

STRAIGHTENING UP AND COMING OUT:  
DOCUMENTING THE HETEROSEXUAL TRAJECTORY ON TLC DAYTIME

By

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This project examines the cultural work performed, reiterated, and broadcast in reality television. Specifically, I examine the daytime reality television shows aired on The Learning Channel. These shows include *A Dating Story*, *A Makeover Story*, *Second Chance*, *Perfect Proposal*, *A Wedding Story*, and *A Baby Story*. Simply looking at the daytime lineup reveals one of my primary arguments: These shows relay the *curriculum vitae* of what I refer to as the “heterosexual trajectory,” or the “trajectory of heterosexuality.” While these shows can be classified as “reality” television, they are, in fact, more like documentaries. Because the documentary requires specific and strategic ethical decisions, The Learning Channel’s daytime lineup is inherently bound up with the institutional ethos of heterosexuality, starting at one heterosexual practice (dating), and ending with a specific, ideologically strategic goal (marriage and children). Furthermore,

close examination of each show reveals how the heterosexual trajectory is bound up with the formation of subjectivity, race, class, and gender norms. Drawing from queer theories, I show how the overt emphasis on white, middle-class, compulsory heterosexuality implicitly covers over, in fact erases, the possibility of imagining any existence outside of these small parameters. Yet paradoxically, we see that each show is either staged around, or informed by, the notion of “coming out.” Thus, that which is covered over continuously erupts in the very space intended to expel such rhetoric.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2000, the buzz on the streets in Spain was “*Hermano Grande*”—*Big Brother*. Everyone with access to a television absolutely *had* to watch this new reality series, and you could not interact publicly without knowing which of the cast members had most recently been eliminated from the show. I scoffed at the idea of having one’s television-viewing habits being the basis for social acceptance and, being the avant-garde non-conformist that I had to be, I refused to watch the show.

Two years later, in the summer of 2002, I found myself in a predicament: I, a bookworm, and my best friend, an avid MTV viewer, were traveling across the United States. Of course, we were sharing hotel rooms and I soon realized that the television is much louder than the turning of the pages in a novel. Much to my chagrin, I was forced to watch episode after episode of MTV’s reality series, *The Real World*. A remarkable thing happened: I found myself completely consumed by these seven people’s lives. There was nothing all too remarkable about their everyday lives—lust, scandal, greed, work, and alcohol consumption were all things that I too had experienced within the past week. Yet there was something intriguing, and at the same time disturbing, about seeing people’s everyday lives unravel before my eyes, about knowing that these seven cast members allowed themselves to be under surveillance, twenty-four hours a day, in order to bring their otherwise private, everyday lives into the public realm.

Since then, I, like so many others, have been a reality television junkie, partly out of boredom, mostly out of a desire to critique the cultural work of this relatively new (and largely undefined) genre. Most recently, I have become engrossed in The Learning Channel, especially the daytime programming. One terrible afternoon, I found myself starry-eyed during an episode of *A Wedding Story*. I, the self-proclaimed eternal bachelorette, was falling into the trap of the Cinderella white wedding.

My initial and resounding reaction to this personal phenomenon is what brings me to this project. My purpose here is to examine the cultural work performed, reiterated, and broadcast in reality television. Specifically, I will examine the daytime ‘reality’ television shows aired on The Learning Channel (TLC). These shows include *A Dating Story*, *A Makeover Story*, *Second Chance*, *Perfect Proposal*, *A Wedding Story*, and *A Baby Story*. Simply looking at the daytime lineup reveals one of my primary arguments: These shows relay the *curriculum vitae* of what I refer to as the ‘heterosexual trajectory,’ or the ‘trajectory of heterosexuality.’ And while these shows can be classified as ‘reality’ television, they are, in fact, more like documentaries. Since the documentary requires specific and strategic ethical decisions, TLC’s daytime lineup is inherently bound up with the institutional ethos of heterosexuality, starting at one heterosexual practice (dating) and ending with a specific, ideologically strategic goal (marriage and children). Furthermore, close examination of each show reveals how the heterosexual trajectory is bound up with the formation of subjectivity, race, class, and gender norms. The overt emphasis on white, middle-class, compulsory heterosexuality implicitly covers over, in fact erases, the possibility of imagining any existence outside of the small parameters set up by TLC. Yet paradoxically, we see that each show is either staged around, or

informed by, the notion of “coming out.” Thus, that which is covered over continuously erupts in the very space intended to expel such rhetoric.

CHAPTER 2  
INITIATION AND REPETITION:  
COMING INTO THE HETEROSEXUAL TRAJECTORY

The Learning Channel is part of a larger network of education-based programming. It is owned and operated by Discovery Communications Inc., which also supplies thirteen other channels: Discovery Health, Discovery Wings, Animal Planet, The Science Channel, The Travel Channel, BBC America, Home & Leisure, Discover Kids, Discovery Times, FitTV, Discovery en Espanol, HD TV, and Discovery.

Aside from the Discovery Channel itself, The Learning Channel is Discovery Communications' most popular network. With its relatively recent signature show, *Trading Spaces*, TLC posted massive ratings gains. Media Life Magazine reports that between April 2002 and April 2003, TLC's viewership rose 78% among women ages 25-54, 68% among women 18-34, and 66% among 18-49-year-olds overall (Fitzgerald). Indeed, women make up the bulk of TLC's viewership. According to Discovery Communications, "[t]he combination of *Trading Spaces* and *While You Were Out* regularly draws more women than any other network on television— broadcast, pay or ad-supported cable." Furthermore, the daytime programming "dominates cable during the day, with the #1 programming block for young women in all of cable."

Indeed, since TLC's daytime lineup airs during the traditional soap opera time slot— from about 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.— it is figured as an alternative to soap operas. Lynn Spigel notes that soap operas gained popularity among housewives during the 1950s,

when major networks sought to increase daytime viewership by “designing programs to suit the content and organization of the housewife’s day” (78). Furthermore, the soap opera format is traditionally associated with a viewership of distracted housewives and stay-at-home mothers (4). With multiple characters and plots, emphasis on dialogue over action, and resistance to narrative closure, the distracted housewife can go about her everyday chores, tuning in only occasionally without missing the show’s current plotlines (Spigel 78; Fiske 179-180). And, since the perceived ‘non-work’ of the housewife has been so sorely underappreciated, so too has the soap opera format.<sup>1</sup> Many soap operas contain improbable and/or scandalous story lines, including alien abductions, resurrections from the dead, incest, and the like. Women’s ‘indulgence’ in these unlikely plots makes for the popular opinion that the soap-opera viewer is a hysterical female fanatic living in a fantasy world and, in turn, has lower standards of morality or intelligence.

Perhaps as a response to these connotations, TLC has provided the housewife and stay-at-home mother with the alternative of a healthy dose of ‘reality’ television while still maintaining the implied indulgence in the personal lives of others. Thus, TLC’s heterosexual trajectory offers a distinct option to soaps. In contrast to soap operas, TLC daytime is (theoretically) based on distinct, separate couples, not extended family trees and on-going plots. This is palatable, generally family-friendly ‘reality’ television. The connotation of that TLC daytime is ‘reality’ television in itself gives TLC a more ‘respectable’ status compared to soap operas.

Meanwhile, other networks that perhaps appeal to women stay closer to the daytime drama and/or sitcom genres. During the same time slot as TLC’s daytime

programming, the major networks air shows like *Judge Judy*, *Celebrity Justice*, and of course, a slew of soap operas. The Home & Garden channel airs a long lineup of home redecorating shows. ABC Family shows 7<sup>th</sup> *Heaven*, *Full House*, *Growing Pains*, and *Family Matters*. The Oxygen Channel (a 'racier' woman-centered network) airs *A Different World*, *Roseanne*, and various movies, while Lifetime (the purported woman's network) airs *Mad About You* (the show about a quintessentially 'cute,' 'real' couple), *The Nanny*, *Unsolved Mystery*, and the Lifetime movie of the day. Compared to these competing networks, TLC's lineup appeals to a female audience, while avoiding the falsified laugh tracks of sitcom and the melodrama of 'women's' movies. Also interesting to note are TLC's 'counterparts' (genre-similar shows airing on other networks), such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *The Bachelor*, *Extreme Makeover*, and the like. Not only do these shows air on different networks, but they also air during a very different time slot, generally prime-time or late-night television. These time slots allow for a different view of a similar genre. For instance, *Queer Eye* is comparable to *A Dating Story* and *A Makeover Story*, but, notwithstanding the relatively recent daytime reruns of the show, *Queer Eye* allows for a queer reading and queer visibility to a popular audience. In contrast, TLC adheres to and reiterates heteronormative and inherently exclusionary televisual flow.

However, considering TLC's daytime time slot, what I am concerned with for the moment is why, how, and even *if* these shows come to offer some sort of alternative to soap operas. In "Bursting Bubbles: 'Soap Opera,' Audiences, and the Limits of Genre," Robert C. Allen writes that, "[i]n many instances, historical changes in viewer demographics do not occur by accident but are encouraged by campaigns to attract new

categories of viewers or to shift the demographic center of viewership from one group to another” (53). Relatedly, Marc Andrejevic writes that “the historical moment marked by the role of television in the ostensibly democratic demystification of authority (the era of Watergate and Warhol) and the advent of the first reality show based on the daily lives of real people, corresponds to the *return* of an era of increasing economic inequality. . . .

The deployment of the offer of shared control becomes more ideologically important at a time when real control over economic resources is becoming increasingly concentrated” (67). In addition, “[t]he promise deployed by reality TV is that submission to comprehensive surveillance is not merely a character-building challenge and a ‘growth’ experience, but a way to participate in a medium that has long relegated audience members to the role of passive spectators” (2). In other words, what ‘reality’ television, like TLC, actually offers is a sense of involvement in the otherwise unattainable ‘glamour’ of television stardom, while clearly covering over the reality of everyday inequalities. On TLC, whose slogan is “Life Unscripted,” female viewers are encouraged to ‘see themselves’ in the show, which promises an escape from the everyday while at once validating and reinstating everyday experiences.

