

Playing It Straight:

Reality Dating Shows and the Construction of Heterosexuality

By Stephen Tropiano



Contestants on the first version of *The Dating Game* (1965–73). Photo courtesy of Photofest.

Abstract: The author examines the reality dating show *Playing It Straight* (2004), in which a female contestant looking for love must determine the sexual orientation of her male suitors. The show transforms heteronormativity into a literal performance, thereby revealing how the construction of heterosexuality is dependent on the recognition and subsequent exclusion of homosexuality.

Keywords: gay male, gender, heteronormativity, homosexual, queer, reality TV, sexuality

Since its inception, television has been a bastion of heteronormativity, endlessly reinforcing traditional gender roles while standing watch over its sacred institutions, such as marriage (between a man and a woman), motherhood, and the nuclear family. Although most contemporary situation comedies and dramas share a more cynical view of heterosexual love, romance, and marriage than their 1950s counterparts, television continues to perpetuate the *heterosexual imaginary*, “the belief system that relies on romantic and sacred notions of heterosexuality in order to create and maintain the illusion of well being” (Ingraham 16). Even a post-feminist comedy like *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), which celebrated female solidarity while simultaneously defending a single, white female’s right to an orgasm and a pair of Jimmy Choos, concluded its six-season run with Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) and her three comrades each finally landing her “Mr. Right” and (presumably) living happily ever after.

The heterosexual imaginary and its underlying premise—heteronormativity—are also at the heart of reality dating shows. This popular genre was part of the wave of reality programs that flooded the network airwaves in the late 1990s (Ingraham 17; McClanahan 303). Like the majority of highly rated reality programs (e.g., *The Amazing Race* [2001–present], *Big Brother* [2000–present], and *Survivor* [2000–present]), dating

shows incorporate elements of two popular TV genres—game shows and soap operas. As contestants vie for the attention and, ultimately, the heart of the eligible bachelor or bachelorette, the cameras also capture all of the backstage rivalry, backstabbing, and high drama that make for good reality television.

Following in the footsteps of successful dating shows such as *The Bachelor* (2002–present), *For Love or Money* (2003–04), and *Joe Millionaire* (2003), the Fox network made a unique addition to the genre with *Playing It Straight* (2004). The show followed the same basic format as other reality dating shows but added a twist. In the first episode, Jackie Thomas, a college student from Appleton, Wisconsin, arrives at a Nevada ranch in hope of making a love connection. She is introduced to fourteen hunky, eligible men—only to learn that her chances of finding that special someone have been reduced, because while some of her suitors are heterosexual, the others are only pretending. In the end, if she chooses a straight guy, the couple splits one million dollars. But if her final choice turns out to be gay, he gets all the money and she goes home alone and empty handed. Although *Playing It Straight* was a ratings disaster (and canceled by Fox after three episodes), versions identical to the U.S. series aired under the same title in Australia in the fall of 2004 and in the United Kingdom in the spring of 2005.

The complex construction of both heterosexuality and homosexuality in *Playing It Straight* warrants further investigation. On the surface, the inclusion of gay male participants masquerading as straight on a heterosexual dating show has the potential to subvert (and/or, at the very least, to critique) the heteronormative paradigm. It also might subvert and/or critique the way in which heterosexuality and homosexuality are linked in accordance with the hetero/homo binary—the “master binary” on which the modern conceptualization of human sexuality is based (Brickell 426).

According to historian Jonathan Katz, this link dates back to the inception of heterosexuality, which was conceived in the 1860s by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs

and Karl Maria Kertbeny, who were both, ironically, advocates of same-sex love and its decriminalization (51–54). For Kertbeny, heterosexual males and females participated in two distinct types of coitus, which were distinguished by their purpose: procreative/natural versus nonprocreative/unnatural (Katz 53). The stigmatization of nonprocreative heterosexuality as unnatural continued through the turn of the century. Katz credits Sigmund Freud for “normalizing” heterosexuality, regardless of its purpose, yet it continued to be discussed by the psychoanalyst and his successors in tandem with homosexuality:

The initial appearance of “heterosexual” in a discussion of homosexuality is a typical practice of Freud’s that later became typical of others. Heterosexuals, it turns out, most often owe the explicit, public mention of their existence to talk of homosexuals. Though the heterosexual category came to signify the double standard, it remained oddly dependent on the subordinate homosexual category. Heterosexual and homosexual appeared in public as Siamese twins, the first good, the second bad, bound together for life in unalterable, antagonistic symbiosis. (65)

In accordance with the hetero/homo binary, sexual orientation is divided into two distinct categories: procreative/natural heterosexuality and nonprocreative/unnatural homosexuality. But as Diana Fuss observes, heterosexuality’s naturalized status depends on both the *articulation* and the *exclusion* of homosexuality. Fuss also recognizes that the heterosexual/homosexual binary depends on another binary—inside/outside:

Homosexuality, in a word, becomes the excluded; it stands for, paradoxically, that which stands without. But the binary structure of sexual orientation, fundamentally a structure of exclusion and exteriorization, nonetheless constructs that exclusion by prominently including the contaminated other in its oppositional logic. The homo in relation to the hetero, much like the feminine in relation to the masculine, operates as an indispensable interior exclusion—an outside which is inside interiority making the articulation of the latter possible, a transgression of the border which is necessary to constitute the border as such. (3)

Playing It Straight constructed both its gay and straight subjects within the confines of this master binary. It did this

under the pretense of a social experiment designed to bridge the great social and cultural divide between gay and straight men by foregrounding their similarities, rather than their differences. But the show's sexual politics was problematic because its construction of heterosexuality and homosexuality was based on a structure of exclusion and exteriorization. Rather than challenging heteronormativity, *Playing It Straight* reinforced it by requiring its gay male participants to go back into the closet and to assimilate by masquerading as heterosexual, only to be outed (for fun and games) by the female and, in some instances, their fellow male contestants. In the end, both the *presence* and the *exclusion* of gay men ultimately served the interests of the heterosexual imaginary by maintaining heterosexuality's dominant status within the hetero/homo binary.

