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The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom

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Feminism, Homosexuality, and Blue-Collar Perversity in *Roseanne*



When Lecy Goranson auditioned to play the eldest child in a new family sitcom starring stand-up comedian Roseanne Barr, she thought she knew what to expect: “I pictured Roseanne as a Meredith Baxter-Birney type, so when I saw her in all her glory with no make-up and her sweatpants . . . I was pretty shocked,” as she then diplomatically added, “but pleasantly shocked” (“Lecy Goranson Interview: I Was a Teenage Becky”).¹ On *Roseanne*’s debut in 1988, much of the United States shared Goranson’s surprise, for Barr demolished the “Meredith Baxter-Birney” image of television motherhood that reigned during the 1980s, with its antecedents dating back several decades.² In planning her transition from stand-up comedian to television sitcom mom, Barr threw down a gauntlet against a genre that frequently relegated women to the margins of its plotlines, thereby initiating a new vision of domestic relations: “In *my* show, the Woman is no longer a victim, but in control of her own mind. I wanted to make family sitcoms as we know them obsolete” (*ML* 234).³

With its Rust Belt setting in the fictional town of Lanford, Illinois, *Roseanne* portrays the lives of working-class Americans and the economic challenges they faced following Ronald Reagan’s presidency, and the program consistently infuses its blue-collar sensibility with issues related to gender and sexuality, including women’s reproductive rights, pornography, homosexuality, and children’s sexual autonomy. Recasting the prevailing middle-to upper-middle-class ethos of most family sitcoms, Barr depicted feminism

and sexuality as blue-collar issues that upend various cultural ideologies, filtering her humor through a dual perspective of economic and gender politics to recalibrate the mores of American culture and of sitcom narratology.⁴ By highlighting *Roseanne*'s fictionality through repeated allusions and homages to past family sitcoms and their archaic sexual politics, Barr eroded the genre's governing principle of evasion when considering the erotic lives of family members in favor of a protean and proleptic queerness. Furthermore, in contrast to what we might term the symptomatic queerness of *Leave It to Beaver*, *The Brady Bunch*, and *The Cosby Show*, *Roseanne* modeled the emergent possibility throughout the 1990s for surface depictions of homosexuality to unsettle the trifold cultural fantasies of the family sitcom, of "family-friendly" television protocols, and of innocent children.

Roseanne features Barr as the eponymous matriarch of the extended Conner clan—wife of Dan (John Goodman), sister of Jackie (Laurie Metcalf), and mother of Becky (Lecy Goranson and Sarah Chalke), Darlene (Sara Gilbert), D.J. (Michael Fishman), and, in the final two seasons, her infant son, Jerry.⁵ Becky's boyfriend-then-husband, Mark (Glenn Quinn), and Darlene's boyfriend-then-husband, David (Johnny Galecki), join the family as the years progress, and Roseanne's relationships with her stuffy mother, Bev (Estelle Parsons), and freethinking grandmother, Nana Mary (Shelley Winters), showcase the challenges and joys of intergenerational relationships. The primary cast of characters includes as well Roseanne's friend Crystal (Natalie West), who marries her father-in-law, Ed (Ned Beatty); family friend Arnie, as played by Barr's boyfriend/husband/ex-husband Tom Arnold; and her coworkers Leon (Martin Mull) and Nancy (Sandra Bernhard). *Roseanne* fictionalizes and allegorizes various aspects of Barr's life, including her roots in working-class America, her relationships with her sister and children, and, in the series' final season, her transition to a life of incredible wealth.⁶

Whereas popular domestic sitcoms of the 1980s typically featured upper-middle-class families, such as the Keatons of *Family Ties* (1982–89), the Huxtables of *The Cosby Show* (1984–92), and the Seavers of *Growing Pains* (1985–92), *Roseanne*'s Conner family, along with the Bundys of *Married with Children* (1987–97) and the Simpsons of *The Simpsons* (1989–), demolished the genre's decorum with their gleeful odes to dysfunction, crashing into the genre like pit bulls at a poodle show. Barr proclaimed of her success and her sensibility, "I liked and respected Bill Cosby, but business is business, and my ring-around-the-blue-collar family knocked his show out of the top ratings spot with a thud heard around the world of showbiz" (*R* 149). Defiantly queer in its treatment of economics, sexuality, and their numerous points of intersection, *Roseanne* rewrote the scripts of the family sitcom by casting ostensibly perverse pleasures as newly normative and in shifting the contours of blue-collar sexualities and of parent-child relationships in times of economic

scarcity. Also, in showcasing the pleasures of resisting conservative politics and patriarchal narrative traditions, *Roseanne* heralded a groundbreaking, openly queer model of the family sitcom by reveling in the Conners' dysfunction, which then ironically highlighted the true dysfunction of the wider economic system.

Barr's Blue-Collar Feminism: Women's Sexuality, Abortion, and Pornography

Against the backdrop of 1960s and 1970s second-wave feminism, which achieved remarkable advances for women's rights in the economic, educational, and domestic realms, Barr surged to the top of the stand-up comedy circuit in the mid-1980s, developing, in her words, "a whole new kind of comedy called 'funny womanness,'" through which she molded the stereotypical figure of the American housewife into a "domestic goddess."⁷ As Rosemarie Tong asserts of feminism's historical trajectory, third-wave feminists in the late 1980s began criticizing the movement's earlier orientation toward white, middle- to upper-class women: "Like multicultural, postcolonial, and global feminists, third-wave feminists stress that women and feminists come in many colors, ethnicities, nationalities, religions, and cultural backgrounds."⁸ Third-wave feminist theory advocates a wider consideration of women's positions in culture and an awareness of the intersectional nodes of identity. The practice of third-wave feminist media theory, as conceived by Merri Lisa Johnson, entails "adopting a differential consciousness that allows us to move around inside our responses, between what we like and what we critique, balancing on the shifting grounds between hegemony and agency in which every text is 'an inevitable site of ideological struggle.'"⁹ All programs bear ideology's imprint, particularly in Hollywood's profit-driven economy, so Barr's challenge was to create a uniquely feminist character within this system.

Barr's realization that second-wave feminism overlooked social class as a constitutive factor of a woman's identity sparked her revolutionary contribution to feminist humor, and she describes her working-class roots as key to her identity and to her comedic style: "I had found my voice. No longer wishing to speak in academic language, or even in a feminist language, because it all seemed dead to me, I began to speak as a working-class woman who is a mother, a woman who no longer believed in change, progress, growth, or hope. This was the language that all the women on the street spoke" (*MLW* 161). In a memorable swipe at bourgeois ideology, she taunts, "Hey, class is for schmucks who take life as a spectator sport anyway, so who needs it?" (*ML* 152–53). Owing to their tendency to erase class as a formative aspect of their characters' identities, presuming instead a universal upper-middle-class norm—which, of course, is not the norm—many family sitcoms promote

the United States' capitalistic status quo through their refusal to consider the possibility of lives lived under socioeconomic distress. Furthermore, analyzing class elicits numerous taxonomic challenges, for even commonly employed terms—*low class*, *middle class*, *upper class*—are ambiguous in their meanings and at their margins. As Diana Kendall observes in her study of media depictions of social class, “Even sociologists who have spent years studying the U.S. class structure do not agree about what constitutes the middle class or whether such a class actually exists (some assert that there are only two classes: the upper class and the working class).”¹⁰

With class as an overarching theme, *Roseanne* eschews the agnostic political stances of most television programs and forthrightly condemns Reagan Republicanism, skewering in particular its antagonism toward unionized labor. In his January 1981 inaugural speech, Ronald Reagan famously proclaimed, “In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem,” thus signaling his intention to rewrite the civic contract between the American government and its people.¹¹ The ensuing decade witnessed the ascendancy of conservatism in a range of spheres and, as Michael Schaller argues, a corresponding loss of influence for such liberal organizations as the Democratic Party, trade unions, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the National Organization for Women.¹² As Walter Galenson observes, the Reagan presidency marked “the beginning of the most difficult period for organized labor since the early 1930s,” to the extent that the “concept of a ‘union-free environment’ gained currency,” with this hostility most evident in the crushing of the air traffic controllers’ strike of 1981.¹³

