that "it's not just 'Ellen buys a table' this year" (quoted in "O," p. 20), she was only half right: it is not Ellen but *Ellen's* viewers who, in effect, "buy a table," who consume a product perceived through an epistemology of the commodity that is very much like the epistemology of the closet itself. And like Marx's famous table that, "as soon as it emerges as a commodity . . . not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities . . . stands on its head," Ellen too necessarily be-

48. Quoted in Matthew Kilty, "The Outing of Ellen," *LGNY*, 11 May 1997, p. 16, and in *Reuters/Variety Entertainment Summary*, www.clarinet.com, 8 Apr. 1997.

49. See Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes, 3 vols. (New York, 1977), 1:163–77.

50. *Ibid.*, 1:166–67.

comes through this process “a thing which transcends sensuousness,” her homosexuality now an objectified and consumable—rather than simply erotic—form.⁵¹

Never one to miss the opportunity for a joke, DeGeneres herself spoofed this combined logic of the commodity and closet. On *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* that aired on NBC the same night as “The Episode” aired on a competing network, Leno interviewed actress Anne Heche, DeGeneres’s girlfriend, also under fire for using their relationship as a publicity stunt. Asked whether Ellen came to the show with her, Heche replied “Well, yeah, she’s here . . . she goes everywhere with me,” at which point there’s a cut backstage to reveal DeGeneres, supposedly unaware of the camera, talking on the phone: “I’m at the *Tonight Show* with Anne. This is ridiculous. When she approached me with the idea of, like, getting together for publicity, I thought, ‘fine, O.K., I’ll do it for you,’ but I need more money . . . this is going to hurt my image, do you understand what I’m saying? I can’t be seen with her like this. No, no, no, it’s not over now. She wants me to stay until people know how to pronounce her last name. . . . Just ask for more money ’cause I can’t keep this up.” She then hangs up the phone, exclaiming to herself, “My husband and kids are going to kill me.”⁵² In this extended gag that takes aim at both sales and sexual presumptions, DeGeneres exposes, through double reversals, the logic of the commodity and the logic of the closet (indeed, exposes the link between the two), suggesting in the process the ambivalent effects of this very linkage.

Still, a joke that mocks the commodification of gay identity, with whatever fatal wit, does not erase it; indeed, ultimately, it was this very commodity logic that killed *Ellen* (in the process, at least according to DeGeneres’s own rhetoric, killing Ellen herself). In the 1997–98 season, the show’s ratings plummeted, making it difficult, ABC executives claimed, for them to sell airtime to advertisers. Countering that explanation, DeGeneres claimed that it was ABC that failed to sell the show; they misplaced it in the network lineup and refused to advertise it with the same vigor as their other programs.⁵³ There were also conflicts over content: one, for example, involved a dispute over the filming of a kiss. Making an interesting comparison, DeGeneres noted, in a *PrimeTime Live* interview with Diane Sawyer, that ABC had publicized episodes of other sitcoms with same-sex kisses—specifically, those in which the protagonists got their kisses as ploys in sexual masquerades (as occurred, for instance, on *The Drew Carey Show* and *Spin City*, both of which aired stories in which

51. *Ibid.*, 1:163.

52. Jay Leno, interview with Anne Heche, 30 Apr. 1997, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*.

53. See, for instance, DeGeneres’s comments quoted in “O” (the issue with “Yep, She’s Too Gay” printed on the cover, harkening back, of course, to her previous “Yep, I’m Gay” *Time* cover article), and Jess Cagle, “As Gay as It Gets?” *Entertainment Weekly*, 8 May 1998, pp. 27–32; hereafter abbreviated “A.”

their leads pretended to be gay). Only *Ellen*, with an “actual gay” protagonist, not only received no promotion for its “kiss episodes” (even one in which the kiss is “fake” even if Ellen’s sexuality is “real”) but garnered a parental advisory warning as well.⁵⁴

The issue behind these institutional battles was, of course, whether, as Chastity Bono of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation put it, *Ellen* had become “too gay”; after Ellen Morgan came to the knowledge of her sexuality, many of the 1997–98 episodes detailed her growing knowledge of gay/lesbian life (learning the ins and outs of a relationship, developing a familiarity with gay politics and people)—material that raised controversies over notions of relevancy, awareness, and audiences’ ability to “relate.”⁵⁵ According to some, in its attempt to narrativize the logic of the closet, *Ellen* had become harpingly pedagogical; according to others (including DeGeneres herself), it was important to use the program as an educational device. Yet to attempt to use TV’s famed intimacy as a tool for teaching about new intimate pairings is to risk neglecting the anxiety (often siphoned off as laughter) that accompanies TV’s treatment of sex. Eschewing the comedy typically found in sitcom pairings, Ellen’s search for a mate was presented in more serious terms, pushing at the limits of the show’s genre in order to show how gender need not be a limit to TV’s vision of romance. The questions, then, over what’s too gay or not gay enough, what’s “funny that way” or what’s simply queer, whether the show was “too different” or “too all the same,” overly demonstrative or underappreciative in instructing viewers on reading the text, revealed once again that the door of the closet can swing both ways, that sexual knowingness remains a faultline for knowing TV.⁵⁶

Both supporting and refuting the idea that *Ellen* was, as ABC president Robert Iger put it, plagued by “sameness,” the program’s final episode inserted *Ellen* into a honored trajectory of TV history.⁵⁷ Linking

54. DeGeneres made this observation in a *PrimeTime Live* interview with Sawyer, 6 May 1998.

55. Chastity Bono’s comments were widely reported. For one take on the incident (and DeGeneres’s reaction), see, for instance, “A,” p. 30.

