

**LIKE MOTHER, LIKE DAUGHTER: AN EXPLORATION OF GENDER
EXPANSIVE IDENTITY IN *TRANSPARENT***

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Introduction

Jill Soloway's interest in writing about identity and the complexities of sexuality and gender started long before creating the series *Transparent*, a critically acclaimed drama from Amazon Studios about the "late in life" male to female transition of a family patriarch. As shared with Krista Smith of *Vanity Fair* in an interview at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival about Soloway's film *Afternoon Delight* (2013), Soloway explains that, "I've sort of noticed I've been writing similar themes, which I call 'the heroine's journey,' which is about sort of repairing the divided feminine" (Smith, 2013). A prime example of this type of writing can be found in her body of work on the television show *The United States of Tara*, created by another celebrated feminist writer, Diablo Cody. The show, about a woman with multiple personalities, both male and female, allowed Cody and Soloway to explore transgressions in gender performativity.

However, as Levy (2015) writes, Soloway's television writing career stalled after *The United States of Tara* failed to live up to network executives' expectations for the show. Following their departure, Soloway continued seeking writing opportunities but was unable to find steady work. "Then her father called to say that he was a woman named Carrie, and the most intimate patriarchy in her life toppled" (Levy, 2015). Out of this discovery, the nebulous feelings Soloway had on gender started to make more sense. Soloway's sister Faith shared this about the news of her father's transgenderism, "For Jill, it was: *This* is why I am the way I am. This is why I have these feelings about being female in the world" (Levy, 2015).

It is unmistakable that *Transparent* is a project through which Jill Soloway makes an effort to understand gender expansive identity. As noted above, the show serves as a semi-autobiographical narrative of a father's transition and the impact it has on the dynamics of family. Interestingly, while making the show, Soloway's own identity has been profoundly

transformed, and the writer now identifies as gender non-binary and prefers to be recognized with singular they pronouns.

In an interview with Kara Swisher during the 2017 Code Conference, a technology and digital media business conference, Soloway describes how *Transparent* found a home at Amazon for several different reasons. Soloway explains to Swisher and the audience that after pitching the show to several different companies, like HBO, Showtime, FX, and Netflix, the sentiment they sensed was, “Everyone had their reason why it wasn’t the right time for this show, at this network, with me” (Swisher, 2017). However, Soloway goes on to explain how their agent convinced them to pitch the show to Amazon, despite the confusion on how the show would ultimately be distributed and viewed by audiences. Furthermore, Soloway explains that Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos gave full support to her radical narrative. In the interview, Soloway shares that Bezos told them, “The way that story can make change is so much faster than the way that politics can make change” (Swisher, 2017). Soloway expands on this by arguing that, “You create culture that has story in it that says, for example, something as radical as trans people are people, and then laws follow” (Swisher, 2017).

So, create that show they did. After a positive response to a pilot episode released on February 6, 2014, Amazon Studios green lighted the series for a full, ten-episode season that debuted later that same year. For the sake of this analysis, I am going to spend some time here briefly summarizing the series. The series begins with Mort Pfefferman (Jeffery Tambor) inviting his three adult children, Sarah (Amy Landecker), Josh (Jay Duplass), and Ali (Gaby Hoffman), to dinner for a big announcement. The children speculate about what the news could be, mostly focusing on the possibility of terminal illness and how that would affect each of their inheritances. As the season progresses, audiences watch as more and more family secrets are

exposed in the wake of Mort's announcement to transition. Mixed in with those newly discovered realities are flashbacks to Mort's decades long struggle with identity, and his attempts to become his "true self," a woman named Maura.

Following that lead, season two continues to give glimpses into the past by returning, over and over, to 1930s Berlin, where audiences are shown a parallel narrative about Maura's mother, Rose, and her family's struggle as the Nazis rose to power. In these flashbacks, audiences learn about a Pfefferman family history of transgenderism and tranvestism in which Rose's brother Gershon lives openly as a trans person named Gittel. Interestingly, the actress that plays the young Rose, Emily Robinson, also plays Ali's younger self in previous flashbacks, which bolsters the notions of Maura and Ali's relationship that I will speak on more in subsequent sections of this critical analysis. Additionally, I will address seasons three and four and the implications of new revelations in those episodes later in this project. For now, the stage has been set to illustrate the importance of this show.

To some, this story of transgenderism could not have come at a better time. For example, Jeffery Tambor, who plays Maura, answers a question from CNN interviewer Samuel Burke about the effect Caitlyn Jenner, arguably the most famous contemporary trans person, has had on the show: "Imagine an arrow, and we were like this arrow, being shot into this zeitgeist that was already there, and it just blew up. Our timing was ineffable. It was just perfect timing (Burke, 2015). In addition to Jenner's very public transition due to her recurring role on the reality television program *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, Tambor and those who agree with him can further illustrate the significance of the timing of a show like *Transparent* by pointing to the political atmosphere surrounding the trans movement.

While the concept of transgenderism is not new, public and political discourse about trans issues have increased in frequency. Much of these recent discussions have stemmed from debates over controversial interpretations of non-discriminatory laws. Perhaps, the most famous of these debates is on what have come to be known as “bathroom bills,” which are the result of trans individuals wishing to use public bathrooms for the gender with which they identify. Much of the opposition to these efforts to protect the trans community from discrimination come from people who conflate trans identity with sexually deviant, and often criminal, behaviors. Unfortunately for the trans community, Americans across the country have expressed mixed feelings about the issue of public bathroom use by trans people. According to a Pew Research Center Survey, public opinion on the highly contentious topic is split, more or less, right down the middle, with 51% of adults supporting the use of a restroom that aligns with gender identity and 46% of adults feeling that trans people should use the bathroom matching the gender they were born into (Lipka, 2016).

However, the discriminatory practices and policies concerning the trans community go beyond the infamous bathroom bills passed in states like North Carolina. For example, just this past July, President Donald Trump announced that transgendered individuals would no longer be allowed to serve in the United States military through a series of tweets. In those posts, Trump argued that in order for the military to be successful, it could not “be burdened with the tremendous medical costs and disruption that transgender in the military would entail” (realDonaldTrump, 2017). More recently, the topic of transgender discrimination was discussed by Attorney General Jeff Sessions just last week when he released a memo from the Department of Justice stating that, “Although federal law, including Title VII, provides various protections to

transgender individuals, Title VII does not prohibit discrimination based on gender identity *per se*" (Moreau, 2017).

