

## *Would You Like to be Queen for a Day?: finding a working class voice in American television of the 1950s*

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The opening shot panned the audience sitting at tiered tables at the Moulin Rouge, a Hollywood night club. As the theme music, 'Hey Look Me Over', played the announcer welcomed viewers to the 'number one Cinderella show in America'. Finally, the camera settled on the host of the show, Jack Bailey. Pointing dramatically into the camera, he would shout, 'Would you like to be Queen for a Day?' Embedded in that infamous question were a number of assumptions about the nature of women's lives in the 1950s. Certainly, one assumption was that this was a frivolous show for and about frivolous and silly women. Nothing could be further from the truth.

*Queen for a Day*, which aired from 1955 to 1964, has been called 'the worst program in TV history'. When *Queen* made its television debut on 1 January 1955, *New York Times* critic Jack Gould asked, 'What has Sarnoff wrought?' Critics all over the country uniformly penned their disgust, and the result was that the show was watched by 13 million Americans every day and catapulted to number one in the ratings [1].

Modern cultural historians have shared the disdain of those contemporary critics in dismissing, trivializing, or ignoring the show. Susan Douglas underscores these attitudes by calling *Queen* 'a monument to the glories of female martyrdom and victimization' and referring to its female contestants as 'flagellants'. It is hardly surprising that a show associated both with a female audience and with feminine subject matter should be dismissed as tripe. Such comments not only disparage the women who appeared on the show, but their narratives of financial deprivation, physical and emotional loss, isolation and helplessness as well [2].

The premise of this show was simple, and rested on women competing with other women to see who had the most terrible life. This was actually one of the few sanctioned forms of competition between women in the 1950s. What other areas did women have to compete in the 1950s besides beauty pageants? Interestingly, *Queen* relied on the same signifiers of beauty pageants—the title, the crown, the robe—to honor its winners.

I would like to situate *Queen* at the locus of consumer culture, class, the domestic ideal, and female forms of expression in the post-World War II period. *Queen for a Day* is significant in so far as it is a repository of the voices of the women we rarely hear, women whose concerns were not reflected in the popular cultural forms of the 1950s. The contestants who populated *Queen* were primarily working class and lower middle class women, women who in some cases were barely living above a subsistence level. Stephanie Koontz has estimated that 25% Americans were poor in the 1950s. That is,

some 40–50 million people were trying to exist without government support programs [3]. Poor, working class women were hardly the idealized representations we have come to associate with the 1950s in America, and yet in *Queen* the concerns of working class women were front and center. What is particularly compelling is that in this show their problems were served up as entertainment for the middle class housewife watching at home.

During the postwar years, the primary site of entertainment transferred from the public space of theaters to the private space of the home, the traditional sphere of women. TV has always relied on what Steven Stark calls ‘female forms of expression, such as narratives and self disclosure’. Television’s strong suit has been going ‘up close and personal’ giving the viewer the ‘illusion of intimacy’. This technique has been used successfully in the past in shows as disparate as *Queen* and Edward R. Murrow’s *Person to Person*, and continues to be used today by entertainers like Oprah Winfrey and Barbara Walters. This promise of intimacy is compounded by the fact that women are the primary material consumers in society and TV’s principal audience in daytime [4].

In this article, I would like to discuss the feminist possibilities inscribed in the show. I believe that cultural texts that are created for a female audience and revolve around the concerns of women can offer themselves up to a feminist reading because there tends to be a kind of ‘female address’ implied in texts that focus on women’s lives. One way of exploring this is to examine the ways in which the show constructed a positive space for women and for female subjectivities. As Suzanne Walters has argued, ‘this highlighting of a female point of view renders the genre open to a feminist reading, and available to a female audience’. The process of spectator identification is guided by a female point-of view. The narratives of *Queen* focus on the minutia of women’s lives—family, relationships, work, friendships—and tend to express what Jackie Byars has called a ‘female voice’ [5].

The female narratives of *Queen* also constitute what John Fiske has called ‘a feminine counter-text’. As he argues, ‘women can use cultural commodities in ways that negate or evade the economic and gender power of the system that produces and distributes them’. While men clearly had the institutional power to control the production of the cultural text, they did not have the ideological power to control the form and content of the female narratives on *Queen*. While *Queen* reinforced the dominate gender ideologies of the 1950s, it also revealed its inconsistencies and ambivalence. The contestants on *Queen* problematized the model of traditional gender roles, where the masculine is linked with the public sphere of production and providing, and the feminine with the private sphere of leisure and consumption. In fact in *Queen* there is often an inversion of traditional gender roles. As Lynn Spigel has shown a popular theme of 1950s TV was the erosion of patriarchal authority. *Queen* clearly underscores this patriarchal impotence as female contestants were forced to reveal to a national TV audience their spouses’ inability to provide for their families [6].