The problematic aspect of TLC daytime is the fact that the everydayness, the “life unscripted-ness” it represents corresponds to the normative white, middle- to upper-middle class viewer. In fact, Brighthouse Advertising, a popular cable advertising business, specifically posits this notion on its TLC promotion site. “The Learning Channel makes for the perfect introduction to some of the finest homes in the neighborhood. Drawn to The Learning Channel’s extensive schedule of non-fiction programming, they’re anything but passive viewers. They’re the insatiably curious,

relentlessly learned individuals who want to know more.” Viewers are “[e]ducated adults with an above-average likelihood of post-graduate education plus professional or managerial status. . . . The Learning Channel delivers a highly educated audience of adults who are 27 percent more likely than the average U.S. adult to have graduated college, and 76 percent more likely to own a personal computer at home, according to Mediamark Research, Inc. data cited by TLC.” The Learning Channel’s viewers also have a median income of \$51,838. Thus, the programming appeals to a public already economically privileged, and in turn reinstates and reiterates white, heterosexual, middle- to upper-middle class values. And where there is a privileging of the status quo, there is an inherent abjection of that which does not fit into or enhance the ethos of such. TLC’s programming blocks the televisual construction and representation of ‘other’ publics.

Perhaps, then, TLC’s daytime programming is *not* unlike the soap opera genre. It provides a distraction from everyday realities, while providing televisual representations that encourage the female viewer to see an aspect of themselves on the screen. And, as stated by Discovery Communications, the female viewers of their daytime programs “tune in for emotional stories of everyday people regarding pivotal moments in their lives.” Note here the tension between the everyday and the extraordinary. On the one hand is the emphasis on people ‘just like’ the female viewer. Women are encouraged to “emotionally” identify with the people on the screen, which invokes stereotypes of the maternal woman while providing a sort of validation and aggrandizement of the ignored, everyday ‘traumas’ of females’ lives. On the other hand, there is an overt focus on the extraordinary moments of everyday life. The Learning Channel’s daytime lineup, like soap operas, adds an element of the unusual to the banality of the everyday, thus

imparting a sense of validity and/or excitement to the stay-at-home mother's routine. It is indeed appropriate, then, that The Learning Channel now goes by TLC, invoking the traditional maternal characteristics of tender loving care.

Ironically, while TLC spectacularizes women's everyday experiences with traumatic, dramatic, and tense moments, its daytime programming provides an alternative to the instabilities characteristic of soap operas. John Fiske notes that the soap opera world "is one of perpetual disturbance and threat. . . . The equilibrium of a happy, stable family is constantly there in the background, but is never achieved." The traditional, happily-ever-after marriage is nonexistent in soap operas. "All soap opera marriages have within them the seeds of their own destruction" (180-181). TLC's heterosexual trajectory theoretically negates these instabilities. According to their daytime programming, heterosexual couples date (*A Dating Story*), get made over (*A Makeover Story*), have a chance to reunite with the 'one that got away' (*Second Chance*), propose to their girlfriends (*Perfect Proposal*), get married (*A Wedding Story*), and have children (*A Baby Story*). The overriding message of this particular lineup suggests continuity, stable intimacy, and the promise of heterosexual romance. Yet, as I will demonstrate, this programming constantly reveals the gaps and fissures of institutional heteronormativity.

It is at this point, where TLC daytime supposes a constancy and stability in the heterosexual matrix, that the analysis of TLC's daytime programming takes a problematic turn. Part of TLC's security blanket is its technical classification as and popular recognition as 'reality TV.' However, TLC daytime simply 'feels' more like a documentary, and various elements equate the shows more closely with the documentary than with the broad, and largely undefined, genre of 'reality TV.' Because TLC's

daytime programming relies so heavily on the presentation and purported ‘solution’ to problems, as well as interviews, personal narratives, photographs, and other historical artifacts, I contend that its programming is more closely related to the documentary form than so-called ‘reality TV.’ It is difficult, if not impossible, to completely categorize either genre, but it seems that documentary is viewed as unmediated and unbiased, while reality TV is largely mediated and spectacularized. Think, for instance, of shows like *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, *Extreme Makeover*, *Trading Spaces*, *Joe Millionaire*, *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, and so many others. These shows are all *overtly* mediated and contrived to achieve their respective goals, while documentary is supposed, at first glance, to not have any particular interference or agenda. The TLC shows I am concerned with are, for the most part, more closely aligned with the documentary form, not only in their technical work, but also because they (re)present the apparently unmediated, everyday lives of real people.

This documentary aspect makes these shows especially worthy of examination because, as Bill Nichols notes, documentary is just as restricted, fictionalized, and institutionalized as any other narrative. Thus, documentary must be analyzed in terms of history, ideology, class, intertextuality, and other informing logics. Like a (fictional) narrative, documentary is based on establishing a problem/context, presenting the problem’s background, examining its current complexity, and concluding with a solution or path for resolution (18). In conjunction with strategic editing, documentary also relies on oral narrative or the spoken word as evidence of its validity as a historical recapitulation of an event or experience. All of TLC’s daytime programs rely heavily on interviews and oral narratives from both the primary subjects of the show as well as more

peripheral characters (parents, friends, siblings, etc.). In fact, interviews and archival photographs constitute the beginning of each show, thus immediately establishing it as “historical” and “real.” Unlike traditional notions of the interview, where both filmmaker/interviewer and interviewee speak, the TLC interviews are what Nichols calls “pseudomonologues,” where the filmmaker is apparently absent and the interviewee addresses the camera directly. This style of interview supposedly negates the distance between the viewer and the speaker, making it seem as though the viewer is the subject of address. This type of interview is appropriate for TLC daytime, since one of its basic premises is to invite the female viewer to engage directly in the televisual scene.

Without an overriding narrative voice (from a host, for example) to act as the voice of reason or knowledge, the interviewees act as the arbiters of knowledge, thus further extending the invitation for the female viewer to ‘see herself’ in the story. In addition, these interviews serve as “evidence” to the “realness” of the show, but, as Nichols points out, interviewing has strong ideological implications as well. The interviewees appear to speak of their own volition (there is no host and the camera person is off-screen), which, according to Nichols, theoretically “conveys the sense of unmediated and unfettered access to the world” (38, 43). Further compounding this sense of access to the world are the camera angles, which attempt to produce a voyeuristic aspect (camera shots coming out from behind a tree to ‘accidentally’ capture the subjects’ conversation, unsteady camera work, etc.), and thus evoke a sense of liveness and realness. In addition, TLC’s reliance on verbal testimony and archival images from the subjects’ pasts works to “demonstrate the validity or possibly, the doubtfulness, of what witnesses state” (44). This testimony “introduces a sense of partialness, of *situated*

presence and *local* knowledge that derives from the actual encounter of filmmaker and other” (45, italics in original).

With these elements in mind, and with TLC’s proposal to capture “Life Unscripted,” that is, life *as it is* and *as it happens*, we must critique it based primarily on documentary analysis. Because documentary purports to capture the ‘true’ essence of a specific project, Nichols claims that documentary offers an implicit argument: This is how the world is, and here’s why. At the same time, because documentary is supposedly (and erroneously) viewed as an unmediated genre, it is privileged over other forms of narration. As Nichols states, “[d]ocumentary offers access to a shared, historical construct. Instead of *a* world, we are offered access to *the* world” (109). This adds an ethical dilemma to the documentary genre, since documentarians, like any other filmmaker, make decisions as to what is included in the documentary’s ‘truth’ and what is deleted. As I will show, TLC daytime shows only those scenes which will enhance its argument that the world is heterosexual, economically privileged, and in alignment with ‘white’ ideologies.

In addition, the overabundance of interviews on TLC daytime evoke the Foucauldian problematics of the confessional, where the confession is posited as an liberating gesture, only for it to be displaced within a regulatory and institutionalized regime. However, as Mimi White contends, the interview/confessional takes a different turn when televised. Writing primarily of interviews/confessions on ‘therapeutic’ television shows, White argues that “[t]he positions of confessor and interlocutor undergo substantial revision as they proliferate and create multiple possibilities for engaging viewers,” thus resulting in “a networked subjectivity with identity construed in mediated

performative terms” (314). In other words, where Foucault’s confessional implies an interlocutor, a “you” to whom the confession is directed, the televisual confession/interview has, in essence, a countless number of interlocutors. Thus, performative subject formation, in televisual discourse, depends on the confession/interview’s ability to engage— that is, be validated and recognized by— a mass audience. This does not erase the power of the interview; it simply places it within the mass media, reasserting the ideological implications of visual culture. In this sense, then, the TLC interviews place the issue of subject formation (of the interviewee) within the eyes, so to speak, of the viewer— a viewer supposedly already in a position to interpellate, a heterosexual, white, middle- to upper-middle class viewer.

Specifically, The Learning Channel’s daytime programming seeks to (re)present the ‘reality,’ stability, and romance of heterosexual relationships. This begins on *A Dating Story*, TLC’s ‘kinder, gentler’ version of popular dating reality television shows. Unlike, for instance, *Elimidate* (on the WB) or *Dismissed* (MTV), *A Dating Story* involves no competitive element. And, unlike *Blind Date*, *A Dating Story* has no sarcastic commentary or pop-up cartoons. Instead, *A Dating Story* is simply the story of a man and woman, set up on a blind date. It has a more ‘serious’ approach to dating than its ‘racier’ counterparts. Whereas shows like *Blind Date* or *Elimidate* center on drunken debauchery and maximum sexual interaction, *A Dating Story*’s premise is to connect potentially compatible singles in hopes of a long-term relationship. Public displays of affection are so rare on *A Dating Story* that it seems almost scandalous to watch when a couple occasionally does kiss at the end of the date.

The show's introductory theme music and visuals present the idea of a coming together, or bonding, of a young heterosexual couple. While soap operas' music leans toward violin and pianos, which invoke a sense of romance and maturity, the music on *A Dating Story* can best be characterized as hip and funky, with staccato horn music and a distinct rhythm bass. This effectively defines the show's target audience— young, 'hip' singles, possibly college students watching the show on their day off from classes, or the stay-at-home mom (or dad?) looking for an alternative to soap operas.

The graphics add to the emphasis on youth and beauty so common in today's visual culture. We see two tri-sectional flip books, the type that allows the reader or user to create unique beings or pictures composed of elements from different objects. (Think, for instance, of children's flip books that allow the child to create an animal made of a giraffe's head, a dog's body, and elephant's feet.) On *A Dating Story*, however, the pictures are created from different elements of human bodies. The flip books are made up of the elements of women or men— never both at the in the same book, of course. The figures scrutinize each other. If one flip-book person is not beautiful or energetic enough, the other person can discard him or her— change the page, so to speak. For both people, there are no images of 'average'-looking men or women. No one is overweight, has acne, is balding or going gray. Dating seems to be the purview of the young, thin, and beautiful. Furthermore, it is not until one person sees someone he or she likes that either of them can become whole. In other words, subjectivity comes about as a result of mutual sexual attraction and recognition from a member of the opposite sex. In this sense, then, heterosexual recognition is a form of interpellation— I find you attractive; thus, you can be recognized as whole, valid, nameable being. Without the sexual

acknowledgment from the opposite sex, the flip-book figures continue to be without ‘wholeness,’ a subjectivity– the pages keep changing. And so begins the first step in the heterosexual trajectory.

