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Resisting, Reiterating, and Dancing Through

The Swinging Closet Doors of Ellen DeGeneres's Televised Personalities

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Gushing to *The Advocate* about her new girlfriend, comedian Ellen DeGeneres, *Arrested Development* star Portia De Rossi says: "She was so courageous and loud in '97, and now she is doing something that is more subliminal. She's changing the world, she really is" (Kort, "Portia," 40). De Rossi subtly articulates a difference between Ellen's 1997 "coming out" and Ellen's current daily dance into America's living rooms as a beloved daytime talk show host who "happens to be" gay. LGBT activists and media critics slightly disagree, asserting that Ellen may be "softpedaling her lesbianism" on *Ellen: The Ellen DeGeneres Show* to find widespread acceptance (Lo, "The Incredible Story"; Heffernan, "The Perils" E5). As *New York Times* critic Virginia Heffernan puts it: "Ms. DeGeneres no longer wants to talk about being gay, so she discusses pleasant [topics]: décor, holidays and the fridge" (E5). Host of a mainstream variety show that has wowed NBC network executives by pulling in impressive numbers of its targeted demographic—women ages 25–54 (Deeken 30; Schnuer S1)—and hyped as an "every-woman approach" ("The Ellen DeGeneres Show"), DeGeneres avoids the topic of her own homosexuality and actively closes down conversation in which the very word or concept comes up.

... Not verbally addressing queer identity on her talk show is understandable from DeGeneres's personal perspective. Her career all but collapsed not long after the glow of her public coming-out party died down.

From Moore, C. (2008). Resisting, reiterating, and dancing through: The swinging closet doors of Ellen DeGeneres's televised personalities. In R. Beirne (Ed.), *Televising queer women: A reader* (pp. 17–31). New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

"To come out," according to [queer theorist David M.] Halperin,

is precisely to expose oneself to a different set of dangers and constraints, to make oneself into a convenient screen onto which straight people can project all the fantasies they routinely entertain about gay people, and to suffer one's every gesture, statement, expression, and opinion to be totally and irrevocably marked by the overwhelming social significance of one's openly acknowledged homosexual identity. (30)

Following Ellen DeGeneres's self-outing, her private life (with ex-girlfriend Anne Heche) became unbearably public—their love affair's ups and downs became unending fodder for gossip columnists and paparazzi, who stalked the new couple. Ellen's groundbreaking sitcom was also summarily canceled the next year, due to advertiser pullouts, public attacks from the religious right, and, arguably, sabotage by the ABC network itself in imposing parental advisories because of the show's portrayals of same-sex romance. (Such advisories were not, of course, placed on programs that tackled more explicitly sexual subjects with heterosexual leads) (Gross 162). Throughout these trials, DeGeneres became an important icon of political courage for the LGBT community, even though she candidly expressed that she had neither intended her coming out as a political statement nor wished to become a poster-woman for the queer cause. . . .

Since its launch in 2003, Ellen has crafted herself a talk-show persona on *Ellen: The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, who linguistically sidesteps the word or concept of homosexuality. However, she performs queerness through what implicitly "exceeds" her stand-up jokes and sit-down talk, and, physically, through the ritual action of her daily dance sequence. Through these methods, perhaps DeGeneres escapes being such a "convenient screen" for hate-mongers or bearing the responsibility of being a

spokesperson for all of gay America, while she still maintains a *televisibility*¹ of queer identity. Demonstrating how Ellen's coming out and her return to the closet become enacted again and again, ad infinitum, on television, my textual analysis involves queer ruptures on the primarily heterosexual text of Ellen's current Emmy-winning daytime talk show. Seeing "being in the closet" and "being out" as performances that are constantly negotiated socially—either actively resisted or reinscribed—rather than one-time denials or declarations of sexuality that hold, this chapter highlights ambiguous moments in DeGeneres's daily show. In specific instances that I explore, DeGeneres gestures rhetorically or symbolically to her sexual preference, absurdly omits or redirects possible discussions of homosexuality, or is subtly or not-so-subtly "called out" as gay by her celebrity guests. . . .

