

Talking Freaks: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Families on Daytime Talk TV

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The thing we constantly ask ourselves is, "Is this something our audience can relate to?" So whereas lesbian issues aren't something that maybe middle America, you know, maybe the housewife with three kids who's in Kansas City isn't that related to, but yet she can understand a mother-son relationship. I think that people can kind of relate to what it must be like to be going through something like that and have to deal with your children. Or like coming out to your parents and friends. It's not necessary that everyone can relate to being homosexual, but people can relate to having to reveal something to your parents, reveal something to your friends, that's going to potentially cause problems.

—Leeza executive producer Nancy Alspaugh¹

Springer had a person who had a sex change, and they dragged his family on there. His two sons saying, "We ain't going to talk to him anymore." And his little eleven-year-old daughter stands up in the audience, says, "I don't want to ever see him again." And Springer stands up with his last five-minute little comment and says, "If you're thinking about having one of these things and you brought kids into the world, why don't you just keep your pants on until they're grown up and out of the house and then do what you're going to do." That was an outright attack on our community and we are desperately trying to dry up his supply of transgenders. They'll still find people. They're going to have to find an awful lot of rogue people, though, people that aren't connected, because anybody who's connected with anything, we're going to basically say, "This show is quarantined."

—transsexual activist and former talk-show guest Cheryl-Ann Costa

Queer parents, parents of lesbians, cross-dressing teenagers and their mothers, married gay couples adopting children, drag queens and their sisters: queer family relationships, while emerging in a strained and limited way in the political arena, are all over daytime television. Family politics, in fact, are emerging not in an arena of cultural silence in daytime entertainment genres but in one of exploding cultural visibility, of ongoing chatter, testimony, and display. Now that Ellen's coming-out episode is already a distant memory, and drag queen Ru Paul holds court on *The Hollywood Squares*, and prime-time sitcom *Will and Grace* boasts the first gay male title character, and both gay-male "best-friend" characters and chic lesbian bars are becoming movie clichés, it is time to revisit the politics of visibility. We are clearly in the midst of an explosion of visibility for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people in commercial-media culture. Even though plenty of Hollywood stars remain closeted (Signorile 1993), much of what is happening seems to be right in line with what many of us have craved personally for years, and organizations such as the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) have pursued politically for years. It has been something of a sacred cow in gay-media studies and politics that more exposure is the goal (Fejes and Petrich 1993; Gross 1989; Russo 1987), and now we are getting that. But looking at representations of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender families on daytime television talk shows complicates the question of visibility just a bit—and now is an especially important time to do so.

On a collective level, the desire for visibility is especially powerful for marginalized groups, whose public images are often minimal or wildly distorted. Since contemporary lesbian and gay identities began forming earlier in this century, cultural visibility has been a central concern for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, who have been subject to the charge that they do not exist, and many of whom, since queerness is not marked on the body, can and do choose to be invisible. The positive effects of visibility are quite plain: "Cultural visibility can prepare the ground for gay civil rights protection," as Rosemary Hennessy sums it up, and "affirmative images of lesbians and gays in the mainstream media . . . can be empowering for those of us who have lived most of our lives with no validation at all from the dominant culture" (1994/95:31–32). In the case of political struggle for the recognition of a diversity of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender family forms, for instance, the fact that such families exist on their own terms, and the stories that get widely told about where sex- and gender-nonconformists fit in "the family," are clearly important. The desire to be recog-

nized, affirmed, validated, and to lay the cultural groundwork for political change, in fact, is so strong it has tended to inhibit careful analysis of the dynamics of becoming visible.

A number of things recommend talk shows as a place to look at visibility processes. For one, in a sense they paved the way for the kinds of publicity we are seeing now: they have been really the one place in commercial media where we, since the 1970s, have been consistently visible. It is no accident that Oprah Winfrey played Ellen-the-character's therapist in the famous 1996 coming-out episode, and that Ellen-the-star chose Winfrey's show as the one on which to first appear with then-girlfriend Anne Heche. On a certain level, "queers" rule these shows (Gamson 1998a; Shattuc 1997). More important, they offer a case in which transgendered people, lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men are, at least partially and potentially, *agents* in their own visibility. Beyond their obvious exploitative and sensationalist nature, that is the twist talk shows provide: people playing themselves. A close look appropriately messes up conventional thinking about visibility. What kinds of visibility does television provide, and for whom exactly, and on what terms? Might "positive" images also be "negative" ones? Just what kind of cultural environment underwrites the politics of the family?