For approximately the first two-thirds of the show, the couples on *A Dating Story* do not meet. What we get instead is a stunning amount of background information on each person. First, the individuals usually give extensive information on their upbringing– whether or not they come from a divorced family, how many siblings they have, where they grew up and under what conditions, and so on. Meanwhile, pictures of the individual as a child, with family, friends, and pets flash on the screen as the person continues to narrate and talk about themselves.

The obvious emphasis at the beginning of the show is on family. To be fair, *A Dating Story* does not discriminate based on whether or not a person comes from a divorced family. However, this is the only type of familial problem we see, and the divorce is often figured as a dramatic and traumatic event. In essence, then, the reality of the United States’ divorce rate is posited as a rare occasion. Yet nearly 50% of marriages end in divorce, making divorce an everyday occurrence and certainly part of this country’s reality. While children of divorced parents are not uncommon on the show, more often than not the individuals come from the stereotypical nuclear family– usually white, middle- to upper-middle class, with siblings and pets. The person narrating nearly always reveres his or her family. The overemphasis on the person’s familial background suggests the psychoanalytic adage that one will perpetuate the background from which one came. However, the dating aspect of the show complicates this notion. Generally, when the person comes from a home where both mother and father are still married, the

person nearly always iterates how they are seeking to re-create that 'happy' environment with the 'right' partner of the opposite sex. As figured on the show, this is a 'good' thing. However, if the person comes from a divorced family, heterosexual dating is figured as a remedy to this familial trauma. As long as they find someone of the opposite sex to spend the rest of their lives with, familial background will theoretically be erased, and Puritanical marriage ideals will be perpetuated.

After the individuals relate their familial backgrounds, they talk extensively on their current interests and desires. Hobbies abound— kayaking, rollerblading, dancing, exercising, and so on. The individuals also talk about their jobs. Meanwhile, the cameras follow them along while they engage in their myriad hobbies, while on the job, and while performing everyday tasks. The footage of the individuals engaged in these activities is juxtaposed with footage of them narrating the activities. These split-screen shots provide visual evidence of the active, exciting lives these individuals supposedly lead. In fact, no one on the show seems to be 'boring.' It is almost as though boringness, or boredom, would be a sin, and possibly a disqualifying trait. Important to note is that hobbies require a certain amount of free time and, usually, expendable income. Hence, the couples on the show are never from low-income families or lifestyles.

Before the couple meets, they invariably get together with friends and/or family, and engage in some sort of relaxing activity. With the friends or family, the individuals discuss their hopes and expectations for the date. At this point in the show, the obviously constructed and unnatural nature of the set-up becomes evident. It seems most unlikely that every single couple shown would actually have a family barbeque before a date, were it not for the cameras and the producers. Yet the viewer continues to watch

because, almost without fail, the individuals will discuss the possibility of this date being ‘the one.’ The constructedness of the show clashes with the apparently ‘natural’ conversations the subjects have with their friends and/or family. Though these odd moments would seem to undermine the show’s rhetorical strategy, the viewer keeps watching, for she is invited to engage in the same romantic expectation.

The overabundance of attention paid to individual backgrounds can be read in several ways. We can read this approach as TLC’s rhetoric of everyday reality, which in this case suggests that dating— that is, dating with the expectation of a long-term relationship— is not to be toyed with. While other dating shows tend to throw a few heterosexual singles together, without regard to the individuals’ pasts or the potential couple’s future, *A Dating Story* presents a competition-less, probable scenario. In fact, until recently, the couple was set up by one of their friends, ‘just like’ it might happen in ‘real life.’

Importantly, the attention *A Dating Story* pays to individual backgrounds encourages the spectator’s identification— specifically the female spectator— with the televisual subjects. The close-ups on the individuals’ faces, along with their often emotional personal narratives, parallel the close-ups employed on soap operas. As Dennis Porter states, “a face in close-up is what before the age of film only a lover or a mother saw” (qtd. in Fiske, 183). In other words, the camera angles on *A Dating Story* clearly address a female audience and encourage female identification, specifically the *maternal*, heterosexual female, with the subjects on the screen. The theoretical and ideological implications of this practice are a bit disturbing. On the one hand, it reiterates the age-old imperative for women (as spectators of the show) to find ‘the one,’ settle

down, and get married. On the other hand, daytime television viewers are often married women and stay-at-home mothers. If *A Dating Story* shares this same time slot and attracts many of the same viewers, then what pleasure does this female viewer get from watching the show? Taken as a part of a whole— that is, a single show within a larger ideological framework— *A Dating Story* is an enticement and foreshadowing of what is to come: the heterosexual trajectory (more on this later). But taken on its own, as a single show, *A Dating Story* could produce a sense of nostalgia for those romantic, whirlwind days of dating, thus indicating a gap in the popular ‘romantic’ visions of heterosexual love and the individual, actual, lived experiences of dating or marriage.

Furthermore, we must read these interviews as a form of a confession. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, Foucault argues that “the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks it (for it is he [sic] who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing; not in the one who knows and answers, but in the one who questions and is not supposed to know. And this discourse of truth finally takes effect, not in the one who receives it, but in the one from who it is wrested” (62). Most importantly, the discourse of the confessional is both informed by and enters into the relations of power-knowledge. And, as Foucault so astutely notes, Western culture is so deeply informed by the ideology of the confession that “we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our secret nature, ‘demands’ only to surface . . .” (60). The confession is posited as a ‘liberation’ and empowerment for the confessor, when in actuality it is an effect of the constraints of power-knowledge. On *A Dating Story*, the interviews leading up to the couple meeting ‘allow’ the individuals to ‘confess’— confess their personal backgrounds,

confess their desires, and, most importantly, confess their ‘transgression’ of heterosexual norms— they shake their heads at and are embarrassed by their single-hood. And once they ‘confess,’ once their ‘secrets’ are aired, they have effectively “come out”— come out to the viewers about their idiosyncrasies, and interpellated into the matrix of heteronormativity.

Televisually speaking, however, the goal of the first two-thirds of the show is to build up tension. Right before the couple finally meets face to face, the image goes into slow motion as one person walks towards the other. The spectator already knows how much the individuals have in common and, right after the commercial break, he or she will find out if common interests necessarily make for a long-term relationship. Since the build up is so drawn out, the commercial break can be almost maddening, especially if the couple seems especially suited for each other or, in another case, if the couple seems oddly mismatched. Other dating shows certainly do this same practice— on *Elimidate*, for instance, we will “find out who will be elimidated when we return.” But whereas other dating shows rely on the ‘tease’ of sexual displays and competition to keep the viewers tuned in, *A Dating Story* relies on personal interviews, viewer identification with the subjects, and commercial breaks to create tension.

In essence, then, *A Dating Story*’s strategy for keeping viewers tuned in is based on a specifically gendered, stereotyped practice: Women like emotion, empathy, indulgence in personal matters; men like sex. In addition, we must remember the primary audience, the women looking for an alternative to soap operas. The fact that the first two-thirds of the show is pseudomonologue, and personal and familial background information on the individuals, makes *A Dating Story* not unlike traditional soap-opera

formats. The presumed housewife or stay-at-home mother can tune in for the last ten minutes of the show without missing the primary action.

It is during these final few minutes of the show that the couple finally meets. If the earlier family barbeque seemed unnatural, then the actual date appears especially forced. Couples go to gyms, theme parks, blueberry fields, and even alligator farms (for some good, old fashioned alligator wrestling) for their first date. All throughout the date, the individuals provide reactions and commentary for the camera and the spectators at home. After the initial meeting; before, during, and after each activity; before, during, and after the obligatory meal; before and after the much-anticipated good-bye (kiss?), the individuals are surveilled, interviewed, followed by the camera to permanently record personal impressions. The editing makes it obvious that the date is constantly interrupted. These mini-interviews intend to make what someone's real, personal thoughts might have look natural. It is as though the individuals are merely thinking aloud during every step of the date. However, the constant interruption necessitates the question of what such interruptions do the interaction of the couple and the flow of the date. Recording personal impressions at once naturalizes the cameras' presence while simultaneously drawing attention to the extremely constructed nature of the show. Personal thought becomes a spectacle for viewer consumption, and the intimacies and nuances of interpersonal communication are concretized—made 'real'—instead of being sporadic or unstable.

This is not to say that every date ends in fairy-tale romance on *A Dating Story*. For instance, one recent couple was strangely mismatched and the date was painfully tense. The woman was a high-powered, extroverted, elitist fashion designer; the man, an

introverted balloon artist for children's birthday parties. Throughout the woman's interviews, she became progressively more aggravated as the man made balloon figures out of every activity they did— they go to the driving range, he makes a balloon club and ball. There were moments where the woman seemed on the verge of sneaking out a bathroom window. However, at the end of each date, successful or not, the viewer gets an update on the couple's status. On the one hand, the update can be seen as a form of narrative closure— “and this is how things turned out.” On the other hand, the updates also seem to provide yet another parallel between soap operas and *A Dating Story* in that they can leave the story more open-ended. When the date goes well, the update tells the viewer that the couple is still dating, thus the relationship exceeds the half-hour time slot and invokes the promise of on-going romance. In any case, these updates encourage the (female) spectator's indulgence in and association with the heterosexual matrix, and lead into TLC's 'resolution' of the heterosexual trajectory later in the day (*A Baby Story*).

Recently, *A Dating Story* added a female host, Sabrina Soto. Her presence and narration provides a female voice with which the audience can identify. Specifically, she provokes speculation, enticement, and excitement for the female viewer by indulging in the traditionally feminine practice of gossip— “I hear that this is what he/she is like,” or “He/she told me that . . .” Sabrina's voice acts as the overarching voice of knowledge, the narrative thread holding an otherwise unpredictable story together. In addition, Sabrina's role as the receptacle and conveyer of privileged information ultimately works to reiterate the 'promise' of heterosexual romance. For example, she recently 'mediated' a date between Sharony, a 35-year-old author, and Julian, a 32-year-old business advisor and author. The couple seems compatible— both enjoy jazz and writing, and both value

education. Before the date, Sabrina gets together with Sharony for a manicure and some 'girl talk.' As Sabrina tells Sharony what Julian is like, the couple's potential compatibility becomes more obvious, and Sharony grows excited about the date. At this point, Sabrina asks Sharony, "So can you just imagine your names together on the invitations?" This entire scene reinstates traditional aspects of femininity such as gossip, fantasy, interiority (both spatial— in the nail salon— and metaphorical— revealing secrets), and heterosexual marriage. Meanwhile, the 'girl talk' is interspersed with camera shots of Julian at his high-powered job, Julian jogging and weight lifting, Julian interacting with clients and friends. This editing further reiterates traditional, patriarchal gender roles— women stay inside (the salon); men interact with others in the public sphere. At the end of the show, Sabrina's narration replaces the textual update, but does not differ in content. On this particular date, Sabrina encourages heterosexual bonding by romanticizing the future of the compatible couple.