Repetition and reiteration is a central theme in Ellen's show, with her daily dances, recurring verbal noises and catch phrases. I ultimately argue that Ellen's many repetitious behaviors also serve as multiple self-outings. Anna McCarthy suggests that perhaps queer visibility on television is only permissible as spectacle; such televisibility becomes dangerous to heteronormativity when it presents queer lives and loves as "quotidian" (*"Ellen: Making Queer Television History"* 597). By repeatedly dancing to the same songs and expressing the same verbal ticks over and over again, Ellen seeks in the opening sequences of her talk show to present the out-of-the-ordinary repeatedly, until its very performance, occurring daily, becomes un-alarming and even infectious celebratory.

During her ritual opening dance, Ellen looks into the camera, directly addressing the audience, and then follows by breaking the proscenium arch, dancing out into the pulsating, cheering, similarly dancing live studio audience. Her daily dances, set to a handful of uplifting disco, hip hop, and R&B songs, with their awkward,

non-choreographed moves, together with her wide, toothy grin, seem to proclaim a message of self-acceptance: *This is me! I'm great just the way I am, and you can be great just the way you are too!* Her dance moves themselves evoke nostalgia for the gay-steeped, 1970s-era culture of disco. While Ellen does not remind her audience of her queerness over and over again verbally, Ellen does repeat acts that are both absurd and permissible, causing the most bizarre squawks and awkward dance moves to become a commonplace sight, and a site for pleasure.

Subliminal Rituals

While De Rossi's claim that Ellen is "changing the world" might represent the overstated rhetorical flourish of the lovestruck, De Rossi's use of the word "subliminal," meaning "below the threshold of conscious perception" (*Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary* 1994: 1154), to describe what Ellen is "doing," does astutely point out the very liminality of Ellen's ritualistic daily performances.² To put it in other terms, De Rossi is here distinguishing between a media *event* and a repeated media *ritual*. A media *event* is a one-time, idiosyncratic phenomenon that acts as an exception to the usual rules of both television flow and content, and, if planned, is often surrounded by quite a bit of promotional hype (Hubert 31; McCarthy, "Ellen: Making Queer Television History" 593). A repeated media *ritual* also temporarily upends or stretches convention (only to reinstate it); however, it is less outwardly eventful; in fact, it gradually becomes perceived as a part of the normal flow, and signifies through repetition, over time, or through multiple broadcasts (Couldry 24). One punctuates the Nielsen's ratings, the other has the potential to slowly, rather than rapidly, shift consciousness through a process of slow audience acclimation to, and reinforcement of, difference.

Encoding/Decoding the Dance

When asked why Ellen DeGeneres does not address her homosexuality on her talk show, lesbian actress and screenwriter Guinevere Turner (*Go Fish, The L Word*) declared emphatically "How could you dance like that and not be gay? That's a way of saying with every opening representation, I'm gay!" ("Personal Interview" 2005). Marusya Bociurkiw, in a recent critical essay published in *Canadian Woman Studies*, concurred with Turner's view that Ellen's lesbianism is palpable in her dancing: "As the music, usually hip hop, is played, Ellen's body is on display in a manner that is decidedly not heteronormative. Here DeGeneres displays the grace and confidence that her accessible, self-deprecating, 'kook' act disavows. DeGeneres looks like a butch lesbian dancing alone, in a club" (176).

However, these interpretations are just that, individualized readings of a polysemic text, and sometimes we see what we want to see. Furthermore, "what a dyke dancing looks like" is a nearly impossible thing to put one's finger on. Just as lesbians are a diverse, rather than homogeneous group, comprising women of varying ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, styles, classes, gender presentations, and so on, their dance moves likely vary enormously. So while a general consensus remains among these readings, that "something's queer" here, I try to show, through examining prior precedents of Ellen expressing herself physically—whether through physical humor or through dance—that not only does her opening "dance with herself" (and thus the viewer) represent a daily declaration of queer identity, but that she has previously coded it to mean exactly that.

