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TALKBACK

Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity

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Chicago and London

1 WHY I LOVE TRASH

One can only imagine what this constant attention to the fringes of society, to those who break rules, is doing to our society's ability to define and constrain deviance. One thing seems fairly certain: law-abiding, privacy-loving, ordinary people who have had reasonably happy childhoods and are satisfied with their lives, probably won't get to tell their stories on Phil, Sally, or Oprah. . . . Television talk shows are not interested in adequately reflecting or representing social reality, but in highlighting and trivializing its underside for fun and profit.

PROFESSORS VICKI ABT AND MEL SEESHOLTZ¹

Nobody wants to watch anything that's smarmy or tabloid or silly or unseemly—except the audience.

TALK SHOW HOST SALLY JESSY RAPHAEL²

Doesn't she look like a weird, scary drag queen?

FILMMAKER GREGG ARAKI, ON TALK SHOW HOST SALLY JESSY RAPHAEL³

Let's begin here: talk shows are bad for you, so bad you could catch a cold. Turn them off, a women's magazine suggested in 1995, and turn on Mother Teresa, since watching her "caring feelings" radiate from the screen, according to psychologist Dr. David McClelland of Harvard, has been shown to raise the level of an antibody that fights colds. "It stands to reason," reasons the *First* magazine writer, "that viewing threatening, confrontational images could create an opposite reaction." In fact, given that talk shows "create feelings of frustration" and fear, "shatter our trust and faith" in our expectations of people's behavior, and "give us a false perception of reality," it is perhaps best to watch game shows or soaps while nursing that cold. Watching daytime talk shows could conceivably send you into a decline into pathologies of all sorts: scared, angry, disgusted, convinced that you are abnormal for not fitting in with the "cast of misfits and perverts," susceptible to both perversion and more colds.

While the Mother Teresa versus Jerry Springer matchup is out there enough to be camp, the hand-wringing it represents is only an exaggerated version of the many criticisms and political rallying cries aimed at talk shows over the last few years. Experts of all sorts can be found issuing warnings about talk show dangers. Before bringing out Dr. McClelland, for instance, the *First* article quotes George Gerbner, dean emeritus of the Annenberg School for Communication ("These shows are virtually destroying the goodness of America"), Harvard psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint ("It does not bode well for the future generation of young people growing up on a steady diet of this drivel"), and Fred Strassberger, once chair of the media task force of the American Psychological Association ("It's now becoming alarmingly clear that talk shows are adding greatly to the fear, tensions and stress in our society"); later, TV critic Tom Shales joins in ("These shows are portraying

Americans as shallow monsters”), along with psychologist Robert Simmermon (“cruel exploitation of people’s deepest wounds to entertain viewers who could very well wind up believing such aberrant behavior is normal”).⁴ Goodness, normality, and stability, if we buy these arguments, are all threatened by the drivel, exploitation, and monstrosities of daytime TV talk shows.

One person’s trash, though, is another person’s gold mine. Sure, I sometimes hate these shows. What’s not to hate? They can be among the most shrill, mean, embarrassing, fingernails-on-the-blackboard, one-note, pointless jabber. But I can’t help it, I love them just the same. In part, I love them because they are so peculiar, so American, filled with fun stuff like “relationship experts” (who are not actually required to have any credentialed expertise; it’s almost enough just to declare “I’m a people person”) and huge emotions, and hosts who wear their hypocrisies on their tailored sleeves, shedding tears for the people whose secrets they extract for profit while attacking them for revealing secrets on national television, riling up their guests and then scolding them for being so malicious. Silly as they can be, daytime TV talk shows are filled with information about the American environment in which they take root, in which expertise and authenticity and rationality are increasingly problematic, and in which the lines between public and private are shifting so strangely. And they embody that information with Barnumesque gusto. I like what talk shows make us think about.

But there’s more to my affinity. Although you might not know it from looking at me, and although in many ways my behaviors and tastes are embarrassingly conventional—a good story, a comfortable pair of jeans, hugs—I identify with the misfits, monsters, trash, and perverts. From that perspective, talk shows look rather different. If you are lesbian, bisexual, gay, or transgendered, watching daytime TV talk shows is pretty spooky. (Indeed, it must be unnerving and exciting for pretty much anyone whose behavior or identity does not conform to the dominant conventions of goodness, decency, and normality.) While you might get a few minutes on national news every once in a while, or a spot on a sitcom looking normal as can be, almost everywhere else in media culture you are either unwelcome, written by somebody else, or heavily edited.

On television talk shows, you are more than welcome. You are begged and coached and asked to tell, tell, tell, in an absurd, hyper enactment of what Michel Foucault called the “incitement to discourse,” that incessant modern demand that we voice every this-and-that of sexuality.⁵ Here you are

testifying, dating, getting laughs, being made over, screaming, performing, crying, not just talking but talking back, and you are doing these things in front of millions of people. The last few years have seen shows on “lipstick lesbians,” gay teens, gay cops, lesbian cops, cross-dressing hookers, transsexual call girls, gay and lesbian gang members, straight go-go dancers pretending to be gay, people who want their relatives to stop cross-dressing, lesbian and gay comedians, gay people in love with straight ones, women who love gay men, same-sex marriage, drag queen makeovers, drag kings, same-sex sexual harassment, homophobia, lesbian mothers, gay twins, gay beauty pageants, transsexual beauty pageants, people who are fired for not being gay, gay men reuniting with their high school sweethearts, bisexual teens, bisexual couples, bisexuals in general, gays in the military, same-sex crushes, hermaphrodites, boys who want to be girls, female-to-male transsexuals, male-to-female transsexuals and their boyfriends, and gay talk shows—to mention just a few. Watching all this, be it tap-dancing drag queens or married gay bodybuilders or self-possessed bisexual teenagers, I sometimes get choked up. For people whose life experience is so heavily tilted toward invisibility, whose nonconformity, even when it looks very much like conformity, discredits them and disenfranchises them, daytime TV talk shows are a big shot of visibility and media accreditation. It looks, for a moment, like you own this place.

Indeed, listening closely to the perspectives and experiences of sex and gender nonconformists—people who live, in one way or another, outside the boundaries of heterosexual norms and gender conventions—sheds a different kind of light on talk shows.⁶ Dangers begin to look like opportunities, spotlights start to feel like they’re burning your flesh. Exploiting the need for visibility and voice, talk shows provide them, in distorted but real, hollow but gratifying, ways. They have much to tell about those needs and those contradictions, about the weird and changing public sphere in which people are talking. Just as important for my purposes, talk shows shed a different kind of light on sex and gender conformity. They are spots not only of visibility but of the subsequent redrawing of the lines between the normal and the abnormal. They are, in a very real sense, battlegrounds over what sexuality and gender can be in this country: in them we can see most clearly the kinds of strategies, casualties, and wounds involved, and we can think most clearly about what winning these kinds of battles might really mean. These battles over media space allow us to get a grip on the ways sex and gender conformity is filtered through the daily interactions between commercial cultural industries and those making their lives within and

around media culture. I watch talk shows for a laugh and a jolt of recognition, but also for what they can tell me about a society that funnels such large questions—indeed, that funnels entire *populations* nearly wholesale—into the small, loopy spectacle of daytime talk.

Defecating in public

It is a long, twisted road that takes us toward insight, but the controversy over the talk show genre in general—a genre itself largely composed of controversy and conflict—is a promising first step. On the one side, cultural critics, both popular and scholarly, point adamantly toward the dangers of exploitation, voyeurism, pseudotherapy, and the “defining down” of deviance, in which the strange and unacceptable are made to seem ordinary and fine. On the other side, defenders both within and outside the television industry argue that talk shows are democracy at work—flawed democracy but democracy nonetheless—giving voice to the socially marginalized and ordinary folks, providing rowdy commonsense counterpoints to elite authority in mass-mediated culture. Beneath each position, and in the space between them, is a piece of the puzzle with which this book is playing.

The list of dangers is well worth considering. There is, to begin with, concern for the people who go on the shows, who are offered and accept a deal with the devil. They are manipulated, sometimes lied to, seduced, used, and discarded; pick 'em up in a limo, producers joke, send 'em home in a cab. They are sometimes set up and surprised—“ambushed,” as critics like to call it—which can be extremely damaging, even to the point of triggering lawsuits and murderous impulses, as in the case of Scott Amedure, who revealed his secret crush for Jonathan Schmitz on a never-aired *Jenny Jones Show*, including his fantasy of tying Schmitz up in a hammock and spraying him with whipped cream and champagne. Amedure was murdered several days later by Schmitz, who, after receiving an anonymous love note, went to his admirer's trailer home near Detroit and shot him at close range with a 12-gauge shotgun. Schmitz complained that the show had set him up to be humiliated. “There was no ambush,” a spokeswoman for *Jenny Jones* owner Warner Brothers said; “that's not our style.” Amedure, Schmitz proclaimed, had “fucked me on national TV.”⁷

Although most survive without bodily harm, guests often do considerable damage to themselves and others. They are offered airfare and a hotel room in New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago, a bit of television exposure, a shot

of attention and a microphone, some free “therapy.” In exchange, guests publicly air their relationship troubles, deep secrets, and intimate life experiences, usually in the manners most likely to grab ratings: exaggerated, loud, simplified, and so on. Even more disturbing, perhaps, it is those who typically do not feel entitled to speak, or who cannot afford or imagine therapy, who are most vulnerable to the seduction of television. This is, critics suggest, not a great deal for the guests, since telling problems and secrets in front of millions of people is a poor substitute for actually working them out. Not to mention, critics often add, a bit undignified. “Therapy is not a spectator sport,” says sociologist and talk show critic-at-large Vicki Abt. Telling secrets on television is “like defecating in public.”⁸

While it is worth challenging the equation of talking and defecating, all this, we will see, is basically the case. But it is also the easy part: talk shows are show business, and it is their mission to exploit. They commodify and use talkers to build an entertainment product, which is then used to attract audiences, who then are sold to advertisers, which results in a profit for the producers. Exploitation thus ought to be the starting point for analysis and not, as it so often is, its conclusion. The puzzling thing is not the logic of commercial television, which is well documented, well understood, and extremely powerful, but why so many people, many of them fully aware of what's expected of them on a talk show, make the deal.