Perhaps the most insidious aspect of the show is the fact that race is a determining factor in the show's editing. Depending on the individuals' race, the background music and the scenes the producers choose to show change. One date features Angela and Shawn, two black individuals. The usual gendered juxtaposition of scenes occurs— Angela frets about the date while she gets her hair and makeup done by her best friend, while Shawn tries to appear nonchalant. Yet the fact that this couple is black is highlighted by the music and editing. Unlike the techno or classical-style music that plays in the background when the couple is white, the music on Angela and Shawn's date is R&B and rap-style music. When the camera focuses on Shawn walking toward Angela when they first meet, the R&B music gets louder, as though to emphasize his cool,

‘black’ strut. This editorial practice is not unique; on every show during TLC’s daytime programming, every race has ‘its’ own music. Thus, while *A Dating Story* purports to be ‘democratic’ in that any single can be featured, and interracial dating does and can occur, he or she cannot escape racialization and othering.

Immediately following *A Dating Story* is *A Makeover Story*. While this may appear to interrupt the heterosexual trajectory, (what does a new hairdo have to do with marriage and children?) it in fact does not. Like the show that precedes it, *A Makeover Story* emphasizes heteronormativity, feminine identification with televisual images, and traditional gender roles, but with a distinctly capitalist edge, and with an overt emphasis on positing the body as the site on which social norms and ideals are displayed. The show begins with the fashion ‘transgressors,’ and usually it is based on more than one person’s makeover— mother and daughter, best friends, husband and wife. Importantly, I can only recall one episode that involved two men. Men are usually only involved if they are made over along with their wives or girlfriends, lest *A Makeover Story* and its subjects be perceived as queer. And, with the advent of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *A Makeover Story* must differentiate itself from the ‘flamboyance’ of queer programming.

*A Makeover Story* instead focuses mainly on women and effectively reiterates traditional gender norms. No matter the age of the woman— for *A Makeover Story* shows women of ages ranging from college student to grandmother— sexiness and youth are the goals. At the start of the show, the subjects try on clothing from their current wardrobe while either the other person, friends, and/or family critique their sense of style. Invariably, the subjects are criticized for not looking youthful and sexy enough.

Meanwhile, the camera works to prove the critiques, showing the makeover subjects' wardrobe while he or she engages in everyday activities. Although the subjects defend their clothing choices ("it's comfortable," or "it fits well," and so on), they eventually 'confess' to the need for a fashion makeover. The notion that this is a confession— and the show does not posit it any other way— is problematic in itself, for they are essentially confession to transgressing the ideologies of normative heterosexuality, gender roles, and capitalist consumption.

These apparently desirable traits are expressed, of course, through clothing, jewelry, and makeup. The overt surveillance makes clear the fact that the focal point of the show is not the *person*— his or her ideologies, routines, lived experiences— but the *body*. Specifically, the camera's gaze focuses on the rhetoric— in the form of clothing, hairstyle, and make up— inscribed on and displayed by the body. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau describes how pre-existing societal codes and mores are inscribed on the body in everyday life. "[N]ormative discourse 'operates' only if it has already become a *story*, a text articulated on something real and speaking in its name, i.e., a law made into a story and historicized, . . . recounted by bodies. . . . The intextuation of the body corresponds to the incarnation of the law; it supports it, it even seems to establish it, and in any case it serves it. . . . In this respect, clothes themselves can be regarded as instruments through which a social law maintains its hold on bodies and its members regulates them and exercises them through changes in fashion as well as through military maneuvers" (149) The 'law' invoked on *A Makeover Story* is the capitalist mode of consumption, and it is through the body and its signifiers, in the form of clothing, that the law is incarnated.

Indeed, after the subjects' initial 'confession' that they have transgressed the unwritten 'laws' of fashion, they are off to shop. The retailers featured on the show are, of course, high-end stores, primarily boutiques and designer shops such as Betsey Johnson. It is during the shopping trip that the emphasis on capitalist consumption, and the chasm between this imperative and the subjects' daily lives, becomes supremely obvious. The makeover subjects are instructed by the store's fashion stylists to try on clothing that the subject would never wear. For example, one episode features Amber and Jon, a married couple who volunteer with Big Brothers-Big Sisters. The episode is significantly entitled "Rags to Riches"—Amber and Jon are one of the very rare low-income couples ever featured on TLC. Their wardrobe is, of course, determined by their economic level. Yet during their makeovers, they are both enticed by the otherwise unattainable designer clothing and professional hairstyles.

On the one hand, then, are the subjects' everyday lives, hardly composed of frivolities such as high-end clothing and expensive trips to the salon. On the other hand is the world of *A Makeover Story*, the elitist lifestyle of fashion, one where the makeover subject does not even have to think about cost or practicality. The goal is to discard the subjects' personal taste and economic level in exchange for socially-acceptable signifiers. In fact, they are encouraged to look like movie stars and runway models. Thus, we see that publicly-perceived lifestyles are what matter, not actual, lived class relations. The subject consumes not just the product, but all of the cultural signifiers attached to it. Importantly, as Donald Lowe observes, "*lifestyle* as the new social relations of consumption has overshadowed *class* as the social relations of production" (62, italics in original). Class is ultimately determinative, but lifestyle is what *A Makeover Story* sells.

No matter who they are or what background they come from, women can be ‘sexy,’ ‘hip,’ and ‘young’; men can be ‘hip,’ ‘masculine,’ and ‘fashionable’— as long as they consume and display the appropriate material signifiers. This decontextualization of the subject reiterates the fact that the show is about the *body*, not the individual.

During the shopping trip, there is a strangely overt focus on narcissism. As the makeover subject tries on different outfits, the fashion designer informs the subject and the viewer on the brand name, the unique features, and the materials of the clothing, while the camera zooms in on the details. The subject then gives his or her reaction to the clothing and spins around in front of the mirror for several minutes, staring at him or herself, smiling, and tossing their hair about. It is an odd scene, to say the least, one that emphasizes the narcissism so often implied in capitalist critiques. In addition, the facial expressions, slow-motion shots, and close-ups imply an impending transformation. The camera work suggests that the subject *feels* his or her *personality* changing along with the clothes. In psychoanalytic terms, narcissism refers to an attempt to re-establish abandoned relationship by merging images of those abandoned relationships with images in one’s self. If we take psychoanalytic narcissism in its capitalist parallel, then those abandoned relationships are the unfulfilled promises of capitalist consumption and production. Thus, the mirror scenes on *A Makeover Story* symbolize the merge of the unfulfilled capitalist promise with the image of the individual’s reflection in the mirror. Individuals are invited to indulge in this capitalist narcissistic spectacle, to believe that consumption will in fact change their lives.

After the shopping trip, the individuals go for a hair and makeup session at an upscale salon. Here again, we see the disconnect between capitalist ideologies and lived,

everyday experiences. For example, one episode features two stay-at-home mothers who both recently lost a lot of weight. Despite their active lifestyles—chasing after multiple toddlers, exercising, and keeping house—they are transformed into what the show calls “domestic divas,” with the almost-obligatory short haircut and “glamorous” makeup. Granted that the hair and makeup transformations may be a boost for their self esteem, but the reality is that the cuts are impractical for everyday upkeep, and the makeup most certainly so.

In addition to the rhetoric of capitalist modes of consumption, *A Makeover Story* reiterates traditional roles of gender and sexuality. Women, who constitute the majority of the subjects, are encouraged to go for “sophisticated,” “classy,” “age-appropriate,” yet “sexy” looks. Hair should be “fun” and “flirty” for women. The makeup artists generally promote “natural,” “fresh,” yet “sexy” looks. As popularly conceived and critiqued, women must embody pure dichotomy—angel/devil, covered/revealed, made up/natural. Men, meanwhile, are encouraged to ‘indulge’ in traditionally feminine activities such as pedicures, manicures, and hair coloring. Lest we term these men metro- or homosexual, the feminine aspects of their makeovers are immediately counteracted with traditionally masculine rhetoric. They are advised to look “confident,” “masculine,” and “professional.” All this is performed with the often overt, voiced demand that men and women should dress to appeal to the opposite sex.

The most important aspect of *A Makeover Story* is not the makeover per se, but the rhetoric of *coming out*, of (re)presenting one’s self to their loved ones as a new person. Each makeover depends on some sort of celebration or re-invention. Birthdays are a major reason for makeovers, as are going-away parties, new-job parties, retirement

parties, and the like. Some, on the other hand, are simply to “prove” to friends and family that the individuals can transform. On an episode with Dani and Cindy, two personal trainers, the women are criticized by friends and family for looking “too masculine” and still living and dressing in the 80s. Dani especially fits this critique, with rippled biceps, a sky-high, over-processed, bleached-blond hairstyle, and a predilection for dressing in fluorescent colors. The only reason for the makeover is to show their friends and families a different look. After the individuals are made over, an entourage of people awaits them in restaurants, ballrooms, backyards, and so on. It is a moment of great anticipation. The expectant people are interviewed as they await what the show often calls “the guest of honor,” or “the star of the show.” When the makeover subjects walk in, there is the expected wave of screams, tears, and hugs. It is truly as though the new clothes and hairstyles equate to new people. In fact, the makeover subjects often look in the mirror and say that they do not even recognize themselves anymore.

The overemphasis on “coming out” begs the question of (to paraphrase Sedgwick), what are the makeover subjects coming out of? And what are they coming into? As I have suggested, the individuals are somehow “rehabilitated” and “rescued” from the drudgery of the everyday. The visual and oral rhetoric of the show indicates that they are “coming out” of the banality of everyday life, and “coming into” the rhythms of capitalist consumption. Yet, as Sedgwick notes, the spaces from which the individuals emerge (the closet, in her analysis) will constantly haunt and inform their everyday lives (Sedgwick 45-61). Despite the show’s rhetoric, “domestic divas” will go back to being busy mothers, “beach beauties” will go back to being overworked and

underpaid graduate students, and would-be runway models will go back to being starving actors. These are the excesses which the show cannot, and will not, contain.