Rather than revisit the coming-out media event of Ellen's "Puppy Episode" (4.22 and 4.23, April 30, 1997), which has been explored in depth by Anna McCarthy, Susan J. Hubert, and Steven Capsuto,

among others, I concentrate instead on two pre-coming-out episodes from the second season of *Ellen*—texts, which, like her talk show, operate “doubly.” In “The Fix Up” (2.5, October 19, 1994), Ellen’s dance moves are first foregrounded, and in “Thirty Kilo Man” part 1 and 2 (2.23, May 10, 1995; 2.24, May 17, 1995), her character has a heterosexual love affair that reads as unmistakably queer.

Elevator Music on Early *Ellen*

Early *Ellen* is best described as ABC’s version of *Seinfeld*’s sitcom about nothing, since both half-hour shows center around known stand-up comedians and their witty banter about insignificant, repetitious, or everyday matters with friends. During the three seasons prior to Ellen DeGeneres’s/*Ellen* Morgan’s doubly momentous 1997 coming out, Ellen’s character on the middling-rated sitcom was consistently stuck in a weekly cycle of dates-gone-wrong with guys, that, for an array of incidental and sometimes extravagantly bizarre reasons, just do not fit. In “The Gladiators” (2.19, March 1, 1995) for instance, Ellen’s new beau, Nitro, a gladiator from the then-popular television show, *American Gladiators*,³ is snapped away from her by an ultra-buff woman (Ice), leading the bookstore owner to jealously beat the pumped-up woman to a pulp with a padded lance.

The sitcom’s season with the most overtly heterosexual storylines, the second, is also the season with the most queer subtext. Disney would not okay the idea of Ellen Morgan’s coming out until more than a year later, when blatant hints began to be worked into the weekly scripts (Gross 157). Ellen’s obsessive man-shopping in season two is painted by the writers and producers as downright absurd, but what will serve as the alternative (asexuality, in most of season three, before facing her queer identity), is not quite clear yet. Journalist for *The San Francisco Examiner*, Joyce Millman, caught

on early. In the spring of 1995, in a column entitled “The Sitcom that Dare Not Speak Its Name,” the television critic prematurely outed Ellen Morgan: “As a gal sitcom, *Ellen* doesn’t make any sense at all, until you view it through the looking glass, where the unspoken subtext becomes the main point. Then is *Ellen* is transformed into one of TV’s savviest, funniest, slyest shows. *Ellen* Morgan is a closet lesbian” (B1).

In “The Fix Up” (2.5, October 19, 1994) of season two, the episode opens with Ellen inside an elevator—the enclosed space that arguably acts as the show’s metaphorical stand-in for a closet. Ellen’s adventures in (or waiting for) an elevator are a reoccurring trope on the show. Given the sitcom’s frequent meta-references to sitcom history (see McCarthy, “Ellen: Making Queer Television History” 607–614), perhaps this trope, seen throughout the second season, is also a tip of the hat to the historically common “meat locker” sitcom scenario, wherein people with differences get stuck in a small space, often a meat locker or an elevator, and overcome differences (Sconce 104–105). In this case, the elevator’s only other passenger exits, and finding herself alone, Ellen openly acknowledges the song playing over the loud speakers, Aretha Franklin’s “Respect,” by first tapping her feet, then swinging from side to side and lip-synching. As the song builds to crescendo, Ellen is observed flailing, rocking her head along to the words, and jumping into the air, landing with thumps. As audience members, we are in anticipation for the elevator doors to suddenly open and or Ellen to be “found out.” Instead, Franklin’s rousing tune halts abruptly and a male authoritarian voice comes over the loud speakers: “Excuse me, ma’am, this is security” the voice interrupts. “Please refrain from jumping in the elevator.” The camera offers a shot from above, looking down at Ellen, as she immediately looks up to the speaker, with a petrified deer-in-the-headlights acknowledgment that she is being surveyed. She then cradles her head down in her hand, in embarrassment, before the camera cuts away.