In contrast to *Roseanne*'s defiant liberalism and further highlighting Barr's iconoclastic and ultimately queer ethos, Reaganite conservatism pervades numerous 1980s sitcoms, with Alex P. Keaton (Michael J. Fox) of *Family Ties* serving as the era's defining avatar of Reagan Republicanism. In this show's pilot, after father Steven Keaton (Michael Gross) escorts Alex home from a whites-only country club, viewers might reasonably expect that Alex will realize his shortsightedness in abandoning his family's commitment to racial justice. Instead, both father and son admit their failings, with Steven apologizing for meddling in his son's affairs and admitting the rashness of his actions: “We're both getting older. One of us is bound to grow up sooner or later” (“Pilot”). Even young Kevin Arnold (Fred Savage) of *The Wonder Years* (1988–93), aged twelve in 1968, rejects the youthful, rebellious spirit of the 1960s on numerous occasions, primarily through Daniel Stern's voice-over narration that details his present-day understanding of his childhood. Rather than praising the era's defiant sensibility, he defends white, middle-class suburban bubbles against aspersions concerning the “anonymity of the suburbs, or the mindlessness of the TV generation” and extols it as a setting where “there were people with stories, there were families bound together in the pain and

struggle of love” (“Pilot”). In an encounter dramatizing the conflict between liberalism and conservatism, Kevin’s father, Jack, and his sister Karen’s boyfriend argue over the Vietnam War, with Jack defending U.S. intervention against communism and the boyfriend attacking the military industrial complex and asserting his unwillingness to sacrifice his life for it. Even years later, Kevin cannot determine his moral position on the issue: “Who was right and who was wrong? Well, I’m supposed to be an adult now, and I still can’t completely figure that one out” (“Angel”). Still, Jack’s stance, as well as his occupational affiliation with the military industrial complex (“My Father’s Office”), appears validated when Karen breaks up with this boyfriend at the episode’s end, as his free-love sensibility proves his unworthiness as a suitor. With 1980s sitcom conservatism, even the Vietnam War could be redeemed as a worthy expenditure, in a spirit of resurgent patriotism reflective of Reagan’s call for “morning in America.”

With a sharply different tone from such Reaganite programming, Roseanne’s blue-collar feminism is evident when, at the first season’s conclusion, she leads a walkout from the Wellman plastics factory that employs her, Jackie, and Crystal (“Let’s Call It Quits”), thus momentarily merging the program’s comic sensibility with the gritty realism of such pro-union productions as *Norma Rae* (1979). In a grand irony of casting that retroactively enhances the episode’s anti-Republican themes, Reagan acolyte Fred Dalton Thompson, a leading Republican politician in the 1990s and 2000s, who served as U.S. senator from Tennessee (1994–2003) and ran for the Republican presidential nomination in 2008, plays the role of the manager dismissive of his workers’ concerns. The necessity of unions for blue-collar households is staged again when the Conners’ state representative, Mike Summers, comes to their door, declaring that he wants to encourage businesses to relocate to Lanford by offering tax breaks as an incentive. Roseanne demands, “Who’s gonna pay the taxes they ain’t paying?” Summers replies, “You will . . . but you’ll be working good steady employment.” Roseanne barks, “Union wages?” as she steamrolls past him: “So, they’re gonna dump the unions so they can come here and hire us at scab wages and then, for that privilege, we get to pay their taxes.” Summers, in a futile attempt to recast economics and politics as a sphere of masculine discussion, evasively inquires, “Is your husband home?”—yet viewers realize that Roseanne’s political authority cannot be evaded simply by appealing to Dan (“Aliens”).

More than incidental moments establishing the Conners’ socioeconomic status, such scenes contribute to the series’ narrative arc, which stresses the detrimental effects of conservative politics on union households. As Barr summarizes: “The whole nine years of the show is about the union leaving Lanford. I was pretty much following what was happening in America” (“Lanford Daze” Commentary Track). While many viewers see the series’ last season as the one

that proverbially “jumps the shark,” as the Conners win \$108 million in a lottery and then cavort around Martha’s Vineyard before returning home, it features as well Roseanne and Jackie cooperating with Edgar Wellman (James Brolin) so that their former coworkers can purchase ownership rights to the plastics factory, thus emancipating them from a rapacious form of capitalism.¹⁴ Roseanne’s visceral distaste for Republicanism is depicted when she tells Darlene that she should find other ways to annoy her parents than experimenting with drugs, and Darlene wisecracks, “Well, there is a young Republican I’m interested in” (“Snoop Davey Dave”). Likewise, when Roseanne records a video time capsule for Jerry, she states her fear of her children becoming Republicans (“Direct to Video”). Most family sitcoms either eschew politics altogether or serve as “equal-opportunity offenders,” taking comedic potshots at both parties, with *Roseanne*’s divergence from this tradition a striking reflection of its feminist worldview.¹⁵

Within *Roseanne*’s allegorical consideration of blue-collar life without unions, her struggles to provide for her family showcase a mother’s tribulations in times of economic duress, with Barr’s body, through her defiant presentation of fatness, metonymically capturing the program’s ethos. As Julie Bettie states, “In *Roseanne*, the socially ‘low’ is marked by Roseanne and Dan Conner’s large bodies, in striking contrast to the thin and normatively beautiful characters of middle-class sitcoms”;¹⁶ in a similar vein Kathleen Rowe explains, “By being fat, loud, and ever willing to ‘do offensive things,’ the star persona ‘Roseanne Arnold’ displays, above all, a supreme ease with her body—an ease which triggers much of the unease surrounding her because it diminishes the power of others to control her.”¹⁷ The program’s overarching tension, then, is between a feminist who asserts herself and her authority within her home and workplace yet who is caught within an economic system that undermines her autonomy. To this end the precariousness of the Conners’ finances receives extensive narrative attention, such as when Becky takes some groceries for a food drive, but Roseanne counters that the food should be given to them (“Life and Stuff”). Similarly, when the power company turns off their electricity because they have not paid their bills, Roseanne deadpans, “Well, middle class was fun” (“The Dark Ages”).

Further in this regard, *Roseanne* continually underscores the thin line between blue-collar respectability and white-trash degradation, with Roseanne striving to maintain her family’s precarious social position. The program’s set design accentuates the aesthetic gray area between these social castes. Matt Williams, the show’s creator, sought an authentic aura for its sets—“Worn and lived in. Nothing should look new”—and Nikke Finke documents that he “sent the set designer to his grandmother’s house in order to model *Roseanne*’s kitchen after hers, down to the louvered windows above the sink. And the couch and chairs in the living room were bought out of the Sears catalogue.”¹⁸

The Conners' bad taste is often played for jokes, as evident in the Godzilla statuette perched on a bureau behind the family's afghan-draped sofa, with this tchotchke emblemizing Roseanne's character stomping through life's challenges. In Dan's ironic words, it is "the crown jewel of our collection" ("Millions from Heaven"). Contributing further to the set's bourgeois aesthetics, the iconic symbol of white-trash decorating—pink flamingoes—adorns their shower curtain, and they display in their living room the notoriously déclassé artwork of dogs playing billiards. But their taste, as is explained in numerous episodes, reflects the exigencies of their economic situation, in which they must take what they find to decorate their home—such as when they mistakenly purchase items from thieves robbing their neighbors ("Tolerate Thy Neighbor"). The decrepitude of the Conners' home serves as fodder for the program's gallows humor, as it also imparts the reality of the family's economic situation in that, quite simply, their financial circumstances are unlikely to change as they pass from job to job. Roseanne frequently comments on the family's precarious social position, and after Dan is arrested for attacking Jackie's abusive boyfriend, she sighs, "Everyone's been saying it for years, but with Dan going to jail, we are officially poor white trash" ("War and Peace"). While humor leavens these lines, when Becky and Mark move into a trailer park, Roseanne is dismayed that her daughter's socioeconomic trajectory appears to be moving downward ("Happy Trailers").

