



When the Stars Come Out: Jodie Foster's Queer Families and the Celebrity Private Sphere

Claire Bond Potter

Am I your passion your promise your end?
I say I am, yes I am
Your passion your promise your end, yes I am

—Melissa Etheridge¹

When Jodie Foster came out at the 2013 Golden Globes, her revelation (such as it was) was greeted with empathy, cynicism, and confusion. What was she saying? Did she actually come out if she didn't say the word "lesbian?" This should prompt the question—What does it mean for a celebrity to come out in the 21st century? Most of them don't, even as the larger culture has become dramatically more knowledgeable about and supportive of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (GLBTQ) people. Does a celebrity coming out still matter?

Following the 1997 "Puppy Episode" in which her daughter Ellen announced she was a lesbian, GLBTQ activist Betty DeGeneres told fans that: "Coming out is a gift." But what kind of a gift? And to whom was it given? Like Ellen, some celebrities have come out not just to relieve anxiety about the dissonance between their private and public lives, but also because they have come to believe that they should use their influence on behalf of social justice. The GLBTQ movement

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that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s enrolled the support of prominent GLBTQ people, many of whom urged others still in the closet that they could both serve as role models and also demonstrate how many influential and accomplished queers there were. Celebrity outings were part of a long transformation from radical and highly sexualized street activism to the promotion of “homonormativity,” a 21st-century civil rights agenda that sought inclusion in, rather than transformation of, the public sphere. In particular, homonormativity emphasized overcoming barriers to family formation, through domestic partnership, adoption, child rearing, and ultimately, gay marriage.²

When Ellen DeGeneres came out on her sitcom, “Ellen,” in 1997, this political work had failed to produce tangible political change, and some of the achievements of gay liberation had become more fragile. This made “The Puppy Episode”—and the many social fears that Ellen’s character articulated as she searched for love—particularly significant. During the Clinton administration, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” had replaced a ban on gays in the military; the U.S. Supreme Court had upheld criminal sodomy laws in *Bowers v. Hardwick*,³ and the president had signed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), making federal recognition of gay and lesbian marriages illegal.⁴ Simultaneously, by the 1990s, partly because the legislative environment was unwelcoming, the AIDS activist organization ACT UP (and successors like Queer Nation) had made media strategies crucial to advancing a queer policy agenda.

DeGeneres’s coming out was historic in its scope, suggesting a new political role for celebrities who were willing to go public with a private sexual identity.⁵ Likewise, in a political atmosphere in which conservatives articulated GLBTQ citizens as a threat to family, mobilizing supportive families on behalf of a queer agenda opened a second front in the fight for rights. Parents and siblings could exercise heterosexual privilege on behalf of a gay rights agenda, but, more radically, they could also speak firsthand about the family as a homophobic institution in need of reform. Following the lead of activist Jeanne Manford, who had founded Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) in 1972, prominent parents of queers, significant and insignificant, began to offer themselves as experts to homophobic parents in need of support, education, and correction. Betty DeGeneres, for example, experienced “relief” when Ellen came out, not only because she “too would be able to come out of the closet,” but because she would be able to use her bully pulpit as a celebrity mother to speak out about homophobia.⁶

Coming out as a kind of public gift giving—to one’s self, family, and the larger GLBTQ community—structured the expectations around Jodie Foster’s acceptance speech for the Cecil B. DeMille Lifetime Achievement Award at the

Golden Globes in 2013. And yet, Foster's speech was oblique. She never said the words "lesbian" or "gay"; she has not offered herself up for fundraisers nor has she suggested she wants to be a role model, an activist, or even a passive object for hope, *à la* Dan Savage: "It gets better! I was a lonely, desperate lesbian and now I'm the most powerful woman in Hollywood!" In fact, as the speech progressed, Foster went way off the coming out script. She seemed to be saying that, despite not being public about her sexual identity, she has been pretty happy. What could this have meant?

Let's go to the videotape.

Walking from a front row table to the stage required that Alicia Christian "Jodie" Foster travel between one family—her private household and intimate circle—and another group of intimates: the vast numbers of people whose names are scrolling down the screen as you are rushing out of the theater. Upon reaching the podium, she identified the industry insiders who filled the room as her other "family, of sorts," made up of

Fathers mostly. Executives, producers, the directors, my fellow actors out there, we've giggled through love scenes, we've punched and cried and spit and vomited and blown snot all over one another—and those are just the costars I liked. But, you know, more than anyone else, I share my most special memories with members of the crew. Blood-shaking friendships, brothers and sisters. We made movies together, and you can't get more intimate than that.⁷

Let's do a quick, queer reading of these opening remarks. Articulating fellow artists as "family" with whom one recreates life in all its intimacies is well within the long tradition of theater, television, and film. In the modern era, child stars in television shows and movies often confess that, for the duration of a shoot or a series, their on-screen parents and siblings are at least as real to them as their biological families. "Family" is also camp code for queer. An affirmative answer to the question "Is she (or he) family?" makes queer people visible to each other in environments where being out would be unwise or dangerous. Hence, Foster emphasizes both the "realness" of these relationships—shared bodily fluids, physical contact, and emotions—and the fictional nature of family itself.