Yet the promise of life-changing experiences and transformations continues on TLC daytime. *A Makeover Story* segues into *Second Chance* and *Perfect Proposal*, two shows recently added to TLC's daytime lineup. *Second Chance* reunites long-lost loves, and *Perfect Proposal* sets up elaborate schemes for men to propose to their girlfriends. Like TLC's other daytime shows, both *Second Chance* and *Perfect Proposal* feature an overabundance of personal background information and specific camera and editing techniques which heighten the sense of anticipation. Although I will not engage in an analysis of these shows, it is important to note that both shows center on the idea of romantic heterosexual relationships. *Second Chance* posits the spiritual ideology of a 'soul mate,' the 'one that got away.' The show centers on the idea that, despite years of absence, a couple can reunite and reignite a romantic flame that died long ago. *Perfect Proposal*'s message, according to televised advertisements, is that "it's the right time, the right setting, and the right answer." The right answer is, of course, the woman's "yes" following the man's "will you marry me?"

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tania Modleski has offered a counter argument to this popular disparagement of soap operas in her essay "The Rhythms of Reception: Daytime Television and Women's Work." In *Regarding Television*. Kaplan, Ann, ed. Frederick: University Publications of America, 1983. 67-75.

CHAPTER 3  
CORSETS, CARRIAGES, AND KIDS:  
CONTAINING THE FEMALE GAZE IN THE HETEROSEXUAL TRAJECTORY

An interesting shift occurs between the first two shows of the heterosexual trajectory (*A Dating Story* and *A Makeover Story*) and the final two shows (*A Wedding Story* and *A Baby Story*). *A Dating Story* and *A Makeover Story* invite interactive critique from the female viewers. Women can imagine how they might have handled a particular situation or person on *A Dating Story*. She can place herself in the position of the fashion designer or makeup artist on *A Makeover Story*. In short, there is a space for female analysis and interaction. In contrast, this space is closed up in the final two shows. Whereas women are invited to *actively* engage and position themselves as actors in the beginning of the heterosexual trajectory, they are forced into the position of spectator and passive participant at the end. This, as Raymond Williams notes, is a shift in the programming's flow. Prior to television broadcasting, everyday events (going to a play, reading a book) were discrete and often temporary experiences. With the advent of broadcast television, and with the organization of programs into timed units, "[p]roblems of mix and proportion became predominant in broadcast policy" (82). As broadcast television developed, these problems were resolved by clumping together similar types of programming to attract and maintain certain 'types' of audiences. The interruptions between and within shows (in the form of advertisements) further work to capture an intended target audience. Thus, counter to the notion that television programming is

random and unplanned, Williams documents the flow of several programming sequences to note that within and between shows, sequence and flow are actually specific, ideologically charged broadcasting strategies. Indeed, he argues that “[i]n all developed broadcasting systems the characteristic organisation, and therefore the characteristic experience, is one of sequence or flow” (80).<sup>1</sup>

With the notion of flow in mind, we see that *A Wedding Story* and *A Baby Story* foreclose any possibility of participation from a female spectator. Remember that *A Wedding Story* is preceded by *Perfect Proposal*, the show that features men proposing to their girlfriends. As though to contain the excess of *Perfect Proposal* and satiate the heterosexual female viewer’s desires, there is an almost seamless segue from *Perfect Proposal* into *A Wedding Story*. Indeed, *A Wedding Story* invites the female viewer to actually attend the televised wedding. However, notice that she is merely a spectator of the events. Unlike *A Makeover Story* or *A Dating Story*, where the events are not contained by the ultimate ideological goal of heterosexuality (marriage and children), *A Wedding Story*’s story is already written. Thus, the female viewer’s active critique is stymied and contained. As part of TLC’s daytime flow, this is an important shift to notice. The institution of heterosexual marriage is such that it should not be critiqued, according to the flow.

The show starts out with violin- and piano-based music and an image of a wedding invitation, wherein the viewer is directly addressed: “Your presence is requested at the wedding of . . .” The show follows a couple throughout their wedding, from the few days before the ceremony through the wedding reception. Like the other ‘story’

shows, there is an emphasis on background information, the context leading up to the wedding— how the couple met, how long they have been together, what unique trials they have experienced as a couple. Lest we lose sight of the show’s objective, every commercial break is preceded by a shot of the couple kissing and/or saying “I love you.” After the ceremony, the show ends with the couple expressing their hopes and dreams for their future together as a married couple.

The obvious critique of *A Wedding Story* is that it reiterates and encourages the institutionalized, compulsory, heterosexual matrix. As Adrienne Rich notes, there is a “cluster of forces within which women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable— even if unsatisfying or oppressive— components of their lives” (234). Rich’s statement is especially appropriate for *A Wedding Story* (and all other TLC ‘story’ shows), considering the primarily female audience. *A Wedding Story* posits heterosexual marriage as a “dream come true,” and within this rhetoric, no other dreams exist. Heterosexuality is romanticized and idealized on *A Wedding Story*, thus making it appear “normal” and “natural.”

Importantly, however, the romanticization of heteronormativity on *A Wedding Story* covers over the myriad institutions which support and reinstate heterosexuality as the norm. As Chrys Ingraham so aptly notes, “[w]ith nearly half of all marriages ending in divorce and the historical necessity of marriage diminishing, the wedding market ‘needs’ the fantasy of the once-in-a-lifetime extravaganza/spectacle or it would cease to exist” (75). Indeed, *A Wedding Story* pays far less attention to the man than to the woman and her Cinderella dreams of dressing in pure white to finally marry her Prince

Charming. Furthermore, the overall camera work and editing on *A Wedding Story* differs from that of the preceding shows. Whereas *A Dating Story* and *A Makeover Story* have a much ‘faster’ and intentionally edited sense to them, with more quick cuts, split screen shots, techno-style music, and brightly-colored overlays, *A Wedding Story* tends to feel slower, more lingering, yet at the same time, more ‘live.’ The camera is held unsteadily, the background music is more ‘romantic’ (violins and pianos), slow-motion shots abound, and the camera’s voyeuristic gaze is heightened (the camera moves around a family gathering to “accidentally” overhear their conversations, for example). Ever since the introduction of television into peoples’ homes, “television was assumed to offer to the viewer a particular temporal and spatial experience, an experience marked by a sense of nowness and hereness and inflected by presumed access to the real” (Berenstein 25). The documentary aspect of TLC— the interviews, archival photographs, visual evidence, the sense that this is *a* view of *the* world— certainly highlights the sense of access to the real. In addition, the liveness emphasized on *A Wedding Story* not only invites the romantic, heterosexual female spectator to indulge in these fantasies, but it also covers over the realities of weddings, the wedding industry, and the heterosexual ideology upholding these traditions. This is a theoretically dangerous practice, for, as Ingraham states,

The ideology of romantic love is a belief in a social relation disconnected from real conditions of existence—a social relation that masks or conceals contradictions in favor of reproducing a reassuring illusion or the promise of well-being and bonding. This ideal depends upon a belief in monogamous coupling as the preferred manifestation of love relationship, making all other possibilities unimaginable or unacceptable. It also elevates the individual in the couple to the status of unique and exclusive, bestowed with the mantle of ‘chosen one’ or ‘one and only’ from ‘now until forever,’ ‘till death do us part.’ (85)

The reality is, the wedding industry generates up to \$72 *billion* dollars a year in revenues, with weddings costing an average of \$20,000 (“Bridal Industry Statistics”). When taking into consideration race and class issues, “the cost of the average wedding represents 51 percent of the mean earnings of a white family of four and 89 percent of the median earnings for black families” (Ingraham 28). In addition, the wedding industry is a transnational industry; a majority of wedding-related products (diamond rings, bridal gowns, tuxedos, flowers, limousines, etc.) are manufactured outside of the United States in less-than-ideal working conditions. Then there are the pre- and post-wedding costs and considerations: lawyers, honeymoons, hotel costs, possible home buying and furnishing, and so on.

These statistics, however, focus primarily on middle-class whites. When national averages are adjusted to account for racial, ethnic, and class differences, the information changes. Black couples spend an average of \$10,000 per wedding, approximately half the “standard.” Furthermore, “[t]he 88 percent marriage rate for Americans cited in wedding industry and census materials is primarily applicable to whites and is significantly lower for hispanics (68 percent) and even lower yet for blacks (46 percent).” When these numbers are broken down by sex, the U.S. Census Bureau statistics show that, for people between the ages of 25 and 44, only 16 percent of white women and 25.3 percent of white men have never married compared to 39 percent of black women and 42.8 percent of black men.

Of course, these facts and figures are not explored or displayed on *A Wedding Story*, thus suggesting that the *dream* of romance and marital bliss is more important than

the actual, economic realities of the wedding industry. The realities of economic and race inequalities, and the reality of the wedding as an industry and institution of heteronormativity, exceed the show's televisual discourse. Nichols writes that excess "is that does not fit into a given analytic scheme; it is the noise that remains when we agree upon limits for what will pass as information" (141). *A Wedding Story's* "scheme" is to convey, cite, and reiterate heteronormativity, in a specifically and intentionally romanticized vision. Furthermore, as I will demonstrate, *A Wedding Story* is replete with citations and reiterations of class, race, and sexual stereotypes and norms.

*A Wedding Story* begins with the couple narrating the story of how they met. As to be expected of a narrative fiction posing as 'reality,' there is always some obstacle which the couple must overcome. In fact, more often than not, the featured couple has experienced some sort of obstacle to the fulfillment of their wedding. On Kim and Rockney's episode, we learn that, although they grew up together, they spent fourteen years apart. In the interim, Kim had two children out of wedlock, Rockney got married and divorced, both joined the military, and Kim developed leukemia in 1996. Sara and Karim, another featured couple, faced the 'problem' of interracial and interreligious dating—Sara is from a town in Kansas with a population of 400, Karim is an Islamic man from Morocco. Veronica and Jorge nearly missed the chance to marry. Veronica was practicing to join a convent when she met Jorge at church. Despite these potential setbacks, the promise posited by *A Wedding Story* is that, despite any hindrances, a loving, romantic, long-term, and legally sanctioned heterosexual marriage can be

realized. To go back to Nichols, *A Wedding Story*'s argument is that heterosexual love and marriage is the panacea for all ills.