It is with these more general questions in mind—what is, can, and should be going on with cultural visibility—that I turn to the representation of families in the talk-show genre. As anyone who has watched one of these shows knows, "family" is a topic of particular interest to talk shows. One dominant format, especially now, is programming that features families in conflict; more generally, producers, aiming primarily at women for whom everyday marriage and family relationships are central, routinely produce their programs by putting such family issues at the center. In the culture at large, put simply, sexual "deviants" have been seen as aliens within families or outcasts from them, biologically incapable of reproducing (Weston 1991); on talk shows, families with queers in them, and queer families, can usually be counted upon for a certain amount of conflict, and are thus constants.

In fact, "family" is the firm, beating heart of daytime talk TV. As a genre that is highly domestic, in which chattering people in pseudo-living rooms make their way into actual living rooms, and a genre targeting primarily women at home, there is a constant return to the concerns of family life. "In the end," as Jane Shattuc has argued, "the shows depend on the nuclear family as their mainstay. . . . Almost every show plays upon the fear and loss and the triumph and return of the nuclear family" (1997:45). That mainstay is and has been an opening for sexually nonconforming people—who are

parts of families and make trouble for them—one major source of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender visibility on these shows, a visibility that simultaneously gives voice and exploits. It is also the source of a major tension on the shows: between promoting "acceptance" and "tolerance" of different sorts of family members and protecting the underpinnings of the heterosexual, monogamous, nuclear family, in which people of "opposite" sexes make exclusive emotional and sexual commitments to one another, divide up tasks (at least loosely) along gender lines, and rear children together.

As I move into the details of this picture, I want to expand on this tension between "normalizing" and "freakifying" our families. Talk shows do this, I will argue, by on the one hand working with a loosely liberal ideology while on the other hand establishing a new, updated, culturally conservative version of "normal" families that includes gays and lesbians while programming transgendered and bisexual people as too selfish and monstrous for the family. This is another important reminder that our visibility is shot through with a politics of division (Gamson 1998b; Schacter 1997). The cultural visibility strategies to which family politics are attached must take these divisions carefully into account.

TALK SHOWS, CLASS, AND FAMILIES

The show was about people who can't accept their gay relatives, and my job was to sort through all of the things that had just been seen on the air and try to come to some sort of understanding. . . . So it's about five minutes into the show, and I realize that they have on a collection of the most incredibly dysfunctional people from rural parts of the United States. People who have never been on television before and are saying the most horrific, hateful things to each other. Mother to daughter, lesbian lover to the mother-in-law, half-brother to brother. And I'm watching this thinking, "How am I ever going to go out there and make any sense of any of this?" One guy yelled, "The only pussy you've ever seen is the cat that crawled across the floor in your house," and "my fucking daughter this and that." Every other word was "fuck." Then they introduced a mother and her straight daughter and they interviewed the lesbian daughter—they haven't seen each other in I don't know how long—and her lover. There was screaming back and forth. "You're not my child. They must have mixed up the babies at the hospital." And the sister says, "She's ruined her life. They took the children away because of

the lover." Terrible things back and forth. Then they brought out a sister and brother, Hispanic sister and brother. And, "fucking this," and "fuck that," and "he borrows my clothes and I'm going to get AIDS from the clothes." And then Sally introduced two boys, sixteen and nineteen, straight kids from the mountains of Tennessee, who had the most horrible things to say about gay people. They were there because their brother was going to be on the show. Well, they introduced the brother and the lover. They came out holding hands, swish onto the stage, throw themselves in their chairs and tongue kiss. But they were worked up too, they were angry and they were told to do whatever, and they're not going on with any particular agendas. And I thought, "We're in great shape now."

—Writer and Sally guest Eric Marcus

The recent history of the TV-talk genre offers the first indicators of the kinds of divisions on which talk-show visibility depends. The talk-show genre has always combined the rational, "propriety"-oriented styles of public participation associated with the middle classes with the more emotional, "irreverent" public culture associated with American lower classes. There is nothing inherent in class background, of course, that dictates how one behaves in public, nothing inherently rational about middle-class people or inherently emotional about working-class ones. Yet historically, to boil it down to its simplest, class cultures developed—typically by defining themselves against one another—such that rationality became the more common middle-class public participatory strategy and emotionality became the stronger base of working-class public participation (see DiMaggio 1991; Habermas 1991; Levine 1988; Peiss 1986).

Talk shows joined the two, exaggerating each through various strategies and routines (guest and audience recruitment, programming frames, guest and audience coaching, host styles, and so on). In the earlier days of the genre, when the *Donahue* model dominated, and continuing in some programs today, primarily white, middle-class, highly educated, organizationally affiliated guests came on to talk "rationally" about issues, either in debate or testimonial format. More recently, beginning in the 1990s with *Ricki Lake*, *Jerry Springer*, and their imitators—who targeted a younger, more racially and socioeconomically diverse audience—primarily unaffiliated, working-class and poor people of many colors with little education come on TV mainly to argue emotionally about interpersonal relationships (Gamson 1998a; Grindstaff 1997; Shattuc 1997). The genre has thus more or less split into two subgenres: one dependent on an exaggerated middle-class "social

controversy" and "service" culture, the other on an exaggerated working-class and underclass "interpersonal conflict" culture; one relatively polite and taking itself quite seriously, the other unapologetically and playfully rowdy.