Tania Modleski has theorized that watching television ‘fits into a general pattern of everyday life’, and must be understood in terms of ‘rhythms of reception’. From the beginning, the industry had to find ways to address viewers whose attention was not focused primarily on the program but on their household chores. One of the earliest concerns of network executives was to integrate television programming into the daily routine of the housewife just as radio had done earlier. Commercial television depended on the housewife as consumer, and thus she was the primary target of advertisers [7]. Another critic argued that TV was like ‘programmed music, a kind of visual Muzak, tuned to the rhythm of everyday life, erasing every particle of sales resistance from her

mind. Daytime TV is geared to the short attention span, the quick glimpse garnered between the dishes and the ironing' [8].

*Queen for a Day* functioned not only as a showcase for consumer goods, but set new standards of living and created new consumer desires. It masked actual class divisions by suggesting it was possible for everyone to live a middle class lifestyle. *Queen* clearly positioned women as consumers, and suggested that problems could be solved through the practice of consumption. As John Fiske says of game shows in general, 'they are a cultural product of consumer capitalism. They foreground commodities, they blur the distinctions between themselves and the commercials embedded in them, and the reward that they offer are those of the commodity system. In short, they relentlessly address and position the women as housewife and consumer' [9].

While the advertising of the period was aimed at the middle class, the representations on *Queen* were women of the working class. Roland Marchand argues that popular discourse of the 1950s tended to efface class differences and to emphasize the way that postwar prosperity had benefitted all Americans. This point-of-view was reflected in a 1959 Department of Labor report that concluded that a distinct 'working class' identity was disappearing.

The wage earner's way of life is well-nigh indistinguishable from that of his salaried co-citizens. Their homes, their cars, their babysitters, the style of [their] clothes ... the food they eat, [their] bank ... [their] days off, the education of their children, their church all of these are alike and are becoming more identical [10].

*Queen* revolved around both the inequities of the class system and the real differences between the classes. Mirra Komarovsky's *Blue Collar Marriage*, one of the few major analyses of the working class family in the 1950s, underscores the deprivation and the hardship of the working class:

Daily life is a constant struggle to meet the bills for rent, groceries, a pair of shoes, a winter coat, the TV set and the washing machine. The oppressive, almost palpable burden of bills seldom lifts [11].

In fact, working class and racial and ethnic women were a staple of 1950s television. *Queen for a Day* was actually very symptomatic of television the time. I would like to give this discussion some historical specificity by locating it within the other discourses available to women on TV in the 1950s. During the 1950s, TV became 'an American habit and a virtual necessity' Only 9% of American families had television sets in 1950, but by 1959 86% had TVs and they were watching them 5 hours a day. Early TV took its form from radio. On the radio, networks simply sold time to sponsors, who would hire an agency to create a show. *Queen* was in many ways a kind of hybrid of the most dominant forms of the decade: domestic comedies, game shows and soap operas [12].

Despite our collective memory of 1950s television as being populated by happy housewives in frilly aprons, pearls and heels, the women of the domestic comedies of the era were a diverse bunch, who defy easy categorization. One of the earliest situation comedies, *The Goldbergs* (1949–1963), featured a matronly, working class, Jewish housewife dispensing advice out of her kitchen window in the Bronx. Mama, of *I Remember Mama* (1949–1956), was a Scandinavian immigrant trying to come to terms with her Americanized daughter, Dagmar. Although it featured some of the most stereotypical, offensive representations of African-American women, *Amos 'n Andy* (1950–1953) was populated by a number of female characters including Sapphire, Kingfish's nagging wife, and the nosey Gribble sisters. It was eventually taken off the

air due to the protests of the NAACP. The 1950s also saw the first television show to be built around an African American female character, *Beulah* (1950–1953). Beulah was a maid, who managed to solve all the problems of the white family for whom she worked. It would be remade in the 1960s as *Hazel* starring Shirley Booth. It contained a number of stereotypes, including Beulah as the nurturing mammy, Butterfly McQueen as the best friend, Oriole, essentially reprising her role as Prissy in *Gone with the Wind*, and the ‘shiftless’ boyfriend, Bill Jackson, the hapless owner of ‘Bill’s Fix-it Shop’. Nonetheless, the role of Beulah was played by three of the greatest African-American actresses of the era, Ethel Waters (1950–1951), Hattie McDaniel (1951), and Louise Beavers (1952–1953), and was a portrait of dignity and compassion. At a time when much of America was segregated, these shows placed the subject of race before a mass audience [13].