This scene might be read divorced from any queer subtext, as mere silliness in an elevator, with Ellen as the 1990s Lucy Ricardo, always getting herself into a new kind of trouble. However, the larger text of the sitcom suggests the elevator as a contained closet, within which Ellen Morgan can finally release herself, be happy with who she is, until she is again reminded, reprimanded by a voice from outside, that others do not approve of her lifestyle. This is particularly suggested by the content of the dialogue between Ellen and her mother that immediately follows, and furthermore by the theme (failed heterosexual daring, what else?) of "The Fix Up."

In the scene that follows, Ellen's mother asks her a question over coffee that reoccurs, rephrased, throughout the series: "So, are you seeing anyone these days?" When Ellen's answer implies no, her mom continues in full fuss mode: "I just worry about you. You're not immortal . . . I just want you to be happy." Ellen retorts, "You know it's possible to be happy without a man." "Must you joke about everything?" her mom returns, and then promptly tries to fix Ellen up with someone she grew up with. Described by Ellen as the "weird" kid in the neighborhood who ate bugs, he has matured into an adult man who is not peculiar at all; in fact, Ellen seems to find him quite charming. In a plot reversal, he ends up finding Ellen entirely "weird," through the usual comedy of errors. "The Fix Up" is a stereotypical example of the pre-coming-out plotline, wherein events beyond Ellen's control, but generally propelled at least partially by her neurotic behavior, spiral, causing Ellen ultimately to be rejected by her possible heterosexual love interest, rather than force the thirty-something to own up to the fact that she is not truly interested in the first place. There are also instances where Ellen rejects men; these generally involve Ellen's discovery that the man she thought was a dreamboat has an impossible-to-stand trait.

The "date that always goes wrong" plot is finally frustrated and complicated in the two-part season two finale, "Thirty Kilo Man" (2.23 and 2.24, May 10, 1995, and May 17, 1995). The first part of the finale opens in Ellen's apartment, with Ellen's mother asking her about her plans for the weekend. When Ellen makes a joke about getting a "Chia Date," so that she can sprinkle it and "watch it grow," Ellen's mom pulls out the claws: "You know what the problem with you is, Ellen? You're too picky. You always look for a man's faults. Greg was too nice, Roger watched too much TV, Carl was a drag." "Drag king, mother," Ellen corrects, "I know I nitpick . . ." As the episode continues, Dan, a man she was interested in during an earlier episode but rejected after discovering that he delivered pizza for a living, returns from Italy with a new, more prestigious job. The first ever return "beard" is also the one that actually ends up in bed with Ellen. A "next day" scenario finds Ellen strutting out from her bedroom in a robe, hair mussed, puffing on an imaginary cigarette. Dan emerges fully dressed and primed, and she kisses him, mumbling, "No fair, you brushed your teeth." "Sorry," he practically sings. They touch their way into the living-room, and in full soap-opera pitch, Dan gushes: "I never want this feeling to end. Ellen Morgan, I think I'm falling in love with you." In this scene, Ellen is scripted and choreographed into the position of the stereotypical man in a classic romance, who swaggers out of the bedroom, while Dan is the stereotypical woman, who rushes to say effusive things, to say "I love you" right away.

Later, when Dan comes back from work, Ellen backs him into the couch and gets on top, kissing him. His beeper starts to vibrate in his pants, she pauses to say, "What's that?" and then keeps kissing him, pressing into him, moaning "You are such a considerate man!" She grabs the cordless phone from the coffee table. "Okay, it stopped. What's your number?" This joke on his

beeper as vibrator, a device implied as more pleasurable than perhaps his penis, again with the classic roles switched (her as the "horny" one), plays on the notion that, although he is a man, they are in a "lesbian" affair. This joke is toyed with even further in part two of the finale, when he figuratively "brings a U-Haul," moving in with her right away, and they spend all waking moments together. In their every dialogue and physical interaction, Ellen plays butch to Dan's femme, and the season uses the potential of their hetero-homo romance continuing as a cliff-hanger to the next season. Here the sitcom *Ellen* playfully queers heterosexual scenarios, since it cannot yet show a queer one. Ellen's otherness is continually the underlying gag.