Heteronormativity and Reality Dating Shows

The reality dating show genre dates back to the 1960s with *The Dating Game*, a long-running, popular game show that aired in both prime time (1966–70) and daytime (1965–73), and was followed by syndicated versions (1973–74, 1977–80, and 1996–2000). The show also ran in syndication in 1986 under the title *The New Dating Game*, which was changed for the remainder of its run (1987–89) to *The All-New Dating Game*. Unlike *The Bachelor* and other recent dating shows on which a single male or female, over the course of several episodes, hopes to find a potential life partner, a contestant on *The Dating Game* would ask three members of the opposite sex (whose faces were concealed) a series of questions for ten minutes and then pick one to accompany him or her on a chaperoned date. *The Dating Game* was the inspiration for several other shows, which tinkered with its structure to reflect the changes in societal attitudes toward sex. For example, after choosing their date, contestants on *Love Connection* (1983–95, 1998–99) and *Studs* (1991–93) would return to the program to relay the details (sordid or otherwise) of what did (or did not) happen on their date. More recent shows, such as

Best Friend's Date (2004–05) and *Blind Date* (1999–2006), have taken it one step further by sending a camera crew along to capture the highs and lows of a couple's date.

The contestants who have appeared on the more recent string of prime-time reality dating shows seem to have been looking for something more permanent. Dubbed "Must Marry TV" by television critic Jill Vejnosa (F1), the reality dating show genre was slow out of the gate in relation to other reality series, due to the negative criticism generated by the Fox network's controversial and highly rated *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?* (2000). The show's detractors considered the beauty pageant for wannabe brides, who competed on live television to become the wife of a mystery man, a new low in reality television.¹ *Multi-Millionaire* also proved to be a major embarrassment for the network when the producers discovered that their potential groom, comic/real estate investor Rick Rockwell, had been issued a restraining order by a previous girlfriend. As a result, Sandy Grushow, chair of the Fox Entertainment Group, canceled a scheduled repeat airing of the show and declared a moratorium on all "exploitative specials" (Carter A1).²

Two years later, the genre was given a second chance by the success of ABC's highly rated *The Bachelor*, which inspired a string of imitators, including *Average Joe* (2003–05), *The Bachelorette* (2003–04), *For Love or Money* (2003), *Joe Millionaire* (2003), *Mr. Personality* (2003), *Outback Jack* (2004), and *Who Wants to Marry My Dad?* (2003–04). These and a host of other reality dating shows share a basic setup: a single male or female contestant on a quest for true love is introduced to a dozen or so potential mates. As he or she spends one-on-one time with them (reality television's version of a date), the pool is narrowed down until the show's finale, when the contestant reveals his or her final choice. While by all appearances it may seem like "the real thing," the couple's love connection is ultimately contrived and controlled by the show's producers and story editors, who spin the heterosexual imaginary into a fairy tale complete with a storybook setting (French chateau,

Roman palace, etc.) and props (champagne, red roses, a horse-drawn carriage, etc.) straight out of a romance novel.

In her analysis of *The Bachelor*, Andrea McClanahan contends that the show promotes the heterosexual imaginary by perpetuating the myth that being in a heterosexual relationship is a prerequisite for happiness. By demonstrating how women will compete against each other for the attention of a man they hardly know, McClanahan asserts, the show reinforces the heterosexual myth "that in our society, individuals, at some point, must find their 'other,' specifically, their opposite sex romantic other, to be fulfilled" (304). Mike Fleiss, the show's creator, apparently subscribes to this myth, as he argues that *The Bachelor* appeals to female viewers because "it reflects the fact that people will do just about anything to find the right mate. It's an important goal that everyone can relate to" (qtd. in Farhi C1). But Fleiss is assuming that female viewers identify with the women on the show. As Paul Farhi suggests, perhaps some women watch the show with "amused detachment" because "it makes them feel smart, or at least superior by comparison to *The Bachelor's* blubbing, backbiting bachelorettes" (C1).

The reality dating shows that capitalized on the success of *The Bachelor* were also distinguished by one or more twists to the basic setup. One familiar twist that poses a potential threat to the heterosexual imaginary is the use of a monetary incentive for capturing the heart of a bachelor(ette). From a creative standpoint, a cash prize adds to the drama because it casts doubt on the motives of each participant. Does he or she have real feelings for the contestant, or is he or she just pretending in order to win the money (and maybe have his or her fifteen minutes of fame)? But when the winner proves that his or her feelings for the bachelor(ette) are genuine by choosing love over money, the ending to their fairy tale is all the more romantic.