One of the most enduring representations of the decade were the ditzy madcap heroines, including Gracie Allen on *Burns and Allen* (1950–1958), Gale Storm as Margie Albright on *My Little Margie* (1952–1955), Joan Davis as Joan Stevenson *I Married Joan* (1952–1955), and of course Lucille Ball as Lucy Ricardo on *I Love Lucy* (1951–1957). Although they all adhered to traditional gender roles, they also tended to subvert those very roles, and revealed the tedium of the housewife’s day. These protagonists defied their ‘place’ and spent their time trying to figure out ways to undermine their husband’s or father’s authority. While Margaret Anderson on *Father Knows Best* (1954–1962), Donna Stone of *The Donna Reed Show* (1953–1963), June Cleaver of *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–1963), Harriet Nelson of *Ozzie and Harriet* (1952–1966) come the closest to conforming to our notions of middle class respectability, they were hardly the only representations of women on television.

Single women held jobs such as Eve Arden as Connie Brooks on *Our Miss Brooks* (1952–1956), who brought her mordant wit to her role as a schoolteacher. Ann Southern was a sharp tongued and competent secretary, Susie McNamara, on *Private Secretary* (1952–1957), and later played the assistant manager of a hotel on *The Ann Southern Show* (1958–1961). Gale Storm was the social director for a cruise ship on *Oh Susanna* (1956–1960). Finally, there were as many representations of working class women than ever before. Marjorie Reynolds played the long suffering wife, Peg, of the bumbling Chester Riley on *Life of Riley* (1953–1958), Kathy Nolan played Kate McCoy, a farm wife with an illiterate husband on *The Real McCoys* (1957–1962), and of course, Audrey Meadows created one of the most memorable working class women on television as Alice Kramden on *The Honeymooners* (1955–1956). Alice was the voice of reason in contrast to her volatile, bus-driver husband, Ralph. Her only pleasure seemed to be her neighbor, Trixie Norton. The Kramden apartment, arguably the most depressing set on television, lacked a phone or a television. In fact, Alice would have been a perfect contestant for *Queen for a Day*, as would women like Peg Riley and Kate McCoy. These women were married to men who hardly conformed to the ideal of a male breadwinner. Their labor was unskilled, their employment sporadic and marginal. Their wives might have looked at *Queen* as a way for them to get the consumer goods that their husbands could not.

The female narratives of *Queen for a Day* conform most closely to the plots of the soap opera genre. Soap operas were originally created as vehicles to sell soap products on the radio. The mother of the genre was Irma Philips, who was hired by Procter and Gamble in 1930 to create a 15-minute serial called *Painted Dreams*. In this early form, the sales pitch was woven into the show. By the mid-1930s, soap operas were a radio staple with shows like *The Romance of Helen Trent*, *Mary Noble*, *Our Gal Sunday*, and

*The Guiding Light*. By 1939, Proctor and Gamble was sponsoring 22 shows, and by 1940 there were 64 on the air [14].

Soap operas first came to television in 1950 and continued to last only 15 minutes. Many of Irma Philips's radio shows were adapted to television, including *The Guiding Light* (1952–), *The Brighter Day* (1954–1962), and *The Edge of Night* (1956–1984). The dearth of action in these slow-moving, emotionally involving narratives allowed housewives to continue to incorporate them into their daily routines.

Several observations that Mary Ellen Brown makes about soap operas and women's resistive pleasure can be extrapolated to *Queen*. As she notes, although the purpose of the soaps was to create female consumers or to create the desire for consumer goods, they were 'less about buying products, and more about people's relationships'. Brown argues that the pleasure women get from soap operas comes 'from an understanding that own's ideological position is problememantic in our culture ... Fans get pleasure from ... the discomfort they feel when the contradiction of their social position are momentarily brought to the surface by the narrative' [15]. The female narratives of *Queen* revealed the shortcomings of the traditional gender ideologies of the 1950s in underscoring the inability of both men and women to conform to their 'place' or the inability of men to provide for their families.