Bringing this discussion full circle, consider Jill Soloway's remarks during their acceptance speech at 67th Primetime Emmy Awards in 2015. Soloway argued that, "We don't have a trans tipping point yet, we have a trans civil rights problem" (Mischer, 2015). These comments, made in response to an article published in a 2014 issue of *Time Magazine* that explored the new and more robust visibility of the transgender experience in America, expressed Soloway's dissatisfaction at the policies still allowing people to discriminate towards the trans community; and provides more context to the importance of studying Soloway's work in *Transparent*.

Theory

In this section, my discussion turns to the post-structural theories on the production of identity, especially in terms of gender and sexuality. First, we will examine the French philosophical historian Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978). From there, we will move onto theorist Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). Finally, our discussion will explore cultural critic Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests* (1992). Through these texts, I will establish how gender essentialism came to be understood, and how this understanding gave rise to the problematic conceptualization of a gender and sexuality binary; and was then rebuked by more contemporary constructivist notions of identity.

Writing on the heels of the sexual revolution, Foucault (1978) argues that Western cultures are not the sexually liberated societies that we believe ourselves to be. Rather, he suggests that we continue to live in an age dominated by a prudish "Victorian regime," producing in ourselves a "restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality" (Foucault, 1978, p. 3).

However, this muted sexuality does not necessarily mean that the dialogues on sex were silenced. In fact, according to Foucault (1978), “when one looks back over these last three centuries with their continual transformations, things appear in a very different light: around and apropos of sex, one sees a veritable discursive explosion” (p.17). However, this proliferation of discourses on sexuality was, in Foucault’s mind, another mechanism of social control. By exploring the different ways that people were incited to speak about the truth of sex, especially through the self-scrutinizing acts of confession and psychoanalysis, Foucault demonstrates how powerfully we govern our own behavior and the behavior of others.

Speaking on the genesis of this authority on sexual practices, Foucault (1978) suggests that “canonical law, the Christian pastoral, and civil law” became the three chief informants of what society considered appropriate (p. 37). At the heart of each one of these were concerns of marital affairs. These codes insisted on sexual practices outside of the procreational endeavors of heterosexual married couples, such as adultery, debauchery, and sodomy, as being perverse, deviant, and unnatural. However, Foucault (1978) posits “that if [discourse on sex] has carried with it taboos and prohibitions, it has also, in a more fundamental way, ensured the solidification and implantation of an entire sexual mosaic” (p. 53).

Further illustrating the machinery of this continued governance, Foucault (1978) contends that sex came to be understood in two different ways; “a biology of reproduction, which developed continuously according to a general scientific normativity, and a medicine of sex conforming to quite different rules of formation” (p. 54). Those rules on the medicine of sex, according to Foucault, were adopted from the prior laws imposed by religious and economic forces. One of the procedures adopted in this medicalized age to produce the truth of sex, psychoanalysis, closely mirrored the age-old practice of confession. Foucault (1978) addresses

how this religious practice came to be “constituted in scientific terms” by suggesting that one of the ways this happened was “through a medicalization of the effects of confession” (p. 65,67). He goes on to argue that, “[s]ituated at the point of intersection of a technique of confession and a scientific discursivity, ... sexuality was defined as being ‘by nature’” (p. 68) In other words, sexual practices of pure pleasure became linked to mental illness and pathologization, which indicated that those practices were the behaviors of sick and unnatural individuals; while sexualities that aided in the reproduction of labor power were celebrated and normalized.

Ultimately, Foucault balks at this essentialist understanding of sexuality and, instead, maintains that sexuality is nothing more than a social construct. He writes:

“sex” made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere: sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified. (p. 154)

That is to say, the truth of sexuality lies far beyond the reproductive organs on our bodies and how we use those organs in our expressions of desire. Rather, Foucault suggests that our identities, especially in terms of sexuality, are the consequence of an extensive progression of power relations throughout the history of civilization.

Building on this notion, Butler (1990) carries Foucault’s non-essentialist claim further into a discussion of gender by proposing a performative theory of gender. Like Foucault, Butler (1990) emphasizes that gender identity is not the expression of some prior self, or essence, but instead, the result of signifying actions and behaviors, or performances, of an individual within societal norms. She writes, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that

identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (p. 34). In other words, gender is manifest in each and every moment through our routine behaviors, patterns of speech and gesture, and certain sartorial codes.

To demonstrate this theory of gender performativity, Butler (1990) investigates the ways in which drag queens expose the fallacy of an essential masculine or feminine identity, congruent to one’s sexual body. She writes, ““*in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself- as well as its contingency*” (p. 187). Thus, drag performance reveals gender to be something that lacks any original or authentic source by the appropriation and exaggeration of the cultural codes associated with femininity. Furthermore, through this revealing, gender is shown to be unstable, something that can be disrupted, disordered, defied and distorted.

It is worth noting, that in the preface of a 1999 reprinting of *Gender Trouble*, Butler acknowledges certain oversights in her original text. She writes:

“my theory sometimes waffles between understating performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical. I have come to think that the two are invariably related, chiasmically so, and that a reconsideration of the speech act as an instance of power invariably draws attention to both its theatrical and linguistic dimensions. (p. xxvi)

Furthermore, Butler concedes that her original text wrongfully omits a discussion on transgenderism and intersexuality, both of which are highly marginalized groups of people that struggle to achieve intelligibility, and thus, a “livable life.” However, before we begin a lengthy cultural analysis of transgendered identity, specifically in terms of its media representation, let’s first move our discussion to the long history of transvestism, or cross-dressing, its role in theatre

and culture, and the social anxieties it creates when put into practice as presented in Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests*.

In her text, Garber (1992) investigates the extensive and interesting relationship between clothes and identity, and the numerous ways in which these sartorial codes help to construct culture. Garber (1992) argues that “*transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture*: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself” (p. 17). In other words, like Foucault and Butler, Garber insists that the cultural signals indicated by one's clothing, especially in instances where that clothing is attired by the wrong body, expose the constructivist, rather than the essentialist, notions of identity categorization.