Yet it is not really the guests, generally dismissed as dysfunctional losers on display, who concern talk show critics most centrally. It is the audience, either innocent or drawn in by appeals to their most base interests, that preoccupies critics the most. For some, the problem is the model of problem solving offered. Psychologists Jeanne Heaton and Nona Wilson argue in *Tuning in Trouble*, for instance, that talk shows provide “bad lessons in mental health,” offer “bad advice and no resolutions for problems,” and wind up “reinforcing stereotypes rather than defusing them.” “Credible therapeutic practice aimed at catharsis or confrontation,” they point out, “is quite different from the bastardized Talk TV version.” Indeed, they suggest that viewers avoid “the temptation to apply other people's problems or solutions to your own life,” avoid using “the shows as a model for how to communicate” or as tools for diagnosing friends and relatives, and so on.⁹ The advice is sound, if a bit elementary: talk shows are not a smart place to look for either therapy or problem solving.

Beyond the worry that audiences will adopt therapeutic technique from daytime talk, critics are even more troubled by the general social effects of talk shows. Here and there, a critic from the Left, such as Jill Nelson writing

in *The Nation*, assails the casting of “a few pathological individuals” as representatives of a population, distracting from social, political, and economic conditions in favor of stereotypes such as “stupid, sex-addicted, dependent, baby-makers, with an occasional castrating bitch thrown in” (women of all colors) and “violent predators out to get you with their penis, their gun, or both” (young black men).¹⁰ More commonly, though, critics make the related argument that talk shows indulge voyeuristic tendencies that, while perhaps offering the opportunity to feel superior, are ugly. “Exploitation, voyeurism, peeping Toms, freak shows, all come to mind in attempting to characterize these happenings,” write Vicki Abt and Mel Seesholtz, for instance.¹¹ “For the audience,” *Washington Post* reporter Howard Kurtz adds in *Hot Air*, “watching the cavalcade of deviant and dysfunctional types may serve as a kind of group therapy, a communal exercise in national voyeurism.”¹² These “fairground-style freak shows” are just a modern-day version of throwing Christians to the lions, psychologists Heaton and Wilson assert: in place of Christians we have “the emotionally wounded or the socially outcast,” in place of lions are “psychic demons,” in place of blood there is psychological damage, in place of crowds yelling “Kill, kill, kill!” we have crowds yelling “Why don’t you cut his balls off?”¹³ Even if such events serve to unite the Romans among us, offering what Neal Gabler calls “the reassurance of our superiority over the guests and over the programs themselves,”¹⁴ they do so at significant costs. “Perhaps the sight of so many people with revolting problems makes some folks feel better about their own rather humdrum lives,” Kurtz argues, but “we become desensitized by the endless freak show.”¹⁵ Talk shows are pruriently addictive, the argument goes, like rubbernecking at car wrecks: daytime talk shows are to public information what pornography is to sexual intimacy.

I will have more to say about the ceaseless characterization of talk shows as “freak shows,” but for now it is enough to note that the lines are drawn so starkly: between Christians and Romans, between “deviant and dysfunctional types” and “some folks,” the guests and “us,” between “the fringes of society, those who break rules” and “law-abiding, privacy-loving, ordinary people who have had reasonably happy childhoods and are satisfied with their lives.” These are important lines, and plainly political ones, and the ones critics most fiercely act to protect. And as one who falls both within and outside the lines, I find the confidence with which critics draw them in need of as much careful consideration as the genre’s alarming exploitations.

In fact, the lines of difference and normality are the centerpiece of the arguments against talk shows: talk shows, critics repeat over and over, rede-

fine deviance and abnormality, and this is not a good thing. “The lines between what is bizarre and alarming and what is typical and inconsequential are blurred,” point out psychologists Heaton and Wilson; talk shows “exaggerate abnormality” by suggesting that “certain problems are more common than they are, thus exaggerating their frequency,” and by embellishing “the symptoms and outcomes of problems, thus exaggerating their consequences.” Viewers are left with images of “drag queens getting makeovers and transsexuals’ surprising transformations blended together with normal adolescent development.”¹⁶ Kurtz, himself a regular on political talk shows, is a little less clinical in his assessment: “This is more than just harmless diversion. It is, all too often, a televised exercise in defining deviancy down. By parading the sickest, the weirdest, the most painfully afflicted before an audience of millions, these shows bombard us with sleaze to the point of numbness. The abnormal becomes ordinary, the pathetic merely another pause in our daily channel surfing.”¹⁷

This boundary between the normal and the abnormal, tightly linked to those between decent and vulgar, sacred and profane, healthy and unhealthy, and moral and immoral, is the key not only for critics in journalism, but for those in politics as well. “This is the world turned upside down,” former secretary of education William Bennett complained of daytime talk.¹⁸ “We’ve forgotten that civilization depends on keeping some of this stuff under wraps.”¹⁹ As a reminder, Bennett offered his own tamer, secularized version of the Mother Teresa versus the freaks argument: this place is owned by perverts, and decent people must retrieve it. Launching a campaign to “clean up” the “cultural rot” of daytime TV, pressuring advertisers to withdraw from shows that “parade perversity into our living rooms,”²⁰ Bennett, with Connecticut senator Joseph Lieberman and the public-interest group Empower America, emphasized the degenerative moral impact of talk shows, which “increasingly make the abnormal normal, and set up the most perverse role models for our children and adults.” The entertainment industry, Lieberman told a press conference, is “degrading our culture and ultimately threatening our children’s future,” through both “sexual deviancy” and “constant hyperemotional confrontations.” “The reality is that these shows are at the, at the front lines,” he continued, echoing the *Post*’s Kurtz nearly word for word, “of distorting our perceptions of what is normal and acceptable,” adding to “the tendency of our country to define deviancy down.”²¹ Our living rooms, our children, our normality, all under threat.

The interesting thing here is not just that talk shows are seen as a threat to norms and normality—as we will see, they are indeed just that, and the

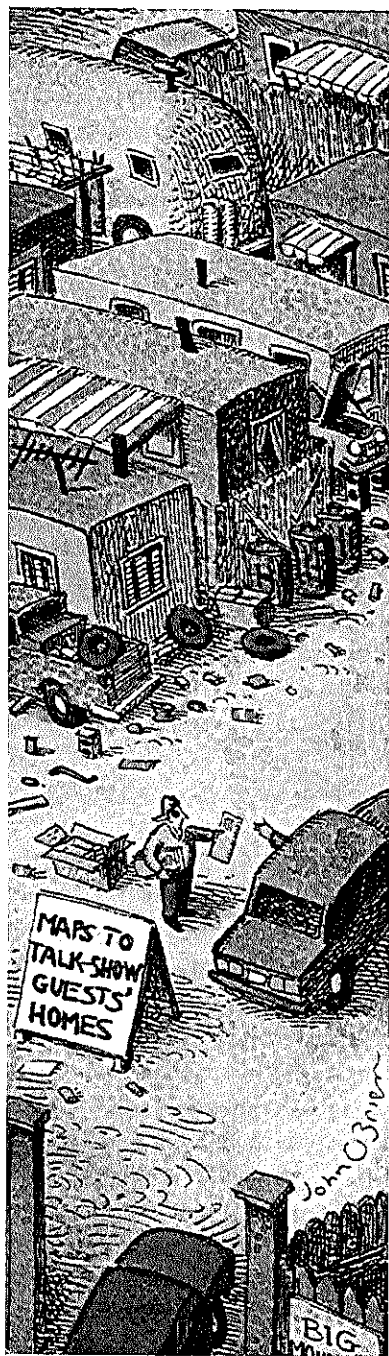


Figure 1 Maps to talk show guests' homes.
 Drawing by John O'Brien; © 1996
 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

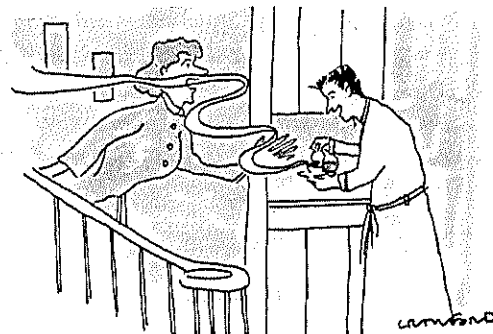
CONGRESSIONALLY MANDATED
 THEMES
 FOR THE DAYTIME TALK SHOWS



"WIVES WHO MAKE ASPIC WHEN THEIR HUSBANDS ARE AWAY"



"IS MY BRIDGE PARTNER PSYCHIC?"



"I MARRIED A LOVABLE LUG WHO MAKES ME COFFEE"

Figure 2 Congressionally mandated themes for the daytime talk shows.
 Drawing by Crawford; © 1996 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

fight is often between those who think this is a good thing and those who think it is not—but just who threatens whom here, who is “us” and who is “them.” Sexual nonconformists are only the most obvious specter. Consider the common strategy of listing topics to demonstrate the degraded status of talk shows: “Maury Povich has done women who leave husbands for other women, student-teacher affairs, and a woman who says she was gang-raped at fourteen. Geraldo Rivera has done transsexuals and their families, teen prostitutes, mud-wrestling women, swinging sexual suicide, power dykes, girls impregnated by their stepfathers, serial killers, kids who kill, and battered women who kill.”²² One need not deny the prurience and sensationalism of talk shows to see the connections being made by critics. Serial killers and bisexual women, transsexuals and mud wrestlers, dykes and battered women: “the sickest, the weirdest, the most painfully afflicted.” New York *Daily News* columnist Linda Stasi, not shy about telling us what she really thinks, provides a further, complicating hint of the threatening categories: talk shows, she says, have become “a vast, scary wasteland where the dregs of society—sociopaths, perverts, uneducated lazy scum who abuse their children and sleep with anyone who’ll have them—become stars for fifteen minutes.”²³ That list is a typical and fascinating mix: perverts and those lacking education, lazy people and people who have a lot of sex. Kurtz backs up Stasi, for instance, asserting that, “after all, middle-class folks who work hard and raise their children in a reasonable fashion don’t get invited on *Donahue* or *Geraldo*. They do not exist on daytime television. Instead, we are bombarded with negative images of the sort of losers most of us would avoid at the local supermarket.”²⁴

The “dregs of society” argument, in fact, almost always lumps together indecency, sexual difference, lack of education, and social class—though class is typically coded as “uneducated” or “inarticulate,” or, when linked to race, as “trash” or “urban.” Take this passage from a book on talk shows and mental health: “Pulitzer Prize-winning author David Halberstam used to call *Donahue* a ‘televised Ph.D. course.’ Now he says that *Donahue* has ‘lost its soul.’ Likewise, Art Buchwald used to receive regular invitations to talk about his essays and books on *Donahue*. But now ‘Buchwald claims he can’t get an invitation . . . unless he gets a sex-change operation.’ ”²⁵ You used to be able to get an education, listening to men like Halberstam and Buchwald; now, talk shows have replaced educated men with transsexuals, resulting in the loss of the talk show soul. The examples continue, but after even just a taste the equations start to come clear: uneducated is lazy is sex-loving is sexually perverted is non-middle-class is soulless losers.