56. Related to this question of whether *Ellen* became “too different” or “too all the same” is the generic and style vacillation that the show experienced in the 1997–98 season. For instance, *Entertainment Weekly* complained that “the show fluctuated from merely poignant (Ellen visits her girlfriend in the hospital) to broadly comic (Ellen at a wake in a chicken suit)” and that the supporting cast members “were often relegated to deep background” (“A,” p. 30). Shifting between melodrama and slapstick, instruction and inanity, gay themes and heterosexual norms, the program lacked any cohesive identity—despite the fact that the program’s mission now seemed to be to clarify an identity for its title character (and for gays and lesbians on TV in general).

57. ABC president Robert Iger made this comment to Sawyer in the *PrimeTime Live* story about the cancellation of *Ellen* (Sawyer, interview with Iger, 6 May 1998, *PrimeTime Live*.) To Iger’s claim, “The audience left primarily due to *sameness*—not gayness, sameness,” Sawyer responded, “Well, she is gay every week, though . . . Paul Reiser is heterosexual

Ellen to past and present TV texts, the one-hour finale, a “mockumentary” on groundbreaking television, alternated “interviews” with cast and “commentators” (largely other television personalities) with scenes of Ellen’s “appearances” in a number of key televisual moments (the first on-air pregnancy, à la *I Love Lucy*; the introduction of political rhetoric in situation comedy, à la *All in the Family*, and so on). Clearly, this was meant as a sort of self-congratulation for the series’s groundbreaking status as the first prime-time program to feature a gay or lesbian lead.⁵⁸ Or was it? In the final moments of the show, DeGeneres explains *her* understanding of the program’s watershed event: she was the first prime-time figure ever honestly to reveal her age on television. To punctuate, DeGeneres replays lines from her famous speech in “The Episode.” “Why do I have to be so ashamed? I mean, why can’t I just see the truth? I mean, be who I am, I’m thirty-five years old . . .”—and then abruptly stops the tape.

Which brings me back to my opening example of *Roseanne*. As I noted in describing the episode “Skeleton in the Closet,” the Connor family pranks also couple performances of sexuality with performances of age—both of which incite anxieties over the ambiguities of body and identity (that show’s bombshell that age and sexual orientation, involving not simply categorization but lived instantiation, might not be as certain and determined as we think). For commercial television, which must keep its texts both steadily familiar yet refreshingly alive, the uncertainty of the new and the inevitability of growing old pose equal threats. In their masquerades, members of the Connor family mock both fears, miming

every single week.” Sawyer then asked Iger to compare this situation concerning sexuality to one concerning race: “You wouldn’t ask a black person to be a little less black.” Iger’s reply: “Society . . . is more used to differences in race.” This slippage between gayness and sameness and then, immediately thereafter, between gayness and difference, is very telling not only in light of my comments above about television’s pedagogic potential through sameness and difference but also in light of Sedgwick’s more general point about homosexuality and the founding conceptual oppositions (including the binary same/different) of our culture’s epistemology. The exchange is also, of course, telling in the conjunctions and disjunctions it articulates between U.S. TV’s treatment of sexuality and its treatment of race.

58. Despite the self-congratulatory stance of *Ellen*’s finale, the show once again mocked the combined logic of the commodity and closet previously discussed. For instance, to interviewer Linda Ellerbee’s exclamation that “over 40 million people watched that show [“The Episode”],” Ellen replied, “if I had known we’d get that kind of number, I would have called it the ‘everybody who’s watching please send me a dollar’ episode.” When, later, DeGeneres suggested that the program’s groundbreaking moment involved not the announcement of her sexuality but the announcement of her age, Ellerbee, taken aback, said, “Maybe I’m mistaken, but I thought telling people you were gay was the whole point of the episode.” DeGeneres responded, “Really? No, no, that’s just the spin the network put on it. They’re gay-crazy over there.” While denying that this was either her motive or her understanding of the text (though still expressing anxiety over her financial position), DeGeneres still acknowledges (however satirically) the profit that both ABC and Ellen herself might be able accrue by capitalizing on this supposed gay-craze (“*Ellen*: A Hollywood Tribute,” 13 May 1998, *Ellen*.)

the awkward pangs of self- (and other-) discovery and the horrors of premature decline. As indicated above, in describing her rebirth and decline, DeGeneres also used a rhetoric of death. In an interview about her program's cancellation, she told *Entertainment Weekly*, "'And now I'm dead,'" to which Heche, also at the interview, added: "'That's it. Being married to a dead person, it's cool, it's different. We've already done the gay thing'" (quoted in "A," p. 28). And so, apparently, had television. The shock of the new quickly gave rise to the tedium of the old—surely a death blow for a text in a medium that stakes its claim on up-to-date liveness.