Garber's (1992) inquiry into dress begins with a recounting of the sumptuary laws that have been long proclaimed by certain communities. These laws were primarily designed to regulate and demarcate identities such as class and gender by maintaining what was and was not appropriate consumption of goods by these different categories of people. Informing these laws, according to Garber (1992) were the religious and political institutions of the time, which were often times one in the same. Speaking on the divine origins of these sartorial regulations, Garber (1992) points to “the biblical injunction from Deuteronomy” that women are prohibited to wear men's clothing (p. 28). Furthermore, she demonstrates how Renaissance and Puritanical antitheatricalists, “in their debates about gender, cross-dressing, and the stage, articulated deep-seated anxieties about the possibility that identity was not fixed, that there was no underlying ‘self’ at all, and that therefore identities had to be zealously and jealously safeguarded” (p. 32).

In a passage apropos of our own examination into the emancipatory power of a narrative like *Transparent*, Garber notes, “[m]aking a woman into a man apparently remains more difficult

– in the theater as elsewhere- than discovering the ‘woman’ already inside him” (p. 38) That is to say, cross-dressing has long been practiced, acceptably or not, by male actors on stage, thus giving license to men elsewhere to explore their own destabilized masculine identity. Therefore, it appears that Garber, and likely Foucault and Butler, too, would agree with our assertion that the radical narrative of the transgendered experience, and its disrupting effect, on display in *Transparent* is, yet again, another example of the patriarchal social control that has long structured the ways in which individuals create identity.

Moreover, we can find evidence of this argument in Garber’s (1992) chapter called “The Transvestite’s Progress” in which she critiques several media texts where cross-dressing plays a major role in the narrative. This chapter couches the discussion of the transvestite’s progress as a narrative trope in a discussion of famous jazz musician Billy Tipton, who lived as a man and was “revealed” to be a woman upon examination by a funeral director after Billy’s death. Writing of these cross-dressing characters, and of Billy Tipton, Garber (1992) writes, “Each is ‘compelled’ by social and economic forces to disguise himself or herself in order to get a job, escape repression, or gain artistic or political ‘freedom’” (p. 70). To support this claim, Garber (1992) cites examples of Shakespearean cross-dressers, like Rosalind of *As You Like It*, and characters derivative of Rosalind, like Théodore de Serannes of Théophile Gautier’s 1835 novel, *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, as well as other more famous contemporary examples like Barbara Streisand’s *Yentl*. In a passage shared from Gautier’s novel, Garber (1992) shines a light on the cross-dressing Théodore’s feelings on identity quoting, “I belong to a third sex, a sex apart, which has yet no name... My dream would be to have each sex in turn, and to satisfy my dual nature: man today, woman tomorrow. (Gautier, 330)” (p. 74). In other words, Garber’s argument is that the transvestite’s appearance in narrative only reinforces the social norms and behaviors,

or performances, that continuously produce the problematic identity binary of male/female, masculine/feminine, and gay/straight, to name a few.

Review of Literature

The magnitude of the body of literature on the topic of identity, especially in regard to gender and sexuality, makes researching in this field a demanding task. In order to give a concise and cohesive examination, I will address a contemporary sampling of literature beginning with a general discussion on the importance of continued critical analysis of popular media, and then move onto a more specific investigation of transgender representation in media. Through this review, I aim to show the importance of my own examination of *Transparent* and the potential effects the show has on its audiences.

As the prior section of this prospectus indicates, my critical analysis of *Transparent* owes a great debt to the discipline of feminist studies, as that field of study helped bring discussions on gender to the forefront of media criticism. Speaking to this, Watkins and Emerson (2000) argue that gender informs an array of social norms and values that shape the media industry's production practices and conventions. Furthermore, they contend that feminist criticism has helped generate interest in a subgenre of media studies called "reception studies." The authors define that field as an exploration of how audiences become actively engaged in a process of making meaning through their consumption of mediated cultural texts. Understanding this process of meaning making reveals the extreme need for media literacy to help create an engaged and active citizenry. While my own approach of critically analyzing *Transparent* is not intended to be a reception study, the discussions I hope to provide will help demonstrate the importance of reception studies by illustrating the power of narrative.

Continuing the discussion, Cobb and Tasker (2016) write that the enduring legacy of feminist film criticism can be found “anywhere that feminism and visual culture meet” (p. 2). In other words, these authors recognize that concepts first brought into discussion because of feminist film criticism still provide the lens through which feminist theorists should consume all visual media. Additionally, these scholars address the continued problematic dominance of men as leaders in the filmmaking industry; one point that makes the female led production and direction of Amazon’s *Transparent* all the more interesting.

The literature on the representation of transgendered life in media has expanded within the last few years, because the topic has become more and more visible in American popular culture. Kunzel (2014) suggests that, although it is at the risk of being ever-identified as “emerging,” transgender studies is now a flourishing field of academic inquiry. She points to several recent publications and conferences as evidence of the discipline’s continued importance. However, in addition to praising the raised awareness of an interdisciplinary discourse on transgender people and their lives, Kunzel (2014) also addresses criticisms by some researchers of a “transnormativity, whereby certain transgender bodies are valued, counted, recognized, and folded into citizenship, while others are marginalized, rendered abject, excluded, and made vulnerable to violence and premature death” (p. 287).

For example, consider Skidmore’s (2011) analysis of Christine Jorgensen, a transgender woman that became a media sensation in the 1950s which elevated her to the status of a heroic figure within the emerging field of transgender studies. Skidmore (2011) explains how Jorgensen’s story was used to construct what she calls the “good transsexual,” and the effects this narrative has had on trans people and their communities. The author concludes by suggesting that any invisibility of the trans experience in media is due to the construction of that narrative,

and that media scholars “must pay attention to the structures regulating visibility” (Skidmore, 2011, p. 296).

The concept of transnormativity is discussed further by Johnson (2016) through an exploration of documentary films about female-to-male transgender individuals. In this article, the author argues that certain identifications, characteristics, and behaviors are accepted by medical standards, while individuals who fall outside of that medical model are marginalized, and “rendered invisible” (Johnson, 2016, p. 467). In other words, transnormativity only works to reify the existing binary of gender identity as either male/female or transmale/transfemale.