Puzzle pieces begin to emerge from these criticisms. How exactly do poverty and lack of education, sex and gender nonconformity, and race come to be lumped together and condemned as monstrosities? What are we to make of these equations? Are they the result of exploitative programming that scripts and markets weird people most of “us” wouldn’t talk to in a supermarket, selling the middle-class audience its own superiority? Are they the result of willful distortions by guardians of middle-class morality and culture, part and parcel of the ongoing “culture wars” in the United States? Are they, as defenders of the genre suggest, the result of a democratization process that threatens those who are used to the privilege of owning and defining public discourse?

The chatter of the dispossessed

Audiences and participants sit in a circular form and—this is the only TV format in which this happens—speak out, sometimes without being called on. They yell at each other, disagree with experts, and come to no authoritative conclusions. There is something exhilarating about watching people who are usually invisible—because of class, race, gender, status—having their say and, often, being wholly disrespectful of their “betters.”

PROFESSOR ELAYNE RAPPING²⁶

Audience discussion programs adopt an anti-elitist position which implicitly draws on . . . alternative epistemological traditions, offering a reevaluation of the life-world, repudiating criticisms of the ordinary person as incompetent or ignorant, questioning the deference traditionally due to experts through their separation from the life-world and their incorporation into the system, and asserting instead the worth of the “common man.”

PROFESSORS SONIA LIVINGSTONE AND PETER LUNT²⁷

As long as they speak the King’s English, we say it’s OK. But then you get someone who isn’t wealthy, who doesn’t have title or position, and they come on and talk about something that’s important to them—all of a sudden we call that trash.

TALK SHOW HOST JERRY SPRINGER²⁸

Just as exploitation is an obvious component of talk shows, so is democratization. Where critics choose one Greco-Roman analogy, defenders tout

another: in place of the Christian-eating spectacle, they see, although not always so simply, a democratic forum. Where critics see “freaks” and “trash,” defenders see “have-nots” and “common people.” These are important counterpoints, and raise important questions suppressed by critics, of voice, visibility, and inclusion. But this line of thinking, too, on its own tends to run in an unhelpful direction, simplifying the conditions of visibility, the distortions of voice, and the restrictions on inclusion that daytime talk involves. Just because people are talking back does not mean we are witnessing democratic impulses and effects.

It is easy enough to discern the elitism in criticisms of talk shows, or any other popular genre, and defenders of talk shows from within the industry push up against it with a defense of the masses, painting themselves as both defenders of free speech and friends of the common folk.²⁹ “I think it’s a shame that we’ve got so many people who claim to talk to God every day,” Phil Donahue complained to Larry King, “coming down from the mountain to tell their neighbors what they ought to see.”³⁰ Charles Perez, a young former *Ricki Lake Show* producer who had a short stint as host of his own show, while perhaps not quite as impressed with the tastes of his neighbors, took a similar “the people have chosen” approach to talk. “I put this a lot in the hands of the public,” he said. “The same way you have a corner grocer and he should be selling mostly vegetables, but he’s selling Hershey candy bars because that’s what all the kids on the block want.”³¹ Talk shows may not be nutritious, but viewers should not be faulted for wanting what they want.

This populist defense of talk shows, familiar from arguments about popular culture in general, is taken many steps beyond the shoulder-shrugging, “it’s a free country” line. Talk shows, defenders claim, give voice to common folks and visibility to invisible folks, and it is this characteristic that elicits such hostility. Indeed, Donahue and others assert, the talk show genre was and is a “revolutionary” one. “It’s called democracy,” Donahue argues, “but [before my program] there were no shows that—every day, let just folks stand up and say what-for. I’m proud of the democracy of the show.”³² Ellen Willis, writing in *The Nation*, makes a similar, although much more complex, point: “Social conservatives have been notably unsuccessful at stemming the democratization of culture, the breakdown of those class, sex and race-bound conventions that once reliably separated high from low, ‘news’ from ‘gossip,’ public from unspeakably private, respectable from deviant. Talk shows are a product of this democratization; they let people who have been largely excluded from the public conversation appear on national

TV and talk about their sex lives, their family fights, sometimes their literal dirty laundry. . . . On talk shows, whatever their drawbacks, the proles get to talk.”³³ When the proles get the microphone, when the excluded become included, there is always a fight. The nastiness of critics toward talk shows, the argument goes, is simply a veiled anxiety about cultural democratization—and especially about the assertive, rowdy space taken on talk shows by usually silent classes of people. Talk shows “operate at the level of everyday life, where real people live and breathe,” Donna Gaines writes. “Bennett’s morality squad may see talk shows as carnival freak shows, but all that means is that the shows have the power to drag us statistical outcasts in from the margins.”³⁴ “Do you ever call a Congressman trash?” asks Jerry Springer. “It’s a euphemism for trailer park, minorities, space between their teeth. We all know it. They don’t want to hear about them, they don’t want to see them.”³⁵ Springer argues that he is giving unpopular people “access to the airwaves” (“as if embarrassing them before millions,” snorts Howard Kurtz, “were some kind of public service”).³⁶ Princess Di with bulimia is news on *20/20* with Barbara Walters, Yale-educated host Richard Bey complains, but his own show—which, on the day I attended, included a “freeloader” named Rob lying on his back on a spinning “Wheel of Torture” while his dorm-mates poured buckets of paint and baked beans on him—is trash. “They don’t think these people deserve to be heard or seen,” he suggests, taking a sort of working-person’s-hero pose. “Mine is a working class audience. It’s very representative of America.”³⁷

Many academics echo this line of thinking, emphasizing the democratic aspects of the genre. Audience-participation talk shows, Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt claim, for instance, “are a forum in which people can speak in their own voice, which . . . is vital for the construction of a gendered or cultural identity.”³⁸ Oprah Winfrey herself, Gloria-Jean Masciarotte suggests in the journal *Genders*, is “a device of identity that organizes new antagonisms in the contemporary formations of democratic struggle.”³⁹ Talk shows “constitute a ‘contested space’ in which new discursive practices are developed,” Paolo Carpiagnano and his colleagues argue in the journal *Social Text*, “in contrast to the traditional modes of political and ideological representation.” “The talk show can be seen as a terrain of struggle of discursive practices. . . . [What] is conceived as a confrontational device becomes an opening for the empowerment of an alternative discursive practice. These discourses don’t have to conform to civility nor to the dictates of the general interest. They can be expressed for what they are: particular, regional, one-sided, and for that reason politically alive. . . . The talk show

rejects the arrogance of a discourse that defines itself on the basis of its difference from common sense."⁴⁰ Talk shows embrace everyday common sense against elite expertise, privileging "the storied life over the expert guest," emphasizing "'ordinary' experience," and the "'authentic' voice of the everyday people, or street smarts of the working class."⁴¹ They provide "a space in which ordinary experiences are collected together as grounding for a decision."⁴²

Indeed, daytime talk, as a woman-oriented genre, is arguably rooted in social movement-generated changes of the sixties and seventies, especially those pushed by feminism. Defenders point to the genre's predominantly female audience, and in particular to its feminist-inspired reworking of what counts as legitimate public discussion, as evidence that it is a genre of "empowerment." Most significantly, TV talk is built on a radical departure from what has traditionally been seen to belong in the public sphere: drawing on "the personal is political" charge of feminism, talk shows move personal lives to the forefront of public discussion. Their popularity, Carpignano and others argue, are a symptom of "a transformation in the nature of the political," and "the means of expression of these new areas of political struggle are quite different from those of formal politics."⁴³ Talk shows, such arguments suggest, are politics by other means.

Moreover, such talk show analysts claim, the political effects are empowering for those who have traditionally been defined as outside of public discussion, whose lives were, until recently, kept private by both choice and coercion—in particular, women and sex and gender minorities. Phil Donahue argues, for instance, "these programs cumulatively make a contribution toward the empowerment of women especially";⁴⁴ *Village Voice* writer Richard Goldstein points out that talk shows "were the first mass-cultural arena where homosexuals could get beyond polemics and simply justify their love."⁴⁵ The same basic claim comes through in the sparse academic literature on TV talk: that talk shows "afford women the political gesture of overcoming their alienation through talking about their particular experience as women in society," promote "an unnatural or perverse sexual identity,"⁴⁶ and can be seen as "a celebration of outlaw culture"⁴⁷ (a point, of course, on which the critics concur). Daytime TV talk shows are thus "the lever in the dislocation of universal, natural difference," disrupting traditional sex and gender categories. "It is to that epic dislocation in categories and knowledge," Masciarotte claims, "that the talk shows' most recent, combative forms speak."⁴⁸

Previously silenced people speaking in their own voices, spaces for "alternative epistemologies" opening up, common sense battling the politics and ideology of traditional elites, political arenas expanding, "epic dislocations" and rethinking of social categories: these would all seem to be significant, healthy contributions of the talk show genre to democratic practice. Indeed, it would seem, talk shows, even if they aren't exactly good for you, are at least good for us—especially those of us with an investment in social change. Yet even setting aside the tendency to romanticize "the masses" and the near gibberish of claims such as "*The Oprah Winfrey Show* functions as a new bildungsroman that charts the irritant in the system through an endless narrative of discomfort" and so forth,⁴⁹ something seems a bit fishy here. If you have ever actually watched a few hours of talk shows, they seem about as much about democracy as *The Price Is Right* is about mathematics. Sniffing around this territory more closely, digging through some of its assumptions, clarifies further where we have to go.

Two claims in particular hide within the defenses of talk shows, even the critical defenses: that talk shows "give voice" and that they operate as some kind of "forum." Pushing at them a little uncovers more interesting questions. It is certainly true that, more than anywhere else on television, talk shows invite people to speak for themselves. But do people on daytime talk really wind up speaking in a voice that they and others recognize as somehow authentically their own? How do the medium and the genre structure the "voices" that come out? What sorts of speaking voices are available, and in what ways are they distorted? How could we even tell a "real" voice from a "false" one? Second, there is the question of the "forum." It is certainly true that talk shows come closer than anywhere else on American television to providing a means for a wide range of people, credentialed but especially not so credentialed, to converse about all sorts of things. But is daytime talk really a forum, a set of conversations? How do the production and programming strategies shape the capacity for discussion, and the content of conversation? If, as Wayne Munson has put it, talk shows are simultaneously spectacle and conversation,⁵⁰ what is the relationship here between the circus and the symposium, and what is the political significance of their combination?