But as Reagan-era union-busting catalyzes the economic troubles that entrap the Conners, Barr's feminism and promotion of women's sexual autonomy allow a modicum of queer resistance to ideological structures that otherwise brook little hope for change. As Barr proclaims of her feminist ideals, "The *Roseanne* show is . . . about American's unwashed unconscious. Every episode sprouts at least a seed of something banal turned on its ass, something so pointedly 'incorrect,' filtered through a working class language that claims every MALE-defined thing from family to economics, to God, as belonging, rightfully, and at last, to the realm of women" (*ML* 235). Within the patriarchal economic system in which its eponymous protagonist must struggle, *Roseanne* stresses the primacy of female desire in numerous ways, even rewriting the voyeuristic tropes of scopophilia that privilege men gazing at beautiful women.¹⁹ Instead, women wield the gaze in *Roseanne*, such as when Crystal asks Roseanne why she fell in love with Dan. She replies, "his sense of humor . . . that and the way his jeans kept falling off the back of his butt" ("Here's to Good Friends"). Whereas many family sitcoms depict husband and wife chastely relaxing in bed together, or at most mildly canoodling, Roseanne and Dan do not "make love"; simply stated, they fuck, and they do so with abandon. Their exertions tumble them back and forth over the mattress, such as when their heads appear at their bed's foot, with the blankets crumpled behind them ("Canoga Time"; fig. 4.1). On another



FIGURE 4.1 In “Canoga Time,” after a raging fight, Roseanne and Dan forgive each other through their rough-and-tumble lovemaking.

occasion Dan retrieves a condom from the bedside table—“You want to be ribbed or tickled tonight?”—as, eagerly anticipating intercourse, he pants like a dog (“Two Down, One to Go”; fig. 4.2). In portraying Roseanne and Dan’s efforts to conceive their fourth child, the camera frames Roseanne lying in bed with her legs sticking straight in the air: “I’m directing your sperms where to go,” she explains (“Be My Baby”; fig. 4.3). It is also implied that Roseanne and Dan engage in public sex, such as when she hints that she will masturbate him at the movie theatre: “We can do that trick with the popcorn box,” she wheedles (“Somebody Stole My Gal”). When they begin necking in their truck, Roseanne agrees despite her initial hesitation, but urges her husband to preserve a modicum of modesty: “OK, but try to keep your butt below the window” (“Be My Baby”).

Like Roseanne, her sister Jackie faces a life of economic hardship as she moves through an array of mostly unsatisfying occupations after the plastics factory: police officer, perfume spritzer, truck driver, and other blue-collar positions. The sitcom contrasts Roseanne’s monogamy with Jackie’s promiscuity but primarily to enjoy the humor of this contrast rather than to judge her for her active sex life. Dan says to Becky of her aunt’s wedding plans, “I don’t know, babe. I think Aunt Jackie’s body might reject a white dress” (“To Tell the Truth”), and viewers also learn that her sexual precociousness began



FIGURE 4.2 “Two Down, One to Go” depicts Dan “begging” for intercourse.



FIGURE 4.3 The staging of this postcoital scene in “Be My Baby” visually informs viewers that Dan has recently ejaculated in Roseanne’s vagina.

during early adolescence. Roseanne reminds Jackie that she dated a forty-year-old man in eighth grade, and Jackie declares that she “taught him more than he taught me” (“Dear Mom and Dad”). Reminiscing over her date for her first school dance, Jackie recalls his name was Marshall Gordon, but Roseanne clarifies, “That wasn’t his first name. That was his job. He got kicked off the force ‘cause of you” (“The Blaming of the Shrew”). When Jackie and her boyfriend Fred (Michael O’Keefe) discuss their sexual histories, he states that he has slept with three women, and she replies that she has slept with, on average, three men a year: “What’s to discuss? I slept with sixty men—most of them separately” (“Past Imperfect”). By depicting Roseanne as a sexually satisfied wife and by refusing to depict Jackie within the standard story line of the “fallen woman,” *Roseanne* demolishes the social construction of a woman’s identity as configured through her sexuality.

Given the program’s investment in women’s sex lives, it is not surprising that multiple characters become pregnant: widowed mother Crystal has a young adolescent son, Lonnie, yet finds herself distraught when, after marrying Ed, she bears two children in quick succession. Jackie becomes pregnant after what she presumed to be a one-night stand with Fred. Roseanne and Dan, when pondering whether to have a fourth child, consider both their ages and their economic status as reasons not to proceed with their plans. After Roseanne misses her period, Jackie suggests that she could avail herself of an abortion. The discussion proceeds with Crystal interjecting that some people believe abortion is murder, Jackie disagreeing, and Roseanne stating definitively that “some people call it a choice” (“The Test”). In these story lines the inevitability of considering abortion arises in conjunction with women’s economic distress, forthrightly thematizing their reproductive rights as an essential feature of the modern family and of the modern economy and thereby highlighting the hypocrisy of right-wing politicians who oppose women’s reproductive freedom while showing little concern for the economic duress women face in providing for their families. While Crystal, Jackie, and Roseanne do not abort their pregnancies, Becky wonders aloud what she would have done if she had become pregnant in high school without legal access to an abortion, and Nana Mary divulges that she underwent two abortions in her youth (“Thanksgiving 1994”). Nana Mary shares neither the circumstances requiring these terminations nor her methods for procuring them prior to the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, so the contrast between Becky’s present and Nana Mary’s past asks viewers to consider the necessity for women to attend to their reproductive decisions by themselves, particularly within an environment with limited financial resources.

Within this world of blue-collar feminism the male characters incarnate varying models of masculinity and sexuality: Dan is the devoted yet gruff husband and father; Fred is the sensitive and emotional 1990s man; Mark is

the bad boy maturing into responsibility. Regardless of their individual characteristics, these men continually cede to women's authority, for the program simply dismisses most pretensions of patriarchal prowess as a shallow vestige of yesteryear. The phallus wields little authority in *Roseanne*, and its ineffectiveness is highlighted in scenes depicting the anxieties accompanying male performance, particularly in the story line of David's sexual maturation. Desperate to consummate his relationship with Darlene, he retires with her to a motel room after prom but finds himself impotent. Darlene comforts him: "I'm sorry David. I know how much you wanted this to happen." He then pleads, "Darlene, just please stop talking. If you say anything else, it might disappear altogether" ("Promises, Promises"). In this world where female desires dominate, the phallic promise of the penis as a signifier of male puissance fails to stand up for itself, and, tacitly acknowledging these circumstances, the male characters accept their secondary role in this blue-collar matriarchy. Certainly, they do not contest women's primacy regarding pregnancy decisions, such as when Fred declares to Jackie: "It's your body, it's your decision. There's nothing that I can do about it" ("Be My Baby"). Roseanne argues about paternal rights with Dan and Mark, pointing out to them that "Jackie has so far put in, what, eight months into this baby, and Fred, he put in—what do you think?—three minutes, and I'm being very generous here. And so you think they're equal partners in the deal?" ("Don't Make Room for Daddy"). Further advancing its feminist treatment of women's reproductive themes, the series ridicules men's discomfort with lactation. Dan is obviously taken aback when Crystal breastfeeds at the breakfast table, but Roseanne brusquely reminds him, "Oh, Dan, it's not like you've never seen a breast before" ("A Bitter Pill to Swallow"). After her son Andy's birth, Jackie leaks on her wedding dress, and in the episode's tag, she nurses Andy while she and Fred exchange vows ("Altar Egos").²⁰ By breastfeeding Jerry, Roseanne scares away the policeman who approaches her and Jackie in their car after the trucker whom they insulted crashes into a utility pole ("The Getaway, Almost"). Unable to control the phallus and fearful of lactating breasts, the men of *Roseanne* collectively depict the relative impotency and fragility of the male gender, presenting a queered vision of 1990s masculinity bereft of its privileges.