In "Three strikes" (2.21, March 29, 1995), Ellen, forced under court order to live with her parents, is made, by her mother, to wear a dress. As she walks through work, the laugh track goes wild; Ellen in a flowery dress in which she looks awkward is a joke in and of itself. Ellen Morgan's (and, really, Ellen DeGeneres's) queerness is what always exceeds the text, both with her dates that do not work, and with the one, Dan, that does.

Heterosexual Talk

Ellen's closeted verbal discourse around the topic of her sexuality on *Ellen: The Ellen DeGeneres Show* functions similarly to the coded scripting of her pre-out counterpart, Ellen Morgan, on *Ellen*. . . .

Generally, when the topic of her own sexuality is broached, live, Ellen DeGeneres defers the question within a heterosexual paradigm, in which straight desire is always the point-of-reference, the norm. Like a pre-"Puppy Episode" Ellen Morgan, who cannot seem to find the right man, Ellen DeGeneres never enunciates the nature of her desire on air, but always enunciates, rather, *what her desire is not*.

Two live tapings of *Ellen: The Ellen DeGeneres Show* demonstrate this point. In a November 10, 2005, interview with Jake Gyllenhaal, the young actor comes out on stage with 400 white roses for Ellen, to congratulate her on her 400th live talk show (3.49, November 10, 2005). When they sit down together, Ellen immediately declares Jake "cute" and gives him a publicity suggestion: "More shots with your shirt off," showing a clip of him naked from the waist up in *Jarhead*. Her studio audience, mostly women, cheer at the top of their lungs. "You should take it off right now," Ellen urges. "You don't have to . . . It's only going to help you." Gyllenhaal unbuttons his top button then closes it again. "It's my 400th show," begs Ellen. "Roses are sweet and everything . . . I'll give 'em back if you'll take your shirt off." Gyllenhaal becomes bright red and laughs, clearly bashful.

Ellen here mimics Rosie O'Donnell's "passing" as straight. Rosie O'Donnell, who came out as a lesbian *after* her popular television talk show wrapped, perfected "passing" by regularly harping on her ambiguously sexualized obsession with *Top Gun* star Tom Cruise. Gyllenhaal is verbally worshiped like Cruise; however, Ellen camps the faked crush even further, demonstrating her "passing" clearly as shtick. Acting similarly as a facilitator for straight women in their fantasies, DeGeneres's play act has a distinct difference from O'Donnell's: DeGeneres's homosexuality is a known secret—a secret the audience knows in an iconic way—and she trades on this knowledge to make her interaction funny.

"It's not for me," Ellen asserts, looking Gyllenhaal in the eye, smiling. He can barely talk; he refuses to budge, but good naturedly. "It's not for me!" she insists again, making it clear, as if he did not get it the first time, that she is not trying to sexually harass him; *besides, she's gay*. They share an understanding glance. "Are you single right now? I should ask that.

Not for me, again, *I don't care*, but the women in the audience want to know." After the commercial break, Gyllenhaal loosens the collar of his shirt and exposes the top of his chest.