Cavalcante (2017) moves the discussion to transgender media texts called “breakout texts.” These breakout texts are described as “first of its kind” representations that generate three distinct breaks: “a break into the cultural mainstream, a break with historical representational paradigms, and a breaking into the everyday lives of the audiences they purport to represent” (Cavalcante, 2017, p. 539). In this article, the breakout texts most extensively analyzed are *Boys Don't Cry* and *TransAmerica*, both of which have transgender protagonists. Using ethnographic fieldwork, Cavalcante (2017) discusses how these films were received and used by trans communities. The author demonstrates that these texts lead to a “‘mediatized linked fate’, or the sense that one’s own everyday life experiences, chances, and potentialities - and those of their social group – are tethered to a media text or character” (Cavalcante, 2017, p. 544). Furthermore, Cavalcante (2017) expresses the importance of transgender individuals being able to act as cultural interpreters of these narratives due to a “special kind of knowledge and sensibility that comes from experience” (p. 549). In the concluding paragraph of this article, the author acknowledges the arrival of new breakout texts, including *Transparent* and other trans television shows. It is worth noting here, that of these new, and old, “breakout texts,” *Transparent* stands

apart to the extent that it is not a narrative interpreted, but rather created by a community of transgendered individuals. This fact, in principle, should give the text a unique insight and access to experiences of the trans identity.

In fact, several members of this community of transgender talent were interviewed by Stacey Wilson Hunt of *Vulture*. In the interview, Hunt spoke to actresses Alexandra Billings (“Davina”), Trace Lysette (“Shea”), and Alexandra Grey (“Elizah Edwards”); producers Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst; director Silas Howard; and the writers Ali Liebegott and Our Lady J who all identify as transgender. In the interview, Hunt (2016) writes that their conversations allowed the group “to reflect on how the series has changed the way we tell trans stories, the hopefulness they now feel for trans children, and why they disagree on how important it is to cast trans people in transgender roles”.

However, some scholars are not impressed with *Transparent*, specifically, is Funk and Funk’s (2016) article that critiques the show for a problematic use of the historical “coming out” narrative. These researchers contend that *Transparent*, as of season two, does more work hypostasizing the accepted gender binary than it does disrupting cisgender privilege. Particularly troubling to the authors is the idea that “trans* people who do not “come out,” or fully disclose their birth and medical history are deceptive and dishonest” (Funk & Funk, 2016, p. 901). In my analysis, will show that this assessment of *Transparent* is not entirely accurate.

Preview of Thesis

While Funk and Funk (2016) may be right about Maura and the use of the “coming out” narrative, their analysis does not consider other important characters that further challenge the historical conception of the gender binary. That said, my own investigation of *Transparent* will address similar observations on the reductive elements of the show. However, these observations will be centered on the characterizations of Maura Pfefferman and her family through the entirety of the show’s four seasons. Specifically, this study will address how Maura’s transition within her family dynamic is problematized by class, religion, and sexuality.

Furthermore, I will pay special attention to the juxtaposition of the characters Maura and Ali, her youngest daughter, played by Gabby Hoffman. The relationship between Maura and Ali is an important one in the show, and is made evident in the pilot episode when Maura (still dressed and performing identity as Mort) tells Ali, “You know, out of all my kids, you’re the one. You can see me most clearly” (Soloway, 2014). As the series progresses, this bond between Maura and Ali is strengthened as Ali begins to question her own identity, very much mirroring the real-life experiences of Jill Soloway. It is my contention that in *Transparent*, Maura can be understood as representative of a modernist, thus essentialist, understanding of gender identity while Ali represents a post-modern, constructivist understanding.

By studying each of these characters we can begin to evaluate how effective *Transparent* is in showing its viewers an authentic narrative on gender. Furthermore, we can assess how well the show does in teaching audiences about the true nature of gender and identity, especially in terms of the competing notions of essentialism and constructivism.

CHAPTER 2

Jeffery Tambor has received wide critical acclaim for his portrayal of Maura (formerly Mort) Pfefferman, a retired professor who, after years of closeted transvestism, is now transitioning publicly from male to female. Tambor's performance has been called "career-redefining" (McNamara, 2014, p. 4) and "a revelation" (Poniewozik, 2014, p. 1) by some critics who praise the show for its power to address complicated issues of identity. More recently, however, Tambor has come under scrutiny for allegations of sexual misconduct, which will be discussed at greater length in later chapters. For now, I will focus on a reading of our primary text, making the argument that Tambor's character, Maura, can be seen as representing the modernist, thus essentialist, understanding of gender identity. However, that notion of gender essentialism is challenged numerous times throughout Maura's journey to become the woman she feels to be inside. These challenges, ultimately, lead to a shift in how Maura, and the characters around her, conceptualize gender identity. In the following sections, I will identify key moments in the show's narrative that correspond to the subsections "Coming Out," "Passing," "Gender Confirmation Surgery," and "Judaica and Fatherhood."

Coming Out

In the pilot episode, the audience isn't introduced to Tambor's character until after meeting his three adult children. I want to note that I will be referring to Tambor as Mort and using *he* and *him* pronouns prior to the point in the show's greater narrative when his "female" identity is revealed. The episode begins on the day that Mort plans to 'come out' to his children, however this is not clear right away. After each of them have been contacted about gathering for a dinner announcement, the Pfefferman children speculate on what the announcement could be, guessing that it's likely cancer, or some other type of terminal illness.

As the Pfefferman siblings and their father eat dinner, the conversation begins to devolve from mocking each other about table manners into rather vulgar claims about the location of barbeque in need of clean up. Mort interrupts by saying, “Hey, guys! Listen, I need to talk to you about something. There is a big change going on.” Before he can say what he is trying to he stops, puts his head in his hands, and repeats, “I love you kids. I love you kids. I love you kids.” After a beat, the children disrupt Mort’s announcement with validations of their hypotheses of terminal illness. Mort becomes frustrated and discontinues his original plans by informing everyone that he will be selling the family home. This announcement sends Mort’s children into yet another argument, which leads to Josh’s abrupt departure.

In a scene that follows is our first clue at what Mort is struggling to tell his children. As he and Ali speak about her financial situation, Mort writes Ali a check and the dynamic of their relationship is revealed through dialogue between the two. After giving Ali money, Mort tells her that “You know, out of all my kids, you’re the one. You can see me most clearly.” He speculates that this connection is because of their shared “depressive gene,” a statement which causes Ali to scoff defensively. Foreshadowing the scene that follows, Mort says to Ali, “Boy, it is so hard when someone sees something that you do not want them to see.”