For example, in the first episode of *Joe Millionaire* (2003), twenty beautiful women arrive at a French chateau to meet a twenty-eight-year-old hunk who has inherited 50 million dollars. But the audience knows that he is actually a

construction worker named Evan Marriott who earns less than \$20,000 a year. In the show's finale, Marriott makes his final choice (Zora Andrich, a part-time model) and then proceeds to tell her the truth about himself. She is forced to make a decision: should she dump him or, despite his lack of wealth, follow her heart? Although she admits feeling hurt by his masquerade, Zora confesses she was "turned off" by his inheritance and would like to continue their "journey." So he slips a diamond ring on her finger and they drink a champagne toast. His faithful butler (Paul Hogan) then appears and explains that all fairy tales must have a "bit of magic," and, to ensure that they live happily ever, he surprises the couple with a check for one million dollars, which they gladly accept.³

Conversely, it is the bachelor who is deceived in the aptly titled *For Love or Money* (2003–04). In season one, the sixteen women competing for Rob Campos's attention are told that the winner will have to choose between him and one million dollars, which she can only keep if she severs all ties with him. Campos does not learn the twist until he has narrowed his choices down to three women, so before making a decision, he must figure out which, if any, of the three finalists are in it for love. Unfortunately, the winner—much to his surprise—chooses the money over him.⁴

The obligatory twist is not necessarily limited to a cash prize. Another potential threat to the heterosexual imaginary is in the form of a large question mark surrounding the sexual orientation of the contestant's potential mates.⁵ In the summer of 2003, the Bravo network launched two gay-themed series, the popular makeover show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003–07) and America's first full-fledged gay reality dating show, *Boy Meets Boy* (2003). The latter was a six-part series that followed a format similar to that of *The Bachelor* and other heterosexual dating shows (an individual looking for love among a group of fifteen potential mates), but with a twist that was revealed at the start only to the audience: some of the men were gay and some were straight. The audience was invited to test their "gaydar" to determine the sexual orientation

of each participant, which, as Jeffrey A. Bennett observes, was purposely frustrated by visual cues (clothing, hairstyles, vocal patterns, and body types) that can be easily manipulated through editing "to suggest one sexual identity and elide the other" (416).

As on *The Bachelor*, each of the first four episodes concludes with an elimination ceremony, during which the show's gay bachelor, James Getzlaff, hands each gentleman he asks to stay a glass of champagne (on *The Bachelor*, it is a rose). At that point, the sexual orientation of each of the three men he sends home is revealed to the audience, and, in an on-camera interview, each reflects on his experiences. Many of the straight men report finding the masquerade challenging, yet each generally admits that he is leaving more enlightened and empathetic toward gay men who are forced to remain in the closet. The big twist is revealed to James at the end of the fourth episode when he is told that one of the three remaining men is heterosexual. To win a trip to New Zealand and \$25,000, James has to figure out which of the three is "playing gay" (*Boy Meets Boy*, episode 4). If the man he finally chooses is heterosexual, he loses and the straight man wins the money.

Boy Meets Boy was not embraced by the critics, many of whom felt the twist was "malicious" (McDaniel), "deceitful" (Steve Murray), "cruel" (Johnson), and "unnecessary and hurtful" (Goodman D1). But Bravo and the show's creative producers defended the premise as a "social experiment" (Ryan D1; de Moraes). Executive producer Douglas Ross repeatedly stated in interviews that the show's primary goal was to break down gay and straight stereotypes: "We very specifically designed this show to challenge the viewer's preconceived notions about what it means to be gay and to be straight. We really wanted it to be an exploration of sexual politics and not sex" (qtd. in Andreoli). While doing media interviews for the show, Getzlaff candidly admitted he was angry about being deceived by the producers until he fully understood their intentions.⁶ When he reveals the twist on camera to his heterosexual friend Andra, who becomes hysterical over the news, he tries to



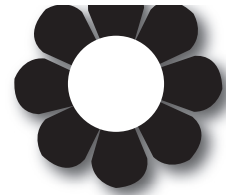
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convince her that the show has potential for educating the straight world about gay people: "If I can get one person to understand there's no difference between us except for who we love, and that we should be able to marry . . . we should be able to hold hands . . . we should be able to do what everybody else does" (*Boy Meets Boy*, episode 5).

As with *Boy Meets Boy*, the producers of *Playing It Straight* claimed that their aim was to challenge gay and straight stereotypes, yet the show's sexual politics was very different from the politics of *Boy Meets Boy*, which offered its closeted straight male contestants the opportunity to see the world from a gay perspective. In conceiving *Playing It Straight*, which required its gay contestants to pretend they were straight, the creative minds behind the series overlooked (or chose to ignore) the existing imbalance of power between the heterosexual majority and the homosexual minority. Consequently, heterosexuality was normalized through the marginalization of the homosexual other.

Heteros on the Range: *Playing It Straight*

Playing It Straight premiered in the United States on Fox in March 2004; however, only three of the eight episodes aired before it was pulled due to low ratings. Fox initially announced that the show would return in the summer, but viewers had to wait until the following January, when all eight episodes could be downloaded from Fox.com on a pay-per-view basis. In the meantime, the network revealed the identity of the winner on the show's Web site (Adalian; Fritz and Adalian). An Australian version (hereafter designated as "AU"), which debuted on the Seven network in September 2004,



suffered a similar fate and was canceled after only a few episodes (both the US and AU versions have since aired on Fox Reality Channel). A British version (hereafter designated as “UK”) premiered in April 2005 as part of Channel 4’s “Twisted Dating Week” and received respectable ratings during its run.