In light of its blue-collar feminist ethos, *Roseanne's* interest in pornography further encodes sexuality as a woman's provenance and queries the ideological binary distinguishing between sexual normality and perversity. Numerous prominent feminists have denigrated pornography as derogatory to women, yet in the 1970s and 1980s a countervailing opinion arose, one that lauded it as a valuable narrative strategy for reassessing Western culture's long-standing debasement of female desire. As Carolyn Bronstein documents, feminists including Susan Brownmiller, Gloria Steinem, Robin Morgan, Shere Hite, and others formed an antipornography action group in the 1970s, yet their efforts

sparked a pushback from prosex feminists who “accused anti-pornography [advocates] of promoting conservative views that supported women’s sexual oppression and argued that efforts to protect girls and women from sexuality would create a repressive climate that would interfere with every woman’s right to seek sexual liberation on her own terms.”²¹ Barr recalls her years in the feminist movement: “Later we changed our name to WAP, Women Against Pornography, which used a traveling slide show to raise funds to help smash patriarchy” (*R* 105). In contrast to these earlier views, Barr’s sitcom often treats pornography approvingly, as in a fantasy sequence in which Roseanne thanks guest star Hugh Hefner, publisher of *Playboy* and iconic libertine since the 1950s, for loosening the United States’ puritanical values (“What a Day for a Daydream”). With the advent of videocassette recorders, pornography entered mainstream American homes in the 1980s, and frequent allusions to it stress its relative banality within the Conner household.²² The episode “House of Grown-Ups” portrays the Conners’ excitement over purchasing a VCR, and it is implied that Dan’s rental choice is pornographic, for Roseanne seems titillated by the prospect of viewing it together. In a similar vein, Roseanne watches a wrestling match with Dan and wisecracks, “This is like all-male porno except they’re wearing bathing suits” (“Lovers’ Lane”). Surely viewers are not meant to construe that Roseanne bases this opinion on her extensive consumption of gay erotica, yet her joke acknowledges that pornography depicts a range of queer desires and acts beyond the heteronormative.

Rather than simply criticizing pornography as degrading to women, *Roseanne* questions its masculinist bias and compares masculine and feminine erotica. The plotline of “Isn’t It Romantic?” portrays Dan planning an idyllic evening for his wife—but one featuring a porn video entitled “Romancing the Bone.” Roseanne objects, “This is nothing but disgusting pornographic filth,” as Dan feebly defends himself: “It’s got ‘romance’ in the title.” Roseanne continues her attack on the ways in which much pornography speaks exclusively to heteroerotic male desire: “It’s just some sick old male fantasy that only appeals to other sick old males.” For Roseanne, then, the problem appears not to be pornography as much as men’s pornography, leaving the possibility open for erotic narratives catering to women’s experiences of desire. Developing this theme, the episode “Sweet Dreams” depicts Roseanne’s fantasy life, which features shirtless hunks tending to her every whim, as she also imagines a life free from the daily commotion of her family. In this sequence a woman’s desires receive the narrative’s attention, while also refusing to depict Roseanne as the self-abnegating mother who puts the needs of her husband and children before her own.

In casting former porn star Traci Lords as Stacy, the bus person at Roseanne and Jackie’s diner, Barr bridged the show’s thematic interest in pornography as relatively banal with her objective to challenge Hollywood’s mores—and

its economic payoffs. Fighting the entertainment industry's antifeminist bias with a porn star may appear a counterintuitive move, yet in so doing, Barr underscored that women's sexual experiences should not preclude them from the popular-culture sphere—even within the family-sitcom genre. Lords recalls the beginnings of her acquaintanceship with Barr: "Roseanne introduced herself, generously saying she had a lot of respect for me. She said Hollywood was a tough place, especially for a woman with a past."²³ At the same time that Barr granted Lords the opportunity to continue her transition to mainstream acting roles, her performance as Stacy relies on her obvious sex appeal, which allows the program to deconstruct other prevailing visions of female sexuality. In a porn parody entitled "Lunch Box Girls"—which serves as the tag to the episode introducing Stacy—Barr, Metcalf, and Lords play hypersexualized waitresses pouting the standard lines of pornographic narratives, such as Metcalf's "I've always been a nice girl. I wish someone could teach me to be bad." A man enters the restaurant, and they proceed with their seductions, but instead of depicting the ensuing hard-core sexcapades—an impossibility for any prime-time network television show, and particularly one broadcast during the "family hour"—the camera depicts the viewer of this video fast-forwarding to its conclusion of the women smoking cigarettes as the man cleans up the kitchen ("Follow the Son"). By interpellating *Roseanne's* audience in the place of this fictional viewer bored by the standard plotlines of porn and fast-forwarding not to the money shot but to the pleasures of male labor in the kitchen, the program's most extended rescripting of pornographic pleasure depicts for male viewers a comic vision of what blue-collar working women desire when watching X-rated fare. Women's desires, sexual or otherwise, drive *Roseanne's* plots, thereby demonstrating the humorous pleasures derived from women's sexual autonomy in a socioeconomic environment affording them few opportunities for financial advancement.

Homosexuality, Heterosexuality, and Blue-Collar Queerness

Sexual intercourse and sexual orientation transcend social class, and in *Roseanne* the variability of sexual desire speaks to the queer pleasures available to economically strapped characters, as well as to the universality of eroticism. The 1990s heralded breakthroughs in network depictions of gay life, most notably with Ellen DeGeneres's Ellen Morgan coming out of the closet in *Ellen* (1994–98) and with *Will & Grace* (1998–2006) detailing the lives of gay urbanites Will Truman (Eric McCormack) and Jack McFarland (Sean Hayes). Notably, however, neither *Ellen* nor *Will & Grace* fall within the purview of family sitcoms, which for the most part remained uncomfortable with gay story lines and were more likely to express mildly homophobic sentiments. For instance, a running gag of *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996–2005) paints

grandfather Frank (Peter Boyle) as suspicious of his infant grandson's sexuality. Ray (Ray Romano) tells his wife, Debra (Patricia Heaton), that Frank fears "little Matthew has homosexual tendencies" ("Pilot"), and later, when the child appears fascinated by a vaginal sculpture created by his grandmother Marie (Doris Roberts), Ray voices his relief: "My father was concerned about him in that department" ("Marie's Sculpture"). For the most part, queers were still banished from the family sitcoms of the era.

In contrast to such reticence over homosexuality, Barr has cited several motivating factors for depicting gay characters in her program. On a personal note she mentions that it was "an important thing to do for me because I have a gay brother and a gay sister" ("Ladies' Choice" Video Commentary), and in a quip she celebrates her friendships with gay men: "Thank God for gay guys—without 'em, us fat women wouldn't have anyone to dance with."²⁴ She also credits her early success in comedy to lesbian audiences: "They made me popular in Denver, they made it safe for me there, too, in comedy. Now you know why I try accurately and respectfully to have lesbians portrayed on all my shows" (*ML* 49). She also notes that such portrayals of gay life were groundbreaking in television's history: "We wanted to do a woman gay character because that had not been done." In casting Sandra Bernhard as Nancy, *Roseanne* allowed a queer actor to play a queer role, as Barr recalls: "Sandra Bernhard was the first actor ever who was gay and who played gay, years and years ahead of Ellen [DeGeneres] and Rosie [O'Donnell] . . . and I still tell her no one has ever been that brave since" (*R* 148). On the intersection of sexuality and Hollywood economics, it is instructive to contrast Barr's praise of Bernhard with her sharp criticism of Jodie Foster, who remained closeted until the 2012 Golden Globes: "I hate everything she stands for, and everyone gathered around her to help her stand for it. It's a big fuckin' lie. Let's not be who we are. Let's hide behind our art. . . . In her fuckin' Armanis with her tits hangin' out. And constantly rewarded and rewarded. And by who? The power structure that she totally speaks for."²⁵ Here Barr identifies the financial payoffs available to closeted stars who cloaked their sexual orientation, thus tacitly endorsing the Hollywood system that required the denial of their very selves. In contrast, by casting Bernhard in a continuing role in a hit family sitcom spanning nine years, Barr created financial incentives for gay actors to proclaim their sexualities as a core feature of their humanity.