The sustained tease of Gyllenhaal's potential strip that never happens acts as a promotional para-text for the film *Jarhead*. Ellen even spells this out: "If you want to see what the rest of that looks like, you have to go see the movie *Jarhead*." Ellen focuses entirely on *Jarhead* and on her flirtation with Gyllenhaal about taking off his shirt. She gives his other about-to-release film, *Brokeback Mountain*, an ever-so-quick mention at the end, but does not ask Gyllenhaal one question about this "film with Heath Ledger" (as she summarizes it), nor does she mention that the film deals with a homosexual romance between Gyllenhaal's and Ledger's characters. While implying that her own homosexuality gives her the social mobility to be so openly cheeky with him, without it constituting any kind of gender upheaval or sexual come-on, Ellen has, in this exchange, played butch to Gyllenhaal's femme, much like Ellen Morgan did with Dan, placing him in the position of the looked at, the desirable. . . . She insists, however, on her non-desire, and does not name why it is that she is not attracted to him—that is supposedly "understood," it goes without saying. Gyllenhaal gets visibly uncomfortable with his position as object, but becomes visibly more comfortable when Ellen finally asks whether he is single, since "the women in the audience want to know," because she is offering him the space of normal heterosexual identity by default. Therefore, she intelligently also skirts the question of *his* sexuality. Ellen comes out through negation, although a denial of a heterosexual desire for one person does not necessarily imply homosexuality. The way she addresses the subject matter is very crafty—to those that do not want to be reminded of the nature of her desires, she does not dare speak its name; to those that do, she is, at least, honest.

In a special event edition of *Ellen: The Ellen DeGeneres Show* that aired on November 30, 2005, celebrating Ellen's twenty-fifth anniversary as a stand-up comedian, a similar incident takes place (3.63). Ellen's "anniversary" special revolves around clips shown from Ellen's career as a stand-up comedian, allowing her to poke fun at her many bad haircuts. Guest celebrities visit to reminisce about Ellen's start in "show biz." Jay Leno, for instance, discusses getting Ellen her first gig on the *Johnny Carson Show*, a show that obviously inspired her own. Her first Carson appearance was featured most prominently during the hour, and the fact that she was the first female comedian ever invited to be interviewed by Carson after her act was underscored. . . . Strangely, however, her sitcom was conspicuously missing from this retrospective. (Consider, for example, a retrospective on Jerry Seinfeld that fails to mention *Seinfeld* . . .) By focusing only on Ellen's stand-up career, not only was her sitcom and her "coming out" conveniently occluded from the history of Ellen that the talk show offers, but no clips with *any* gay content were shown. Ellen rehistoricizes herself as a stand-up comedian first and foremost, and an asexual one at that.

David Spade joins Ellen on this episode, and we learn through their conversation that they met twenty years ago when the two traveled comedy circuits together, Spade opening for Ellen's headlining act. Spade admits a secret: "We used to do some of these gigs together . . . I had a big crush on her . . . then I got the news." Ellen becomes visibly embarrassed and just laughs for a long while, while Spade turns it into a joke: "What it was, was the fact that you had a Walkman . . . and a *sweet* mullet." "I thought you were adorable," Ellen finally responds, "No interest, other than the fact that you were adorable. Although I did . . . I had a crush on you and you know it." She goes right from this statement into a clip of David Spade's vintage comedy. Those of us that are "in" on the joke, read David's crush on Ellen as

real, and Ellen's crush on David as purely platonic. Again here Ellen discursively frames her queerness through expressing what she *does not desire*, and even that in a very mixed-up way, as is evident in the statement, "No interest, other than the fact that you were adorable." *What does that mean?* Ellen does not outright deny her homosexuality; when it comes up, she deflects mention of "gayness" with the double-speak and coded strategies of her pre-coming-out sitcom character. DeGeneres is comfortable expressing her nonheterosexuality (in a specific instance—so that it could be read as follows: she just does not like *him*) on air, but not her homosexuality directly.