"Class" takes its place on TV-talk shows not so much through explicit discussion—a rarity in American popular culture in general—but through its embodiment, often amplified by the programs, in both studio audiences and guests. Occupational markers may be provided (a guest presented and labeled as "lawyer" or "truck-lift operator"), but class backgrounds mostly come across through widely recognized markers such as their language use, levels of emotional effusiveness, gestures, the conditions of their bodies and teeth, and their clothing and hair styles. There may be occasional ambiguity, and we are not talking about class in any strict sociological sense, but for the most part it is safe to say that viewers know that on programs such as *Leeza* they are encountering middle-class people and discourses and on programs such as *Springer* they are encountering working-class or poverty-class people and discourses (Grindstaff 1997). These class-based divisions are the foundation on which talk-show representations of the family are constructed—and it is typically the "trashy" shows (read: the shows with guests and audiences who are not middle-class) that are criticized for giving lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered people, among others, a bad name (Gamson 1998b).

For a taste of the differences, compare two 1995 programs on gay and lesbian parenting. The first, in the middle-class salon style, is hosted by former *Taxi* star Marilu Henner, whose guests—presumably recruited, as on this brand of shows they tend to be, through organizational networks—are various lesbians and gay men raising kids. No one is there to oppose them, no right-wing bigot to argue about recruitment and seduction and America's vulnerable children, and both host and audience are politely supportive. The guests are dressed in professional suitlike garb, the audience members are generally quiet, showing themselves through applause and asking informational questions; very little slang is used, and everyone speaks in the words and cadences of the college educated.

Everyone at this *Marilu* show pretty much agrees that loving families are a good thing. The implicit and sometimes explicit model of family offered, not surprisingly, is the one exemplified by the chosen guests: a liberal revision of the "normal" (and normative) mainstream, two-parent, middle-class nuclear family. Good parenting takes love, Henner suggests in her opening, and "it really shouldn't matter what color skin a parent has, or what religion they are, or even what their sexual orientation is, as long as a parent can raise a child with love and understanding." The rest of the show is structured to

back up that thesis. Jeff, a white gay man in a suit and tie, an amiable cantor, talks about his adopted daughter ("a little Gemini," crows Marilu) and the women who help raise her and makes jokes about prejudice ("I don't make eggs in a gay way"). Debra, a blonde lesbian professional in a smart suit and pearls, talks about finding a "darling guy" in a Beverly Hills hair salon to donate sperm, quotes Thoreau, and praises her children's school ("the parents know we're gay, and nobody cares, and that's beautiful"), explaining that the "only negativity I feel is from Lou Sheldon and Newt Gingrich," and so on. The parents talk of spiritual paths and praying before dinner and "normal families" and "journeys of learning." Debra explains how when she began looking for "alternatives to how I could have children," it was still a pioneering area. "You probably made it easier for a lot of the people who were doing it," Marilu observes, to which Debra responds:

Yes, I did. It was very scary to get into that, but one of the reasons I'm on this show twelve years later to discuss it is because it's worked out in such a positive way, and my children are wonderful and they're happy and they're thriving. So it was an experiment that's worked out in a very positive manner. So I think it's important that we share that with the world,

219 when the radical right is trying to actually talk to us about family values and their family values.

"Mmm hmm," Marilu says, smiling and nodding. "Cause this looks like a family to me." There's a brief pause, and then the camera pans a calmly applauding audience—applauding, apparently, for the integration of lesbians into standard middle-class family forms, for a lesbian family that still "looks like a family to me" (Perpetual Notion 1995). This show, with its unthreatening, professional, woman-in-pearls/man-in-suit, clean-talking, articulate guests (and host, and audience) could have been scripted by GLAAD. But are these "positive" images?