Throughout its run, *Roseanne* grew bolder in its depiction of queer lives and desires, in many ways mimicking the transition out of the closet that gay people undertake, while also repudiating the "guppie" (gay urban professional) stereotype by casting gay men and women as blue-collar workers, facing the same economic challenges as their straight peers.²⁶ Viewers first learn of Leon's sexual orientation when he refuses his female supervisor's advances, and Roseanne meets his "friend" Jerry at the episode's conclusion, with their sexual

relationship implied when Leon states he was looking for the blue shirt Jerry is wearing (“Dances with Darlene”). Leon comes out to Dan and his poker buddies, who are fantasizing over famous actresses, by declaring himself uninterested in sleeping with Melanie Griffith, with the audience’s applause signifying their approval of the character’s honesty (“Why Jackie Becomes a Trucker”). *Roseanne* acknowledges the homophobia confronting gay people, such as when Roseanne defends Leon to their employer, believing he will be fired for his homosexuality: “You’re trying to scrounge up some dirt on Leon just because he’s gay. Well, I ought to call the ACLU ’cause this is totally un-American. And I’m not going to give you any help on your little witch-hunt. No crappy job is worth that” (“Lies”). Roseanne’s tirade is misdirected—ironically, her interviewer did not know of Leon’s homosexuality until she outed him—but her concern that he could lose his job bespeaks her awareness that homophobia bears dire consequences for gay people in the workforce.

Upending the sexual conservatism of most family sitcoms, *Roseanne*’s story lines about gay characters register their core normativity—and conversely, the perversity inherent in heterosexuality. With Nancy and Leon, the program incorporates gay characters into the fabric of the Conners’ lives, but more so, these characters challenge the chimerical vision of sexual normativity as ostensibly embodied in heterosexuality. Viewers first meet Nancy in her role as Arnie’s girlfriend and then wife, but Nancy suggests that heteroerotic desires can be queer as well, telling Roseanne that she and Arnie met when he worked for the water company and, while checking her meter, he peeped through her window. “It was so perverted,” Bernhard intones disgustedly, as she then chirps after a pause, “and then we started dating” (“Vegas”). After Nancy and Arnie separate, Roseanne and Jackie inquire about her dating prospects, and she confides her nascent sense of her shifting sexual desires: “Her name is Marla. I’m seeing a woman.” They laugh, but Nancy continues: “I’m serious. I’m gay.” By casting Morgan Fairchild, the glamorous star of prime-time soap opera *Flamingo Road* (1980–82), as Marla, *Roseanne* refuses the stereotype of the butch lesbian, even as Roseanne appears to endorse this stereotype when she sarcastically says to Jackie of Marla, “Well, she doesn’t look like a lesbian, you know. I mean, lesbians are big ole truck drivers who wear flannel shirts and faded jeans” (“Ladies’ Choice”). Jackie laughs at Roseanne’s riff but then recalls her occupation and looks down at her clothes. As she realizes the match between this stereotypical portrait of lesbians and herself, the episode dissolves any distinctions between heterosexuality and homosexuality as based on a person’s exterior appearance—with Metcalf’s performance capturing Jackie’s discovery that, although she thought she was laughing at Marla, she was really laughing at herself.

As the contrast between Marla’s lesbian chic and Jackie’s heterosexual frumpiness evinces, viewers cannot distinguish between gay and straight characters

by costume alone, and *Roseanne* further stages debates about sexual identity in the 1990s by refusing to enforce a rigid sense of sexual orientation on its characters. Viewers learn that Leon was previously married, and when Roseanne points out to Nancy that her date Roger (Tim Curry) is an “outie” (i.e., has a penis) but Nancy now prefers “innies,” Nancy replies, “Please don’t label me. I am a people person,” to which Jackie wryly moans, “Now I’m losing men to lesbians” (“Promises, Promises”). Nancy later expands on this theme, stating, “Sexuality isn’t all black and white; there’s a whole gray area,” and Roseanne acknowledges her personal sense of sexual fluidity: “I am not afraid of any small percentage of my gayness inside.” Furthermore, Roseanne sarcastically reverses the standard poles of discrimination when she says that Nancy has not introduced them to her gay friends because “You’ve never been able to accept our alternate lifestyle. It isn’t a choice, you know” (“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”).

Along with evacuating any meaningful distinctions between heterosexuality and homosexuality, *Roseanne* demystifies gay sex through jokes about anal and other eroticisms, for their inclusion assumes that viewers of this family sitcom will understand and appreciate this humor, as it also sets up the possibility that parents might need to explain such jokes to their young offspring. While chatting at a bowling alley, Nancy complains to Roseanne, “Arnie’s on my back to have a baby”; Roseanne replies sardonically, “Well, maybe one of these days he’ll get it right” (“The Bowling Show”). At a beauty parlor Roseanne and Jackie meet an effeminate man who plays softball with Fred; Roseanne asks pointedly with the euphemistic metaphors of sodomy, “Was Fred pitching or catching?” (“Skeleton in the Closet”). Roseanne’s antagonistic relationship with Leon brooks little sentimentality, so when she encounters him at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting and says, “I guess you’d have to be pretty drunk to do what you do in bed” (“My Name Is Bev”), the joke’s surface homophobia is balanced by her long-standing friendship with him. Humor about homosexuality functions similarly to humor about heterosexuality in *Roseanne*, with the program’s sharply antisentimental sensibility demonstrating respect for gay characters by subjecting them to the same mistreatment meted out to the Connors while also refusing to censor such jokes in deference to any young viewers in its audience or to the phantom construction of the Child.

Beyond its portrayal of gay characters and gay humor, *Roseanne* challenged the U.S. culture’s prevailing consensus against gay marriage, which surged to national attention in 1991 with Hawaii’s *Baehr v. Miike* case. The ensuing legal battles resulted in passage of the 1996 U.S. Defense of Marriage Act, which prohibited federal recognition of same-sex marriages.²⁷ Countering this vilification of gay marriage, *Roseanne* stages Leon’s wedding to his fiancé Scott (Fred Willard) with Liza Minnelli impersonators, male strippers, and drag queens. Leon rages, “This isn’t a wedding; it’s a circus. You have somehow

managed to take every gay stereotype and roll them up into one gigantic, offensive, Roseanne-iacal ball of wrong.” The scene’s excesses soon give way to a tartly sentimental exchange of vows with Scott professing his eternal affection: “I love you in a way that is mystical, and eternal, and illegal in twenty states.” This episode, entitled “December Bride,” highlighted the inevitable controversies accompanying depictions of gay life in family sitcoms, for when it aired on 12 December 1995, ABC moved *Roseanne*’s scheduled broadcast time from 8:00 p.m. (the “family hour”) to 9:30 p.m., while denying that the switch was due to the episode’s subject matter. In ABC spokeswoman Janice Gretemeyer’s words: “After all, the program has often had gay humor. We just felt the adult humor in this episode was more appropriate for the later time period.”²⁸ Here the fantasies of family-friendly programming and of the family hour reemerge, and again the boundaries of this elastic, imaginary construction are protected while any such controversy inevitably generates greater media interest and higher ratings. In depicting Leon and Scott’s wedding, *Roseanne* pushed the boundaries of network and familial propriety, yet only a little more than a month later, on 18 January 1996, *Friends* (1994–2004) aired the episode “The One with the Lesbian Wedding,” in which Ross’s ex-wife marries her long-term partner. As Ron Becker argues, the lesson that networks drew from the portrayal of same-sex story lines was that “Gay material, especially same-sex kissing, could arouse controversy and network nerves, but it and the scandal it might create could also draw huge ratings without serious economic consequences.”²⁹