After Mort’s daughters depart, the audience watches as he places a phone call to an unknown person and strips down to his underwear. As Mort walks down the hallway, he explains that he could not do what he had intended to at dinner. Mort enters a bedroom still on the phone. The shot cuts to a low angle of the clothing Mort has just removed in the foreground and in the background, we can see Mort emerge dressed in something long and flowing, perhaps a dress. The shot cuts again to a bedside table and begins to pan toward the bed. As the camera pans, it’s clear that Mort has changed into a nightgown and we watch as he lets his long hair out of the

ponytail he had been wearing. As the lyrics to the song playing over this scene, and several of the following scenes, say, “We’re building us a new horizon;” and, quite literally, Mort’s sartorial change in this scene sets in motion the show’s central narrative and our primary concern- the construction of gender and sexuality in our culture.

By changing clothes and letting down his hair, Mort introduces for the audience what Garber (1992) calls the “disruptive element” of transvestism upon the very conceptualization of a male/female gender binary. While this may not be clear right away, this issue of vesture is addressed directly in a scene that begins at the end of the pilot and concludes in the opening of the second episode, where Mort’s eldest daughter, Sarah, and former lesbian partner, Tammy, are engaged in a passionate, adulterous kiss only to be discovered by an unsuspecting Mort dressed entirely in female attire. As one can imagine, Sarah is confused at this sight and asks her father what he is wearing.

As the scene continues in the opening of the second episode, Mort begins his coming out process with Sarah, doing his best to explain the drastically different person he appears to be at this moment. In, perhaps, the most insightful exchange of dialogue between the father and daughter, Sarah asks, “Are you saying you’re going to start dressing up like a lady all the time?” Mort replies, “No, honey. All my life- my whole life I’ve been dressing up like a man. This is me.” In other words, Mort has long felt an incongruity between his inner self and his outer self, an incongruity that he is finally confronting in the open. Morgan and Stevens (2008) explain that this feeling, in which a transgendered individual’s internal gender identity does not match the biological sex of their physical body, can be thought of as “a sense of body-mind dissonance” (p. 587). Additionally, Spencer (2013) contends that “these feelings can cause anger, conflict, confusion, and frustration for transgender adolescents, as well for their parents” (p. 115). As

continued reading of *Transparent* will illuminate, those same frustrations have the ability to problematize a transgendered parent's relationship to their children and others.

It is interesting to note here that this dialogue between Mort and Sarah was inspired by a conversation that *Transparent* creator Jill Soloway had with a close friend after Soloway's own father decided to transition. Furthermore, in the audio-commentary that accompanies this episode, Soloway expresses a transformation in their thinking about their parent and the "dressing up" that helps construct gender identity. Soloway says, "I think a lot of people think about 'transness' as you're changing from one to another. I used to be a boy, now I am a girl. But instead, it's like 'No, I've *always* been a girl.'" In other words, in these early episodes gender is undoubtedly being presented as something essential to one's nature, something fixed or static. However, as we will see, this notion of essentialism in terms of gender identity is challenged more and more as the series progresses, especially through the youngest of the Pfefferman children, Ali. I will discuss her character at much greater length in the next chapter.

Following the continued scene that begins episode two, there is a cut to the show's opening credits. Immediately after the credits, the narrative begins to diverge from a linear, chronological order of events, showing Mort in 1989, presenting as male. In this scene, Mort walks hurriedly towards his office, enters, then locks the door behind himself. While sitting in the dark, Mort opens a desk drawer and pulls out a shopping bag that contains a brightly-colored blouse. Mort begins to undo his tie, presumably to put on the blouse, but is interrupted by a student knocking on his office door. These flashbacks continue throughout season one to provide context to Mort's journey toward a self-realization of trans identity.

A primary narrative of these flashback scenes is a budding relationship between Mort and Mark (played by Bradley Whitford), a man he meets while browsing through a pornographic

trans magazine. The two men bond over an affinity for cross-dressing and make some trips together to explore the practice in relative anonymity. On the first trip, Mark, dressed as Marcy, helps Mort pick the name “Maura” for his female presentation of self, after Mort’s self-given name seems too “stripper-y.” The next trip these two make together is to a cross-dressing retreat called Camp Camellia. This plotline provides interesting insight into trans history. Specifically, the connection between *transvestites* and *transsexuals*, and the anxiety over the conflation of cross-dressing with homosexuality.

The trip is documented in season one’s episode eight, entitled “Best New Girl.” At one point, Maura and Marcy (née Mort and Mark) sit with a group of cross-dressers during a meal. As they eat, the group discusses an incident from the year prior in which one of the camp attendees was caught injecting herself with hormones. The group’s response is fairly uniform in aversion to this type of behavior, and may best be summarized when one character says, “We are cross-dressers, but we are still men.” As the others around the table cheer to such a proclamation, Maura sits silently, totally aware of her “otherness” even within this marginalized group. The separation is discussed again moments later when Maura, Marcy, and the wife of one of the cross-dressers discuss the incident again. During the conversation, Marcy insists, “Transvestites are not transsexuals. Never the twain shall meet.”

These anxieties are explored in Garber’s (1992) chapter titled “Breaking the Code.” In her text, Garber discusses an organization called Tri-Ess, or the “Society for the Second Self.” Much like the exclusionary feelings expressed by the cross-dressing campers in *Transparent*, Tri-Ess restricts its membership to heterosexual males. As Garber acknowledges, this policy came under scrutiny by a member of Tri-Ess, Eileen McCleary, and author, Joann Roberts, who called the exclusion of gay transvestites “discrimination” and “homophobia,” and argued that

these “closed” groups feared admitting gay transvestites because, “If they are seen to associate with gay TVs, then somehow that is an admission that transvestism is sexual” (Garber, 1992, p. 133). This thought points to the complexity of gender construction and sexual preference that often confounds members of a heteronormative culture. Garber goes on to conclude her discussion on Tri-Ess by explaining, “The transsexual may wish to literalize that fantasy [cross-dressing] through an alteration in the body; the transvestite keeps the fantasy in play, though often in a ritualized way, by deploying a rhetoric of *clothing, naming, and performance* or *acting out*” (Garber, 1992, p. 134). In other words, there is an important distinction between these two marginalized identities; where transsexuals may be interested in physical changes to the body that reflect who they feel to be “inside” and align with culturally acceptable readings of their bodies, transvestites are merely interested in subversion of the sartorial codes that dictate gender categorization.

