

Chapter 1

My Date with Phil Donahue: A Queer Intellectual in TV-Land

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In 1994 I had a journalist girlfriend named Jane Rosette who had spent ten years covering the AIDS epidemic. Wise in the ways of that to me unfamiliar realm, she would frequently disparage this or that activist or public figure as a real “media slut,” someone who would do anything to get their opinion noticed by the press or their face on TV. That fall my media promiscuity quotient would be tested when a woman who introduced herself as a producer for the Phil Donahue television talk show telephoned. She invited me with alluring flattery (“we understand you are a nationally known expert on female impersonation”), to appear on the show, along with the three lead actors, Terence Stamp, Hugo Weaving, and Guy Pearce, from the newly released Australian film, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and “some others,” to be taped about three days hence. As I fell over myself agreeing to do the show I could hear Jane’s voice in my head whispering, “media slut.”

There are good reasons why progressive intellectuals are rarely seen on American television. Our politics and our whole enterprise are disrespected by the powerful, and with the role of the public intellectual shrinking, particularly on the left, we have mostly retreated into academia where our opinions are seldom asked by the outside world and we mostly say we don’t care. So why did I jump into the media fray? I was no wannabee media celebrity like Camille Paglia. The real bait was promoting my newly published book, an ethnohistory of the gay community of Cherry Grove. It had been well reviewed, but the thought of being able to reach the millions who watched the Donahue show – that was an author’s sweet dream. Who doesn’t want to be read?

Digression number one: actually it depends on whom you want to be read by, a strictly specialist audience or a broader one. These issues predate the “bad writing” contest that once lampooned jargony academic writing in the pages of *Lingua Franca*; in my own discipline, Margaret Mead was reviled by many because her books were widely read and she appeared on radio and television. The decision whether, as an intellectual or artist, one wants to appear on television is related to questions of

economic survival, morality, politics, and language, as well as a trepidation factor – does one want to subject oneself? Because media appearances are stressful and morally ambiguous: as one gay media critic put it: “If you speak, you must prepare to be used.”¹

Tossing and turning over these issues that night, it suddenly occurred to me that I had not even asked the producer who the other guests she had mentioned in passing might be. The next morning I called and asked exactly who else would be appearing. Besides the actors, there would be a live drag queen, she said, and “someone who doesn’t approve of female impersonation.” When I insisted on knowing who this was, she admitted it was a Dr Paul Cameron. That’s when the alarm siren finally wailed. Paul Cameron, I knew vaguely, was some kind of right-wing anti-gay ideologue.

I needed to know more about Cameron and there were only a couple of days until the taping. I got on the telephone to acquaintances in NGLTF and to old friends including Larry Gross, a professor of communications at the Annenberg School at Penn. Within 24 hours Larry faxed me pages of information on him gleaned from the internet, journals, and newspapers without which I would have felt totally unprepared.

Cameron, a born-again Christian, had a PhD in psychology, but he had been fired from the University of Nebraska, after which he had established a think tank called the Institute for Scientific Investigation of Sexuality (ISIS) and toured the country as a speaker for right-wing groups and an expert-for-hire in anti-gay political campaigns. He was an early and enthusiastic practitioner of “ex-gay” therapy. As of 1994 ISIS had published a number of virulently anti-gay pamphlets that were distributed to policy-makers and ultimately used in the widely distributed right-wing video, the “Gay Agenda.” Citing his own research and that of others, Cameron claimed in graphic and deliberately scary language to have found that both gay men and lesbians were wildly promiscuous and diseased; that gay men in particular should be tattooed and quarantined. The articles mentioned that he was very difficult to debate because his arguments jumped around “like a pinball machine . . . you try to build up a case, and the argument changes.”²

I must admit to being naively puzzled about why the Donahue producers had asked Paul Cameron to be a guest on a show about *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, the adventures of two drag queens and a transsexual who travel by bus across spectacular Australian outback. Why would Phil Donahue, whose reputation was liberal, have a homophobe like Cameron on his show, I vaguely wondered. My main concern, however, was whether I should go on the show at all. Cameron might be a nut, but he had far more media experience than I, and would my presence lend him credibility? But both Larry Gross and Sue Hyde, then with NGLTF, advised me to go on the show with the goal of exposing Cameron as a bigot on national TV.

I called the Donahue producer back and said I would go on the show on two conditions: that Donahue plug my book, and that Donahue would expose Paul Cameron’s scholarship as a sham. Widely criticized by psychologists and sociologists, Cameron had been ejected from the American Psychological Association in

December 1983 for misrepresenting the work of other scholars and for using dishonest research methods. The producer said that Donahue was aware of this and would mention it during the show, and that he would certainly plug my book.