*Queen for a Day* was considered a game show. Like soap operas, game shows had been a staple of radio. By 1939 game shows made up approximately 25% of the sponsored programs on radio. After 1945, more shows began focusing on the housewife, such as *Sisters of the Skillet*, *Ladies Be Seated*, *Bride and Groom*, *Second Honeymoon*, and *Queen for a Day*, which made its debut on radio in 1945. One popular show, *Strike It Rich*, that originated on radio and moved to television, was much like the premise of *Queen* in that it featured people phoning in their sob stories, and viewers would respond [16].

John Fiske has explored the appeal of game shows to female fans. He concentrates on three 'semiotic discourses' common in the genre: consumerism, the family, and romance. All three features are present in the narratives of *Queen*. Fiske argues that game shows offer women an arena where female skill and knowledge are valued, and 'liberates women from their economic constraints, and in doing so liberates them from their husband's economic power' [17]. *Queen* allowed its contestants a venue to take control of tenuous family finances.

Much has been written about the era of the big money quiz shows, such as *The \$64,000 Question* and *Twenty-One*, and the resultant scandals. Yet a trend perhaps more common than those where contestants displayed their encyclopedic knowledge, were shows where contestants made complete fools of themselves. Many game shows turned on the exploitation of their contestants. People were willing to be the brunt of ill treatment on shows like *People Are Funny*, *Who Do You Trust*, *Beat the Clock*, *Truth or Consequences*, *You Bet Your Life* and *Strike It Rich*. Certainly, *Queen* was also based to some extent on the 'debasing of its contestants and reducing them to objects of pity [18].'

*Queen for A Day* originally ran on radio from 1945 to 1955. It then made the transition to television, where it ruled the airwaves until 1964. *Queen* began airing on television as a 30-minute show, but was expanded to 45 minutes after about 6 months. By one estimate, NBC earned about 9 million dollars annually from *Queen*. Sponsors paid \$4000 for a 1-minute commercial, which were done live throughout the broadcast. Revenue did not only come from advertisers, it also came from companies that gave free merchandise in return for plugs. As the first producer, Howard Blake recalled,

And so it came to pass that the more gifts we gave the Queen, the more money we made. We *loaded* the queen with gifts—at the rate of one million dollars a year. Eventually, what with the regular commercials and gift plugs, only about 15 of the 45 minutes were left for the actual show ... The other 30 minutes were nothing but commercials and plugs [19].

In many ways *Queen* was just a giant TV commercial masquerading as a television show.

The phenomenal success was due in large measure to its host, the unctuous Jack Bailey, the very personification of a snake oil salesman. He had perfected his craft through years of work as a carnival barker, an actor in stock, a department store salesman and finally as a radio announcer. In 1945, he became the host of the radio version of *Queen for a Day*. *TV Guide* called him ‘the number one mesmerizer of middle-aged females and the most relentless dispenser of free washing machines’ [20].

The heart of the show was the contestant’s interviews and the selection of the Queen. Before each show, potential contestants were chosen from the studio audience. Women who wanted to compete were given ‘wish cards’ to fill out. Staff members narrowed finalists down to a list of 25. These 25 were then called on stage just a few minutes before air time, and interviewed for a few seconds by Jack Bailey. Bailey would then choose the five with the ‘best’ stories to appear on the show. Each contestant had to sign a release form swearing that if her hardship had been falsified she would have to forfeit her winnings [21].

The format was simple. The five finalists would tell their sad stories over the air. Then the audience would choose the Queen via applause registered by the ‘applause-o-meter’. A Queen would thus be selected, a sable-collared, red, velvet robe would be placed on her shoulders, a jeweled crown lowered onto her head, and Bailey would roar, ‘I now pronounce you Queen for a Day!’ Then a parade of beautiful women wearing short, sabled trimmed outfits, looking suspiciously like Santa’s helpers, would trot out caressing the gifts to be presented to that day’s Queen, while an off-camera announcer extolled the virtues of each prize.

The losers, no matter how desperate their needs, had to settle for a small consolation prize, like a radio, an electric skillet, a toaster, or a dozen pair of nylons. As the former producer remembered, ‘Sometimes they would burst into tears, but we never let the camera see that. Once the Queen was elected, the losers were deliberately ignored’. Occasionally viewers would call in after a show and offer help to some of the losing contestants. In fact, Bailey often opened a show by commenting on the generosity of a viewer who had called in with help for a former contestant. Even sponsors were moved occasionally to donate desired products. Jeanne Cagney, the fashion commentator, said of the losers, ‘I often think of the runners-up and hope that maybe it helps them just to come on the show to tell someone about their problems’ [22].