Our protagonist, Maura, undoubtedly a product of what Butler (1999) calls “the heterosexual matrix,” subscribes to an essentialist approach, believing that she has a “core” gender identity based on a binary of male/female or masculine/feminine. Because of her strong feelings toward this notion, passing or *reading*, as a woman is very important to Maura. In order to achieve the reading of her body that she wishes for, Maura befriends another transwoman, Davina (played by an actual transwoman named Alexandra Billings), from the Los Angeles LGBT Center where she attends support group meetings. Davina becomes a sort of mentor for all things trans to Maura throughout the show’s narrative, giving her lessons in “femininity” and warning her of difficulties that could very well present themselves on this particular path. Funk and Funk (2016) contend that this gender coaching and the warnings of “inevitable” familial alienation can be linked to feelings of internalized transphobia, which they argue is very much at

play in *Transparent*. Evidence of this can be found in the numerous over-the-shoulder shots of Maura gazing into a mirror, seeming to “long for something different, or abhor what looks back at her” (Funk & Funk, 2016, p. 884). Furthermore, Funk and Funk (2016) assert that these mirror shots of Maura, and flashback shots of Mort feeling a need to isolate himself from family in an attempt to find solace before preparing to “play an inauthentic role at home,” normalize trans loathing for both cisgender and transgender audience members. In fact, in an interview with Stephen Colbert for his late-night talk show, Tambor tells a story of preparing for the role of Maura with one of the transgender producers of the show, Zackary Drucker, that illustrates this normalization. Tambor says:

We were walking down the grocery aisles, and I said, ‘Well, how would Maura shop?’ And, Zackary left me alone and then there was this man and he just looked at me. I’ll never forget the look because it was the look of absolute hatred, and it was a smirk of absolute phobia, and I went, ‘That’s— you know. Don’t ever forget this because that’s what Maura is every day of her life’ ([CITATION](#)).

In other words, the actor responsible for portraying the primary trans experience on this show has internalized and normalized feelings of shame and resentment toward “the identity markers that once encoded her as male” (Funk & Funk, 2016, p. 887).

Passing

As the show progresses through seasons two and three, Maura’s desire to pass for female becomes stronger and stronger. In season two, specifically, this desire is challenged very directly in several scenes. I will analyze two scenes in particular that seem to problematize the trans experience as an authentic presentation of gender. The first scene takes place at a lunch meeting

organized by Maura and an old colleague from her tenure as a college professor. The meeting is planned as an informational interview of sorts between Maura's daughter Ali and a professor in the Women and Gender Studies program at UCLA, Leslie Mackinaw (played by Cherry Jones). Over the course of the meal, it is revealed that Leslie and Maura had a loose affiliation in the past while they both worked at Berkley. In an uncomfortable moment, Leslie acknowledges that she and Maura have history by explaining the adversarial relationship between herself, her "sisters in arms," and the editorial board that Maura ran while presenting as Mort. After feeling attacked for her prior actions, ones that Leslie described as misogyny, Maura insists that her actions were never meant to be sexist. At one point, Maura admits that she does not remember that time in her life very well, to which Leslie responds, "Why would you?" This response is obviously a critique of the ignorance or unconscious oppression that cisgender men often impose onto women and other marginalized identities.

Maura's prior positions of power are discussed again later in the season in an episode entitled "Man on the Land." In the episode, Maura and her two daughters, Sarah and Ali, visit a women's only festival in the woods. Shortly after arriving, Maura is made aware of a festival policy that indicates this event is for "women born women" by a festival attendee named Vicki (played by Angelica Houston). In other words, transwomen are not allowed in this exclusively female domain to ensure a safe place for the attendants. Meanwhile, Ali is made aware of the same policy when Leslie, who has become Ali's most recent romantic interest, informs her that bringing Maura "may not have been the wisest choice." Upon learning of the policy, both Maura and Ali become concerned about the ramifications of Maura's presence.

In fact, Maura's disorientation upon learning of this policy can be seen as she walks around fully aware of her "otherness;" worried at the possibility of being exposed as a "man on

the land” at any moment by one of the seemingly suspicious women walking around her. After several hours of searching, Maura finds Ali sitting with Leslie and a group of the festival founders and regulars just as the group is expressing frustration at women’s constant fear of predators, or more pointedly, men. Despite reluctance to stay at the campfire, Ali convinces Maura to take a seat. As the group talks, Maura’s history as a “man” is challenged, again, by an incitement from Leslie about the festival policy. In response to Leslie’s comment, Maura asks what exactly that policy is and gets her answer from one of the festival founders, “Simple. Women born women.” A debate ensues about the politics of female identity and the biological factors that help construct that identity.

It is worth noting here that these debates are not unfounded narrative choices, rather a very real dispute amongst early feminists. In their 1972 paper, “Socialist Feminism: A Strategy for the Women’s Movement,” the members of the Hyde Park Chapter of the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union wrote:

Objectively, men as a group have vested interests opposed to those of women as a group. We will, for example, cut into their jobs, challenge their position of comfort in the family, and take personal power away from them. In the short-run, and in some ways, men are an enemy. (p. 25)

However, the group does address separatism within women’s liberation as having “two meanings.” First, the group contends that feminist separatism can be understood as an “ideological position ideological position arguing for the separate development of men and women as fully as possible;” second, it can be seen as “a tactical position, arguing for separate organizations or life alternatives” (p. 26). The group’s paper concludes that while separatism can

be beneficial, it is ultimately an argument that has primarily caused controversy “within the movement (p. 26).

After one of the women in the group suggests that the policy is chiefly concerned with nudity, in as much as “Penises are triggering.” Maura grows more defensive and argumentative. The conversation devolves further when the same woman who clarified the policy moments earlier exclaims, “I don’t care about your goddamn penis! It’s about the privilege.” Maura replies in a way that dismisses this claim and portrays herself as a victim in “pain”. She is quickly corrected by Leslie who says, “Your pain and your privilege are separate, and Berkley is a great example of that.” Ali tries to explain further to Maura how Leslie’s comment is true, suggesting that Maura was compensated as a man at Berkley, amongst a litany of other benefits she enjoyed while presenting as male, which leads to Maura’s departure from the campfire. As Maura begins to pack her things, she becomes increasingly belligerent, shouting “Man on the land!”