In the first episode, the male suitors gather at a ranch (dubbed Sizzlin’ Saddles in the United States and Australia and El Rancho Macho in the United Kingdom), awaiting the arrival of the female contestant. But before she arrives, the show’s female host appears and delivers the big news. “Not all of you guys are who you appear to be,” explains US host Daphne Brogdon. “Some of you are straight, and some of you are gay.” One man asks, “As in *homosexual*?” (*Playing* [US]). The female contestant (Jackie in the United States, Becky in Australia, and Zoe in the United Kingdom) arrives and, after she settles in and meets her suitors, the host reappears and reveals the twist to her. She is told that to win the guy and the cash prize, she must use her gaydar to determine who is straight and who is gay. As Australian host Natalie Garonzi matter-of-factly explains, “It’s either love and money, or heartbreak and nothing” (*Playing* [AU], episode 1).

Over the course of the series, the men vie to spend time alone with the female contestant by competing in a series of activities and challenges. In an effort to get to know her suitors (and figure out which are gay), she is permitted at various points to request some one-on-one time. At the end of each episode, there is an elimination ceremony, during which she must ask two men to leave the ranch. Before exchanging goodbyes, she gets to ask and he must answer the big question: “Are you gay or are you straight?”

The three versions of *Playing It Straight* are remarkably similar in their format and content. Like other reality dating shows, an episode of *Playing It Straight* is composed of a mixture of “live” footage, interviews with the participants, and montage sequences, which condense the duration of events and mark the passage of time. On the UK version, a guitar-playing trou-

badour (Brian Beacock) opens each episode with a musical recap of what happened last week and provides commentary throughout the show. He sings, “Just like a needle in a gaystuck / Zoe don’t know / Is she gonna get pricked or win the show?” (*Playing* [UK], episode 5). The UK version also features an off-camera narrator (bisexual Scottish stage and film actor Alan Cumming), whose comments consist of sexual innuendos and double entendres about gay and straight men (“Camping may be what gay men do best, but can gay men set up camp? The boys must erect their own tents and Zoe watches for any telltale signs” (*Playing* [UK], episode 3)).⁷ On one level, the campy songs and narration construct the show’s implied author as gay (or at the very least, gay friendly or inclusive), but instead of offsetting the show’s hetero bias, there is an underlying homophobia in the form of jokes and references to “flaming queens,” “limp wrists,” and the danger of dropping the soap in the shower, which run throughout each version.⁸

Viewers in all three countries were encouraged to test their gaydar by playing along with the female contestant. The program summary for the US show on the Fox Reality Channel Web site aligns the audience with the female contestant:

One beautiful single woman. 14 sexy bachelors. A million-dollar prize. Think you know where this is going? Think again . . . things aren’t exactly as they appear when FOX puts this young lady and the viewing audience to the test to determine which guys are straight and which guys might be just PLAYING IT STRAIGHT. (“Playing It Straight” [US])

The press release for the AU version addresses viewers more directly, inviting them to test their gaydar: “How good is your gaydar? Can you tell by looking at a man and talking to him whether he is gay or straight?” (“Playing It Straight” [AU]). One journalist noted that when promoting the show, Seven asked the gaydar question “at least 10 times a day” (Razer).

Channel 4’s Web site for the version in the United Kingdom is the most elaborate. In addition to profiles of each male contestant, there are a series of comical quizzes viewers can take to

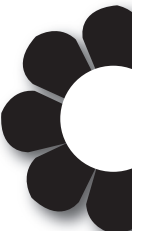
determine which guy they most resemble, how “camp” they are (the questions cover such topics as *Sex and the City*, leather pants, grooming, and cat or dog preferences), and how they rate on a Gay-O-Meter (it reveals “how much of you is dying to get out of the closet”), which also doubles as a Metrosexual-O-Meter and asserts, “forget gay or straight . . . most of us are in between” (“Playing It Straight” [UK]).

The Gay-O-Meter and the Metrosexual-O-Meter comically construct an individual as a heterosexual, homosexual, or metrosexual on the basis of his behavior and knowledge. The female contestant on *Playing It Straight*, as did the home audience, relied on similar indicators in order to separate the gay male contestants from the straight. But the game that she (and we) were invited to play focuses on ferreting out the gay male participants. Consequently, the show did not define the heterosexual male subject on his own terms; instead, in accordance with the hetero/homo binary, it constructed him in terms of what he is not—the homosexual other. The show defined heterosexuality through the “interior exclusion” of the male homosexual and through a “performance” of behaviors that do not so much define heterosexuality as serve as signifiers that differentiate a homosexual from a nonhomosexual.

The Interior Exclusion of Homosexuality

In his *History of Sexuality, Volume I*, Michel Foucault states that the year 1860, during which Dr. Karl Wesphal published his famous article on contrary sexual sensations, marks the birth of the modern homosexual. Until that time, homosexuality had been defined in terms of sexual practices. But now the homosexual had a public identity:

The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. . . . We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized . . . less by a type of sexual



relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and feminine in oneself. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (43)

But as Fuss points out, the birth of the modern homosexual—the acknowledgment of his or her existence through the medical construction of his or her identity—also marks the moment of the homosexual’s disappearance into the closet:

That the first coming out was also simultaneously a closeting; that the homosexual’s debut onto the stage of historical identities was as much an egress as an entry; and that the priority or “firstness” of homosexuality, which preceded heterosexuality in western usage by a startling eleven years, nonetheless could not preempt its relegation to secondary status: all these factors highlight, in their very contradictoriness, the ambiguous operations of ins and outs. “Out” cannot help but to carry a double valence for gay and lesbian subjects. On the one hand, it conjures up the exteriority of the negative—the devalued or outlawed term in the hetero/homo binary. On the other hand, it suggests the process of coming out—a movement into a metaphysics of presence, speech, and cultural visibility. (4)

The object of *Playing It Straight* was to identify the gay male participants, with the sole purpose of eliminating them. To win the game, the gay players had to not only conceal their sexual orientation, but also publicly renounce it. To serve their self-interests, participants resorted to such tactics as finger pointing and name calling. One man could accuse another of being gay, regardless of whether his accusation was based on truth or speculation. If the female contestant suspected that someone was gay, she could ask him to leave the ranch in the elimination ceremony. Although it is the primary reason for eliminating the majority of suitors, she may also believe a guy is heterosexual, yet the lack of chemistry between them is a sufficient reason for saying goodbye.