Roseanne delineates the frustrations of a closeted life in the story arc of Bev, Roseanne and Jackie’s mother, with whom they share a rocky relationship. Bev is primarily characterized as a starchy prude, yet she earns the nickname “Craftmatic adjustable Bev” when she breaks her hip after having sex with her boyfriend, Jake (Red Buttons). Roseanne soon wonders if Bev ever enjoyed sex, and her mother replies, “Your father was good, in the sense that he never took longer than the commercials.” In the episode’s tag, Jake and Bev discuss their sex life offscreen, as she, clad in a leather dominatrix outfit and carrying a whip, enters the living room to retrieve a pair of handcuffs before returning to the bedroom (“Body by Jake”; fig. 4.4). Bev’s sexual evolution reaches its climax when, as she becomes so frustrated describing her joyless marriage, she confesses that she could tolerate sex only if she read *Playboy* beforehand. Darlene deadpans, “Well, I think Grandma just outed herself,” and Roseanne adds, “My right-wing, conservative, Republican mother is a great big old lesbo” (“Home Is Where the Afghan Is”). Bev then enjoys a remarkable transformation, as she finds companionship with the local chanteuse, Joyce (Ruta Lee). In the series’ final episode, Roseanne explains in voice-over the meaning of this transition: “My mom came from a generation where women were supposed to be submissive about everything. I never bought into that, and I wish mom



FIGURE 4.4 Bev's sexual desires are staged for humor in this scene ("Body by Jake"), yet her sexual evolution into lesbianism during her twilight years highlights the necessity for women to pursue their true sexual desires.

hadn't either. I wish she had made different choices, so I think that's why I made her gay. I wanted her to have some sense of herself as a woman" ("Into That Good Night, Part 2"). Seeing her mother as economically trapped in a life of erotic malaise, and depicting her socially conservative Republicanism as a denial of her innermost, repressed desires, *Roseanne* views lesbianism as a narrative solution to the erasure of women's economic and individual autonomy. With Bev as a lesbian, the series suggests, she can also simply be a woman.

Whereas *Roseanne's* interactions with gay characters emphasize her progressive outlook, Dan evinces discomfort with homosexuality in several episodes and thus appears to represent the program's conservative viewers needing enlightenment about their prejudices. Foremost, he frets over any incipient sign of D.J.'s effeminacy: "Two daughters isn't enough for you?" he demands of *Roseanne* when his son dresses as a witch for Halloween ("Trick or Treat"). When Nancy and Marla lean in to kiss under the holiday mistletoe, the camera cuts away to Dan jabbering nervously on the phone. He also asks Nancy and Marla, "Could you guys cool it with 'giving each other presents' in front of the kid?"—fearing that he will need to decode for his offspring this apparently queer euphemism—but Nancy responds she is simply referring to a sweater. Nancy later tells Dan, "At some point I think Marla and I could get pregnant

and have a baby.” He asks how they could accomplish this feat but requests that she impart this information “without getting too specific.” Nancy nonchalantly shrugs, “you just get some sperm,” but the staging of the scene—Dan is basting the Thanksgiving turkey as the discussion unfolds—implies that his willful ignorance merely protects him from what he already knows (“It’s No Place Like Home for the Holidays”). Like Dan, as *Roseanne* indicates, viewers at home might know more about homosexuality than they otherwise admit—including its core normativity.

Despite the visibility that Nancy, Leon, and Bev receive, their sex lives are implied rather than depicted, with any same-sex eroticism, even kisses, transpiring offscreen—in contrast to the series’ candid depictions of heterosexual eroticism. Because networks censored even saccharine depictions of same-sex affections in the 1990s, Roseanne herself must serve as the privileged site of homoerotic presence. Although viewers never see Nancy kiss Marla, Sharon (Mariel Hemingway) kisses Roseanne at a gay bar (“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”). On another occasion Roseanne dresses in drag and finds herself menaced by the belligerent patrons at a local bar, and Dan must rescue her from a fight with an aggressive boor. This man asks, “What’s it to you?” to which Dan declares, “He’s my husband” (“Trick or Treat”). Dan and Roseanne kiss while she remains in drag, so the series’ two onscreen homoerotic kisses involve its heterosexual protagonist. *Roseanne* revolutionized the structures of the family sitcom by integrating gay characters and plotlines into its story lines, and in undermining the very concept of heteronormativity through a television mom’s gender-bending, same-sex kissing, and transvestism, it further collapsed the prevailing invisibility of same-sex desire within the family sitcom—proving simultaneously the perversity of heterosexuality and the fundamental normativity of homosexuality, as much as possible within the protocols of network television and its ostensible family hour.

Children’s Queer Sexual Autonomy

While *Roseanne*, for the most part, candidly portrays the sexual development of the Conner children, traces of the cultural fantasy of the innocent child remain, thereby acknowledging its appeal to parents unready to discuss their youngsters’ budding understanding of eroticism. In this light, children’s sexuality, even their heterosexuality, often registers as queer, for it fractures the fantasy of innocence so many adults cherish. Confronted with evidence of Becky’s sexual activity, Dan turns to Roseanne for guidance, and as he lays his head in her lap, she tells him a fairy-tale allegory of a princess who, with her royal parents, decides “to live happily ever after in a totally sex-free world”; Dan claps and pleads, “Tell it again” (“A Bitter Pill to Swallow”). Furthermore, when working with child actors, many adults express their concern for the

children cast in provocative story lines, as evident in John Goodman's concern for Michael Fishman: "I was worried if we were going to warp his life because he was hanging out with these foul, vulgar people all day, and he's this little kid" ("John Goodman: A Candid Interview"). Despite Dan's desire not to learn of his children's sexuality, and despite Goodman's concern over exposing Fishman to crudity, *Roseanne* primarily showcases the Conner children as sexually aware. When Dan makes a double entendre about a pair in poker and Roseanne's breasts, Darlene responds, "You guys think we don't get your corny little sex jokes" ("Dear Mom and Dad"), thus highlighting the precocious knowledge of children who correctly interpret the sexual discussions surrounding them.

Even in the show's early episodes, Becky's and Darlene's sexual maturation receives detailed attention, primarily to question the necessity of parental intervention in matters of teen sexuality. The *mise-en-scène* of their shared bedroom features stuffed animals and a poster of shirtless men, a muddled statement of desires both infantile and pubescent. Sexual development sparks competition between the two, such as when Becky tells her sister: "Shut up, Darlene. You're just jealous because I'm dating, and you're flat" ("Dan's Birthday Bash"). Only eleven, Darlene experiences her first period in the episode "Nightmare on Oak Street," with this title alluding to the purported horror of female menstruation (as evident in Stephen King's *Carrie* and other such works that construe female sexuality as terrifying). While Darlene appreciates Roseanne's guidance in this episode, learning that she can remain a tomboy even as she matures into adolescence, more often *Roseanne* rewrites the sitcom tropes of benevolent parental authority, for quite simply, the Conner parents concede their inability to influence their children's decisions—sexual or otherwise. When Becky finds herself in trouble at school for "flipping the bird" in her class photograph, Roseanne explains to the school's principal: "Because no matter how much we try to control what our kids do, at some point they're just going to do what they're going to do. They're like people that way" ("Bird Is the Word"). In a similar moment Becky and Mark take Dan's motorcycle without permission. He is furious but does not punish her because, as he angrily explains, "You're just going to do whatever the hell you want anyway" ("Her Boyfriend's Back"). Such scenes reject the standard telos of many family sitcoms, in which pat moralizing solves children's problems and reasserts parental authority.

As much as *Roseanne* demolishes the myth of the "Father Knows Best" sitcom, the program does not simply replace paternal wisdom with maternal wisdom, concentrating instead on the necessity for children to seek their own understanding of their sexual and emotional maturation. Rarely at a loss for words, Roseanne finds herself flustered when discussing sex with her daughters, who dominate the conversation:

DARLENE: What you're trying to say is that we're far too young to go all the way.

BECKY: Well, both your body and your mind have to reach a certain level of maturity.

ROSEANNE: Yeah.

DARLENE: And you don't want to regret it later . . .

BECKY: And, hey, you have to love the guy . . .