But not to worry. As Sedgwick reminds us, as long as we locate ourselves within an epistemological space mapped by the terms of life/death, inside/outside, public/private, secrecy/disclosure—as, I've suggested, U.S. TV does—sexuality will remain a pressing issue, one both bothersome and banal.⁵⁹ The logic of the closet will thus always be available for televisual resuscitation—something more than demonstrated by the public/private, sensational/deadening drama of what even *TV Guide* came to call "ClintonTV."⁶⁰ A less momentous (or perhaps less monotonous) example, but one that relates more directly to the other examples I've given (because, in fact, it reiterates all of them) is the recent NBC show *Will and Grace*. Cited in many stories concerning DeGeneres's battles, *Will and Grace* was frequently brought up (or brought out) in the popular press as a demonstration that *Ellen's* demise need not be taken as a sign of television's resistance to gay and lesbian content.

Given my argument that television has not simply been resistant to gay content—that its position on the precarious border of the many op-

59. Thus, though DeGeneres remarked to Sawyer, "You can't just come out and then go back in the closet," I am suggesting that such "coming out and going back in" indeed defines television's epistemological movement (even if not the actual movement of actors in the U.S. TV industry)—or, more accurately, that television confounds the distinctions between in and out so that these two positions cannot simply be posed as oppositions but are instead mutually implicated in the medium as it's been historically organized in this country (Sawyer, interview with DeGeneres, 6 May 1998, *PrimeTime Live*).

60. *TV Guide* introduced "ClintonTV," penned by Andrew Ferguson, as a new section to provide "continuing coverage of the scandal" at the beginning of October 1998 (Andrew Ferguson, "The Power of Babble," *TV Guide*, 3 Oct. 1998, pp. 34–35, 42). In the inaugural column, Ferguson notes how "the medium of television had absorbed the scandal and transformed it, making it its own. . . . The scandal has become great TV—and in so doing has revealed the strengths and weaknesses of TV itself" (p. 34). Ferguson is interested in television's capacity for "live" coverage, "immediacy," and "speed." According to him, "everything was exposed, instantaneously" (p. 35), yielding a populist free-for-all that threatens standards of legitimacy and authority; at risk, Ferguson suggests, is "journalism as a profession, [and] journalists as specialized practitioners doing work that requires concentration and expertise and a sense of detachment" (p. 42). While I am also interested in how television makes such sex scandals "its own," thus revealing "the strengths and weaknesses of TV itself," I am less concerned with defending traditional journalistic standards of epistemic authority and legitimacy than in analyzing a framing tele-epistemology that leads TV critics such as Ferguson to describe television in terms of both exposure and obscurity, concentration and distraction, close participation and reasoned detachment.

positions I've listed demands some engagement with questions of sexuality just as it demands their disavowal—I would not necessarily disagree. But this upholds, rather than undoes, the tele-epistemology I've described. Indeed, in bringing homosexuality back to televisual life, *Will and Grace* also resuscitates the many strategies of "knowing sexuality" previously elaborated. Because, unlike *Ellen*, *Will and Grace's* Will was introduced as gay from the very start, the network didn't have to imagine how to have him (and us) come to this knowledge. Yet in revealing television's anxious attempt to draw a distinction between the attribution of sexuality and the enactment of desire, Will is, in effect, placed in a male/female couple, as the show is centered on his relationship with his female roommate/soulmate, the aforementioned Grace. His best friend, Jack, the other gay man on the show, is also, to some degree, teamed with a woman (thematically if not emotionally), Grace's friend Karen. Further, Jack seems to combine almost all of the other strategies in one (the knowing secondary character who's life doesn't get the attention, the obvious stereotype turned into camp, the object of jokes based on hints and innuendos, and so on).

In other words, if *Ellen* can be seen as narrativizing, not just symptomatizing, TV's logic of the closet, then *Will and Grace* might be seen as spatializing this logic—adding dimension by exhibiting (whether knowingly or not) all of the permutations in one half-hour show. Perhaps, in that way, it implicitly performs the range of the textual/sexual moves that I've tried explicitly to map. But this is not to say that explicit announcement (whether of the television theorist or the television text) is a means of escaping the epistemological trajectories I've discussed. Like a television console whose exterior is made to be displayed while the actual workings are hidden within, such announcements may repackage or reframe but not necessarily short-circuit the system (though, as I've suggested, it is likely to short-circuit itself). In other words, I hope that I have demonstrated that in formulating a politics of representation, we need not—indeed, should not—simply ask for more (more disclosure, more true-to-life drama, more explicit imagery), that the explicit revelation of sexuality on commercial television need not explode the logic of the closet. For that, taking a lesson from Roseanne, we might just have to blow up the whole house.