The newer breed of shows, on the other hand, routinely recruits guests through toll-free numbers rather than through organizations, and attracts a crowd with little familiarity with a movement agenda; different kinds of queer families show up here. Consider, for instance, the class and ethnic markers in Eric Marcus's description, quoted in the epigraph to this section, of the rather typical *Sally* show on which he appeared as the middle-class, mainstream counterpoint: the bleeped-out swearing, the "Hispanic sister and brother," the "dysfunctional" guests from "the mountains of Tennessee," the public display of tongue kissing. Or consider a 1995 *Ricki Lake* show,

which, despite the various markers announcing that the guests are not middle-class professionals (a straight-woman-versus-lesbian-mothers set from Arkansas, facing off in indelicate language about whether "a child of gay parents can grow up normal"), at first appears to be only a slight, personalized adaptation of the bigotry-is-bad programming of the *Donahue* years. When a panelist complains that the lesbians' kid will not know what is normal, Lake, in a sharp navy pants suit, gets a serious, slightly impatient look on her face, as though she is speaking to a small, somewhat bratty child. "But that's just it, what is normal, Lorraine?" Asked by Lake why straight couples can sit on the same sofa and hold hands at her house while the lesbians cannot, Lorraine says she is not ready to explain it to her kids. "What is the difference?" says Ricki. "They love each other. It's not like they're spewing hate everywhere. What *you're* doing is spewing hate telling them it's wrong to love someone." Applause from the audience. Bigots bad, lesbians good.

That is, until a "bad" lesbian mother shows up. Karen, a fifteen-year-old heterosexual African American, is there to tell her mother, Helen ("bar-tender, Illinois," says her caption) and her mother's Latina lover, Marie ("I'm a mechanic, I work in construction," she says to audience applause) that she thinks "being gay or lesbian is disgusting." Helen, in black leggings, big earrings, and a sparkly blazer, reports that she has seven kids, and speaks angrily, unapologetically, and colloquially—she is about as far as you can get from the middle-class lesbians on *Marilu*—about how this is "something Karen has to deal with," and how "her opinion doesn't matter to me, I'm happy, I made a choice to be with a woman and I'm not ashamed of it." The sympathy, not surprisingly, quickly moves toward the daughter, who confesses to Ricki that she was so bothered by her mother's lesbianism that she once tried to take her own life. The audience responds with cooing sympathy, and Helen becomes a lightning rod for audience hostility during the rest of the program, while various other guests do their shtick: a lesbian who doesn't think gay people should parent; a white gay man with discolored teeth who wants children bickering with a large straight woman who complains that he goes through his lovers like he changes his underwear; circuit-conservative Paul Cameron (a discredited psychologist from the right-wing Family Research Institute) who trades "facts" with certified homosexual Gabriel Rotello—the latter two, in professional outfits, clearly representing middle-class expertise. Helen spars with guests ("What society tell her to feel, I don't care"), with Lorraine ("How many daddies have your kids had?"), with her own daughter, and most of all with Cameron ("We up here to talk about *why* are peoples against it"). "Just because you got on a suit and tie and you

got what they got a manhood down there," she spits at Cameron, "what make you so *normal*?"

One does not often see or hear from working-class lesbians of color raising children in American mass culture; on TV-talk shows, however, they make regular appearances. And Helen's arguments are not much different from those of white, college-educated gay activists—"normal" is often a synonym for "in power," homophobia not homosexuality is the social problem, lesbians and gays are as entitled to fulfillment as straight people, and so on—albeit in a different language, and in brief, hard-to-catch outbursts. Yet Helen herself is booed largely because of her presentational style, is not sympathetic, has a bad attitude, and most of all is a "*bad mother*," (Paramount Pictures 1995a), lacking the "enlightened" parenting techniques advocated by middle-class experts. In the terms encouraged by the program, Helen lacks "class"; indeed, her status as a relatively poor, relatively uneducated woman of color makes it quite easy for class and racial hostilities to attach to hostilities toward nonnormative family forms, the whole package dismissed as selfish, unfair, inhumane.

Now, are these negative images? The newer, rowdier type of talk show, with its anyone-can-be-a-star recruitment strategies and its strategy of giving the stage to people from marginalized class and racial positions (in order to exploit them, of course), has meant, for instance, a tremendous diversification in the available images of families on these shows. It is no longer just white and middle-class people who are shown creating queer families or dealing with lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender family members. For another thing, it has meant that a much more aggressive, noisy, challenging, "in your face" approach to families of origin—*What makes you so normal?*—and to gay, bisexual, transgender, and lesbian people's roles in families and as parents has taken the stage. Activists interested in establishing the similarity of gay families to "normal" ones through their closeness to the middle-class mainstream, that is, have lost control of the discourse. The model of the lesbian or gay family that makes its way onto the screens on these kinds of shows thus includes, on the one hand, a much wider range of classes and races within it than one finds almost anywhere in American media culture, and these guests from marginalized class, ethnic, and racial statuses often present themselves with extraordinary strength, articulateness, and power; on the other hand, the lower status of the guests as poor, often not white, and queer, their heavily marked class positioning in a world where middle class is normative, their setting-off against representatives of middle-class family values, means that they and their families are easily dismissed as "dysfunctional" and not "respectable." The class divi-

sion of talk shows has made the question of "positive" and "negative" family images harder to answer, in large part because it amplifies the question of just whose version of lesbian mother, or gay father, or transsexual daughter, or bisexual son is going to get air time. Whether one thinks the changes in the genre are good or not, they provide another important reminder of the divisions playing out as our visibility increases. Just whose families get to be seen as "ours"? Just whose "family values" get to be presented as ours? Any path to visibility must face down these questions.