Foster's acknowledgment of "fathers" also signals that the award she is receiving marks a gendered moment. Men, or "fathers," have historically dominated the film and television industry. The award she was accepting acknowledged that Foster has, for 47 years, worked to carve a place for herself in a male world where few women succeed as she has done. This public truth has a private corollary: Foster's extended biological family lacks fathers. Her parents were divorced before she was born; her mother, Brandy, who was also the architect of her career

as a child star, raised her in a domestic partnership with another woman; and Foster has never named the father of her own sons (it is rumored to be Gibson).⁸

These are important and well-known facts that structure Foster's public queerness even as they fail to reveal her as a "lesbian." But here we might ask: From what closet do we expect the real Jodie Foster to emerge? Consistently outspoken about the toll that public scrutiny has taken on her, she has lived queerly since birth without trying to deceive anyone by pretending to be romantically involved with the opposite sex as other queer celebrities have done.⁹ "So while I'm here being all confessional," Foster began (cut to an anxious Julia Louis-Dreyfus who, like other stars in the audience, appeared to be measuring the distance to the nearest fire exit):

I guess I have a sudden urge to say something that I've never really been able to air in public. So, a declaration that I'm a little nervous about but maybe not quite as nervous as my publicist right now, huh Jennifer? But I'm just going to put it out there, right? Loud and proud, right? So I'm going to need your support on this. I am single. Yes I am, I am single. No, I'm kidding—but I mean I'm not really kidding, but I'm kind of kidding.... Can I get a wolf whistle or something?"

Mel Gibson, at Foster's table, obligingly sunk his fingers into his mouth and blew.

Did Foster come out? In 2007, she was said to have come out when she spoke about her relationship with producer Cydney Bernard at the Women in Entertainment Breakfast, an event that was reported but not broadcast. According to one account, the speech "reveal[ed] a vulnerable side to a star who has long resisted calls from gay rights activists to clarify her personal life."¹⁰ At the 2013 Golden Globes, she again acknowledged Bernard, although the couple broke up in 2008, as a friend, creative partner, and co-parent to her sons.

You can't get any more lesbian than that and not have the failure to say the word "lesbian" be deliberate.

So why did Jodie Foster *not* simply say that she is a lesbian? I would argue that she is actively resisting the demands of a compulsory homosexuality that has evolved politically since the 1990s, and that has automatically put gay and lesbian celebrities in service to a larger queer public.¹¹ Humorously taunting the always invisible publicist, and leading the television audience to anticipate the word "lesbian," instead she described herself as "single," an individual not in a relationship at all.

This was, of course, true, in the aftermath of the split with Bernard, and at least one relationship that Foster had broken off since then. And yet, even while distancing herself from queer politics, Foster gestured to queers by employing a

rhetorical style known as “dropping hairpins.” These are coded insider phrases that, when performed, invite a GLBTQ public to make itself visible. “Single” is, among other things, how people in the closet often describe their social status even when they have a lover or domestic partner; and remains the legal status of the vast majority of queer people, whether they are partnered or not. We might add to this, most obviously, other words and phrases that gesture to queers like “family,” “Loud and proud,” and “coming out.” The allusion to Melissa Etheridge’s “Yes I am,” recorded in 1993 when Etheridge herself came out and Foster began her relationship with Bernard, also ties Foster to a recent lesbian history. In the final scenes of “The Puppy Episode,” as Etheridge presents Ellen with the papers that will officially enroll her as a lesbian, she asks “OK, Miss Morgan, I have just one question for you: are you gay?” Ellen replies, “Yes—yes I am!”¹²

Through her knowledge of and skill with queer verbal codes, Foster’s speech underlined that she has nothing to reveal that her public does not already know. As Foster explained to her Hollywood family at the Golden Globes, she has always been out to the people who mattered to her, is not “Honey Boo Boo Child,” and feels no obligation to grant access to her “boring” off-screen life.

I did my coming out about a 1,000 years ago back in the Stone Age, in those very quaint days when a fragile young girl would open up to trusted friends and family and co-workers and then gradually, proudly to everyone who knew her, to everyone she actually met. But now I’m told that every celebrity is expected to honor the details of their private life with a press conference, a fragrance and a prime-time reality show.