It is tempting to choose sides in all of this, and often I do. Depending on my mood, I might be annoyed by the paternalistic moralizing critics and tout defiant perversity, or I might find myself overwhelmed by the willful, wasteful stupidity of TV talk and recommend V-chip brain implants. But I

have now gone a different route, guided by the Big Issues running through the talk show debates and by my own gnawing ambivalence, both as scholar and as just a guy.

What critics and defenders, both inside my brain and outside of it, agree upon is that talk shows are consumed with blurring old distinctions (while often reaffirming them), with making differences harder to tell (while often asserting them with ease): the deviant isn't readily distinguished from the regular person, class stereotypes melt into the hard realities on which they rest, what belongs in private suddenly seems to belong in front of everybody, airing dirty laundry looks much like coming clean. Talk shows wreak special havoc with the "public sphere," moving private stuff into a public spotlight, arousing all sorts of questions about what the public sphere can, does, and should look like.⁵¹ In doing so, they mess with the "normal," giving hours of play and often considerable sympathy to stigmatized populations, behaviors, and identities, and at least partly muddying the waters of normality. And since those brought into the public sphere of TV talk are increasingly distant from the white middle-class guests of earlier years, talk shows wind up attaching class difference to the crossing of public/private and normal/abnormal divides. It is around this stirred pot, in which humdrum and freaky, off-limits and common property, high status and low, sane and crazed, all brew together, that the anxious flies swarm. This seething brew, and not just the talk shows themselves, is what is so powerful and intriguing, and it is this brew on which I myself am feeding, using the close study of TV talk to investigate the broader, linked activities of line-drawing between public and private, classy and trashy, normal and abnormal.

I have long been especially interested in how the lines between normal and abnormal sexual beings are drawn and redrawn: the ways those lines restrict me personally, from the question of whom I can touch to the question of where I can work; the dilemmas confronted by social movements trying to gain rights by claiming the mantle of normality, even as they are also celebrating their "queer" difference and criticizing the oppressive constraints imposed by a hetero-as-normal society;⁵² the ways sexual categories intersect with others (race, class, gender) with their own hierarchies of natural and defective people, and the permutations of perversion pile up and multiply.⁵³ The mass media are plainly very central to these processes of sexual meaning-making, and talk shows are hot spots for the processes, and so my attention is driven toward them.

Indeed, many of the key terms of talk show controversy—the themes of health and pathology, of sacred and profane—speak with special force to

people who cross or have crossed gender lines, and to people who form same-sex partnerships, who have been deemed ill or immoral for most of recent history, and who have been subject to often brutal forms of medical and religious control. But if talk shows speak to us, they certainly speak with forked tongues. Listening to them means living with the fact that they never quite make sense. On this trip into their country, as I offer a translation of their noisy, eager language into my own, you will see that it turns out to be a dialect filled with the syntax of savage contradiction. With careful listening, an ambivalence about talk shows begins to sound just about right. At the heart of this book, where sexual meaning-making, sexual politics, and the redrawing of key social boundaries meet up, are the *paradoxes of visibility* that talk shows dramatize with such fury: democratization through exploitation, truths wrapped in lies, normalization through freak show. There is in fact no choice here between manipulative spectacle and democratic forum, only the puzzle of a situation in which one cannot exist without the other, and the challenge of seeing clearly what this means for a society at war with its own sexual diversity.

The way in

How do we push our way into this weird world? Other people's ideas have certainly helped pave the road. There is by now much scholarly writing about both the construction of sexuality and gender,⁵⁴ and the media representation of sexual minorities.⁵⁵ Put simply, from theory and research on sexuality construction, I lift the idea that sexual categories and statuses are under continual negotiation, and the question of when and how these categories and statuses become open to change and challenge. From theory and research on mass media, I take the notion that media representations are part of a more general system of oppression of nonheterosexuals, operating most commonly to justify continued prejudice, violence, and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people, and the question of when and how media institutions become sites at which oppression can be combated.

"Sexuality is as much a human product as are diets, methods of transportation, systems of etiquette, forms of labor, types of entertainment, processes of production, and modes of oppression," Gayle Rubin wrote fifteen years ago.⁵⁶ Although still subject to debate, the premise that sexuality and gender are "socially constructed," rather than simply reflecting categories and be-

ings found in and fixed by nature, has become commonplace in academic analysis since the 1980s.⁵⁷ Sexual categories and gender categories, theorists and researchers have persuasively demonstrated, vary dramatically across time and across cultures.⁵⁸ Moreover, social scientists have suggested that within any given social structure, sexual attitudes, behaviors, and roles are produced and reproduced through everyday interactions and social “scripts.”⁵⁹ “Gender is a human invention, like language, kinship, religion, and technology; like them, gender organizes human social life in culturally patterned ways,” as Judith Lorber put it recently.⁶⁰

This general framework has yielded an important set of questions, both intellectual and political. If sexuality is indeed constructed and negotiated through social processes, how exactly do these processes work? Under what conditions do sexual categories and meanings change? If we wanted to intervene in this process, where and how might we go about it? While the first question has been effectively approached, the latter two have not been terribly well answered, mainly because sexuality has typically been analyzed in abstraction from its institutional and organizational carriers. Studies of the construction of sexuality only rarely look in detail at the opportunities and constraints associated with *particular institutional settings*, proceeding instead as if sexual categories and meanings exist in free-floating “discourse”;⁶¹ the everyday, practical activities through which sexual meanings are produced and reproduced tend to fade into the background.

Sociologists of culture, however, have long argued that cultural attitudes and cultural content cannot be understood divorced from the organizational contexts in which they are produced.⁶² One cannot understand the homogenization of much television culture, for example, without understanding the political economy of television entertainment production; one cannot understand the tip of television news toward the “official story” without understanding the norms and routines of journalists.⁶³ The same goes for public discourse on sexuality and gender: in order to understand how sex and gender categories, and conformity to those categories, are put together, it helps a good deal to look at the concrete, structured settings where they are being negotiated. Daytime TV talk shows, with their unusual and tremendous attention to sex and gender nonconformity, are rich, juicy places to look at the link between cultural production and sexual meanings.

Partly because they are attentive to the relationship between institutional practice and cultural discourse, studies of commercial media’s roles in reproducing and justifying antigay prejudice have also lent a helpful, rattling hand

here. Taking off with Vito Russo’s ground-breaking *The Celluloid Closet*, in fact, studies of the portrayals of gay men and lesbians in film and television have soundly demonstrated how homosexual lives have been subject to systematic exclusion and stereotyping as victims and villains, how “aspects of gay and lesbian identity, sexuality, and community that are not compatible or that too directly challenge the heterosexual regime are excluded” from mainstream television, how television has produced “stereotypical conceptualizations of AIDS that vilify gays and legitimate homophobia,” how even “positive” portrayals of lesbians “serve as mechanisms to perpetuate hetero/sexism.” At best, Larry Gross suggests of network television, the constraints of “public pressure and advertiser timidity” lead to “well-meaning approaches that plead for tolerance” but require “complete asexuality.”⁶⁴

These studies have congealed into conventional, often sacred-cow ways of thinking about media visibility that are now begging for challenge. Vito Russo’s “invisibility is the great enemy,” for instance, is still the going line in lesbian and gay media activism: more exposure is the answer.⁶⁵ Yet at a time when a major sitcom character and the lesbian playing her have come out amidst a coterie of gay and lesbian supporting characters, when a drag queen has her own talk show on VH-1, when big movie stars no longer see gay roles as career poison, when one soap opera has had a transsexual storyline and another, thrillingly, a gay talk show—murder story line, it may no longer be enough to think so simply about invisibility and stereotyping. With their extraordinary interest in gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender topics (which predates the recent miniexplosion of gay visibility in commercial media by two decades), talk shows are a fabulous chance to see what happens when lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people *are* highly visible subjects in a commercial cultural arena.

The most arresting challenge comes not just from the exceptional visibility daytime television brings to sex and gender nonconformity, but even more from the potential *agency* of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people within the genre. “Gays have always been visible,” after all, Russo argued in the afterword to the revised edition of *The Celluloid Closet*. “It’s *how* they’ve been visible that has remained offensive for almost a century.”⁶⁶ Russo was right: until very recently, lesbians and gay men had little input into our own representation. Almost without exception, the literature on homosexuality and the media has therefore treated the process of representation as one-sided. Larry Gross captures this approach very well.

Representation in the mediated "reality" of our mass culture is in itself power; certainly it is the case that nonrepresentation maintains the powerless status of groups that do not possess significant material or political power bases. Those who are the bottom of the various hierarchies will be kept in their place in part through their relative invisibility; this is a form of symbolic annihilation. When groups or perspectives do attain visibility, the manner of that representation will itself reflect the biases and interests of those elites who define the public agenda. And those elites are mostly white, mostly middle-aged, mostly male, mostly middle- and upper-middle class, and (at least in public) entirely heterosexual.⁶⁷

They annihilate us, or deform us, because it serves them well—and because they can.

It is not so much that this perspective is wrong, but that it sidesteps some of the most telling complexities. Missing from these analyses of lesbian and gay media representation is precisely what is interesting about talk shows: what happens to media representations of nonconforming sexualities when lesbians and gay men are actively invited to participate, to "play themselves" rather than be portrayed by others, to refute stereotypes rather than simply watch them on the screen? That is the twist talk shows provide. They allow us to witness tightly linked, media-generated battles over sexual norms and morality—struggles themselves closely tied to class cultural and public-private divisions—in which transgender, lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are vigorous, visible, sometimes agile, participants. They mess up our thinking about the difficulties and delights of becoming visible—and, in a more general sense, about the political benefits and dilemmas of cultural representation. And as the dust settles, they can clear up our thinking.