During this climactic point in the episode, another narrative from this season reaches its own crescendo. Throughout the season, much like in the first season, we follow a dual narrative timeline; this time it’s Maura’s ancestors living in 1930s Berlin. Audiences watch her young mother Rose (played by Emily Robinson), Rose’s transgendered sister, Gittel (played by Hari Neff), and their mother, Yetta (played by Michaela Watkins), struggle to cope with the onset of Nazi control over the Weimar Republic. Before discussing the juxtaposition of these narrative climaxes, we should address several elements of the flashbacks to “the cosmopolitan city’s flourishing gay subculture” (Liebman, 2015, p. 1).

In an episode entitled “Cherry Blossoms,” Ali and her friend Syd (played by Carrie Brownstein) make a trip to see Maura’s mother, Rose, at her assisted living residence. During this visit, Rose mistakenly identifies Ali as Gershon, when she sees an old pearl ring that Ali is

wearing on a necklace. However, this misidentification leads Ali and Syd to the Malibu Public Library so that Ali can “get some family ‘deets’ into this essay.” As Ali and Syd read in an aisle of the library, a flashback sequence begins with a lingering shot of signs posted at the entrance to Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld’s “Institut für Sexualwissenschaft.” The shot cuts to Rose as she approaches the building, pays for a ticket, and enters the building. Now inside, a tour guide begins to describe what this place is, saying “we believe that a wide range of sexualities, including homosexuality, are normal.” The guide goes on to explain that this is a “safe haven” for people who “are neither male nor female, as *you* understand them.” Next, the group is directed to a portrait of the institute’s founder, Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, a German physician and sexologist who advocated intensely for “sexual minorities” in the early twentieth century. This introduction to Hirschfeld, and a connection between him and the Pfefferman family, provides *Transparent* with its most obvious nod to the historical attempts to conceptualize gender identity and sexuality.

For the purposes of this paper, I will not discuss Hirschfeld’s extended contribution to the understanding of gender and sexuality, but it is important to acknowledge his inclusion into the narrative of *Transparent*. Much of Hirschfeld’s research on sexuality was done in an attempt to emancipate individuals that seemed to defy the limited categorization of sexuality and gender. In his book *Die Tranvestiten*, Hirschfeld offers his “theory of intermediaries.” In the book, he challenges the “dualism of the sexes” by suggesting that, in Hill’s (2005) words, “we are all inherently bisexual (in terms of personality, not sexual orientation) because we all have male and female qualities” (p. 319). Hill (2005) goes on to summarize Hirschfeld’s thoughts on transvestism, and his conflation of that with transsexualism, as “the creation of a sexual category premised on a theory that disavowed categories” (p. 320). Furthermore, Garber (1992) notes that

Hirschfeld “strongly argued that transvestism was a ‘thing in itself,’ quite different from sexual orientation” (p.132).

Getting back to the show, Rose decides to leave the tour group. In the next scene, the audience is introduced to Rose’s sibling, who she calls Gershon, at first, while discussing their mother’s wishes to leave Germany and find their father in America. Several episodes later, we open on the flashback narrative showing Rose and Gershon arriving to Yetta’s home with money for the passports. Upon seeing her young cross-dressed son, Yetta asks, “You walked over here like that, and no one beat the fuck out of you?” Gershon replies that he has a government-issued “transvestite pass” that he credits Hirschfeld with helping him acquire. After a tense conversation about what transvestism is, where Yetta makes the connection between cross-dressing and being “feygeleh,” or Yiddish slang for queer, Rose tells Yetta that she is going to leave with Gittel, the new self-given name of Gershon. After an extended montage of partying and performance at the sexual research institute (with much focus on the pearl ring that leads to Rose’s calling Ali by the wrong name) there is a quarrel between Gittel and Yetta about the name that was put on the visa. When Gittel sees that Gershon is that name Yetta used, she refuses to leave the institute.

As I mentioned before, the flashback narrative culminates simultaneously with the climax of the episode “Man on the Land.” If you will recall, the episode ends with Maura feeling extremely attacked following an argumentative encounter with women at the feminist music festival. As Maura grows increasingly aggressive, shouting “man on the land,” Ali begins to experience a hallucination initiated with the vision of “Jew shoes” on her feet. Next, she sees Yetta walking hurriedly along the path. The scene cuts back to 1933 Berlin, where Rose, Gittel, Hirschfeld, and several others sit quietly. As one cross-dressed individual reads near the window, the audience watches as a group of Nazis arrive to ransack the institute. As the Nazis begin to

corral the people inside and destroy the library, a montage juxtaposing their destruction and Maura's violent thrashing at her campsite ensues.

I do not think that this juxtaposition is accidental on the part of Soloway and the writing team. By contrasting Maura's intense emotional reaction to being challenged on her right to attend a women's only festival, due in large part to the anatomical characteristics of her body, with Nazis arriving to destroy Hirschfeld's institute, and suppress the progressive work of emancipating sexual minorities, the show conflates the intrusions of outsiders into safe spaces. I contend that this scene can be read as the decisive moment that Maura and Gittel both learn their bodies do not qualify as human bodies. Butler (1999) writes:

Those bodily figures who do not fit into either gender fall outside the human, indeed, constitute the domain of the dehumanized and the abject against which the human itself is constituted. If gender is always there, delimiting in advance what qualifies the human, how can we speak of a human who *becomes* its gender, as if gender were a postscript or a cultural afterthought? (p. 151)

In other words, what can we make of the transgendered experience? How can we read a body marked by characteristics of the opposite gender, both seen and unseen? Unfortunately for Gittel and Maura, the answer seems to be that we cannot read that body. In Gittel's world, this notion has much more serious consequences, as the audience watches her be carried away by Nazis to what we can all imagine to be an unpleasant death. For Maura, this realization of the unintelligible reading of her body by other women once more underscores the importance of her transition.