Consequently, the big twist transformed the ranch into a heterocentric, homophobic microcosm, where demonizing homosexuals and homosexuality

was critical for staying in the game, and the ranch’s gay inhabitants had to resort to lies and deception to remain in the closet and protect their identities. American viewers were repeatedly reminded at the start of each show that the gay participants weren’t doing it for love, but for money. The opening montage of each episode of the US series includes a shot of Jackie in which she looks directly into the camera and states, “It’s not like they’re in it for love. *I mean they’re gay.*” Between the two sentences there is a quick zoom (which appears to have been created in postproduction) from a medium shot of Jackie to a medium close-up, which punctuates the second sentence. What she means, of course, is that gay men are not on the show for love, yet the zoom, coupled with the stern tone of Jackie’s voice, implies that she is saying that gay men would not be looking for love *because they are gay.*

Another reminder in the US version is the message that appeared at the start of each episode. The sound of a warning buzzer is accompanied by a graphic that reads: “Attention Viewers! The male contestants in this program may be lying or misrepresenting themselves at all times, including in their interviews.” The UK audience received a similar warning, which appeared periodically throughout the show. During Zoe’s date with one of her suitors, Alex, she asks him point-blank, “Have you ever been with a man?” At the moment when he assures her that he is not gay—“Never been with a man in my life, no”—a purple flashing graphic appears on the bottom of the screen: “Warning: some of these men may be lying” (*Playing [UK]*, episode 2).⁹

The person they were lying to is the female contestant, who, in all three versions, was characterized as an innocent victim (of the gay deceivers, rather than of the producers of the show, who were responsible for the big twist). The audience was also aligned with her throughout the series. At times, she shared her thoughts and reactions via voice-over or direct address into the camera. Jackie (US) is introduced in the first episode by a narrator as a “sweet, innocent, Midwestern girl”; she describes her-

self as “gullible,” saying, “Sometimes I make bad judgment in someone’s character. . . . When someone tells me something I expect it to be the truth.” Jackie is shown walking through the streets of her Wisconsin hometown as she explains, “I consider myself to be a woman with small-town values. I’ve always been raised to go to church and to always be polite. Act like a lady. I’m a fun girl. I’m down to earth. Then if I meet Mr. Right, then that’s fantastic” (*Playing [US]*, episode 1). Similarly, the Web site for the Australian series’ premiere describes Rebecca as “sweet, gorgeous, and innocent” (“Playing It Straight” [AU]). Her self-description is remarkably similar to Jackie’s. Over a montage of her journey to the show’s location in the Australian outback, Rebecca expresses her desire to find a guy who is honest: “I think I am very open and down to earth. I think I’m a good girl. I just want to meet someone that’s honest, and someone who is just there for the same reasons I am. . . . I like people to just be themselves. I don’t like people to pretend” (*Playing [AU]*, episode 1).¹⁰

Once the twist was revealed, the women understood that some of the men would say or do anything to stay in the game. That did not stop them from asking each man his opinion of who could be gay. Most did not hesitate to name names, though it was unclear whether they were simply trying to eliminate their competition or they knew whether someone was gay or straight. At the end of each episode, the male contestants were also given the chance to talk about each other and share their reaction to the elimination round with the audience via a confessional booth, aptly named “The Closet.” (The AU version also includes “The Outhouse,” where the guys who are eliminated deliver their parting words.) Once again, and perhaps only fittingly, when they were talking to the camera in the closet, they were not necessarily telling the truth. As for the women, the contradictory information they received as a result of their inquiries usually left them even more confused.

Playing It Straight was a game show, but it understandably became very



Rather than challenging heteronormativity, *Playing It Straight* reinforced it by requiring its gay male participants to go back into the closet.

difficult for the female contestants to not register some reaction when they discovered that someone they had trusted (and for whom they may have developed romantic feelings) has been lying to them. On heterosexual reality dating shows such as *Joe Millionaire* and *For Love or Money*, there was the possibility that the bachelor may have been rejected by his final choice for moral reasons or because he or she would rather have the money. But if the winner on *Playing It Straight* was gay, he did not really have a choice (unless, as some believe, being gay is a “lifestyle choice”).