My takes on other people's ideas have planted not only these intellectual guideposts but also methodological ones, leading me to a wide range of places to dig for the information that feeds this book. The charge that discourse and institutional practice are not separable phenomena, for instance, prompted me to study the practices of talk show producers, organizations, and guests alongside the thematic, narrative, and representational content of the programs. Thus I wound up in studios, where I sat in the audience at least once in most of the New York-based programs, watching the production of the shows from that perspective; in offices and restaurants in New York and Los Angeles, where I interviewed production staff; in cafes and in people's homes in New York, Washington, Boston, San Francisco,

and Los Angeles, and on the phone to smaller towns, where I interviewed people who had appeared as talk show guests. The details are all in the appendix, but here are the vitals: I interviewed a total of twenty production staff and forty-four guests. (In an ironic, if unsurprising, reversal of their daily routine, almost all of the production staff spoke on the condition that they not be identified, and I therefore sometimes use pseudonyms in the discussion. Almost all of the former guests spoke on the record.) Taken together, these interviews cover experiences on just about every topic-driven daytime talk show that has had a life: *Bertice Berry, Richard Bey, Carnie, Donahue, Gordon Elliott, Gabrielle, Mo Gaffney, Geraldo, Jenny Jones, Ricki Lake, Leeza, Oprah, The Other Side, Charles Perez, Maury Povich, Jane Pratt, Sally Jessy Raphael, Joan Rivers, Rolonda, Jerry Springer, Tempestt, Mark Walberg, Jane Whitney, and Montel Williams.*

At the same time, I collected all the available transcripts in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, and gender-crossing subjects made a significant appearance, for the years 1984–86 and 1994–95; with the assistance of interview subjects, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation, and my own VCR, I collected as many videotapes on these subjects as I could get my hands on. Although not all programs are transcribed, the sample of more than 160 transcripts includes *Bertice Berry, Donahue, Geraldo, Jenny Jones, Oprah, Maury Povich, Susan Powter, Dennis Prager, Sally Jessy Raphael, Rolonda, Jerry Springer, Jane Whitney, and Montel Williams.* The 100-odd hours of videos include most from that list, along with *Richard Bey, Danny Bonaduce, Carnie, Gordon Elliott, Gabrielle, Jenny Jones, Ricki Lake, Leeza, Marilu, The Other Side, Charles Perez, Jane Pratt, Joan Rivers, Tempestt, and Mark Walberg.* The transcripts were coded on a number of key dimensions—guest composition, program topic, thematic content, and so on—from which an outline of talk show content began to emerge; those outlines were then filled in with close readings of all of the transcripts and videos.

I swamped myself with more than enough data about talk show production and content, and much of the book teases out connections between these two strands of research: how producers' needs for both spontaneity and predictability lead to contradictions in the sexual politics of talk show programming, how some guests covertly strategize to change the framing of shows in which they are being used, and so on. But linking talk show content to institutional practices still leaves an important set of actors out of the loop: audiences and viewers who, as much recent work on "cultural reception" has demonstrated, encounter cultural products with their own

practices and interpretive lenses, often shaped by their location in the matrix of social hierarchies.⁶⁸ The insufficiency of assertions about content is illustrated nicely in the debate over talk shows, in which critics and defenders alike assert that talk shows have this or that effect on viewers, or that viewers are getting such and such from them, but never actually *talk* to the people who are allegedly affected.

With that in mind, and backed also by my periodic participant-observation among talk show audiences, I facilitated thirteen group discussions with regular talk show viewers (a total of about seventy-five people). The first nine, conducted in suburban New Jersey, were with heterosexually identified viewers; some groups were mixed, and others were organized according to educational background and/or gender. The next three, which met in Manhattan, were with lesbians and gay men (one group of lesbians, one of gay men, and one mixed men and women). I also visited the Manhattan Gender Network, a transgender organization, and spoke with the group's members about their understandings of television talk shows. There are limits on this information, for sure: nearly all participants were middle-class, and the lesbian and gay viewers were all urban and mostly highly educated. Still, much of what I heard allows me to check the unanchored contentions running through the talk show debates, bouncing the content of the programming off the way viewers think about talk shows, and audience practices and thoughts off producers' routines and claims.

What has emerged from all this watching, reading, questioning, listening, and participating is the curious story of how talk shows and sex and gender nonconformity interact, how gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people make their ways through the genre as subjects and objects, how what seems to be, and often is, a world of goofy lightness turns out to be heavily enmeshed in complicated, contradictory processes of social change. For now, a brief preview. Chapters 2 and 3 offer both a critical grounding in the history and production practices of television talk shows and important evidence of the complex, crisscrossing tracks on which queer visibility rides. Chapter 2 traces the history of TV talk, and the subhistory of sex and gender minorities within them, demonstrating that the genre is built on an awkward combination of class cultures; thus the visibility of lesbian, gay, transgender, and bisexual people is always shaped by the class friction that inheres in daytime TV talk. Chapter 3 takes up the vexed questions of truth and reality on talk shows, and in the process exposes the ins and outs of TV talk production: producers simultaneously pursue big moments of truth and revelation, and scramble, often to the exclusion of anything recognizably "real" or

"true," to control the direction of a show; performance and dishonesty are built into the production of talk television, yet the shows are shot through with jarring breakthrough moments. Sex and gender nonconformity topics ride this wave, largely by fitting into a rhetoric of truth telling ("be true to yourself") which dovetails with both producers' needs and the coming-out strategy of bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender movements.

The next chapters move more explicitly onto political tracks. Chapter 4 wanders through the struggles over sexual morality playing out on talk shows, and especially the fate of the political and moral right on the shows. The shows, loosely guided by a combination of liberal, therapeutic, and bottom-line ideologies, wind up for the most part turning the tables on the antigay right, so that the bigots become the freaks; the result is an unusual, conditional, and unstable acceptance of gay and lesbian, and to a much lesser degree transgender and bisexual, people. Chapter 5 turns to the pulling apart and putting together of sex and gender categories, which are both a source of oppression and a resource for empowerment. Talk shows make a habit of raising the issue of "telling the difference" (between gay and straight, male and female), encouraged by their production needs both to raise the possibility that such differences are spurious and to then close down that possibility in a variety of ways; yet the issue is raised more often, and more frequent opportunities are given to talking "monsters" or "freaks" who defy categorization, than anywhere else in media culture.

Chapter 6 watches the disparate ways political battles are encouraged and reworked by TV talk: the often-successful attempts by activist guests to gain some control over the production process; the exacerbation of internal tensions within lesbian, gay, transgender, and bisexual political organizing, in particular the sharpening of lines between those pursuing "mainstream" assimilation and those emphasizing "queer" difference; and the amplification of larger battles over the lines between public and private, into which sex and gender nonconformists, often interpreted as "flaunting" on talk shows, are swallowed. In chapter 7, I bring together these funny dilemmas, ripe and sometimes rotten, squeezing out their implications for the important, dangerous, and necessary changes in the cultural representation of sex and gender differences.

But that is the end, where my mind left me after countless hours devoted to the somewhat unlikely, dangerously cold-inducing task of talk show immersion. As host, it seems only fair to start by telling you, in a nutshell, what I really think of talk shows. As gayman, I think they're a wretched little place, emptied of so much wisdom and filled, thank God, with inadver-

tent camp, but they're the place most enthusiastically afforded us—a measure of our cultural value. We are taking, and are being given, much more public media space now, but only because talk shows forged a path in there, and we had best understand what we can from the wretched little space where we were once honored guests. As scholarman, I think they're rich and interesting, like a funny, lively, slightly frightening room in a museum: dwell in them for a bit, think about their significance from a bunch of different angles, and you come out knowing more about the world, this current one, in which so much of how people see and feel themselves oozes into shape inside the sticky, narrow walls of commerce. Scholarman and gayman meet, for sure, in their common desire for a collective life in which, on a good day, people really take care of one another, and laugh; but it is really the restless coexistence of the two, one measured and the other lacking the luxury of distance, one concerned with culture in general and the other just trying to survive intact within it, that juices up this book. Talk shows are filled with such odd couplings, packed with paradox, with double-edged swords, with painful pleasures and vapid depths and normal perverts. This book cavorts on the tips of those swords.

2 THE MONSTER WITH TWO HEADS

The wonderful Two-Headed Girl is still on Exhibition in New England. She sings duets by herself and she has a great advantage over the rest of her sex, for she never has to stop talking to eat, and when she is not eating she keeps both tongues going at once. She has a lover and the lover is in a quandary, because at one and the same moment she accepted him with one mouth and rejected him with the other. Now is she her own sister? Is she twins? Or having but one body (and consequently one heart) is she strictly but one person? Does she expect to have one vote or two? Has she the same opinion as herself on all subjects, or does she differ sometimes? Would she feel insulted if she came to spit in her own face?

BOSTON NEWSPAPER, NINETEENTH CENTURY¹

Sometimes I watch talk shows with the sound off, and I pump up the volume on Chick Corea, or Mozart, or Joni Mitchell, thrilling to the class clash. Strings move delicately in and around each other, or the piano goes places I can't even understand, or Joni poetically admonishes herself for old-fashioned longings, and on the screen people suddenly pop out of their seats, coming at each other with chests thrust forward, mouths wide open in silent, monstrous screams. Sometimes they are big people, fat, and sometimes their teeth are bad. My teeth are well dentisted, I avoid potato chips and stick to frozen yogurt, and am sure to punish fatty transgressions with a trip to the gym where, of course, I see again, from my moving perch on the treadmill, the silent screamers on the TV monitors, drowned out by the hip-hop in my headphones.

Trailer-park trash and ghetto kids, one talk show producer told me, that's our joke about the guests we get. Very little in that remark was undisturbing: not the notion that the human-garbage analogy makes any sense, nor the idea that poverty and disposability are related, nor the racial coding, in which trailer-park stands for "poor white" and ghetto stands for "poor black," nor the image of producers laughing all the way to the bank, heads thrown back, as they take down eager messages from people living on not very much. Yet while I can certainly get all superior about it, I knew what the producer meant. We live in the same America, and we speak the same language of class—not class in any strict sociological sense, but we at least roughly know what poor and uneducated, or suburban middle-class, or highly educated and quite well off, look like and sound like.