I would now like to focus on the female narratives of *Queen for a Day*. Whereas most spectators at home were leisured middle class housewives, the contestants were mostly lower middle class and working class women. That is, their fathers or husbands were engaged in blue collar work, while single women were unemployed or employed in unskilled work. Contestants were also characterized by a lack of higher education, often the lack of a high school diploma. In fact, many wishes often centered on the desire for help to get a diploma, continue education, or provide educational opportunities for children. Some of these women were barely living above a subsistence level. Their narratives of deprivation reveal the harsh reality of life for millions of people and the

particular burdens faces by working class women. Komarovsky refers to the 'impoverishment of life' faced by working class women, a life characterized by the lack of both emotional and financial support [23].

Throughout the year a number of predictable patterns and themes of the female narratives would emerge. They include women's role in the changing family economy, consumption as solution, and the glorification of altruism and selflessness. The precarious position of women in the family economy of the 1950s is underscored in the female narratives of *Queen*. Contestants' wishes often focused on their husbands' inability to provide a living wage due to the death, unemployment or disability of a spouse. Thus their wives were forced to mediate between their families and the economy. Komarovsky found two contradictory images inherent in the working class marriages she studied.

On the one hand, the working classes are allegedly more patriarchal than the middle class, being the last remaining stronghold of the tradition of male dominance. On the other hand, another stereotype portrays the low status family as matriarchy ... by default due to the husband's poor economic performance and irresponsibility.

Economic deprivation and financial anxiety put a great deal of strain on working class marriages [24].

Ironically, the first question Bailey usually put to a contestant was 'What does your husband do?' This was a particularly telling question as often their husbands did not **do** anything, precisely the reason the women were forced to go on the show. One guest host, screen actor Adolphe Menjou, began one of his interviews with the pro forma question, and the contestant replied, 'He died in an automobile accident 4 months ago'. Menjou persisted, 'Well what kind of work *did* he do?' [25].

Although financially disempowered, these women were still being constructed by the domestic ideal, yet few of the *Queen* contestants were able to derive any form of identity or status from their husbands' jobs. A frequent wish was for 'power tools' for disabled or unemployed husbands in the hope that they could create their own work. A contestant might also ask for a washer/dryer for herself so that she could take in laundry to support her family or to ease the burden of an unemployed spouse. Other women ran boarding houses. One contestant in a 1956 show, whose husband was an unemployed truck driver, was barely able to tell her story through her tears. The couple was about to be evicted from the trailer they shared with their four children and her parents. 'Oh boy', Bailey sighed in sympathy, and the 'applause-o-meter' was off the charts for the pathetic contestant.

Frequently, *Queen* contestants were widows and single mothers and their wishes highlight their lack of options. In 1956, a homeless widow with two children came on the show 'looking for switchboard work' and 'advice on how to be a good mother'. Another single, working mom wanted a bicycle for a son so that he could help support the family with a paper route. A single, pregnant woman came on asking for baby supplies and a job to help support her baby. One woman asked for new front teeth. She too was an unmarried women with a 10-month old baby. 'If I had my teeth fixed, maybe I could get a husband to take care of my kid.' Another woman, who never made it to the air, asked for \$100 so that she could get a divorce: 'My husband attempted rape on my 6 year old daughter, then left with our money and the car'. The producer deemed this wish even too horrific for daytime. One victim of domestic violence who had been paralyzed on her right side from a head injury inflicted by her husband asked

for a typewriter or a recorder because she wanted to write [26]. These were women in severe crisis, women with real economic need, yet except for the wife of the unemployed truck driver, not one of the women just mentioned were deemed 'pathetic' enough to win the coveted crown. Lacking any kind of institutional or structural support, *Queen* was one of the only available avenues of help. Inherent in these narratives, however, is the recognition that sometimes women needed to work for wages. In fact, Bailey often did theme shows that included certain professions as with the special episode for cosmetologists or women in the dairy industry.

Clearly, the Queen was not always the neediest or most deserving. As a former producer remembered,

A candidate had to want something we could plug—a stove, a carpet, a plane trip, an artificial leg, a year's supply of baby food. And the reason she needed whatever it was had to make a good story. Some of the women were ugly, some incoherent. They had to be dumped, deserving or not ... We had only one aim—to pick the woman who would provide the best entertainment [27].