ROSEANNE: Yeah, and you know, you would like to make sure . . .

DARLENE: That you respect him.

BECKY: Or it's meaningless. ("Like a Virgin")

Roseanne can only chime in approvingly to the lesson her daughters teach her. When Dan says "we can't just let this happen" in reaction to Becky's request for birth control, Roseanne responds, "Well, I don't want it to happen either, but, I mean, it is going to happen. I don't want our daughters getting birth control out of the men's room of the Chevron station like we used to" ("A Bitter Pill to Swallow"). Becky and Mark later marry despite Roseanne and Dan's misgivings; Dan wants to intervene, but Roseanne stops him. "That's your plan? We do nothing?" Dan demands, but Roseanne counters, "You do something stupid, we lose her" ("Terms of Estrangement, Part 2").

Just as Roseanne and Dan cannot control their daughters' dating decisions, Mark and David, their respective boyfriends and then husbands, cannot rewrite the tropes of female autonomy that their mother-in-law embodies. Roseanne and Dan are disappointed when Becky begins waitressing in a skimpy outfit at Bunz—a nod to the Hooters chain—and Dan chides Mark for allowing her to work there. Mark defends himself: "What do you mean, let her? I don't make my wife's decisions." He also tells Dan that he tried to forbid Becky from this job but that she refused to obey his wishes ("White Trash Christmas"). Darlene's control of David is virtually inviolate, as he laments to her: "You have all the power in this relationship and I have nothing" ("Pretty in Black"). Roseanne reminds Dan of Darlene's power over her boyfriend—"Have you seen the control she has over David? . . . David isn't even his real name. She just made that up" ("Everyone Comes to Jackie's")—with her lines alluding to the fact that David was first introduced as Kevin ("The Bowling Show"), with the program never explaining his name change. In sum, parental and masculine control of adolescent female sexuality is repeatedly shown to be a collective fantasy of the family unit, which the Conner women reject even during their early dating experiences. Indeed, when Dan recalls how he seduced Roseanne following her argument with her mother, she reveals to him, "I just set the whole thing up so you would be able to take advantage of me in my time of need." She adds, "Face it, Dan. I seduced you. And Darlene may very well have seduced David. . . . Darlene had sex because she wanted to have sex" ("Everyone Comes to Jackie's").

Within the Conners' blue-collar world, Becky's and Darlene's sexual autonomy registers as a necessary component in their quest to improve their financial prospects. Again, sexuality intersects with Reaganite economics, for Roseanne's concern over her daughters' boyfriends reflects her concern for their financial well-being. After Roseanne commandeers Darlene's home-economics class, Darlene tells her mother—in one of the few moments when she respects maternal authority—“Well, I just wanted to tell you that I learned something kinda important today. Your job is important, and it's tough, so I'm going to make a lot of money, or marry a rich guy, so I don't have to do any of it”; Roseanne ironically replies, “Ah, the student surpasses the teacher, Grasshopper” (“Home-Ec”). Notably, the series indicates that both Darlene and Becky will succeed in their vocational endeavors, and they will likely do so without their husbands' assistance. Dan and Roseanne are shocked and impressed when Darlene tells them that she has been offered a job paying \$30,000 annually but that she refused it to finish college; they worry that Darlene will become “one of them”—the rich people who scorn blue-collar workers (“The White Sheep of the Family”). In moving into a trailer park with Mark, Becky appears to have given up hope of upward financial mobility, yet the episode “Becky Howser, M.D.”—a titular nod to Neil Patrick Harris's starring role as a child doctor in *Doogie Howser, M.D.* (1989–93)—depicts her decision to return to college, with hopes of eventually becoming a doctor. Again, the prospect of financial success troubles the family—Mark worries that Becky will leave him, pointing out that few doctors are married to mechanics—yet his trepidation further underscores the fact that, for Darlene and Becky, their sexual autonomy correlates with their economic potential. They have found men whom they love, yet they do not tie themselves down to futures of financial duress.

As the youngest of the Conner children until his brother Jerry's birth, D.J. undertakes a journey from innocence to experience that highlights the potentially transgressive nature of sexuality to the family unit, for a darkly comic theme hints that his psychosexual development may be taking a pathological turn. Viewers learn that he tied squirrels together in a bizarre act of animal cruelty (“Do You Know Where Your Parents Are?”), and Becky and Darlene are jittery when they find his box of severed doll heads (“Good-bye Mr. Right”). Crystal tells Roseanne that D.J. frightens her son Lonnie (“The Courtship of Eddie, Dan's Father”), and Darlene calls him a “little perv” for spying on their neighbor Molly and threatens him with jail, “where peepers like you get their eyelids sewn shut so they can never peep again” (“Looking for Loans in All the Wrong Places”). Surmising that her brother has begun masturbating, Darlene states that D.J. hides himself in the bathroom for an hour at a time—“Either he's really, really good at it, or he's really, really bad at it”—but Roseanne fears that her son's psychosexual development could go awry, instructing

Darlene: “Well, I don’t want you to give him any grief about this, ’cause you could traumatize him, turn him into a serial killer” (“Homeward Bound”). As D.J. begins dating, it is apparent that he follows in his father’s footsteps and seeks independent girls unafraid to speak their minds—and who will, one assumes, prevent him from succumbing to any potential psychosis. Lisa, his date for his first school dance, calls him Doofus, whereas he refers to her by her name. Roseanne soon coaches Lisa on the proper way to manage a boyfriend, advising her protégée, “You don’t want to take all the fight out of your guy. You want him to still be able to bark at strangers” (“The Blaming of the Shrew”). Later, based on their mutual interest in movies and filmmaking, D.J. begins dating Heather (Heather Matarazzo), and the relationship progresses to the point that they contemplate consummating their affections. D.J. searches madly for condoms, but after he rifles through his parents’ bedroom, Heather tells him she has birth control in her backpack, following her mother’s advice (“Roseanne-Feld”). D.J. and Heather do not have sex on this occasion, but through the staging of this scene—D.J.’s confusion, Heather’s calm—it is clear that she will determine the pace of their burgeoning romance, and the episode never moralizes over their relative youth of approximately fourteen or fifteen years.

And while Becky, Darlene, and D.J. pursue heteroerotic desires, *Roseanne* hints strongly that the extended Conner clan already includes a gay child: Jackie and Fred’s son, Andy. Fred worries that Jackie dresses Andy like a girl, and in the tag to the episode “Maybe Baby,” the program jumps fifteen years into the future, when Andy, obviously played by a young woman, leads his/her school’s cheerleading squad.³⁰ Jackie later tells Roseanne that she enjoys her newfound freedom without Fred, including the pleasure of “put[ting] pretty clothes on Andy, and if he turns out gay, we don’t care because I’ll march in one of those parades with him,” as she coos over her son (“Husbands and Wives”). While recording a video diary for Jerry prior to his birth, Roseanne says that his cousin Andy is likely growing up to be a “little flamer,” but she adds that gay people are just like everyone else and considers the possibility that her unborn child could be gay, stating that there is nothing the child could be that they would not love (“Direct to Video”). Contemplating her unborn child’s sexual desires, Roseanne demolishes the myth of the innocent and asexual child, foregrounding instead the possibility that, as with Becky, Darlene, and D.J., children need to forge their own paths through their sexual development, rather than following the social codes of yesteryear or the patriarchal paradigms of sexuality that for too long foreclosed women’s and gay people’s erotic autonomy.