THERAPEUTIC LIBERALISM AND THE VULNERABLE CHILD

These people are going to repeat the same thing, that if God wanted to create Adam and Steve he would have, blah blah blah. It's all been said and done before, so how are we going to advance it? You never get anywhere. You're never going to change the Bible thumpers. Never. No matter what you do. So why make that the issue of an hour show? It is one of those issues that people are so entrenched religiously, emotionally. How are we going to *maybe* change some of their minds? How are we going to *maybe* create tolerance? The only way you do it is not inherently make that the focus of the hour, not making it a right or wrong issue. It's not like it's right or wrong, it's more like, "Can this mother accept her son's gay lover?" It's like we're taking the assumption that the mother is accepting the son is gay. What you do is take real people that have real family concerns and they in particular want to try to get over it. Or they themselves within the two of them, the son and the mother, want to have some sort of peace. Like, "My mom kicked me out because I'm gay," okay. We're talking about individuals now. We're not talking about the issue of gayness. We're talking about an issue where a son wants to be able to go back into the house because he loves his mother. The mother can't accept the fact that he's gay. That goes beyond saying, "Is gay right or wrong?" We have a family in a crisis.

—Daytime talk show executive producer

Representations of gay, bisexual, lesbian, and transgender parents and family members are shaped not just by these two talk-show models but also by a more general ideological tension inherent in the genre: between a liberal-sexual ideology that eschews secrets and a conservative-gender ideology expressed in a concern for the creation of gender-normal boys and girls. On the one hand, talk shows—whether the older, more sedate Donahue-style

or the newer, hipper Ricki style—are very receptive to the argument that family members must love and accept their homosexual children. This is in part because the shows operate with a loose ideology of liberal pluralism: we are all different, live and let live, tolerate and respect the rights of others to be who they are (Carbaugh 1989). This pluralist tone gets wedded, moreover, to therapeutic values—disseminated by hosts such as Oprah Winfrey—which give an extra push toward tolerance (White 1992). Speech and disclosure are cleansing and healthy, confession is good for the soul; at all costs, talk, you'll feel better. Given the profit-making strategies of the shows, this liberal, therapeutic ideology (once again, a feature of what can loosely be called bourgeois culture) makes good sense: for TV talk to work, everyone must be allowed to speak, or yell, regardless of their position; appeals in the name of tolerance, understanding, free speech, and mental health give this talk at least the appearance of a purpose.

Crass and cynical as it can be, this therapeutic-pluralism-turned-entertainment is much more sympathetic to liberal approaches to gay and lesbian families and family members (and sometimes to transgender and bisexual ones) than to conservative condemnations of it. The result, in fact, is often that the bigot who can't accept a family member becomes the pariah, and the accepting family member becomes the hero. *Donahue*, for instance, programmed a show on gay teens by bringing on a young man whose father tried to kill him after discovering his son was gay; a sixteen-year-old whose mother put him in a mental hospital because he's gay, along with the boy's mother and stepmother; and a nineteen-year-old lesbian and her mother. "We got to get rid of this closet," Donahue declares, typically. One boy, rejected by his biological family, talks about how he has "developed my own family," his surrogate parents, two men. The next tells how his mother called him a "little faggot" and then institutionalized him; she, contrite and ashamed, talks about how "I would say terrible things to him like that and I didn't realize the pressure he was going through," and the grandmother steps in to say "it's a matter of unconditional love." The young lesbian's mother, the last of the family guests, talks about how "you can either reject your child, you can tolerate your child, or you can accept your child," and gets in a plug for Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) just before a brief interview with the associate executive director of Hetrick Martin, a New York City organization serving gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth. The audience is courteous and sympathetic. The show is quite explicitly programmed to model "acceptance" of gay and lesbian kids and even to give information about how to go about it (Multimedia Entertainment 1994).