In fact, frequent wishes for *Queen* contestants included the search for biological parents and siblings, or the need for medical care. These wishes were never granted as they lacked the means to tie the fulfillment of the wish to a product.

The show featured a daily fashion segment hosted by Jeanne Cagney, the sister of actor James Cagney. The prizes won by the Queen were substantial. Aside from the granting of the wish, Queens regularly won designer wardrobes, household appliances, furniture, trips, sterling silver, china, make-up. Yet the message was clear—the right products could 'fix' things. In many instances, the prizes clearly were not enough to 'fix' anything. Sometimes this bordered on the macabre. In one show a contestant asked for 'celotex sheets and a carpenter'. Her husband, who had been dying of a brain tumor, had committed suicide in their bed with a rifle. The bullets pierced the ceiling and wall of the bedroom. She wanted new sheets and the walls repaired. One woman wanted a large kitchen table, so her family would not have to eat in shifts. Another's husband and child suffered from severe asthma and couldn't breathe without the aid of a vaporizer. *Queen* seemed to suggest that there was no problem, no loss that could not be fixed by the right product [28].

As George Lipsitz has pointed out, television is both an advertising mechanism and the 'primary discursive medium of our culture. It irreparably inscribes consumer desire into the fabric of entertainment'. *Queen* clearly helped to create that trend. The seamless narrative of *Queen*—the fact that it was not interrupted by commercials—'managed to reduce complex ideas, images to a melange of distraction and trivialization' [29].

*Queen for a Day* offers a rare glimpse into the lives of women of color as well. They were routinely featured as contestants, and while not to the extent that their white counterparts were, their stories were interchangeable. Women of color provided a venue for Jack Bailey's ignorance and racism. A 1956 show featured a Pima woman from the Gila River Reservation in Arizona. She too was asked about her husband, a Navajo. 'Is he an officer, a chief, or a medicine man?' Bailey asked facetiously. Clearly the marriage of a Pima to a Navajo represented a unique kind of 'mixed marriage' for Bailey, who continued by asking her what language her children spoke. She had been washing her clothes outside by hand, but her wish for a washer and dryer was not granted.

Another Native American contestant, Kay Bennett, a Navajo woman from Gallup,



New Mexico, also underscored the rural and often primitive nature of the lives of Native American women in the 1950s. Her wish was for her 85-year-old grandmother, who had raised 12 children and cooked over an open fire all of her life. Kay wanted her to have the experience of cooking on a modern stove before her life was over. Although Kay was not selected as Queen, the show's sponsors decided to give her the stove anyway, and threw in a set of cookware and an electric coffee percolator because Bennett was such a popular contestant. Her appearance clearly generated a great deal of excitement from viewers. Jack Bailey said that in the 8 years of doing the show it was the first time he had received calls and letters concerning one of the contestants. Bennett, whose performance name was 'White Feather', continued to receive fan mail from her appearance and was even asked to enter the Miss Indian America pageant [30].

In 1957 a Korean woman, who had been displaced by the Korean War and was living in Hawaii, was asked by Bailey if the language was the same in both places. If a contestant had a clear ethnicity, Bailey would always mention it, referring, for example, to one contestant throughout the show as 'the little Polish woman', or the 'Oriental' woman, or asking the Mexican woman if she was 'Spanish or Portugese'. Bailey was patronizing and paternalistic, as in the case of the African-American woman who asked for a wedding dress for her daughter. 'You've been a fine girl', Bailey said as he patted the head of the grown woman. Aside from Bailey's ignorance about race, however, the wishes, hopes, dreams, and problems of racial-ethnic women look very much like those of their white counterparts. Ethnic minority women came into living rooms across the country not as stereotypes, but as real women with real families, problems and concerns. No longer objects of derision and humor as represented on sitcoms, *Queen* put a face on race.

By far the most important theme of the narratives of *Queen* was the importance of altruism and selflessness. The sure-fire way to win was to ask for something for someone else. The winners of *Queen* often served as tropes of selflessness. Never mind that by appearing noble and selfless by asking for something for someone else the winner would get all the additional loot. The message was clear, however: women were expected to put the needs of others above their own interests. Bailey himself commented on this trend:

It's not so much the wish as the why of the wish. Many women put on their cards that they'd like an iron to make their work lighter. Who wouldn't—but the woman who wants an iron so she can take in ironing to help the family finances, that's a different story [31].