In the day or two leading up to the ceremony, the couple is videotaped having family dinners, wedding rehearsals, and rehearsal dinners. On the day of the ceremony, the bride and groom engage in their respective, gendered activities. The bride has her hair and makeup done, while the groom nearly always plays some sport. For instance, on Veronica and Jorge's episode, Veronica is shown at the hairdresser, fretting over the ideal hairstyle. She then goes to her mother's house, where all the female family members and bridal attendants help with the traditional dress fitting. Jorge, in the mean time, plays football with all the male family members and groomsmen. The camera shots switch back and forth between the two as they prepare for the 'big day.' This editing reinstates the centuries-old tradition of keeping the bride and groom apart on their wedding day, a tradition that started in the age of arranged marriages.<sup>2</sup> The problem here, as Ingraham states, is that "Through the use of nostalgia, romance renarrates history and naturalizes tradition. Tradition, then, is left unquestioned, providing a vehicle for ruling-class interests to be both emulated and legitimized" (94). In other words, the viewer forgets—or does not know—the patriarchal and sexist tradition behind the separation of bride and groom. This tradition is so naturalized in Western societies that it is not even questioned. The ceremony follows this segment, then the cameras accompany the wedding party to the reception site, where all guests are shown having a great time.

If the preceding statistics did not make it obvious, then *A Wedding Story* certainly demonstrates how class and capitalism are implicitly bound up with the wedding

tradition. All couples featured on *A Wedding Story* have lavish, traditional white weddings. There are no small, civil services. The camera shots at both the ceremony and reception show at least one hundred, if not several hundred, guests in attendance. At Leslie and Frank's wedding (another featured couple), both of them have six wedding attendants, and there are almost 600 people at the reception. Sara and Karim have not one, but *two* ceremonies *and* receptions in Morocco, adding the extra expense of having to fly Sara's family out from Kansas. According to industry statistics, a reception with two hundred fifty guests costs an average of \$8,000. Obviously, the couples featured on *A Wedding Story* come from already privileged backgrounds, and their weddings apparently exceed averages by a long shot. Considering the class status of the typical TLC viewer, *A Wedding Story* does little in the way of democratizing "access to the real." In fact, it is a circular system which re-invents and re-presents itself daily.

Although the economic and class considerations deserve note, the most insidious aspect of *A Wedding Story* is the way in which race is re-instated all along the way. On the surface, *A Wedding Story* appears an egalitarian endeavor— people of many races, including interracial couples, are represented. Yet difference is constantly highlighted, reiterated, and contrasted with the 'real, white' wedding— a notion that ultimately does not exist. Leslie and Frank's wedding is a perfect example. Leslie and Frank are a black couple. According to the couple, when they first met at work, Leslie was a strong-headed "bitch" who would not give Frank, the office "player," a second glance, particularly because she is a single mother whose experiences with men have been disheartening. But of course, they fall in love. During their interviews, Leslie fantasizes of growing old with

Frank and retiring to Florida, where he will continue to be her “sugar daddy” and she will still be his “boopie.” The day before the wedding, Leslie, Frank, and their wedding attendants go out to play miniature golf. In contrast to episodes featuring white couples, where the pre-wedding activities are constantly interrupted with interviews from family members, Leslie and Frank’s episode has an extended observational shot of the couple bantering and teasing each other. In stereotypical ‘black’ colloquial fashion, Leslie and her female friends scream, laugh, and fall all over each other when Leslie makes a wise crack; Frank “raises the roof” when he shows Leslie up with a hole-in-one. The morning of the wedding, the camera zooms in on the track of weaving that the stylist applies to Leslie’s head. Frank, meanwhile, is shown cooking breakfast for his groomsmen as they watch football, “raise the roof” some more, and compare muscles (Leslie’s brother, one of the groomsmen, is a professional football player). The ceremony itself incorporates traditional African dress and customs, including jumping over the broomstick at the reception.

Contrast to this the episode featuring Kim and Rockney, or Viviana and Rob. Kim and Rockney, a white couple, are from the same small town in Texas. They decide to get married at Camp Jeep, an annual festival for Jeep fanatics (and, based on what I saw on the show, populated almost entirely by whites). Where Leslie and Frank are shown, in an extended shot, teasing each other and speaking in stereotypical ‘black’ dialect, Kim and Rockney are filmed with quick cuts, shown rock climbing and allowing their children to play on inflated vinyl structures. During the same day-before-the-wedding segment on Viviana and Rob’s episode, we see footage of the family barbeque.

The grilling, drinking, and laughing are interspersed with interviews from family members. Rob's cuisine of steaks and burgers is compared, several times, with Viviana's fare of Greek kabobs and sauces. In Rob and Viviana's episode, then, cultural and ethnic differences are contrasted with the 'normalcy' of whiteness, and the same contrast implicitly happens with Leslie and Frank. This is not to say that the extended or long shot is somehow race-related. Rather, I find it intriguing and problematic that the editors would *choose* to construct the same segments in very different ways. It is an almost exoticizing, fetishizing gaze into the lives of Others.

On the one hand, Leslie and Frank's episode (and many others featuring people of color) purports to 'democratize' and complicate traditional notions of the white, Cinderella-style wedding. A wedding that cites African traditions is just as legally binding as one with a white gown and tuxedos. My point here is, these editing choices and camera angles are *deliberate*. Why zoom in on a hair weave? Why choose to *not* intersperse the pre-wedding activity with family interviews? The fact is, *A Wedding Story* indulges the white, female (read, domestic), middle-class gaze of the spectator with televisual representations of the exotic other. As though the editing and camera work were not enough to emphasize color and/or otherness, the music imposed on the episodes concretizes otherness. As with *A Dating Story*, each race and ethnicity has 'its own' music to reiterate racial stereotypes. During Kim and Rockney's episode at Camp Jeep, country and rock and roll music play in the background. All throughout Leslie and Frank's episode, smooth R&B and rap-style music plays in the background. At their ceremony, the music changes from R&B to African music, with 'exotic' sounding vocals,

rhythmic percussion, and chanting. Veronica and Jorge, a Mexican-American couple living in Texas, have Spanish guitar and Mexican mariachi music playing throughout, even during the reception where, based on the dance rhythms of the wedding guests, there is clearly something else actually playing. This is one of the biggest problems with *A Wedding Story*. What *could have been*, what the editors and producers *could have shown* (i.e., the reality of the event) is covered over. Instead, the show opts to portray difference in the way that stereotypes claim they should be.

This is a horrifically overt attempt to categorize, distinguish, and, most importantly, define and contain the unspeakability of the other. To cite Judith Butler, normative subjectivities are defined by that which they are not, so that the excrement defines the other. Here is where *A Wedding Story* falls apart. Through music, camera shots, and other editing techniques, couples such as Leslie and Frank, Veronica and Jorge, Viviana and Rob, and many others, are clearly defined as *not* white, or any other race or culture, for that matter. Yet even a white couple like Kim and Rockney must be defined by specific editing and camera techniques as well. That is, even that which is perceived as ‘normative’ must be contained and defined. As Butler has argued in “Critically Queer,” *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies That Matter*, and elsewhere, this evidences the failings of heteronormativity and, by proxy, of other normative discourses. Normativity, through its constant and frenzied citations and reiterations, continually reveals its failings to approximate a norm *that ultimately does not exist*. Heterosexuality, and its informing normative ideologies, is a species of the simulacrum.

Furthermore, all of these differences are contained within the rhetoric and ideology of the wedding. As long as the performative act of “I now pronounce you . . .” takes place, the wedding is valid, celebrated, legally binding, and publicly recognized. This is especially apparent on Sara and Karim’s episode. The couple first holds the Islamic wedding, but it is not distinguished as ‘a wedding.’ The couple’s respective families gather in the same room while Karim’s family chants and Sara drinks milk, but unless the viewer is familiar with these wedding traditions, the show does nothing in the way of distinguishing this scene as such. Later that evening, however, the ‘real,’ “American” (as signified by the show’s textual overlays) wedding takes place. Sara expresses excitement at being able to wear her traditional white wedding gown. Now that both Sara and the viewer understand the events and the language, the wedding is actuated, and the show can end. In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler argues that the Other “emerges within the system as incoherence, disruption, a threat to its own systematicity”(39). We can see this sense of incoherence when we juxtapose the Islamic wedding with the “American” one. Based on Sara’s reaction (actually, *lack* of reaction) to the Islamic ceremony, and based on the editing in the show, *A Wedding Story* (and a white, upper-middle class, American bride/viewer) does not acknowledge the ceremony’s legality and indeed positions it as a rupture in the perceived coherence of marital ideology. In other words, both the bride and the female viewer must recognize the rhetoric of the wedding, under the rubric of Western, Christian traditions, in order for the ceremony to be valid.

The obligatory citation of these traditions further encourages the specifically female viewer to identify with and fetishize the spectacle of heteronormativity. Indeed, quite a bit of time is spent on observing the woman as she dresses in her white gown, assisted by female friends and family. Like the preceding shows, the female's experience is situated as a 'coming out.' On Viviana and Rob's episode, for instance, the segment devoted to pre-wedding preparations is devoted entirely to Viviana— the cameras do not show a single shot of Rob getting dressed in his tuxedo. Significantly, the segments preceding this scene are dedicated to elaborating on Viviana's extremely close ties to her Orthodox Greek father. At the end of this segment, the camera zooms in on Viviana, dressed in her angelic, white gown, emerging— that is, *coming out*— from an elevator. She greets her father with a hug and a kiss, and the scene fades into commercial. It is an odd, melodramatic moment. The idea of the female as consumer and controller of weddings is highlighted, while the idea that a woman is transferred, as property, between her father and her husband is reiterated. The notion of a single, independent female is what the bride 'comes out' of; the patriarchal tradition of marriage and being 'owned' is what she comes into. Perhaps, though, this is not so much a problem for Viviana. In an eerie, what-would-Freud-say moment, she states how much Rob is like her father.

Popular (i.e., heterosexual) demand suggests that children necessarily follow marriage. *A Wedding Story* cannot contain this heteronormative obligation that is implicitly cited in the ceremonial performative ("I now pronounce you . . ."), but TLC comes through with the conclusion of the heterosexual trajectory. The Learning Channel's daytime lineup 'logically' consummates (pun intended) with *A Baby Story*, a

show where married couples are followed from the woman's late pregnancy through post-delivery. The idea that heteronormativity is finalized in this show is obvious. But the ways in which *A Baby Story* completes this narrative are worth examining.

Unique to *A Baby Story* is a female voice-over narrator. This disembodied female voice begins the show with a short introduction to the couple and their relationship, as scenes of the couple flash across the screen. This female voice-over reinforces the female spectator's gaze and identification with the televisual images. More importantly, though, voice-over narration helps to provide a context and situation for the spectator, as though there were something so excessive and unrepresentable about the footage that it must be contained and constrained by what the voice is willing to tell us.