Ricki Lake has taken this kind of show to its extreme, often by programming class-inflected lessons in tolerance. Writer and ACT UP veteran Michelangelo Signorile, for instance, took the role usually given to a therapist, holding forth from a throne-like chair on a show whose title, "I'm Gay, Get Over It!" even recalls Queer Nation's "We're here, we're queer, get used to it!" Various family members denounce their gay relatives, refusing, in Lake's terms, "to accept you for who you are": Tammy tells her sister Pam, a butch lift-truck operator from Georgia, that Pam doesn't know what she's missing ("I know what I'm missin', but I know what I'm a-gittin', too," Pam responds); a grandmother says she knew there was something wrong with her grandson when he was born ("Not wrong, just different," corrects Lake). "Michelangelo, can you educate her?" Lake says, turning to Signorile. "Michelangelo, enlighten us," which he does, telling this one to love her child and that one that there's nothing she can do about it. Not only was there no antigay, don't-accept-your-children "other side" but, in a twist that has some of the sweetness of just desserts, the militant gay activist had become the one dispensing advice to unloving family members, the gay son elevated to the therapist's throne (Paramount Pictures 1995c). "Remember," Lake says to the camera in her final word, sitting casually on the steps of the stoop-like stage, after a series of people have been blasted by the audience and other panelists for objecting to gays coming near their kids, "children are not born to hate and fear, they are taught to hate and fear" (Paramount Pictures 1995b). Any moral condemnation of gayness that takes place within this kind of "love and accept your gay children" show is at a distinct disadvantage.

A general, self-interested constitutional hostility toward closets, toward secrets that are left unrevealed, leads many talk shows to tilt, regardless of their class compositions and class strategies, toward a welcoming of lesbian and gay family members. Yet, on the other hand, despite the repeated attacks the shows facilitate on the myth that homosexuals recruit children, or ruin them, or are never found in preadult forms, a ubiquitous concern for the fate of "the children" of gays and lesbians also continuously shows up and competes for primacy. Again, this is as much a production-driven concern as an ideological one: the shows target primarily a female audience, often presumed to be mothers (middle-class or not), by programming from the point of view of a generic, heterosexual "mother." The arguments that queer kids should be accepted just like any other, and that children should not be taught to hate and fear gay people, are, in fact, just particular versions of the more general argument that children need parental protection and that families ought to provide safety rather than threat. Often, such a logic is turned against lesbians,

gay men, bisexuals, and gender-crossers—especially when the issue of gay parenting comes up anywhere on the shows—triggering repeated expressions of worry by audiences for “the children.” Significantly, although much of it is fueled by religiously based opposition to homosexuality in general, and in some cases simply repeats the charge that children of gay people will turn out to be gay themselves (and that such a fate is undesirable), the underlying worry seems to be how these children will learn to be “normal” *men and women*—that is, conventionally masculine or feminine.

So, for example, on a 1993 Oprah show on “The Lesbian and Gay Baby Boom,” a mixed-race panel offers testimonials on the experience of being lesbian or gay and raising children, joined by expert testimony from lesbian researchers Charlotte Patterson and April Martin. Roberta and Jacqué, an African American couple, are joined by their kids Nabiway and Eqion, and John and Ron, a white gay couple who are both lawyers and parents, and another lesbian couple and their adult children. By the applause it seems the audience is on the side of tolerance, but when Oprah goes to the audience the program heats up. Hostile audience members object, some on the grounds that homosexuality is immoral and others on the grounds that subjecting children to the hardship and ridicule of having lesbian or gay parents is—as Paul Cameron, attacking Helen the bartender, would argue later of Ricki—“selfish.” Oprah then hands the microphone to an African American man who seems dying to speak and who reveals the concern that often seems to underwrite the objection to lesbian and gay parenting: “How can these two gentlemen,” he says, pointing at the lawyers, “going to teach a little girl to be a girl? And how can you people, how can you teach this boy to be a man, and he’s a fruitcake?” (King World 1993). While TV-talk shows are often programmed to celebrate tolerance of lesbian and gay *children* by their straight parents, their “what about the children?” mantra also encourages attacks on lesbian and gay *parents* for undermining the life chances—the chance to be a “normal” man or woman, especially in terms of gender presentation—of their presumed-to-be-heterosexual children.

BISexuals, TRANSGENDERS, AND THE CONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE OF QUEER FAMILIES

THIS CONCERN WITH “THE CHILDREN” is in part a knee-jerk habit, but the underlying concern with conformity to basic norms of gender and monogamy holds important clues. In many ways, bisexuals and transgen-

dered people pay the price for daytime television’s progay moral cheerleading. The push for accepting gay family members and gay families, in fact, is predicated upon the frequent dismissal of transgendered and bisexual people on TV talk. The ideology the talk-show field seems structured to protect is no longer so much the moral superiority of heterosexual families; rather, it is that of the moral inferiority of unconventional gender presentation and sexual nonmonogamy (see Ringer, chapter 9). This is an advance for *some* gay and lesbian families, but a severely compromised one.