This played out when Zoe chose Ben, a twenty-seven-year-old builder, whose description on the Channel 4 Web site characterizes him as a “well-built, go-getting cockney geezer” (slang for an “odd character”) who has an “an infectious personality but is also very competitive” (“Playing It Straight” [UK]). When she learns he is gay, she is understandably angry and hurt, which she tries to hide by saying, “It’s absolutely fine, it’s all good.” But the way in which the scene plays out hardly makes Ben feel like a winner. The show’s host half-heartedly congratulates him, hands him his check, and consoles Zoe as the two make an awkward exit, leaving Ben standing all alone. The camera later catches him sitting alone, crying. He soon appears at Zoe’s door to give her all of the money, which she offers to split with him. His apology for deceiving her can be interpreted as more of an apology for being gay, if not an expression of his own internalized homophobia:

I came on here to prove a little point, a little point, but sort of quite an important point and I think I’ve proved that for me. . . . I think the world of you . . . and I just

want to cuddle and hold you all the time. Almost like a little sister. And I’m sorry, I felt I let you down big time. I care about you. And I am not that anyway. I’m not a big, fucking, la, la sissy. . . . I’m not an Alex or a Jonny who’s gonna start dancing. I’m not. This is me. This is it. . . . I wish I was straight and I would pick you up and take you away. But I’m not. Stop crying on the telly (referring to himself), everyone is gonna think I am a big sissy. (*Playing* [UK], episode 6)

He doesn’t initially explain what that “little point” is, but one can deduce that it has something to do with proving that not all gay men are “big, fucking, la, la sissies.” Consequently, the producers added a short tag before the end credits in which Ben, perhaps attempting to clarify his earlier remarks (or maybe redeem himself), digs himself in even deeper: “I’m not a hairy fairy . . . who constantly waves his arms about. I’m glad I’m a poof, but I just don’t feel I need to let everyone know it. So I’m just trying to prove—made a bit of a point. We are not all the same” (*Playing* [UK], episode 6). Ironically, it was later revealed that Ben held the title Mr. Gay UK back in 1998.

Playing It Hetero

DEAN. You act so straight!

CAMPBELL. Well, it’s *not* an act. What you see is what you get.

—Contestants on the second episode of *Playing It Straight* (AU)

In an effort to confuse the female contestant and entertain their audience, the producers of *Playing It Straight* purposely cast men who, on the basis of their looks, mannerisms, and personality, could not be easily categorized as gay or straight. In an interview with the *Gay and Lesbian Times*, executive producer Ciara Byrne outlined the producers’ strategy:

When we were casting we looked for a mix of guys. We looked for gay men who didn’t fit the stereotype. We looked for straight men who didn’t fit the straight stereotype, and then we looked for some in the middle that would completely confuse the girl. . . . I think it’s going to surprise a lot of Middle America that this guy does all of these different things that seem very straight and yet he’s gay, so I think that’s great. We’re lifting away

their sexual preferences, we’re taking that away as their identity and we’re kind of giving everybody blank slates to start with, and I think America’s going to really enjoy it. (Qtd. in Bone)

Some of the male contestants even opened up to the camera and explained that they could be (and have been) mistaken for gay based on certain character traits, such as a love for fashion, a tendency to get along better with women, concern about their appearance—one man says, “I look in the mirror every five seconds” (*Playing* [UK], episode 1)—fears (spiders, heights, and scorpions), and grooming habits (which include moisturizing and, for one man, shaving his legs). One contestant, Simon, even quotes a line from an episode of *Seinfeld* in which Jerry is mistaken as gay and admits, “I’m thin, I’m single, and I’m neat” (*Playing* [AU], episode 1).

After the first elimination round on all three shows, the producers’ casting strategy appeared to have paid off. The first two men each of the women asked to leave turned out to be straight. Jackie first says goodbye to Gust, who, ironically, was the most uncomfortable about the gay twist (“My worst nightmare came true,” he says)—but then, of course, he could have been lying. She admits to him that she thinks he could be gay because he is “introverted” and “nervous,” has certain “speech mannerisms,” and was “sitting a certain way” on their date (*Playing* [US], episode 1). Jackie next asks Louis to leave by telling him, “of all the guys I think I got to know you the least . . . I wonder why you didn’t put yourself out there. It kind of made me question your sexuality because I think a straight guy would have been more in that direction” (*Playing* [US], episode 1). Rebecca offers a less detailed explanation when saying goodbye to Simon (she questions his sincerity) and Sam, who is effeminate. She says, “I’m probably not your type of girl!” (*Playing* [AU], episode 1). Zoe also strikes out when she decides two of the guys could be gay because of what she discovers in their rooms. She eliminates Pritesh because he uses a hair straightener (so does she) and Raphael, who brought eight pairs of

designer shoes and has a container of Vaseline (which, he explains, he uses on his lips).

While viewers may or may not have been surprised by the outcome of the first round, Byrne's description of the male participants as "blank slates" in terms of their sexual preference is hardly accurate. She may have envisioned the ranch as some sort of utopia where the sexual identities of its male citizens are not labeled, yet in the heteronormative world of *Playing It Straight*, there is one and only one label that all men wear until proven otherwise: straight. And as the title implies, "straight-ness" is not necessarily limited to heterosexuals, but is something that can be performed.

The issue of performativity calls the "real" in reality programming into question. "Reality" generally refers to both the genre's subject matter and visual style: real people and events are captured through the use of a nonintrusive, hand-held camera and portable sound equipment. Compared to documentaries produced in the *cinéma vérité* or Direct Cinema traditions, the "real" in reality television—from the show's conception through postproduction—is to varying degrees manufactured and mediated by the show's producers. Scholars Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette claim that the audience is aware of this fact because "although reality TV whets our desire for the authentic, much of our engagement with the text hinges on our awareness that what we are watching is constructed and contains 'fictional' elements" (5).

One such element is the performance of the show's participants. Are the characters on reality shows being themselves, or are they acting—intentionally or not—for the camera? In his discussion of the "docusoap" *Big Brother*, John Corner suggests that a combination of the "performative" and the "self-restrained naturalism of demeanor, speech, and behavior" is associated with observational cinema (263). But to perpetuate the heterosexual imaginary and ensure the authenticity of heterosexual love, some reality dating shows require their participants to act, to "play" a role like that of a millionaire on *Joe Millionaire* or someone romantically interested in the bachelor(ette) on *For Love or Money*.