After the voice-over introduction, *A Baby Story's* theme music and introductory graphics appear. Soft, lullaby-esque piano music plays in the background. The screen takes on a soft, hazy tone as images of white woman's pregnant abdomen take over the screen's expanse. First is a close-up of the abdomen, followed by a shot of a doctor's hand with a stethoscope monitoring the woman's body. Next is a shot of a child's hand reaching up to touch the woman's stomach. The woman's hand reaches down to meet the child's, and a glimmering ray of light emanates from the diamond wedding ring on her left hand. She then rubs her own stomach, turns to the side, and places one hand on the bottom of her stomach, the other hand on top. The wedding ring shines. This introduction provides the ideal segue from *A Wedding Story* into *A Baby Story*. The ceremonial performance (and performative) of the preceding show is actualized, as though a natural consequence. This introduction also sets the parameters of acceptability

and intelligibility for the show's content— the fetishizing of the pregnant female body, the reiteration of marital ideology, and the intervention of the medical field from start to finish.

Following the introduction is the almost obligatory recounting of the couple's relationship. The couple's interview is interspersed with pictures which document their history. They tell the story of how they first met, what their wedding was like, and of course, how they got pregnant. As is to be expected, there is always some potential setback to their relationship and/or pregnancy. With Kenneth and Denise, the doctors were concerned because the baby was not gaining weight fast enough, which could have jeopardized its health. With Marsha and Arsen, it was religious difference— Marsha is Jewish, Arsen a Catholic. Sandra and Willy have a cultural difference. Sandra is Korean, Willy is Chinese. The most dramatized problems, however, are those that have to do with conception and/or pregnancy. On Cynthia and Milton's episode, for instance, we learn that they lost their first baby to SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) just one day after the baby was born. Cynthia's narration emphasizes the tragic aspects of the experience— how excited they were, how suddenly the death happened, how "empty and horrible" she felt, and how she could not eat and did not leave her room for three months afterwards. During her narration, Milton is silent, as though to concede ultimate authority of representability to Cynthia. Pictures of her in the delivery room with the now-deceased baby flash across the screen as she cries her way through the story. The scene then cuts to a shot of the couple placing flowers on the baby's grave during a snowy winter day. The camera zooms in on the headstone as the flowers are placed, and

cheerless piano music plays in the background. It is a sad story, of course, and the editing, narration, and camera angles all work to underscore the tragedy. On a more critical note, however, this televisual work ultimately stresses the ‘healing’ work of pregnancy and family. So long as these couples have a baby, whatever differences or tragedies they might have are effectively erased.

But once these obstacles are overcome, the show can go on. As the couple narrates their story, the interspersed pictures provide evidence for their narratives. The couples always claim that they are happy, well-adjusted, and committed. Just in case the narration is not enough evidence for the viewer, photos of the couple smiling or kissing appear on the screen as they narrate. The idea that this show is centered on the female’s experience, for a female viewer, is reinforced by the fact that the male rarely speaks. In addition, it reiterates gendered norms— the talkative, over-excited, hen-pecking female versus the quiet, “let-her-do-the-talking” male.

As in *A Dating Story*, *A Baby Story* spends an inordinate amount of time on background information. It is as though the stability of heterosexual marital ideology is so precarious that it must be negated at every possible turn. Indeed, during these segments and scenes, the couple proclaims the bliss that is their marriage. Often, the woman will tell the story of when and how she knew her soon-to-be husband was ‘the one,’ which of course leads into the story of the wedding, followed by the story of their pregnancy. All throughout, the white, middle- to upper-middle class, nuclear family requirement is reinforced. Marsha and Arsen met in the Hamptons, and summer there every year. After her delivery, we see an idyllic shot of Marsha, Arsen, their (now) two

children, and the family dog playing in the huge, meadow-like backyard. Sandra and Willy traveled around the world before having their first child. Emma and Roberto had two wedding ceremonies— one a civil service in Connecticut, and the other in Florence, Italy, where they hosted over 80 guests. The happy family of four (they previously had a daughter) now spends every summer in Florence. All of these elements require a fairly high level of disposable income. The Learning Channel does not air *A Single Mother Story* or *A Welfare Family Baby Story*. Instead, *A Baby Story* naturalizes the vague rhetoric of the elusive, undefined ‘American Dream.’ Following these initial segments is the mandated family gathering, cut to commercial, and return to see the woman in labor at the hospital.

It is these hospital scenes I am primarily concerned with. Here, we see how intensely a body is monitored, documented, and recorded throughout its life. As the woman screams through her labor pains, the camera zooms in on the clock, cuts to a close-up of the doctor’s face as he or she narrates the most recent events of the labor process. We then get a close-up of the woman’s face in pain, perhaps a close-up of her husband, and most certainly interviews with doctors and nurses. The physicians’ primary responsibility in this show is to document and narrate the medical status of the woman and the baby.

All throughout the delivery, there is an intense sense of “hereness” and “liveness” fomented by camera work. There are unsteady camera angles and a grainy, home-video like screen. Furthermore, some episodes include the home-video recording of family members. For example, on the morning of Cynthia’s delivery, we cut from a sunrise

shot of the exterior of their home to a view from the “Daddy Cam.” Around the perimeter of the screen is a white outline; in the bottom left corner of the screen are the words “Daddy Cam” with a red dot, signifying the ‘record’ mode. During delivery, certain camera angles further give the female viewer a sense of not just “being there,” but of actually performing the delivery. Nearly all the episodes have a shot from behind the mother’s head, so that the viewer has the same view as the laboring mother. This technique has implications at the level of reception. It attempts to erase the edited nature of the program, thus giving the viewer a sense of access to the real. It also pulls the female viewer into the scene, an idea that she can be there and participate, as both a spectator *and* the central actor, in what is usually a very private event. This raises the question, Why would *A Baby Story* especially insist on inviting the female viewer to participate in this scenario? Is this simply an indulgence in the private spaces of other people? Or is it more insidious, trying to instill, appeal to, and/or document the supposedly natural ‘maternal instinct’ of the female viewer? The show’s tear-jerking narrative points toward the latter.

We must consider the abundance of close-ups on the delivering mother, and the idea that the female viewer is invited to participate in this otherwise private trauma and experience. If we take the idea of fetishization, wherein an object or a person is imbued with imaginary magical powers, then we see that the body of the pregnant female is clearly fetishized in *A Baby Story*. The fetishization, however, is bound up with the notion of trauma. Camera angles work to highlight the trauma of labor, so much so that the trauma is ultimately transferred to female spectator. Ultimately, however, there is

that impossible distance between the female viewer and the pregnant mother on the screen— the interviews, which emphasize the uniqueness of the couple’s story, concomitantly create a difference and distance between the viewer and the televisual subjects. In addition to the mother’s-view camera shots, the camera zooms in on the woman crying, the flushed strain on her face as she pushes. We hear the horrific screams as the baby’s body pushes through her cervix. We hear the “I can’t do it!” as she tires. There is no music in the background throughout the delivery process. All the viewer gets is the visual close-ups and audio documentation of trauma. Some women elect non-medicated childbirth, where the screams are all the more intense, and the footage helps underscore the ‘extreme’ nature of natural childbirth. On Emma and Roberto’s episode, for instance, we see scenes of Emma on her hands and knees, moaning in agony. During the delivery, we get an extreme close-up of her face as she screams, “I want it out!!” Such camera work provides visual evidence to the psychoanalytic notion that pregnancy and childbirth arouse fears of bodily integrity. Freud argues that this pain is necessary to realizing one’s body: “Pain seems to play a part in the process, and the way in which we gain new knowledge of our organs during painful illness is perhaps a model of the way by which in general we arrive at the idea of our own body” (qtd. in Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 58). Rather than achieving a separation of the id from the ego through pain, however, *A Baby Story* suggests that the pain and trauma of childbirth results in the integrity of the magical, romantic, maternal afterward. Once the baby is born, the husband and wife marvel at the miracle baby as the camera focuses on their faces together as a family. The joyous piano music starts up, and we cut to commercial. From

start to finish, it is an “it was all worth it” rhetoric, one that fetishizes the pregnant female body and privileges familial, heterosexual relations.

Implicit in the camera’s documentation is the recording and supporting of sexuality, specifically heterosexuality and all its regimented norms. The pregnant woman is always, as purported by TLC, a married woman. The introductory music and graphics, along with the constant close-ups and interviews with the woman and her husband, only work to prove that. More importantly, we see how *A Baby Story*’s documentation of the pregnancy actually records and disseminates ideologies of sexuality specifically. This is important to note because, as Foucault argues, such representation is an example of a local (yet global) center of power-knowledge and the regimented monitoring of sexuality. In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault writes that sexuality, as an area of investigation, is posited as such because “techniques of knowledge and procedures of discourse were capable of investing it” (98). It is similar to the Butlerian notion that heterosexual regimes precede and exceed the body. There are powers at work, preceding the documentation, that proclaim and reiterate what is legitimate and what is not, what counts as knowledge and what does not. Foucault specifically (and aptly) cites “the body of the child, under surveillance, surrounded in his [sic] cradle, his bed, or his room by an entire watch-crew of parents, nurses, servants, educators, and doctors, all attentive to the least manifestations of his sex . . .” (98).

This notion is especially visible on episodes where the parents opt not to know the baby’s sex. Kenneth and Denise, Sandra and Willy, and Lauren and Mars are three couples who chose not to find out the sex of their respective babies. All throughout the

initial interviews, each couple speculates on the sex, and what it will “mean” and “do” to their lives and thinking. Sandra and Willy are shown sifting through the baby clothes they were given as gifts. Sandra holds up a white, teddy-bear covered onesie, and both parents attest that it is “gender neutral.” Willy then holds up a Dodger onesie and says that it could work for a girl or a boy. Sandra laughs and shakes her head in response. Because biological sex is bound up with gender norms, we see that from the time of conception— and even before that, as evidenced in the interviews— sex is a determining factor in how the body is imagined.

We further see evidence of the policing of sex and sexuality in the hospital scenes. Every show includes footage of the doctors speaking to the mother, on top of solo interviews with the doctors that document the mother’s progress during labor. The camera zooms in on heart monitors, ultrasound images, epidural tubes, and stethoscopes on the woman’s pregnant body, while constantly cutting back and forth between medical equipment and the clock on the wall. When the baby is born, there is a shot of him or her on a baby scale; in the bottom left-hand corner of the screen is the baby’s identifying information: its name, weight, and length. Often, the segment following the birth includes the baby’s first trip to the pediatrician. More specifically, though, the moment when the child is born is the most policed and significant moment in the show. Lauren and Mars chose not to find out the sex of their baby, and during their interviews, they express how anxious they are to finally know the sex and what he or she will be like. Not knowing the sex of their child, the parents call it “habibi,” which means “honey” or “sweetheart” in Arabic. When Lauren finally gives birth, the doctor says, “What do we

got here?” He spreads open the baby’s legs and proclaims, “It’s a girl!” As though to prove his correctness, he flashes the new parents a view of the baby’s genitals. The room breaks out in cheers.