In 1963 a hairdresser asked for hairdressing equipment for a TB ward in a local hospital so that she could do hair pro bono. In 1960 a housewife wanted a TV for her neighbor, a single, working mom whose husband had abandoned her. A Mexican-American fourth-grade teacher in an inner city school in LA won supplies for the school—clothes, food, books, games. A 1962 show featured competing altruists. One woman who was the sole support of her family because of her husband's disability asked for stools for her fellow egg-packers to sit on so they would no longer have to sit on crates. She lost to a woman who asked for 50 Mu-Mus for her retarded daughter's school, so that they could have a big luau. 'A fine, unselfish person', beamed a paternal Bailey. As Susan Douglas says of the show, 'there was nothing more glorious or elevating in a woman than selflessness. She asked nothing for herself, but put everyone's needs above her own' [32]. While this is true, *Queen* contestants were well rewarded for their altruism.

Why were women so willing to become public spectacles and allow this sleazy man to exploit their lives and concerns? The key may lie in working class women's desire for consumer goods in postwar America. Mica Nava sees this desire as 'a form of defiance, a refusal to remain marginalized in class terms'. Being on the show provided the 'promise' of a solution, a way to get material goods that were routinely denied them by the culture and the social system. Desire for consumer goods was fairly universal among the couples studied by Mirra Komarovsky. One young wife underscored the wishes of many working class women: 'My sister has it good ... A great big refrigerator, nice house, two irons, a regular and a steam iron, three radios, a beautiful TV set. She's got everything you could want' [33]. Thus major appliances become a route to happiness and status, and *Queen for a Day* held the key.

With a wave of Jack Bailey's magic wand, the accouterments of the middle class home would confer privilege and status of the middle class on working class women and a form of instant upward mobility. Financial deprivation, a lack of real options, and the absence of institutional support for women without skills or education gave working class women a real reason for wanting to be Queen. Since TV had helped to create this desire, then TV would be part of the solution. The show provided these women legitimate access to the female version of the American dream.

What about the women watching at home? Why did *Queen* become such a part of the housewife's day? Certainly no text has a fixed meaning for spectators, yet there might be any number of reasons for the show's longevity and popularity. As one contemporary critic of the show asked, 'If it weren't for the real tedium of the so-called average housewife's, would she willingly endure the tedium of daytime TV? ... or put up with the suave man at the mike who can hardly veil his own contempt for those women making such a public spectacle of themselves [34]'. Some have suggested the pleasure of watching *Queen* represented a kind of hierarchy of suffering for viewers. That is, women viewers were comforted by their own sense of material superiority. As *Queen*'s producer, Howard Blake, said of its viewers, 'The TV audience cried their eyes out, morbidly delighted to find there were people even worse off than they were'. There is also something voyeuristic about the pleasure derived from watching women worse off than they were. This underscores the appeal of tabloid television, which as Susan Walters says, 'draws on the discourses of social reality to win over a female audience [35]'.

The newness of the médium also played a part in the show's appeal. As Michael Lauletta said of his family first television set,

The best thing about the General Electric was that it never showed a bad program. Whether it was Jackie Gleason in the role of Loudmouth Bratton, or a housewife admitting to the world that her husband was an alcoholic dwarf who'd just run off with her sister and the new dishwasher on *Queen*, every program was sheer entertainment [36].

There had never been anything like this before and viewers were totally engaged in the narratives of the contestants.

There is no denying that the Cinderella myth was reinforced by *Queen for a Day*. Perhaps women derived pleasure not from seeing someone worse off than themselves, but in seeing someone's pain assuaged. The show allowed closure, a resolution, a pat ending framed by gifts from the Spiegel Catalogue. It allowed women to see that although not everyone was 'making it', the deserving could be rewarded and everyone could share in the American dream. *Queen for a Day* certainly challenged notions of

postwar prosperity and the domestic ideal for all women, and provided what Mary Ellen Brown calls 'a point of resistance where women [could] see themselves as oppositional to a cultural norm that oppresses them'. In that sense *Queen* might be viewed as a form of consciousness raising, allowing oppressed women to see other oppressed women, and thus realize that these contestants' problems were not caused by personal weakness, but were structural in nature [37].