Playing It Straight provides a showcase for heterosexuality as a performance, a subject to which queer studies has generally devoted limited attention. Since the publication of Judith Butler's groundbreaking *Gender Trouble*, gender and sexual identity have been deconstructed as *performative*, a concept that is often misinterpreted and conflated with *performance*. Butler clearly differentiates between the two: gender is performative on the level of the unconscious. It is a compulsory performance, as opposed to a performance that is a conscious act and does not constitute sexual identity (24).

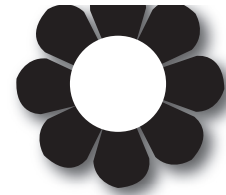
Historically, the conscious performance of homosexuality in films and on television has been in the form of negative stereotypes. A gay male character is easily recognizable when his gayness is conveyed through one or more signifiers in an actor's physical performance (gestures, speech, etc.) or visual design (costume, decor, etc.). As historian Richard Dyer explains, "[T]here are signs of gayness, a repertoire of gestures, expressions, stances, clothing, and even environments that bespeak gayness, but these are cultural forms designed to show what the person's person alone does not show: that he or she is gay" (19). These "signs of gayness"—an effeminate walk, feminine dress, etc.—have been prevalent in motion pictures since the silent era and on television beginning in the early 1970s, when TV series started to include gay male characters in regular supporting roles. While most of the early gay characters on television were effeminate males (along with the occasional psychopath), some television shows countered these images with nonstereotypical, "straight-acting" gay characters who could easily be (and usually were) mistaken for heterosexuals. In fact, the lack of any visible signs of gayness in regard to their physical appearance, speech, behavior, and occupation (e.g., policeman, military officer, or professional football player) was usually central to the plot.¹¹

Dyer suggests that there is a repertoire of signifiers for gayness, but can the same be said for straightness? Is it possible to define one without the other? As

Jay Clarkson contends, "[M]any people (both gay and not) still assume that homosexuality is easily discerned by the absence of heteronormative gender performance. . . . Indeed, as homosexuality needs heterosexuality to define itself, it appears straightness needs the oppositional concept of gayness to exist" (195). In *Playing It Straight*, straightness was not measured by the *presence* of a repertoire of heterosexual signifiers, but rather by their absence, which, in turn, defined gayness. The game not only required the gay men to play straight; it required the heterosexual ones to do the same. Perhaps the lack of a clearly defined set of behaviors and mannerisms that connote straightness may have been the reason why, as Byrne observed, the heterosexual participants found playing it straight such a challenge:

You think it was difficult for the gay guys, but it was really difficult for the straight guys. They were trying to prove that they were something that they already were. They were a lot more frustrated. For the gay guys it was difficult for them because they had to figure out, how do you play it straight as such, how do you flirt with a girl, and all those things that [involves] being something you're not for 24 hours. For the straight guys, the frustration that came out of them was that they were so upset that Jackie would say, "I think you're gay," so they also found it extremely difficult. (Qtd. in Bone)

In accordance with the homosexual/heterosexual binary, the competitions in *Playing It Straight* are divided into two main types. The first is a series of physical challenges—tests of strength, speed, and endurance (arm wrestling, races, a chili-eating contest, and the building of a star-gazing tower)—that give the men an opportunity to put their masculinity (and their gym bodies) on display. The second type is the more "feminine-coded" activities, such as a dance lesson (with same-sex partners) and shopping for an outfit for the female contestant. These and other situations (sharing a bed, showering outdoors, going to a gay/drag bar, drinking body shots off a man's chest) were designed to challenge the men's "straightness" by seeing how they would react when there was a possibility that they would be perceived as gay. Although it was obvious to them, the female, and the



viewers that the situations were contrived and clearly designed for this purpose, the situations still generated nervous (and often homophobic) reactions from some of the participants.

For example, in the first episode, immediately after the twist is revealed, the men are told to pick a roommate. They race upstairs and scramble to find a bed. In the US version, some men end up in a pink room and there is a shortage of beds, so two men are forced to share. They comment on the awkwardness of the situation and their fear that their roommate might be gay. “You don’t know who’s gay, who’s straight,” explains John, “so why would you want to share a bed with someone that you don’t know that answer to? I mean, you don’t want to wake up with your roommate naked beside you. That just wouldn’t make you feel comfortable” (*Playing* [US]). The UK version plays out in a similar manner with two men, Pritesh (straight) and Demetrius, who are forced to share a bed in a room with Jonny. “I feel sorry for Pritesh,” says Danny, “because I think Demetrius is gay.” Demetrius does not appear to be bothered by it, saying, “It’s cool. I’m sure everyone shared a bed with a friend or a cousin at some point.” Jonny, on the other hand, uses the situation to feign that he is heterosexual: “I don’t have any worries about sharing a room with a gay man, just as long as, you know, they aren’t going to try to pounce me” (*Playing* [UK], episode 1).

Homophobic remarks such as this were a tactic the male participants used to assert their heterosexuality. For example, Raphael, the flamboyant designer-store sales assistant who was eliminated in the first round, was repeatedly targeted by the other men, who were all convinced he was gay. Some of the men have a good laugh when Raphael wears Gucci glasses and designer boots while cleaning out the stables. In one scene, they stand in the background and watch him clean. One man does a swishy imitation of him behind his back. George observes, “He seems to be on this show just to prove he is a raving poofter” (*Playing* [UK], episode 1). But Raphael has the last word about Zoe: “I think if she kisses me and we do end up kiss-

ing, she’ll know I’m straight because I will obviously be kissing her because I fancy her” (*Playing* [UK], episode 1).