Foster positioned her private coming out as a nonevent, and a contrast to the ugly desire for publicity that causes ordinary people to let a prying public into their home. One wonders if Foster, who became a child model and actress because her mother wanted it, sees some of her own past in Alana, the child star of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012), a reality show about a white, working class Southern family. The show was briefly in the headlines in 2012 because Alana outed her uncle, who had been living a quiet life as the euphemistic “Uncle Poodle” on national television. We were all subsequently educated to the fact that “poodle” is Southern slang for a closeted gay man whom everyone in the community actually knows is gay.¹³ Perhaps the most uncomfortable moment in the speech, Foster seemed to be positioning private sexuality as mature and public sexuality as childishly impulsive, “high” Hollywood culture against “low” television and tabloid culture. As the audience endorsed Foster’s joke with laughter, the camera cut briefly to Jane Lynch, an out lesbian and the star of the camp television series *Glee*, who was not laughing, and seemed stunned.

Although some viewed this moment as a definitive plug for protecting celebrity privacy, it could also be an opportunity to ask what private sexuality means for lives that are constantly on display. For example, Foster employs a publicist, as do others in her Hollywood family, to release news about her in a controlled fashion. Publicity is crucial to the success of film stars. When fans cease to be interested in actors and actresses, they are no longer celebrities and they do not work. In the film and television industry, “privacy” is not the opposite of “publicity,” but indicates being in control of one’s own image and the uses to which it is put. Hence, it may not be coming out that Foster has resisted, but rather a compulsory homosexuality that requires her to mobilize her private life in service of GLBTQ politics.

A second question Foster raises about the modern media environment is whether it is possible for a celebrity to have any identity that departs from the image that fans already cherish. In *Episodes*, a Showtime situation comedy about making a situation comedy that debuted in 2011, Matt LeBlanc stars as Matt LeBlanc, who cannot escape Joey, the dim-witted 20-something character he played in the 1990s hit series *Friends* and its spinoff, *Joey*. LeBlanc’s private and public selves are hopelessly confused: new roles are always a version of Joey, fans call him Joey, cases of a discontinued perfume called “Joey” fill his garage; and even his stalker is actually stalking Joey. Lisa Kudrow, another *Friends* star, produced a brilliant series in 2005 about a comic actress trying to overcome the loss of identity caused by age and the cultural baggage of a former hit show. Also in 2005, Kirstie Alley’s *Fat Actress* stars “Kirstie Alley” as herself: a former TV star who can’t find work because she is too fat.

Foster has been read queerly for years, even as she has chosen powerful, heterosexual on-screen personae, many of whom are mothers. In this context, let us imagine that Jodie Foster *was* coming out at the Golden Globes as, well, Jodie Foster. By using her national platform to discuss the multiple queer “families” that have sustained her, Foster pointed out that in addition to her many awards and films, her real lifetime achievement may be to have emerged from almost a half century in what she calls “this crazy business” intact, queer, independent, and very much herself. Her announcement, not that she was coming out but that she *was always, already out*, is an important commentary on the queerness of the film and television industry and the tenuous relationship of the private celebrity sphere to its mass-mediated public.

NOTES

1. Melissa Etheridge, “Yes I Am” (audio recording) (New York and Santa Monica: Island Records, 1993).

2. Betty DeGeneres, *Love, Ellen: A Mother/Daughter Journey* (New York: It Books, 2000), 11.
3. *Bowers, Attorney General of Georgia v. Hardwick, et. al* 478 U.S. 186 (1986); argued March 31, 1986; decided June 30, 1986.
4. As of this writing, key provisions of DOMA have been overturned in *Windsor v. United States* 570 U.S. (2013); argued March 27, 2013; decided June 26, 2013.
5. Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 307–8.
6. DeGeneres, *Love, Ellen*, 242.
7. All quotes are from “Jodie Foster’s Golden Globes Speech: Full Transcript,” ABC News, January 14, 2013. <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/entertainment/2013/01/full-transcript-jodie-fosters-golden-globes-speech/>.
8. “Jodie Foster Boys: A Buzz Over Mel Gibson,” *New York Post*, January 18, 2013, 6; Phil Boucher, “Jodie Foster Devastated after Being Dumped by Lesbian Lover,” *Daily Mail Online*, September 12, 2009, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1212828/Jodie-Foster-devastated-dumped-lesbian-lover.html>; Adam Nutburn, “Jodie Foster Feels Free since Splitting with Cydney Bernard,” *ShowbizSpy*, April 28, 2011, <http://www.showbizspy.com/article/231400/jodie-foster-feels-free-since-splitting-from-cydney-bernard.html>.
9. Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981); Robert Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
10. David Gardner, “Jodie Foster Comes Out with Emotional Tribute to Her Girlfriend of 14 Years,” *Daily Mail Online*, December 12, 2007, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-501256/Jodie-Foster-comes-emotional-tribute-girlfriend-14-years.html#ixzz2XAWxYAdm>.
11. Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980), republished in *Journal of Women’s History* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 11–48.
12. Both episodes are available on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmYvt_2fPfl; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EoPqiFOXzxo>.
13. Karen L. Cox, “We’re Here, We’re Queer, Y’all,” *New York Times*, October 3, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/04/opinion/were-here-were-queer-yall.html>.

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