Sitcom Morality and Feminist Metatextuality

In filtering the standard protocols of family sitcoms through a lens of blue-collar feminism and queer sexuality, *Roseanne* eschews the facile morals that conclude many such programs and thus recodes the genre's prevailing normative structures. In a notable exception to this pattern during the series' first season, when Barr was still battling with creator Matt Williams for control of its story lines, Roseanne tells the children, after Dan comes in fourth place in a songwriting contest with four entrants, "We didn't really lose. The only people who lose are the people who don't try. At least we tried" ("Radio Days"). In another moment of such moralizing, Roseanne tells Becky, who is worried that she will receive a C in her biology class if she refuses to dissect a frog, that she will only be angry if she does something she knows is wrong ("The Monday thru Friday Show"). Such homiletic endings reinforce the structures of sitcom narratology that *Roseanne* otherwise rejects; more common is its flouting of the genre's didacticism. When Roseanne begins a diet, loses some weight, and finds that her pants fit her again, viewers might expect that she has learned a lesson in self-control, but she then decides that the winter cold prohibits her from walking the two-and-a-half miles to her job as a sign of commitment to her new healthy lifestyle ("I'm Hungry"). Roseanne, Dan, and Jackie react in horror when they think David is smoking marijuana, but they later steal from this stash and relive their youthful indiscretions. As they recover from their binge, David emphatically denies that the drugs were his: "It's really important what you guys think of me. And I'm not stupid enough to do drugs. Yeah, I tried it when I was younger, but I'm much too mature and smart now to do anything that stupid." The camera then pans from Dan to Jackie to Roseanne, who, while looking a bit worse for wear, also provoked the episode's outrageous humor, thereby overriding any pat moral against recreational drug use ("A Stash from the Past").³¹

Overtly mocking the simplistic morality and gender politics of sitcoms past, *Roseanne* simultaneously pays affectionate homage to its forebears. The episode "Call Waiting" depicts Barr assuming the lead roles in Marlo Thomas's *That Girl* (1966–71), Barbara Eden's *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–70), and Mary Tyler Moore's *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–77), thereby parodying their depictions of femininity in the 1960s and 1970s through her richly satiric performances. When Roseanne asks Dan what he would do if she had died in a tornado that struck Lanford, he replies, "Probably go out and look for Florence Henderson" ("Toto, We're Not in Kansas Anymore"), and Henderson guest-stars as an overprotective mother in a send-up of her *Brady Bunch* persona ("Suck Up or Shut Up"). *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–63) appears to haunt the program's collective subconscious: Jackie hums its theme song as she cooks breakfast for the children, and it plays

extradiegetically when she sends them off to school (“An Officer and a Gentleman”). Dan calls a family meeting to discuss Roseanne’s overtime hours, to which she deadpans, “Oh, god, this ain’t the Ward Cleaver speech” (“Workin’ Overtime”). In a proud moment of parenting, Dan says to Roseanne, “What can I say? I’m a model dad”; she responds by calling him “Ward” (“Fathers and Daughters”). While these examples cannot cover the vast range of *Roseanne*’s allusions to yesteryear’s sitcoms, they collectively pillory the genre’s constructions of the normative nuclear family and its exaggerated deference to patriarchal privilege, as well as contrasting these families’ middle-class comforts to the Conners’ straitened circumstances.

Roseanne concludes its run as the television sitcom equivalent of a *künstlerroman*, with the final shots capturing Roseanne writing the story that audiences have watched over the past nine years. Barr states, “The whole series is that she was writing a book” (“Season 9: Breaking the Sitcom Mold”). Viewers learn that Roseanne aspires to be a writer in the series’ third episode (“D-I-V-O-R-C-E”); for a birthday present to her, Dan refits the downstairs basement as a writing room (“Happy Birthday”), although viewers never see her pursuing this vocation, and the basement became a bedroom for the children as they matured. The final vision of *Roseanne* asks viewers to ponder the meaning of a woman who finally found a room of her own to write in and the seismic effects of her representations of social class and queer sexualities for blue-collar America and beyond. Contemplating her show and her feminist commitments, Barr proclaimed, “Television and truth are enemies,” and she expounded further that “any time any woman gets on TV and tells the truth about anything, that’s a big breakthrough, and I did it” (“Roseanne: Working Class Actress”). Speaking for the necessity of women’s economic and sexual autonomy, Barr turned the cute feminism of Marlo Thomas and Mary Tyler Moore into a roar, forever changing the ways in which women’s, gay men’s and lesbians’, and children’s sexualities are depicted onscreen.

And beyond the ways in which *Roseanne* represented in its narratives a woman’s struggle to survive economically challenging times, the production of the show testifies to Barr’s determination not to cede her vision to the Hollywood forces attempting to rewrite the character she created. As Metcalf remembered of her first days on set, “I knew it was [Barr’s] show because she held the reins on everything” (“Laurie Metcalf Interview: The Sister That Never Leaves”). Goranson likewise stated admiringly, “She knew what she wanted from the show, and she was ruthless about it” (“Interview with Lecy Goranson and Michael Fishman”). Recalling her guest-starring appearance as Roseanne’s cousin, Joan Collins observed that “Roseanne was definitely the boss and, except for Sandra Bernhard and a couple of the other actors, everyone was frankly terrified of her. Understandably. Three of the sycophantic sniggering writers had already been fired, and as Roseanne demanded slicker,

better dialogue, the remainder were on tenterhooks.³² Tabloid fodder for numerous years because of her behavior on set, perceived by many as imperious and autocratic, Barr endured endless criticism, yet the sexism inherent in such discussions was noted in *Penthouse*—hardly a citadel of feminist thought—in an article by Nanette Varian: “Never mind that Bill Cosby jettisoned a few longtime writers with nary a peep from the press. Or that *In the Heat of the Night* star Carroll O’Connor marked his return by announcing his intention to ‘get rid of everyone’ who defied his creative authority. When Roseanne Barr fires, it’s a federal offense.”³³ Film critic Peter Rainer asserted Barr’s determination to ensure that her program adhered to her vision: “She has the reputation of being very forthright. She’s unpredictable and tells it like it is. Many of the male stars like Brando and Nicholson have the same thing, but it’s very hard for a woman to get away with. Jessica Lange has a reputation for being difficult, but she’s a beauty.”³⁴ The story behind *Roseanne*’s production, then, is the story of Barr’s refusal to conform to Hollywood’s expectations for women—particularly for fat women intent on rewriting the industry’s normative scripts.

Yet it is difficult to imagine *Roseanne*’s success without Barr’s control. Matt Williams originally envisioned the show as a sitcom featuring three blue-collar women—a married woman with children, a divorced woman with a child, and a single woman—working in a factory in Indiana. The program was to be called *Life and Stuff*—with this title surviving as that of *Roseanne*’s pilot episode—and its general format is realized in the characters of Roseanne, Crystal, and Jackie and their employment at Wellman Plastics.³⁵ As Barr recalls, Matt Williams told her bluntly, “I just didn’t think people would like you as the main character,” as Roseanne defended the integrity of her vision: “Then I quit. I’m not gonna give away my character after it took my whole goddamn life to build it” (*ML* 4).³⁶ She further explained that Williams “didn’t get it that I wanted a totally *female-driven show*” (*ML* 5). Backstage fracas aside, what is perhaps most important to remember about these production scuffles is Williams’s concessions: “I lay no claim to her character. That is the character she developed in her stand-up routines,” and he also admitted, “What Roseanne brought to the mix that I didn’t was the strong feminist point of view.”³⁷ Without its strong feminist point of view, *Roseanne* would likely have resulted in a moralistic family sitcom similar to those of the past and of its present (e.g., *Family Matters* [1989–98] or *Home Improvement* [1991–99]), and as Barr describes, “They were eviscerating my show, goddammit, they were Osterizing it into the pastel purée that had been spread over the networks for too long now, the same unsatisfying, tasteless, colorless (forget odorless—it stunk) polenta of sitcoms that I couldn’t stomach” (*ML* 92). Rescuing her program from others who did not share her vision, Barr created a uniquely feminist, queer, and sex-positive vision of the American family, with all of its ostensible

perversities—from pornography to homosexuality, abortion to sexually active teens—exposed for Reagan Republicans and their children to see. Still, as much as *Roseanne* subverted the prevailing fantasies of the family sitcom, its long-standing tropes have proved strikingly resilient, a phenomenon evident in the popularity of the tween family sitcom subgenre in the 2000s and notably embodied in pop-princess everywoman Hannah Montana—to whom the next chapter turns.