It is certainly true that, over the past few years, the look and sound of daytime talk TV has gotten increasingly poor, white, and rural and poor, black or Latino, young, and urban. But that's not entirely the case. Flipping

the channel, I might get the urge for a different soundtrack if I happened to stumble onto, say, the Los Angeles-based *Leeza*, hosted by squeaky clean, bright-toothed *Entertainment Tonight* veteran Leeza Gibbons. Everyone there looks a lot like *Leeza*, like they've just finished shopping at the Beverly Center and have stopped by to chat a bit before heading back to the Food Court. The host, the guests, the audience, everyone looks like they smell good. ("They look beautiful and they're all beautifully dressed, they're in sports jackets and they look pretty and they look good," a former audience coordinator for the show told me. "She pays for that. That costs a lot of money." On another show, *Marilyn*, he said, they sometimes paid models \$150 for up to two hours to sit in the audience.) Watching these folks, I long for someone in the audience—a young black woman, maybe, in sunglasses and a jogging suit—to stand up and point at people and slice through the plastic, maybe even using what my friend Jimmy once pointed out is an all-purpose *Ricki* or *Jenny Jones* applause line: "Girl, you got to get some self-respect."

In fact, the talk show genre has always operated as an oddball combination of middle-class coffee-klatch propriety and rationality and working-class irreverence and emotional directness. Talk shows, in a general sense, stretch back to earlier public traditions emerging from different, and sometimes opposed, class cultures, and they still operate with the awkward tension between sensation and conversation growing from these roots. Propriety, of course, is not a middle-class property and working-class and underclass people certainly do not own irreverence and emotion, but the talk show genre is fashioned from particular cultural pieces historically associated with different classes: relatively sober, deliberative, "polite" middle-class forms of participating in and presenting public culture embodied in literary circles and the lyceum, for instance, and irreverent, wild, predominantly lower-class public pleasures such as the carnival, the cabaret, the tabloid, and the nineteenth-century theater.² That history and the talk show's status as a commercial genre aimed at women are a crucial backdrop to the story of sex and gender nonconformity on daytime talk.

Yet, while those tapping talk show history always note the obvious connection to female audiences and women's "empowerment," its intertwined class cultures are generally ignored. Instead, the story is told as a morality tale, going something like this. In 1967, Phil Donahue removed the desk from the *Tonight Show*-style talk show, accidentally discovered that the women in his audience had great questions, and took his microphone into the audience. (One day during a station break, the story goes, a conversation

took off between an audience member and a guest, Noxzema model Gunilla Knudsen, famous for saying the ad line "Take it off, take it all off." When the show went back on the air, the woman from the audience was on stage braiding Ms. Knudsen's hair. "The response was electric," write Jeanne Heaton and Nona Wilson. "From that moment on the audience was an integral part of the show's format. Talk TV would never be the same. Like so many others in America, the women watching finally had a place in the conversation, and they were determined to be heard."³) Donahue became king of daytime.

He was a good king, allowing women to speak and bringing topics into public view that had previously been considered unfit for public discussion. Women, still largely excluded from the public sphere, were given voice. (*Donahue* provided "useful information and dialogue that had been largely unavailable to housebound women. It afforded them the opportunity to voice their opinions about everything from politics to sex, and even the politics of sex."⁴ Or, as Gloria Steinem herself said, oddly implying a link between intelligence and nighttime, "Donahue really understood that women in the daytime are smart, and he put the full range of subjects, from foreign policy to safety in the home, you know, on a time slot that had previously been treated as if it were only for, as someone once put it to me, mental defectives with curlers in their hair. And he always said, too, that if he did his job really well, that the next big talk show host would be a black woman."⁵) He reigned for nearly two decades, largely by bringing social conflicts to the stage, until 1986 when black woman Oprah Winfrey joined him nationally and then surpassed him, matching his cognitive style with her therapeutic one. ("Phil was driven to uncover and explore. Oprah came to share and understand," say Heaton and Wilson.⁶ "We used to say people watch Phil to think," a television producer from this period told me, "and they watch Oprah to feel.")

With talk shows inexpensive to produce and now proven popular and profitable, others joined in, and the timeworn mantle of sensationalism, reborn in Phil's conflict-and-taboo strategy and Oprah's personal-and-taboo one, was taken up by new shows such as *Sally Jessy Raphael* and *Geraldo*. And so, the tale continues, the bad began to drive out the good. So began the era of mothers who hate their daughter's boyfriends, transsexuals and female impersonators, and so on, as serious topics began to be replaced by freak shows and exaggerated emotional displays. ("It appeared that having opened the door to private life," write Heaton and Wilson, "nothing was sacred and everything was up for grabs."⁷) Donahue's "illegitimate chil-

dren,"⁸ as he proudly called them, began to propagate like rabbits. With the growth of cable television in the 1980s, the number of talk shows grew, reaching a high point of nearly thirty syndicated talk shows in the mid-1990s; with such stiff competition for ratings and revenue, the sensationalism on single-topic programs also grew, solidifying in 1994 and 1995, when Ricki Lake and her imitators successfully captured a younger audience with fast-paced, rowdy, "kick him to the curb girlfriend"-style programming. The shows had been finally dumbed down and pumped up, the story goes, so that not only was rational discussion precluded but the pursuit of truth abandoned, in favor of anything, including fraud, that worked. ("There was a growing sense that the shows were ridiculous and that they had covered just about every truth, leaving fakery as the only option to make things wilder," Heaton and Wilson suggest.⁹) In 1996, *Donahue*, the mother of all talk shows, was canceled. Heat, at least for the time being, had replaced light.

Regular folks and Very Special People: Class cultures and public life

It is not so much that this version of history is wrong, but that it misses the important features: the ways in which different class cultures have been continuously competing, represented, and sold, on and through television talk shows. To get hold of this, we need to briefly dig at the roots. Of course, people have been talking to each other in public for a long time—think ancient Greek oratory, think Native American storytelling, think gossip—but here we are looking at a somewhat more specific history of public, participatory culture. While informal public talk of all kinds, particularly the informal talk-of women, certainly plays into the development of television talk in the United States, it is the practices of organized, participatory public leisure that provide the heftiest building blocks of the genre. Talk shows, to put it most simply, are built from middle-class traditions of organized rationality-driven discussion and service-oriented presentation, on the one hand, and urban and rural working-class traditions of emotionally driven participation and spectacular mass entertainments, on the other. Those class cultures solidified originally by being defined *against* one another, primarily as middle and upper classes sought to distinguish themselves from those "below" them, with whom, until the late nineteenth century, they had often

shared public leisure space. Talk shows, in which these class traditions mix and mutate, have reinstated a strained mix of politely "high" and unruly "low" cultures.

One pile of building blocks, Wayne Munson suggests, was inherited from public-sphere traditions initiated by new European middle classes in the seventeenth century, such as the English coffeehouse, a "salon-like setting for intellectual talk focusing on Enlightenment philosophy and the arts."¹⁰ In the American colonies, the coffeehouse was joined by the philosophical society, the literary circle, and the lyceum (originated as "moral and fraternal" instructional associations aimed at young working men, eventually becoming a "celebrity lecture circuit"), all part of a "public sphere in which the common good could be rationally debated by the new middle class, free from private (market) interests and prior to implementation by the state."¹¹ Although some of these traditions were geared toward "raising" working people, they shared a basic model of middle-class public talk as the rational, deliberate, often formalized exchange of ideas. This is the model from which *Donahue*-style talk is primarily drawn. We sit together in a familiar room, take an issue or an idea ("homophobia"), and respectfully submit our thoughts for the benefit of those participating and listening ("My son is homosexual and that doesn't mean he's a bad person"); we ask questions ("What has a homosexual ever done to you to cause you to have this kind of hatred?"), we answer questions ("If God wanted homosexuals he would have made all one sex, you know"), we argue. We applaud or withhold applause, but we do not shout out. And whatever we're trying to figure out, we figure it out together, just us folks sitting around talking.

In fact, a sort of "folk wisdom" pervaded one of the earliest participatory media genres, the women's magazine of the early nineteenth century. Magazines such as the *Ladies' Home Journal* constructed a strategic intimacy with female readers at a time when face-to-face local cultures were fast being replaced by national, impersonal ones, in "an early mediated attempt at what the talk show is so often accused of doing: simulating local, interpersonal communication as an antidote to national and corporate institutions." By the turn of the century, women's magazines had effectively commodified both participatory tendencies (through the solicitation of readers' letters, for instance) and "enlightened self-improvement" (albeit in large part by replacing everyday wisdom with the advice of experts, a strategy also picked up by television talk).¹² Even as the possibilities for back-fence and town-meeting talk became more remote, these earlier middle-class models were built into the commodified versions of public participation: rational talk

for self-improvement, either through the simple, commonsense wisdom of “regular” folks, or through the counsel of professional authorities.

Ways of getting together in public, and what we might do there together, were also developing in another direction with the growth of industries and cities in the mid- to late nineteenth century. New forms of leisure, especially public, commercial ones, brought quite a different model of what everyday participation in nonpolitical public life might look like. New public settings such as dance halls, amusement parks, and nickelodeons “extended the private—leisure having once been domestic—into the public.” The cabaret, for instance, “introduced the interactive space that put performer and spectator in intimate proximity” and “opened the door to greater expressiveness through the intimacy, spontaneity, and informality of its performance.”¹³

While these urban entertainments in part gave shape to “a new, expressive, working-class public life,” one “that rejected the domesticity of middle-class mores associated with Victorianism, the Protestant ethic, or Old World immigrant culture,”¹⁴ until the late nineteenth century public culture often crossed class lines. As historian Lawrence Levine shows in his fascinating study of Shakespeare as pop culture in the nineteenth century, for example, earlier traditions of theatergoing brought patrons of many statuses together in a boisterous, participatory show. Social classes mixed in a class-specific seating division, and noisy, active responses to the show were extremely common—led by the “gallery” occupants, those who either could not afford the better seats in “the pit” or the boxes (“apprentices, servants, poor workmen”) or were not allowed elsewhere (“Negroes and often prostitutes”).¹⁵

Indeed, descriptions of audiences of the time may sound remarkably contemporary to a talk show watcher, not just for the cacophonies they describe but for the class anxiety submerged within them. The noise in the gallery, Washington Irving wrote in 1802, “is somewhat similar to that which prevailed in Noah’s Ark; for we have an imitation of the whistles and yells of every kind of animal”; when roused, those in the gallery “commenced a discharge of apples, nuts & ginger-bread, on the heads of the honest folks in the pit.” (“Cabbages, carrots, pumpkins, potatoes, a wreath of vegetables, a sack of flour and one of soot, a dead goose, with other articles,” the Sacramento *Union* reported of another performance, “simultaneously made their appearance upon the stage.”) Englishwoman Frances Trollope, attending a Shakespearean performance in America in 1832, reported spitting men smelling “of onions and whiskey” and complained that “the applause is expressed by cries and thumping with the feet, instead of clapping,” and

spontaneous choruses of “Yankee Doodle.” “When it is considered here are assembled the wildest and rudest specimens of the Western population,” Tyrone Power wrote a few years later of a New Orleans audience, “men owning no control except the laws, and not viewing these over submissively, and who admit of no *arbiter elegantium* or standard of fine breeding, it confers infinite credit on their innate good feeling, and that sense of propriety which here forms the sole check on their naturally somewhat uproarious jollity.”¹⁶ Thumping, uproarious, whistling working people in the gallery and their quietly applauding, somewhat appalled neighbors of “fine breeding”: both have a familiar ring.