Now for digression number two. In the remaining day before the show, I fretted about what to wear. What should an out butch lesbian wear on national television? How to present oneself, especially visually, is a highly charged issue for all gay people, indeed for all members of stigmatized groups, who are always in painful relation to the stereotypes that dominant groups hold about us. Does one want to prove that one is nothing like the stereotype? Or that despite looking like the stereotype one is both scintillating and just like the girl next door? Without going into all the complexities involved here, my issue on the show was how to dress up without what for me would have been the sell-out of wearing lipstick and a dress, or alternatively, risk becoming a spectacle rather than an “expert” by wearing what I am most comfortable in, pants, shirt and jacket. Ironically, in an effort to look presentable enough as a woman to seem professional, I wore a red blouse, probably signaling to Donahue and Paul Cameron that I was a television neophyte, since red “bleeds” and looks bad on-screen.

I had elected to arrive early to watch a showing of *Priscilla* with the studio audience. They seemed to enjoy the movie, and as it turned out, there were a lot of gay people and sympathetic straights in the audience and only one openly hostile woman. At least I wasn’t going to face an audience packed with right wingers.

In the first segment Donahue chatted with the actors about their experience as “straight guys” acting in the film, and differentiated between drag queens and transsexuals (overall I had the impression that Donahue was ill prepared throughout and was basically winging it). “What’s going on here,” he asked rhetorically, implying that movie drag was becoming as ubiquitous as popcorn. Then he introduced me as an anthropologist, mentioned my book (though not the title) and added: “you are a politically active, out of the closet lesbian person, so your interest in gayness . . . is more than just in passing.” Though taken off guard, I assented. (Paul Cameron’s sexuality never came up.) The Chiron (the letters on screen) read “anthropologist” rather than “out lesbian” which would have further undermined my “expert” credibility.

Next the female impersonator Coco Lachine, who was Empress of the Court of New York that year, though Donahue didn’t say so, performed a lip synch version of “I Will Survive.” Then, during the commercial break, the producers brought Cameron out and tried to seat him next to me, which is when I realized that my being an expert on drag was just a footnote in the show’s agenda; what they really wanted was a cat fight between me, an out lesbian, and Paul Cameron. This was their idea of exciting television. Wholly unprepared, I had a visceral reaction and could not sit next to this man, even if every one of my books wound up remaindered, and I threatened to walk off the set. The impasse was broken by Hugo Weaving who urged the actors to seat themselves so that Cameron could not sit next to me.

Phil introduced Cameron, who was a chubby, innocuous looking and slightly effeminate white guy in a suit, as “chairman of the Family Research Institute . . .”

Immediately Cameron went into his spiel: Gays are promiscuous; they spread AIDS, their “lifestyle” leads to death. There are reaction shots of me frowning angrily and of the audience laughing at him. When Phil asks Cameron if AIDS patients should be quarantined, he answers “yes” and repeats his spiel as a reaction shot shows the actor Guy Pearce laughing at him.

Then the drag performer Coco Lachine, a petite Filipino with a slight accent, came on stage in drag and calmly sat down next to Cameron, saying “don’t we make a lovely couple?” In the next sentence, though, she denounced Cameron for “spreading hate.” Ignoring this and the comment of an audience member that Coco had raised money for charity and “I don’t see how he hurts anyone,” Cameron returned to the theme that homosexuality leads to death.

In the next segment Phil held up my book and briefly plugged it, but after the next commercial break, instead of coming back to my book, he asked me how, as a lesbian, I feel about drag in the gay community, and I used this opportunity to discuss aspects of *Priscilla* that I thought were sexist and racist. Worthy as that was, by the next commercial break I realized that Donahue was not going to expose Cameron as I had been told. I passed a message to him that I wanted to speak right after the break.

When Donahue called on me I inserted my message about how Cameron had been kicked out of the APA for dishonest research; that his “scholarship” was a sham and that in any case he knew nothing about drag, the supposed theme of the show. Interestingly, an audience member brushed aside my attack on Cameron as elitist (“regardless of his credentials” he said sarcastically, as if a supposed expert’s credentials were irrelevant) while attacking Cameron for not having a message of love and tolerance, which I take to be the basic ethos of talk show land. Meanwhile Cameron ignored both me and the audience member and repeated that gay people are diseased, that they aren’t “holding up the sky” by “producing and reproducing” and that they molest children.

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Over all, the Donahue show was probably a better venue for gay intellectuals or artists to get a fair hearing than any talk show that existed then or now, with perhaps the exception of the Charlie Rose show on PBS.³ Neither Donahue nor the audience sympathized with Cameron’s views; in fact both audience and the actors did their best to ridicule and shame him, efforts to which he appeared impervious. He got his points across (although he never succeeded in effectively plugging his book); without counting up the exact minutes, Cameron had much more air time than any other guest, and probably four times as much as I did.