In light of its poor reception in the United States, it is not surprising that *Playing It Straight* did not spark a new trend in reality dating shows.¹² Yet, contrary to the producers’ stated intentions, the show’s true value ironically lies in its failure as a social experiment. It transformed the sexual politics of a heteronormative society into a literal performance, thereby revealing how within the hetero/homo binary, the construction of heterosexuality depends on homosexuality’s recognition and subsequent exclusion. Although the producers and the inhabitants of Sizzlin’ Saddles Ranch and El Rancho Macho may have believed they were simply indulging in a friendly game of sexual masquerade, in the end they only confirmed that for heterosexuals and homosexuals, the playing field remains—at least for the present time—uneven.

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NOTES

1. Carina Chocano’s review best summarizes the reaction of the show’s detractors to what they witnessed: “[I]f this thing goes to series, we will watch it only to witness moral bankruptcy on parade.”

2. Less than two months after her on-air wedding, bride Darva Conger had her unsummarized marriage to Rockwell annulled. Conger, a thirty-four-year-old emergency room nurse, later posed nude in the August 2000 issue of *Playboy* (Kluger).

3. Unfortunately, most reality dating show couples do not stay together. Evan and Zora did not remain a couple beyond the series, nor did David Smith and his final choice, Linda Kazdova, from *The Next Joe Millionaire* (2003).

4. In the season 1 finale of *For Love or Money*, Erin chooses the money over Rob, who informs her that if she had chosen him, they would have split the money. In the first episode of season 2, which aired immediately after season 1, Erin returns and is given the chance to double her million-dollar prize if she can convince the man to choose her over the money. In the show’s second season, fifteen eligible bachelors compete for Erin and get a chance to win a million dollars.

5. While gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals have appeared on reality television programs since the debut of MTV’s long-

running *The Real World* (1992–present), they have until only recently been generally excluded from reality dating series. MTV did break new ground in June 1996 when it celebrated Gay Pride Month with a special same-sex edition of the dating show *Singled Out* (1995–97). According to a spokesperson, the network was apparently concerned that “there was some content we felt should air at a later time” (“MTV”), so the episode was moved from its usual prime-time slot to 11 p.m. But it was only a matter of time before the otherwise gay-friendly MTV loosened up. In 2004, the network’s prime-time lineup included a new reality dating series, *Date My Mom* (2004–06). The oedipal-themed show featured heterosexual, gay, and lesbian contestants, who went on dates with three moms, each of whom tried to convince the contestant to date her son or daughter. More recently, VH1 and Logo, Viacom’s gay channel, teamed up for *Can’t Get a Date* (2006–present), which offers makeovers to gay, lesbian, and heterosexual New Yorkers and gives them expert advice on how to turn their love lives around.

6. Getzlaff discussed the show’s twist on the *Today Show* and *The View* in 2003. See “Katie Couric”; and “Panelists.”

7. All three versions open with a variation of the show’s theme song, a western ballad that tells the tale of a group of handsome cowboys who come to woo a beautiful woman, who discovers that some of them “like a different rodeo” (*Playing It Straight* [AU], *Playing It Straight* [UK], *Playing It Straight* [US]).

8. The troubadour is revealed to be gay in the final episode when he gets a cowboy of his own.

9. Alex admits he was lying in the fifth episode when, by his own choice, he comes out to Zoe over dinner. He tells her, “I’m gay. I think you deserve it” (*Playing* [UK]). Glenn also takes himself out of competition early on by admitting to Becky that he is gay (*Playing* [AU], episode 2). Although he did not come out on camera, Eddie—who is shown on camera getting drunk and making what looks like a pass at another suitor, Ryan—dropped out off-camera (*Playing* [US], episode 2).

10. Rebecca admitted in an interview that upon hearing the twist, she felt scared and alone because the reason she was there was a lie. But like *Boy Meets Boy*’s James, she recognized that the message of the show was acceptance: “I didn’t think there was so much intolerance and those boys did teach me a lot” (Razer).

11. A story line in which the show’s lead character dealt with (or denied) the fact that his friend was gay was featured on shows such as *All in the Family* (1971–79), *Carter Country* (1977–79), *Cheers* (1982–93), *The Fanelli Boys* (1990–91), *Gimme a Break* (1981–87), *The Love Boat* (1977–86), and *Too Close for Comfort* (1980–85).



12. In 2006, Lifetime Television introduced a new reality dating show with a premise similar to *Playing It Straight*'s, but with a format reminiscent of the original *Dating Game*. On *Gay, Straight, or Taken?* (2007) a twenty-something female contestant meets three men and is then told that one is straight and single, another is straight but taken, and the third is gay and has a boyfriend. After going on a date with each of them and observing their behavior toward her, she has to label them. As on *Playing It Straight*, her decisions about whether a guy is gay or straight are usually wrong, because they are based on superficial observations. One aspect of *Gay, Straight, or Taken?* that ranks the show above *Playing It Straight* is the recognition of gay male desire: the gay male's partner along with the "taken" male's girlfriend are introduced at the end of each episode.

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Stephen Tropiano is the author of the recently published *Obscene, Indecent, Immoral & Offensive: 100+ Years of Censored, Banned, and Controversial Films* and is currently editor of the *Journal of Film and Video*.

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