To begin with, bisexuals appear much more rarely than homosexuals in family-focused talk-show formats in which their role as siblings or children or parents is central; instead, they are disproportionately programmed through the format of “relationship troubles.” That is, they are positioned almost exclusively as those who make family life impossible, largely through the reliance on familiar, moldy stereotypes: as people who can’t decide (caught in love triangles, or married bisexuals), who are sexually voracious (rarely do you find a monogamous bisexual), and so on (Hutchins and Ka’ahumanu 1990). Bisexuals are routinely attacked on these shows for their inability “to commit” and for wanting to “have their cake and eat it too.” Although they sometimes get to talk about their families, bisexuals on talk shows for the most part appear as an external *threat* to monogamous family relationships taking place around them, be they heterosexual or homosexual. By comparison, monogamous homosexuals, in fact, look like relatively unthreatening, more easily accepted—more easily *absorbed*—family members. If homosexuals are often invited into the institution of the family on these programs, it is on the condition that they do not bring with them these stereotyped characteristics that TV-talk shows on bisexuals are structured to emphasize: multiple partnering, undisciplined sexuality, indecisiveness, and selfishness.

Transgendered people get much more air play, much of it in bikinis. But they are also very frequently programmed in “family conflict” dramas: confronting their own children, parents, and siblings. If they have children, they are routinely criticized for the gender “confusion” they are alleged to cause: “Do they call you mother or father?” is as standard a question as “Which bathroom do you use?,” and both tend to elicit audience laughter. On the short-lived *Gabrielle* show, for example, activist and historian Susan Stryker is attacked by a young man asking her, “Do you think it’s fair to your son that he calls you mother considering he has no father figure to play catch and teach him the manly things in life?” The audience explodes into applause and cheers (Twentieth Century Fox 1995). “When you bring a

child into the world," Jerry Springer argues on another similar show, "until the child is grown, you have his or her life to live as well. And the trauma of having a young child see Dad become Mom is probably too much to lay on any kid. Until your kids are grown, let Mom wear the dress" (Multimedia Entertainment 1995a). What goes for gay families, obviously, does not go for transgendered ones here.

When they are dealing with their own parents, transgendered people fare a tiny bit better. For one thing, they get some sympathy for being "diseased": they should be accepted, Springer repeats on his many trans shows, just like you would accept a child born with a birth defect. For another thing, if their parents are particularly brutal, they get the same tolerance line offered lesbian and gay "victims." But they are still regularly attacked for disrupting their families with their "selfishness": if they would only act "normal," everything would be just fine. As one audience member put it to a cross-dressing teenager on *Sally*, "You don't think you're selfish to put your mother and brother on national TV looking like a freak?" (Multimedia Entertainment 1995c).

Gender-crossing, in fact, is often treated as homosexuality gone haywire, the nutty extreme of a sexual difference that is acceptable in gender-normative form. On a *Jerry Springer* show nicely titled "Please Act Straight!"—the coercive command phrased as a polite request—a series of transgendered kids are pelted with ridicule and attacks, mainly on the grounds that by cross-dressing they "flaunt" their homosexuality in ways that humiliate their families. They are unwilling, that is, to do *gender* the way others want them to do it, and thus they forfeit their place in the family. Springer asks a guest, the sister of a teenager waiting in the wings, what she thinks about his effeminacy. "I don't want my kids around that," she says. "I be wanting him to play football with them." When the young man emerges, deliberately and smilingly flouncing onto the stage wearing red high heels below an otherwise relatively conventional man's outfit, the crowd hoots and hollers its disapproval. "No," says his mother, simply, shaking her hand. "No way." Later, she flatly announces her plan of action should her son get a sex-change operation: "I'll kill him" (Multimedia Entertainment 1995b). The price for acceptance into the family, here, is gender conformity. With transgendered youth, or gay youth straying outside the bounds of gender norms, the repeated worry about children takes a different shape: it is the pained parent whose kid has "gone too far," who refuses to "act straight," who gets the sympathy of the victimized, not the child.

This is a rather stark contrast to the representation of lesbian and gay

families, and a vivid, if somewhat unsurprising, example of the ideological barter going on here. An adjustment is made, as the family is shown to be open not just to heterosexuals but also to *certain* homosexuals. Unaccepting family members are vilified when their kids are run-of-the-mill, gender-normative gays and lesbians, but applauded when they cut off, publicly disown, or threaten to kill their transgendered kids. A new, postcloset kind of normalization pattern is at work here: the acceptability of lesbian and gay families, and of lesbian and gay people into their birth families, is predicated on their *not* exhibiting the "selfish" sexuality of bisexuals or the "freakish" gender of transgendered people.