The rambunctious participatory behavior, the quick and immediate responses to happenings on stage, much as it does on talk shows, made the audience part of the show. As Levine describes it, nineteenth-century theater has more in common with contemporary sporting events than with contemporary theatrical ones, in that the audience is “more than an audience.” “They are *participants who can enter into the action on the field, who feel a sense of immediacy and at times even of control, who articulate their opinions and feelings vocally and unmistakably*. . . . These frenetic displays of approval and disapproval were signs of engagement in what was happening on the stage—an engagement that on occasion could blur the line between audience and actors.”¹⁷ That description, and its analogy to sporting events, could be as easily applied to late-twentieth-century TV talk audiences as to theater audiences a century prior.

These early commercial entertainments contributed, then, a second blueprint for how public participation might happen: with intimacy, immediacy, expressiveness both vocal and physical, spontaneity, informality, a blurring of the line between performer and audience. We hear echoes in the contemporary talk show, as well: in the unrestrained expressions of audience response (“If there was a prize for attitude, honey, you in the vest, you’d win it, and you, you should have had respect for yourself and kept your legs closed, and to you, you’ve had your five minutes of fame, so just move on”) and rambunctious guest performances (“I don’t talk to her no more, she says I’m a ho”), in the willingness to say and do things way outside the bounds of middle-class “propriety” (“Penis, penis, penis!” “I’ll spit in your mouth!”), in the distrust of scientific rationality (“I believe there have been some scientific studies—but I just know it in my heart, so regardless of the scientific studies—that you are born gay”).

But these earlier forms were not just parallel cultural developments, polite and rowdy cultures moving side by side. Early on, Shakespeare had been

offered as “part of the same milieu inhabited by magicians, dancers, singers, acrobats, minstrels, and comics. He appeared on the same playbills and was advertised in the same spirit.” By the turn of the century, theater audiences were “tamed” and fragmented into class-specific entertainment settings.¹⁸ Indeed, much like in the recent outcry over talk shows, early- and mid-nineteenth-century commercial entertainments—mixed-class events in which high-expression working-class participation provided the tone—prompted a process of class distinction. By the late nineteenth century, participatory culture had become largely class-segregated, in part through the efforts of urban middle classes and elites to distinguish themselves from the boisterous rabble. For instance, those John Gilkeson calls “recreational reformers,” aiming to “remodel working-class amusements so that they would be purposive, restrained, and above all respectable,” began to abandon the ideal of a homogeneous, classless society in favor of “self-supporting and self-governing clubs among segments of the working class.”¹⁹ Indeed, the very distinction between “high” and “popular” culture emerged, Paul DiMaggio argues, out of the efforts of the activities of urban elites to draw a line between “their” culture and that of nonelites. Bostonians of working-class and upper-middle-class statuses before 1850, for example, attended venues that mixed fine art with mutant animals, and “exhibited works by such painters as Sully and Peal alongside Chinese curiosities, stuffed animals, mermaids, and dwarves”; by the early 1900s such mixing of cultural forms, and cultural participants, was much less frequent.²⁰ Politeness and gentility and distance in public settings were emphasized in part as a means of marking off the “higher” from the “lower” forms of public culture, gallery culture from box-seat culture.

Even so, the late-nineteenth-century milieu of inexpensive, spectacular entertainment contributed an even more specific tradition of public culture that has found its way to the talk show: the circus and its sideshows traveling rural America, and their counterpart “dime museums” in cities, which offered “an explosion of amusements and frenzied spectacles” with great popularity from the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century.²¹ The freak show in particular offered the opportunity, for a small price, to be a spectator of oddities. “All for the insignificant price of one dime, two nickels, one-tenth of a dollar—the price of a shave or a hair ribbon,” a freak show “talker” would call, “the greatest, most astounding aggregation of marvels and monstrosities gathered together in one edifice.”²²

Here, in shows large and small, banners and barkers announced the appearances of Lobster Boy (“24 in. long”), Snake Girl (“No Arms No Legs

No Bones, Alive”), Knotty (“World’s Ugliest Man, Alive”), Sweet Marie (“643 lbs.”), Cyclops Pig with Elephants Trunck, Penguin Boy, Frog Boy, the Double-Bodied Girl, the Two-Faced Man, the Woman Changing to Stone, the Mother Who Shocked the World, Boy Change to Girl, Tattooed Girl, Strange Little People.²³ As cultural critic Leslie Fiedler put it, these shows made money by selling public access to beings who challenged “the conventional boundaries between male and female, sexed and sexless, animal and human, large and small, self and other, and consequently between reality and illusion, experience and fantasy, fact and myth.”²⁴ This freak-show challenge, we will see, also found its way into the contemporary talk show.

It was the promoter-showman P. T. Barnum who brought the art of the freak show to its height. Barnum’s American Museum of Living Curiosities accompanied his Greatest Show on Earth. His popular “Marvelous Assemblage of Strangest Human Beings, a Wondrous Study of Nature’s Wildest Vagaries, a World of Oddest, most Amazing Physical Exceptions” included “the tallest and bulkiest of giants; the tiniest and prettiest of dwarves; phantom-like living skeletons; most enormous fat folk; living galleries of tattooing art; the only full-bearded lady, and so on. These were all the curiosities which nature can devise, on exhibition before the public: they were sometimes referred to as the Very Special People.”²⁵ And they were always, banners and promoters declared, alive. “After all,” as the authors of a book on freak-show banners point out, “these advertisements so stretched the human imagination that the word ‘alive’ was almost always added to confirm the attractions’ authenticity. If the audience could be convinced that the sideshow attractions were alive, then they must also be real, although this was not always the case.”²⁶

These elements of the brash, exclamation-pointed sideshow entertainment—its barkers, its “believe it or not” promotional strategy, its exhibition of anomalous beings and behaviors to a half-believing audience—are recreated quite plainly in the contemporary talk show. Like sideshows, talk shows are aimed primarily at less educated, less moneyed populations. In some of the more outrageous programs, one can also see the same “it’s alive!” strategy at work: if the guests are alive, talking on stage in spontaneous-seeming ways, perhaps they must also be real. “Jo-Jo, the Dog-faced Boy, the greatest an-thro-po-log-i-cal mon-ster-os-i-ty in captivity,” a freak-show promoter called decades ago, “brought back at great expense from the jungles of Bary-zil. Walks like a boy. Barks like a dog. Crawls on his belly like a snake.”²⁷ Geraldo Rivera speaks in the same over-the-top

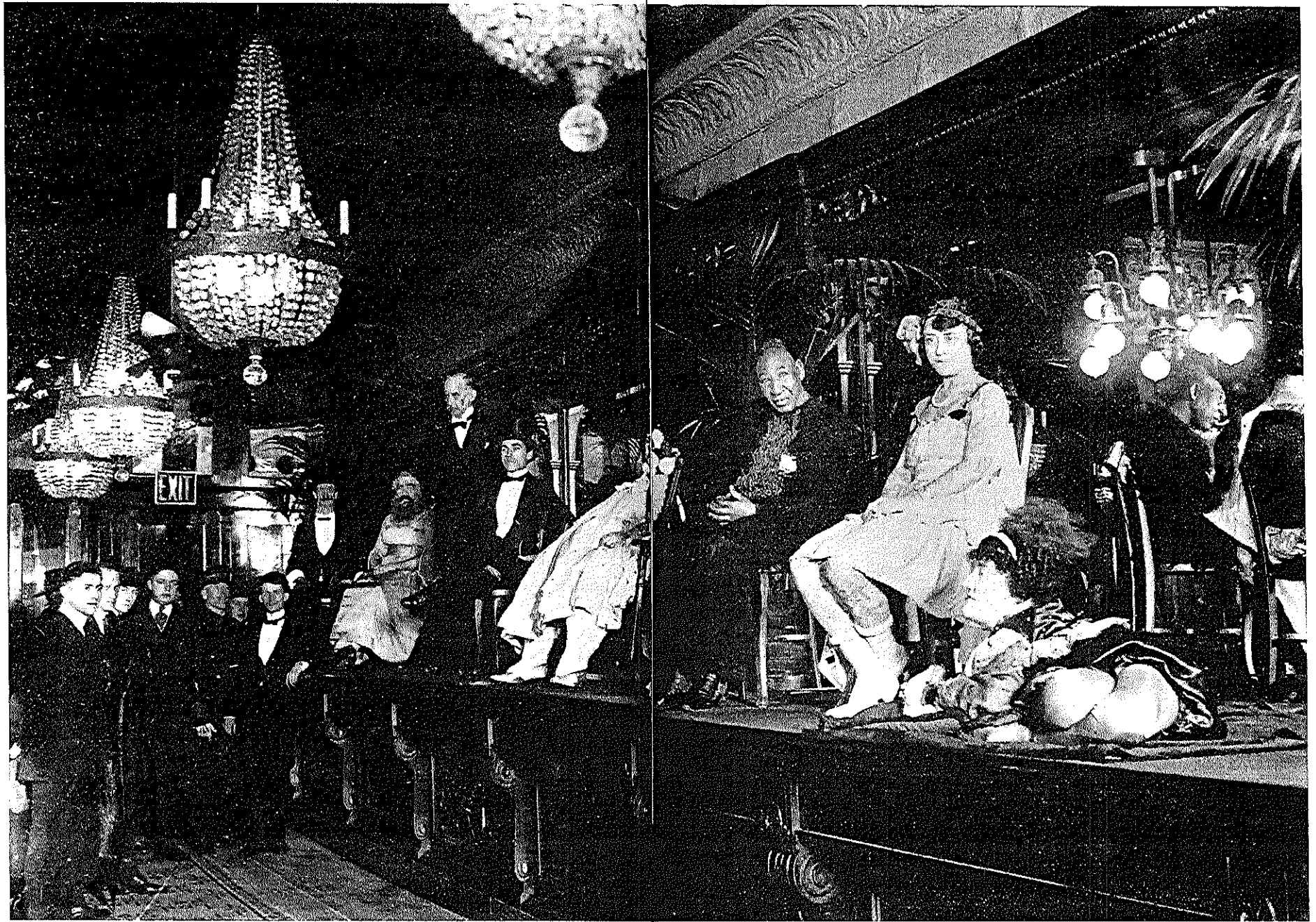


Figure 3 Freaks on exhibit, 1920. UPI/Corbis-Bettmann.

cadences. “Today you are going to see something that will shock and amaze you,” he promises. “It’s a bizarre and incredible trip to the tiny town of Trinidad, Colorado. I’m taking you there so you will have a front-row seat to the first-ever televised sex-change operation in talk show history!”²⁸ “Oh, it’s not another show about transsexuals,” Geraldo’s barker cries at the start of another show about transsexuals. “This time it’s the alternate side to the alternate lifestyle. Women Who Became Men! They went From Girly to Burly! Today’s *Geraldo!*”²⁹ Walks like a boy. Talks like a girl. Brought back at great expense from the surgery rooms of Tri-ni-dad, Co-ly-ra-do.