I didn’t go into the taping with the pre-recorded talking points that Cameron had; instead, except for my intervention denouncing Cameron as a discredited expert, I simply responded to the two questions Donahue put to me. No audience member directed a question toward me; Cameron’s outrageous statements monopolized their attention. During the taping I was preoccupied with not losing my temper,

especially after the producers sprang their “ambush” by trying to seat Cameron next to me.⁴ I did accomplish my two goals of having Donahue plug my book, though only in passing, and of exposing Cameron, though I had to do it myself. But perhaps Cameron should have been my role model? This was also Malcolm X’s strategy, after all. He ignored white reporters’ provocative or inane questions and used the air time to promulgate his own views. But my academic training and rather reserved temperament would make that difficult for me, even if I had a sharper ax to grind than I do. Certainly had I been in Cameron’s position, put down by the audience and other guests, I would not have been able to hold my ground as well.

Obviously there are contrasting strategies for stigmatized people to pursue, especially when there are guests from “the other side,” meaning, for queers, single minded homophobes, as is too often the case. On this Donahue show, the impersonator Coco Lachine was willing to put her gender deviance on full display, and still managed to denounce Cameron with humor and an appeal to tolerance and love. I tried to minimize my difference and maximize my professionalism – not a comfortable trade-off, but actually Coco and I made a pretty good team.

In dealing with talk shows (or any kind of panel), queers should first insist on knowing the names of the other guests. Venue and context are almost everything in determining how we will be seen and whether we have any chance of being heard within the frame of the media agenda. Probably the most successful queer intervention ever was made by the young HIV-positive Cuban-American Pedro Zamora on *The Real World* on MTV, but I think that José Muñoz overestimates Zamora’s agency and underestimates his luck.⁵ The producers hold so many cards; for example they could have easily cut my denunciation of Cameron, or chironed me as “admitted lesbian” rather than as “anthropologist.” Still, I gambled that to promote my gay book, to be visible as an out lesbian intellectual, and to oppose Cameron, it would be worth the risk of failing or of being ridiculed, and it was. Though after the show sales of my book briefly spiked up, in retrospect the main benefit accrued to my self-confidence. Tempted by television, yes, but no media slut because I had been willing to walk out rather than sit next to the despicable Paul Cameron. Out-gunned by Cameron’s fanaticism and media savvy, yes, but not smashed. The next time, if there is one, I won’t wear red.

Notes

1. Joshua Gamson, “Do Ask, Do Tell: Freak Talk on TV,” pp. 329–334 in *The Columbia Reader on Lesbians and Gay Men in Media, Society and Politics*, Larry Gross and James D. Woods, eds., New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
2. Quoted in the *Advocate*, Oct. 29, 1985, p. 30.
3. Charlie Rose has a one-on-one interview format, which precludes the sensationalized cat fight atmosphere that has become even more prevalent in the intervening years. Joshua Gamson thinks even these “screamfest” shows like Ricki Lake offer queers opportunities for agency.

4. Gamson discusses the famous ambush case of Jonathan Schmitz on the Ricki Lake show that led to Scott Amedure's murder by Schmitz and wound up in court. According to Gamson, the ambush is a staple of what Neil Gabler calls "exploitalk TV" (p. 332).

Fieger's emphasis in the case was that the corporations needed to assume responsibility for the consequences of what he claimed was "ambush television." Yet Jenny Jones announced February 17 that she had scheduled another "Secret Gay Crush" show taping for February 22. Jones said then, "I don't think this is the kind of show that can be ignored forever. I really think this topic has the potential to work. Yes, we hit a bump-in-the-road on our first gay crush show, given the fact that a guy was killed. But what are the chances of that happening again? I mean, the only lesson that could possibly have been learned from the previous show was that we should accept everyone, regardless of sexual preference."

The object of gay Ryan Davis' secret crush is non-gay Drake Boyd, and while Schmitz at least knew he was appearing on a "secret crush" show, Boyd was told he was appearing to be reunited with his mother. At her news conference, Jones described Boyd as "a little edgy" and as being "awful mad about something" when she'd last spoken with him on the phone. "So after I got off the phone with him," she said, "I wrote in teeny-tiny letters on the contract that he has to sign to be a guest that the show isn't responsible for anything that happens afterward. I don't think anything will happen but, God forbid if it does, we have all our bases covered." Jones even had Davis' and Boyd's mutual friend Patti Miller present to say, "I have known Drake for a long time, and I know he is going to be really, really mad. In fact, he always tells me when he is drunk that if Ryan ever hit on him he would kill him. But that is only when he is drunk."

(PlanetOut Website, March 28, 2000)

5. José Estéban Muñoz, "Pedro Zamora's *Real World* of Counterpublicity: Performing an Ethics of the Self," pp. 143–160 in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.