FAMILIAL DIVISIONS

"AT THEIR WORST," Jane Shattuc suggests, daytime TV-talk shows "ostracize difference as antithetical to the morals of the familial structure. And at their best, they make difference permissible as the nation attempts to redefine the family in the late twentieth century" (1997:45). The lesson of talk-show visibility is thus perhaps not so much that we are faced with a choice between "positive" and "negative" imagery but that we are faced with a continual drawing of lines in and through the boom of cultural visibility for gay men, lesbians, transgendered people, and bisexuals in which we now find ourselves. TV-talk shows plant land mines in the ideological ground on which redefinitions of the family are taking shape. That is not of course something they do alone, but they are central to the process, partly because they help it along in such unintentional, entertaining ways and partly because they mix it so effectively with pleas for tolerance, enlightenment, and love.

The *kinds* of lines they emphasize, the kinds of differences that are allowed, in their protection of conventional family structures are telling: they set apart potentially powerful sets of political and cultural partners, helping to cut the threads linking various dissident family types and family members. They enact, in their profit-oriented attempt to capture audiences of various kinds through differing class-predicated programming formats, a class-based struggle over control of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender family discourse. Activist guests seeking to establish the acceptable middle-classness of gay and lesbian families are set off against, and increasingly displaced by, working- and poverty-class guests (usually without an explicit political agenda), whose distance from middle-class acceptability offers a

strikingly diverse, often more challenging, yet more easily dismissed, version of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender family forms and values. The class lines cutting through queer family politics are exacerbated.

The alliance between those whose sexual object choice makes them "queer" and those whose gender nonconformity does so—always a tenuous alliance, and a longstanding fault line in sex and gender politics—is also aggravated. The talk show distaste for secrets, expressed routinely in calls for healing and tolerance, is undercut by the "what about the children?" refrain, but not so much, or at least not primarily, because of a worry that children are going to be raised gay. Healing and tolerance calls are instead rescinded primarily because of a concern for the "normal" gender future of the children; the temptation, often put into words, is for those gay people who can to emphasize gender normality, distancing themselves from gender-nonconforming "others." Moreover, the awkward, somewhat contorted steps taken on these programs toward the acceptance of lesbian and gay families (lesbian and gay children should be loved just like everyone else, lesbians and gay men have the right to raise their own children just like everyone else) are met by a heightened, quasi-systematic, often vicious treatment of transgendered and bisexual people as the more serious threats to the family structure. As gay and lesbian families move inside, that is, bisexual and transgendered ones move further toward the freaky; indeed, it is arguably through the positioning of transgenders and bisexuals as not-assimilable that homosexual families are rendered acceptable.

Here again, those who might share an interest in the transformation of the family structure are, through the process of talk-show visibility, pushed further and further apart. This line drawing, this exaggerated division of the "classy" from the "trashy" family, the "normal" from the "freaky" child, which conserves even as it revises the familial structure, is the biggest lesson for family politics from the weird world of daytime talk television.

NOTE

1. This chapter works from transcript, video, and interview data collected for a book-length study, *Freaks Talk Back* (Gamson 1998). Although only a small portion is discussed here, the data consist of the following: in-depth, semi-structured interview with twenty talk-show production staff and forty-four talk-show guests; quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the 160 available transcripts in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, and gender-crossing sub-

jects made a significant appearance, for the years 1984–86 and 1994–95; and interpretive analysis of about one hundred hours of talk-show videotapes. The data cover experiences on nearly every topic-driven daytime talk show that has had a life. Unless otherwise noted, quotations are from interviews conducted by the author in 1995 and 1996.

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IN/VISIBILITY

6

One Man's Story of Being Gay and Diné (Navajo):
A Study in Resiliency

Margaret Ann Waller and Roland McAllen-Walker

What is it to be gay in an American Indian family? We begin our discussion by emphasizing that the terms "Native American family" or "American Indian family" are misleading and obscure the truths about actual family realities. In the United States there are approximately 660 federally recognized tribes—360 located in the forty-eight (contiguous) states and another 300 in Alaska. These numbers do not include the 200 tribes still struggling with legal and governmental agencies to gain federal recognition (Wright, Lopez, and Zumwalt 1997). Each tribe has its own beliefs, practices, ways of living, and language, including its own phenomenology with regard to family and sexual minorities (Roscoe 1987). As with any human group, there is also considerable diversity within any given tribe.

We asked Teles, a twenty-eight-year-old gay Navajo graduate student, if he would share his story with us so that we might situate our discussion of "two-spirit people" in American Indian families within the context of one person's lived experience and avoid inappropriate generalizations. This paper became a process of self-discovery for Teles as well as a learning experience for us, a nonnative lesbian social work practitioner/educator and a gay Diné educator. Consistent with contemporary narrative theory as well as with the Navajo tradition of teaching through stories, we present the text of Teles's story without the extensive paraphrasing and analysis that is customary in European American academic discussions of Native people's lives. We invite the reader to enjoy Teles's story and to allow the text to speak for itself.