This is an eerily exemplary vision of a classic Butlerian moment. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler writes that the vestment of intelligibility is granted through the citation and reiteration of hegemonic heterosexuality. To be intelligible, a subject must be properly interpellated by another intelligible (i.e., heterosexual) subject; furthermore, for that person to remain intelligible, he or she must cite and reiterate the conventions of heterosexuality. In *Bodies That Matter*, she cites, quite aptly, the moment of birth as the primary example of gender performativity.

Consider the medical interpellation which (the recent emergence of the sonogram notwithstanding) shifts and infant from an ‘it’ to a ‘she’ or a ‘he,’ and in that naming, the girl is ‘girded,’ brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender. But that ‘girling’ of the girl does not end there; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reenforce or contest this naturalized effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm. (7-8)

That moment of “girling” on Lauren and Mars’ episode, in other words, is a visual manifestation of heterosexual gender conventions. Once the proud parents see visual evidence of their baby’s sex– the doctor flashes the genitals to them– the baby goes from being a little “habibi” to being an “Angela.” And at this moment, Angela will be expected to play with dolls, dress in pink, have slumber parties and crushes on boys, go to prom, and so on. Thus, we see how *A Baby Story* revolves not simply around the birth, but around the sex and gender(ing) of the baby. As Butler states in “Critically Queer),

“recognition is not conferred on a subject, but forms that subject” (18). In fact, in Cynthia and Milton’s episode, Cynthia becomes very excited about the baby girl she is expecting: “I’m so excited to be having a girl. You know, I’ll be helping her pick out her prom dress, and watching her walk down the aisle. Knowing this, I’m just so happy that I’m gonna have so much fun with a little girl!”

The child’s sex is initially discovered and celebrated by parents and doctors, two primary components in the policing of sex, sexuality, and gender. Once the sex is disclosed, it must be celebrated with the rest of the family. The final segment of *A Baby Story* will almost always entail a family gathering to introduce the baby, which is distinctly figured as a coming out story. In fact, Sandra and Willy host what they actually call a “coming out” party for the baby at a local Chinese restaurant. For them, it is part of a Chinese tradition where, thirty days after the baby is born, the baby “comes out” to the rest of the family. This is a unique episode in that the baby “comes out” in a space of commerce, gluttony, and the exotic. Meanwhile, most parents on other episodes host coming out parties within a domestic space, thus suggesting that the policing and documenting of the body takes place primarily within the domestic sphere among parents and relatives. This emphasis on coming out, and the desire to document it via the camera’s lens, records not simply the ‘miracle of life’; it records the gendering of the body and the regimentation of heterosexual norms.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rick Altman notes that Williams’ notion of flow ignores socioeconomic implications. Altman further argues that the soundtrack can be seen as the major player in maintaining and capitalizing on reception. He states that “flow is related not to the television experience itself—because there is no such single experience—but to the commodification of the spectator in a capitalist, free enterprise system. . . . It should

come as no surprise that the countries with the highest levels of flow are also those with the most highly developed ratings systems, since flow is linked to profit motives and spectator commodification.” Altman, Rick. “Television/Sound.” Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture. Modleski, Tania, ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986. 39-54. 40

<sup>2</sup> “Until relatively recently, brides were considered the property of their father. Their futures and husbands were arranged without their consent. The marriage of an unattractive woman was often arranged with a prospective groom from another town without either of them having ever seen their prospective spouse. In more than one instance, when the groom saw his future wife, usually dressed in white, for the first time on the day of the wedding, he changed his mind and left the bride at the altar. To prevent this from happening, it became ‘bad luck’ for the groom to see the bride on the day of the wedding prior to the ceremony.”  
<<http://www.kendricksdesignerings.com/trad.html>> 31 March 2004.

CHAPTER 4  
CONCLUSION: NOTES ON SURVEILLANCE  
AND THE GENDERING OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

On this note, the heterosexual trajectory ends. Or does it? In an odd yet conceivable way, TLC's heterosexual trajectory has looped back to its beginning. The excess of *A Baby Story*— that is, the heterosexual gender norms that ensue once the girl is girled and the boy is boyed— is re-contained and reiterated on *A Dating Story*, the starting point of the heterosexual trajectory. I can almost imagine a black background with the textual overlay stating “25 years later . . .,” which would lead into the now-grown child's first blind date. In other words, the very lineup of TLC daytime shows (re)present the reiteration, citation, and seeming inescapability of the heterosexual matrix.

What is interesting to note is how naturalized the documentation and surveillance of the heterosexual trajectory *feels* when watching these shows. Visual culture has us so accustomed to seeing images of the private within the public sphere, and of knowing (a la Panopticon) that we are being surveilled, that only recently has scholarship begun to question the cultural work of ‘reality’ television. Although a full analysis of the implications of publicizing the private is beyond the scope of this project, I am interested in the gendered implications of this notion. The private sphere has traditionally been the realm of the female/femininity, while the public sphere is usually associated with the male/masculinity. When camera/surveillance/documentation records the rhythms of everyday life in public (at convenience stores, ATMs, streets, etc.), we see the power of

the male-dominated public gaze at work. But what happens when this assumed male gaze enters the private spaces of the female realm? On the one hand, we might interpret this as yet another way in which male domination attempts to regulate the ‘hysterical,’ uncontrollable Other of the female/feminine sphere. On the other hand, we can argue that publicizing these otherwise private moments is an instance of female penetration in the male-dominated public. In this case, there could be a subversive potential in documenting and publicizing private lives. However, I discard this notion because TLC is essentially preaching to the choir. Its primary viewership is female and the shows are for a heterosexual female gaze. Furthermore, these shows are received in the home, not necessarily in the ‘public’ sphere.

Another topic to consider is the pleasure of documenting and surveilling these intimate experiences. The difference between the documenting and surveilling cameras on TLC daytime and the cameras on say, a streetlight, is that the people on TLC are willingly watched– not just by the camera, however, but for the unseen viewers at home. Surveillance, as Foucault presents it in the Panopticon, is the gaze of a (possibly imagined) viewer on a *knowingly watched* subject and thus creates “an effective disciplinary apparatus– a set of techniques for the management of bodies, the management of attention, and for assuring the ordering of human multiplicities” (qtd. in Turner 96). Furthermore, what we see on television is what Erving Goffman calls a performance, which is “‘socialized,’ molded, and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented” (35). And because performances underscore “the common official values of the society in which it occurs, we may look upon it . . . as a ceremony– as an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral

values of the community” (35). Thus, what we see on TLC daytime is a ceremonial reiteration of white, classist, heterosexist mores and norms. The surveillance footage and subsequent editing work as the mediating center, a sort of filter through which only certain ‘types’ of difference are (re)presented— mainly racial, ethnic, and/or religious differences. Yet these differences, these Others, are held against the backdrop of (hetero)normalcy and whiteness. Furthermore, as Butler, Michel De Certeau, and others would contend, “[t]he act of suffering oneself to be written by the group’s law is oddly accompanied by a pleasure, that of being recognized (but one does not know by whom), of becoming an identifiable word in a social language . . .” (de Certeau 140). In other words, social intelligibility comes about as a result of this documentation. Moreover, it reiterates the (hetero)normalcy of this “social language.”

There are only two subversive potentials, or at least ‘gaps and fissures’ (to borrow a Butlerian term), that I see in TLC daytime. First, this is clearly a compulsive repetition of heteronormativity. As Butler has suggested, this perceived *need* to document heteronormativity at work actually reveals the implicit *weaknesses* of such a regime. “Insofar as heterosexual gender norms produce inapproximable ideals, heterosexuality can be said to operate through the regulated production of hyperbolic versions of ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (“Critically Queer” 26). Hence, the ‘need’ to set up eligible singles on *A Dating Story*; the intense emphasis of “softness” and “femininity,” “toughness” and “masculinity” on *A Makeover Story*; the full segments devoted to the white wedding dress on *A Wedding Story*; and the fetishization of the pregnant female body on *A Baby Story*. Yet, as Butler notes, “[t]hese are for the most part compulsory performances, ones which none of us choose, [as evident with the ‘girling’ and ‘boying’ on *A Baby Story*] but

which each of us is forced to negotiate. I write ‘forced to negotiate’ because the compulsory character of these norms does not always make them efficacious. Such norms are continually haunted by their own inefficacy; hence, the anxiously repeated effort to install and augment their jurisdiction” (26). Thus, even the compulsion to document and celebrate heteronormativity on TLC can rupture. Second, the fact that every show actually employs the notion and rhetoric of “coming out” indicates that the closet, the Other, the abject, or whichever terminology one prefers, not only haunts the perimeters and matrices of heteronormativity, but it also erupts *within* its regimes. Furthermore, now there are shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Gay Weddings*, *Boy Meets Boy* (no longer airing), *Will and Grace*, and other show that at least marginally challenge the overabundance of heteronormative televisual images. Problem is, these are prime-time or late night shows, time slots dedicated to indulging the unnamed (and unnamable) desires of the adult mind.

For me, the logical extension of this project is to focus on other TLC shows, primarily the prime-time and late-night counterparts to the daytime lineup. For instance, *A Dating Story*’s counterpart is *Date Patrol*, wherein one subject is ‘coached,’ that is, ‘rehabilitated,’ for four weeks in order to become ‘dateable.’ The subjects are instructed in the areas of body language and communication, beauty, dating style, and approachability. For *A Makeover Story* it is *What Not to Wear*, which I have already analyzed but could certainly return to. For *A Wedding Story* it is *For Better or For Worse*, a show where the engaged couple relinquishes control of their wedding to a team of friends and family. The team has only one week and \$5,000 to plan ‘the perfect wedding.’ This show exemplifies how heterosexual and marital ideology is implicitly

bound up with the rhetoric of capitalism and production. The counterpart to *A Baby Story* is either *Special Delivery*, *Maternity Ward*, and/or *An Adoption Story*. Interestingly, these shows air on Discovery Health. The first two tend to focus on the trauma, anxiety, and possible death which are a part of birth, while *An Adoption Story* allows a space for representing the adopting family. Interestingly, no counterpart to *A Baby Story* exists on TLC. Perhaps it is too precious— or precarious— a subject to complicate.

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