John Limon points out that DeGeneres's strategy of "skirting" is not only admitted, but defined, in her book *My Point . . . and I Do Have One*:

Someone recently wrote a letter . . . asking "Why does Ellen DeGeneres always wear pants and never skirts?" I'm guessing that the person who wrote that letter meant skirt, a noun signifying an article of clothing, and not skirt, a verb defined as, "to evade or elude (as a topic of conversation) by circumlocution." Because, if they mean the verb skirt, well, they're dead wrong. I'm always skirting. (DeGeneres 93; quoted in Limon 115)

Limon identifies DeGeneres's "skirting" as a form of "escapist art" that refuses "to put all kidding aside," and where "what is made visible . . . is evasion" (116–117). Her verbal skirts act as denials of reality that constantly rely on reality as their vanishing point. Rather than expressing information that can be pinned down or literally understood, she replaces objective "truths" with tangential flights of fancy, distractions, wordplay, while presenting the journey of the skirt itself as having *subjective* and transient values—of imagination, pleasure, possibility.

Limon lyrically asks of DeGeneres's skirting: "Is knowledge of the body repressed or

unlearned? Is the body itself decoded or disclaimed?" (121). He dubs DeGeneres "an inverse Lenny Bruce, whose shame existed to be displayed as pride" (121). The notion that DeGeneres's *pride* (with all of the meanings attached to that word) exists to be *displayed* as shame, as the case may be, is a savvy way to view beneath her linguistic skirts. If skirting is DeGeneres's verbal strategy for, at least on the surface, distancing her comedy from the bodily, from *her body* and the material consequences of the world, while leaking other meanings, DeGeneres's physical displays, especially her dances, convey and rely on utter embodiment: the body engaged in ritual.

Interpretive Dance

. . . . Ellen's choice to deflect or redirect the question of her homosexuality in potentially heterosexual discursive terms on her talk show is one strategy to remove herself from the confessional paradigm, wherein an implied authority outside of herself (like the voice in Ellen Morgan's elevator), "the one who listens" (in the case of her show, the audience), is the implied judge or cheerleader of her private life. Instead, Ellen *performs* her daily dances—illustrating both her control over what is expressed and her pleasure in expressing it. Here Ellen presents her queerness, individuality, difference, otherness, in an expressive act that broadcasts her self-love, and as part of a daily ritual that is ultimately not all about her. Her daily dance also becomes a boundary-crossing ritual shared with all, where she encourages others (her studio audience and viewers at home) to join her—to get up and dance *themselves*. For Ellen, dancing with oneself becomes dancing with the watching world, fulfilling the wish of the final refrain of the 1980s Billy Idol tune, "Dancing With Myself": "If I had a chance, I'd ask the world to dance." Dancing with oneself on television *presents*

a dance of *oneself* to be received, shared, and potentially reciprocated.

Opening the stand-up special *Ellen DeGeneres: The Beginning*, which first aired on cable channel HBO on July 23, 2000, Ellen briefly addresses her coming-out saga before performing a dance about the very subject (set to disco music that devolves into chants of "nah nah, nah nah, nah"). A comedy special such as this one, on a pay cable network such as HBO, offers DeGeneres a markedly less censored venue in which to express herself than on network television, daytime or prime time. In her introduction, Ellen offers an extremely telling speech that I end this chapter with, because I believe it not only introduces Ellen's specific dance performance that night, but frames both her discursive closet and her soon-to-be-daily dance as "out." Speaking her mind about what should now be said, or not said, about her sexuality, Ellen successfully encodes the media ritual of dancing, later to appear on *Ellen: The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, as a performance of queerness that expresses meaning where words have been found to fail:

Since I made the decision to come out three years ago, my life has been very interesting . . . I knew that people would want me to talk about it. Some people may not want me to talk about it. So I went back and forth, trying to decide should I talk about it, should I not talk about it, and ultimately I decided: No, I don't want to talk about it. It's been talked about enough, what can I say? I feel it would be best expressed through interpretive dance.

Notes

1. I use the word *televisibility* to refer to instances of visibility on television by queer subjects.

2. [Liminality refers to an in-between, or transitional, phase or state of consciousness. Ed.] . . .

3. *American Gladiators* (1989–1997, CBS) featured body builders competing against contestants on an obstacle course. Nitro was a regular gladiator and sometime co-host on the sensationalistic game show. Featuring *American Gladiators* on *Ellen* obviously served as an ABC-CBS cross-promotion.

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