The show, which switched over to ABC in 1960, was finally canceled in 1964. Since its inception on radio, it had crowned some 5000 queens, and given away a record \$23,000,000 in prizes. *Look* magazine argued that 'corn, cash and human misery' had been the keys to the show's success. As it went off the air, Bailey was asked about the show's staying power: 'I keep things homey, and let the audience run the show. People feel like they're part of the family' [38].

While working on this article, I received a strange call from a woman who had been surfing the web for information about *Queen for a Day*. Somehow, that search yielded my name. She was trying to find out how to find a specific episode of the program. It seems her best friend's mother had been a contestant when she was pregnant with the friend. She had come on the show asking for baby supplies and a layette and was crowned Queen. The mother died shortly after giving birth to her daughter, and so the daughter had never seen her mother. Finding this episode would provide the daughter with a chance to finally see what her mother was like. Unfortunately, very few of the shows have been preserved, so I could offer the woman little hope of finding it. It would seem that in some cases *Queen for a Day* still held the key to granting women's wishes. That call served as a poignant reminder that this show really meant something not only to the women who appeared on it, but to its viewers as well. *Queen for a Day* was a great deal more than a catalogue of human misery. In many ways it was a lifeline for working class women.

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## NOTES

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- [2] Susan Douglas, *Where the Boys Are: growing up female with the mass media* (New York, 1994), pp. 32, 36.
- [3] Stephanie Koontz, *The Way We Never Were: American families and the nostalgia trap* (New York, 1992), p. 29.
- [4] Steven Stark, *Glued to the Set: 60 television shows and events that made us who we are today* (New York, 1997), p. 31.
- [5] Many of these questions guided by Suzanne Danuta Walters, *Material Girls: making sense of feminist cultural theory* (Berkeley, 1995), pp. 79, 82. Jackie Byars, cited by Walters, p. 83.
- [6] John Fiske, Women and quiz shows: consumerism, patriarchy and resisting pleasures, in Mary Ellen Brown (ed.), *Television and Women's Culture: the politics of the popular* (London, 1990), pp. 134, 141; Walters, p. 84; Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: television and the family ideal in postwar America* (Chicago, 1992), pp. 62–63.
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- [9] Fiske, Women and quiz shows, p. 135.
- [10] Roland Marchand, Visions of classlessness: quests for dominion in American popular culture 1945–1960, in Robert H. Bremer and Gary Reichard (eds), *Reshaping America: society and*

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- [11] Komarovsky, *Blue Collar Marriage*, p. 288.
- [12] Stark, *Glued to the Set*, pp. 3, 80.
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- [14] Mary Ellen Brown, *Soap Opera and Women's Talk: the pleasure of resistance* (Thousand Oaks, CA, 1994), pp. 44–45.
- [15] *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.
- [16] Thomas DeLong, *Quiz Shows: America's infatuation with game shows* (Westport, CT, 1991), pp. 89, 103, 150–151.
- [17] Fiske, Women and quiz shows, pp. 135–136.
- [18] For a discussion of quiz show scandals, see Kent Anderson, *Television Fraud: the history and implications of the quiz show scandals* (Westport, CT, 1978).
- [19] Blake, The worst program, p. 97. My discussion of *Queen for a Day* is based on viewing all the existing episodes of the program that are available from the Museum of Television and Broadcasting in New York, some 20 in all.
- [20] Cited by Maxine Fabe, *TV Game Shows* (New York, 1979).
- [21] Blake, The worst program, pp. 97–98.
- [22] *Ibid.*, p. 98. Cited by DeLong, p. 103.
- [23] Komarovsky, *Blue Collar Marriage*, p. 155.
- [24] *Ibid.*, pp. 222–223.
- [25] Blake, The worst program, p. 98.
- [26] *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- [27] *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- [28] *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- [29] George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: collective memory and American popular culture* (Minneapolis, 1990); p. 64.
- [30] No more cooking on open reservation fires, *McKinley County Warrior*, 15 April 1954, pp. 1, 4. With thanks to Maureen E. Reed for sharing this story with me. For further information about Kay Bennett, see her autobiography, *Kaibah: recollections of a Navajo girlhood* (Los Angeles, 1964).
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- [32] Douglas, *Where the Boys Are*, p. 33.
- [33] Mica Nava, *Changing Cultures: feminism, youth and consumerism* (London, 1992), p. 193; Komarovsky, p. 286.
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- [36] Michael Lauletta, Our first TV set, in Maxine Fabe (ed.), *TV Book: the ultimate television book* (New York, 1977), pp. 16–17.
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