The sensationalist impulse of sideshows was further institutionalized in print, around the same time, in tabloids and “true confession” magazines. Magazines such as *True Story* targeted young, working-class women through a formula of “women’s personal, confessional accounts of temptations, love triangles, and tragic adventures,” backed not by the “idealized art style” of fiction magazines but by “dramatic photographs of models in menacing poses or love clinches.” *True Story*’s motto, in fact, could as easily be the credo of much daytime talk television: “Truth Is Stranger Than Fiction.”³⁰ “Sob sister” journalists, women writers at the beginning of early-twentieth-century “yellow journalism,” dug out and exaggerated the human-interest story behind social injustice. As Jane Shattuc points out, like television talk shows, the tabloids were cheap, were born of new inexpensive technologies, grew up around and were consumed by lower classes, and combined “a populist emphasis on the injustices done to the ‘average’ American with the allure of the extremes of vividly told stories.”³¹ Talk shows inherit much from these presentational strategies, in which everyday emotion is transformed into entertainment, and in which firsthand experience is elevated above abstract knowledge—importantly, it should be noted, characteristics historically associated with working-class and women’s genres of popular culture.

There are undoubtedly more cultural elements feeding into the talk show genre, but the point of this loose cultural history should be clear: talk shows are class mutants. Much like *Very Special People*, they were born of unremarkable stock (civic meetings and theaters, sideshows and women’s magazines) yet emerged a combination of odd, even paradoxical elements. The talk show, as Wayne Munson points out, “conflates the sensational, the advisory, and the political in a promiscuous hall-of-mirrors inclusiveness, mixing cheap amusement with reformist highmindedness, celebrity with anonymity, fulfillment with its lack, progress with regression, promotional

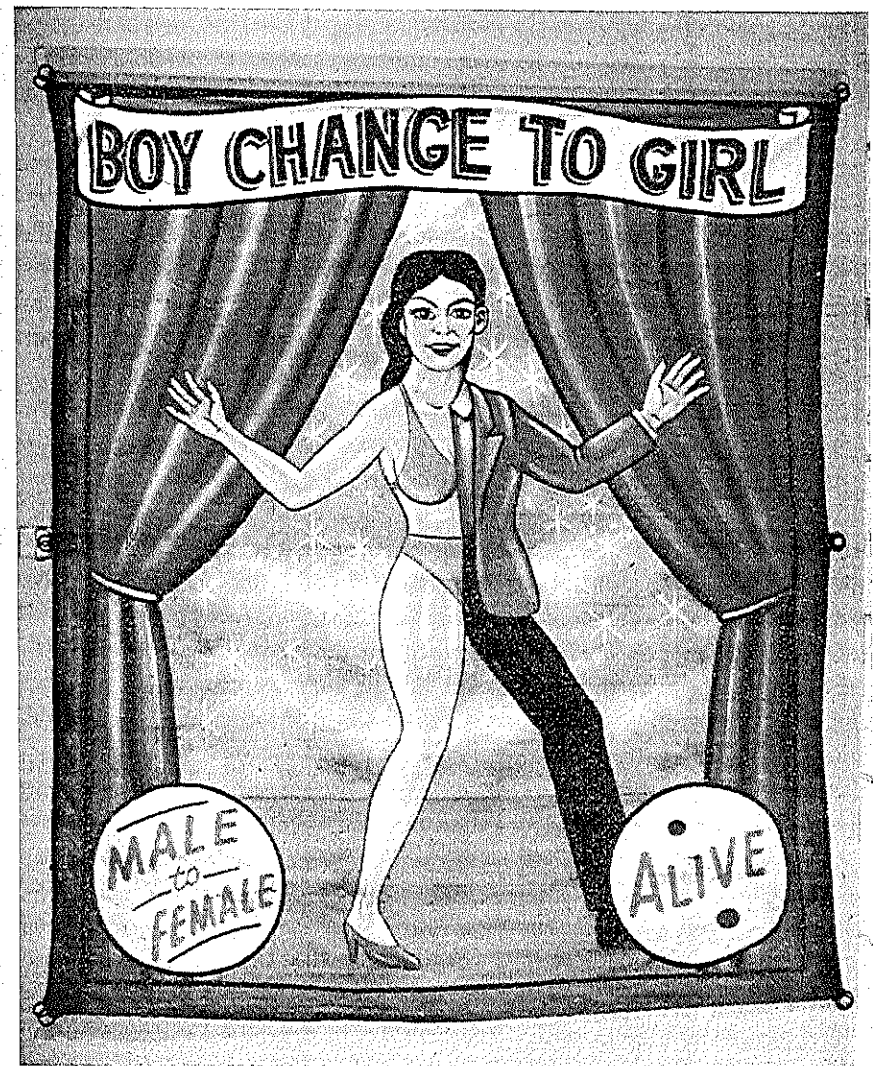


Figure 4 “Boy change to girl” sideshow banner, by Jack Sigler, c. 1950. Courtesy of Carl Hammer Gallery.

'humbug' with the seminar, the conventional with the exotic, expertise with the amateur, the clinical with the emotional." Munson and others read "postmodernism" in this mix, in that the genre "uses the very contradictions it exposes, bringing together a constellation of voices," tends to "juxtapose rather than integrate multiple, heterogeneous, discontinuous elements" and "explodes the notion of any one authentic self or of any single developmental mode."³² These contradictions, heterogeneities, and discontinuities are certainly an important part of the picture, as we will see, structuring the visibility of sex and gender nonconformists. But an emphasis on the postmodern risks obscuring the degree to which the talk show is an awkward patchwork of old-fashioned class cultural fragments.

This beast, that is, has at least a couple of heads. The "respectable," middle-class head, even when it is rudely interrupting, speaks in a reasonable voice, as though it were in an eighteenth-century town meeting or some such thing, to persuade minds or help its neighbors. The "vulgar," poor people's head speaks less carefully, and much more loudly, happily shouting its response, whatever it may be, to the topic at hand, telling any and all who will listen what it thinks, booing and hissing if that gets the point across, as if in the gallery watching Shakespeare. Each head claims the space of the talk show as its own, and of course the two are constantly at odds, but they are joined at the hip, sisters and twins, sharing the same heart, disagreeing with their self, spitting in their own face. At the talk show's true birth within electronic media, however, the bickering was initially not very audible, until the talk show's second head sprouted once again.

STOP

The mother of all talk shows

Talk television's actual parents, of course, were its precursors on radio and television: listener-participation radio shows of the 1930s and 1940s such as *Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour* (a talent show with "real" people), *Truth or Consequences* (in which audience members answered questions mailed in by listeners, often accompanied by public humiliation of one sort or another), and *Vox Pop* (person-on-the-street interviews), which broke open the notion of "ordinary people" as profitable subjects of electronic attention; late-night shows, originated by Sylvester "Pat" Weaver with 1950's *Broadway Open House*, and continuing with *The Steve Allen Show* and *The Tonight Show* with Jack Paar (and, taking over in 1962, Johnny Carson), which provided a model for the "loose, mostly unscripted program

devoted to comedy and casual conversation," with some measure of both spontaneity and the host's personal opinions;³³ and prime-time shows such as the issues-oriented, audience-participation *America's Town Meeting* (1948–52) and *Queen for a Day*, the late-1950s show in which women competed for the crown by telling emotional stories of need.³⁴ By the 1950s, local talk shows were expanding rapidly, often appearing to be hosted, as Brian Rose describes it, "by anyone who could gain access to a camera." New Yorkers in 1959 could watch talk shows hosted by David Susskind, writers Fannie Hurst and Ben Hecht, New Jersey's governor Robert Meyner, even entertainer/former stripper/*Gypsy*-inspiner Gypsy Rose Lee.³⁵

From these starting gates, electronic talk went off in a couple of directions—most simply, one for the boys and one for the girls—until, pulled along with various cultural shifts in the 1960s, Phil Donahue combined the two into a sort of bad-boy show for good women. Significantly, these gendered programming styles mapped roughly onto the class cultural elements of earlier times: women's programming picked up on the quiet, civility-oriented, middle-class traditions, while men's programming made use of the working-class conventions of tabloid, high emotion, and immediacy.

On the one hand, most talk radio (and a few TV brothers) pursued, and continues to pursue, a predominantly male audience through an emphasis on political debate, loud controversy, and shock; they quickly became "outposts for the disaffected."³⁶ When talk radio became a distinct format in the early 1960s—by the mid-1960s, 80 percent of radio stations carried some talk programming—its approach was tabloidesque, built on contention and big emotion, "to exploit news-generated controversies and contemporary problems about which people were emotionally charged—and therefore vulnerable—so as to get their deeper attention and more effectively sell them something."³⁷ In addition to the politically oriented call-in programming that continues to dominate talk radio today, this took forms such as "topless radio" with callers, mostly female, exposing "intimate details of their lives and fantasies over the airwaves," and the shock-jock, insult-and-outrage strategies currently embodied in the wildly popular Howard Stern.³⁸ Both political programming (such as *The David Susskind Show*, which ran in syndication for twenty-six years) and controversy-driven "loud talk" (eventually reproduced for a period in the 1980s by Morton Downey, Jr.) also found their way onto 1960s television, in the short-lived programs hosted by Les Crane, Alan Burke, and the "combative, edgy" Joe Pyne, "who, to the shock and delight of his audience, insulted his bizarre assortment of guests whenever he disliked what they said (which was often)."³⁹