Gender Confirmation Surgery

In season three, Maura's desire to be read as female intensifies following a slight medical emergency that puts her in the county hospital rather than her desired destination of Cedars Sinai. While Maura is in the hospital in the, she expresses an anxiety to her new girlfriend, Vicki. Maura tells her that she thought she was going to die, to which Vicki assures Maura that she is not. Maura replies, "I am not living. I am not doing the things I could be doing, and I do not want to die with some arrogant asshole calling me Mr. Pfefferman." Funk and Funk (2016) note that:

Discrimination in the medical field is especially problematic because many trans* individuals will visit doctors' offices more frequently than will cisgender individuals to undergo surgical procedures, hormone supplementation, and other treatments to alter primary and secondary physical characteristics. (p.894)

So, in the next episode, titled "To Sardines and Back," Maura begins to take those steps more profoundly with a makeover, but more importantly, with an announcement at dinner that evening.

As the family gathers at the house for a birthday party for Maura, there is much talk about Maura's new look. First, Vicki asks Maura about "something in [her] dress" which turns out to be shapewear that Maura is wearing to create a more feminine physique. Next, Josh exclaims that "somebody is stepping it up" while the rest of the family undoubtedly agrees that Maura has made great "improvements." During dinner, Maura brings up a desire to be called something other than Moppa, the endearing name given to her by Ali in season one. Describing the name as "flopsy-mopsy" the audience gets a sense that Maura no longer wants to be seen as something in-between or in flux, part man and part woman, but rather as something stable and static. She asks to be called Grandma by Sarah's children, and Mom by her own children. In yet another challenge to Maura's authenticity as female, her ex-wife Shelley (played by Judith Light) says:

Get a load of this. Mom? Hmm, okay. Well, I mean, were you there when Sarah got her period? Did you slap her across the face like a good Jewish mother? Did you show her how to put her tampon in?

Maura, obviously offended, decides this moment is as good as any to inform the family of her plans to transition medically. The announcement is met with mixed reactions, but ultimately the family and friends assure Maura that they're supportive no matter what. However, when Maura and Shelley leave the table, the three Pfefferman children begin to laugh which could certainly be said to express an absurdity at the thought of Maura's gender confirmation surgery. In other words, Maura's desire to have reconstructive surgery to be read more intelligibly as female is something worthy of mocking, even in the most supportive of families. The absurdity of their father's surgical transition is further discussed as they play a game called "Sardines." Hiding in the closet, the children discuss Maura's desire to change in relation to their own feelings about her appearance. At one point, Ali says, "Yeah, but it's not like she's a Beverly Hills housewife, you know? She just wants to feel beautiful." Then, Josh suggests, "I think I'm okay with the face. Ahem. Just... the idea of Dad's pussy". Each of the children then speak those words aloud, "Dad's pussy," as if to accept that as an assault on everything they know about that parent.

In the next episode, entitled "Just the Facts," Maura meets with her surgeon to discuss the various procedures and to see a computer simulation of what she can expect to look like when they've finished. As Maura expresses pleasure at her simulated, future self the doctor tells her that before moving forward Maura will need to provide a note from a psychologist to approve the surgery. Maura replies, "I have to ask another person for permission?" Certainly, Maura is expressing a frustration at her apparent lack of agency over her own medical decisions, but the subtext can be understood to reinforce that our identities, especially in terms of gender, require

us to constantly be asking permission to belong to the group we feel most comfortable.

Unfortunately for trans individuals, that permission to belong is more difficult to earn without certain anatomical prerequisites.

In the stand-alone flashback episode for season three, entitled “If I Were a Bell,” the audience is given a look at Maura’s confusing childhood in the late 1950s. In the first shots after the opening credits, we see close-ups of a young girl, hair held in place by a barrette, wearing makeup, and dressed in a faux-fur white sweater and white skirt as she plays in the dirt. The pleasant sounds of chirping birds are replaced by the excited sounds of a little league baseball game. A voice over screams, “Mort, young man, wake up!” and as the young girl looks up, the moment is exposed as a daydream when the shot cuts to the same person dressed in a baseball uniform. As the young baseball player struggles to get back into the game, more shouting reveals that this character is a young Mort Pfefferman (played by Sophia Giannamore). Due to his obliviousness, the coach, Mort’s own grandfather, Haim (played by Michael Stuhlbarg) removes Mort from the game and replaces him with another boy from the bench. While sitting on the bench, Haim continues to yell at Mort until the young boy decides to leave the ballpark.

Once Mort is home, the audience watches him remove his baseball cap and take a floral hat box into the family’s bomb shelter. As his grandmother, Yetta, hangs clothes on the line outside, music can be heard coming from the shelter’s ventilation. As Yetta continues with her work, Rose (now played by Gaby Hoffmann) returns home. When Yetta confronts Rose about what is happening in the bomb shelter, Rose dismisses her. Yetta replies, “It brings down God’s judgement. Go talk some sense into that boy before it’s too late.” Rose obliges, and heads into the bunker to chastise young Mort for his cross-dressing. She warns him that his grandfather, Haim, can never find out about this before telling Mort, “You’re a very pretty dancer.” It could

be argued that this mixed message reveals an empathy from Rose, likely due to her relationship with Gittel, but her warnings to conceal the behavior from the family patriarch suggest an internalization of fear and suppression of Mort's feelings of gender confusion. This suppression is reinforced later in the episode when an airstrike siren sounds and the entire family is forced into the bomb shelter. Moments prior to the siren, Mort had been in the bunker dressed in the female clothing his mother allows him to wear in private. Unable to change quickly enough, Mort is discovered by his grandfather still dressed in a white nightgown. Haim responds with outrage. He demands that Mort stop, for good, this behavior before bringing up Gershon. From a low camera angle, one that establishes Haim as dominant and aggressive, he pulls Mort out into the room. The shot changes angles and now looks down on the pair, huddled in the bomb shelter. At one point Haim tells Mort that Gershon, "burned to death in the oven. You want to know why? Because your mother and your grandmother let him run around in a skirt." Clearly, the message to Mort was that this behavior is a matter of life and death, and that if he is to survive, he needed to adhere to the gender policing that is constantly imposed upon us all.

In the next episode, entitled "Off the Grid," Maura again meets with her plastic surgeon. During the meeting, Maura discovers that her cardiologist cannot approve her for the gender confirmation surgery due to a concern about whether she is healthy enough to be anesthetized. After hearing the news, Maura begs the doctor to allow her to sign a waiver to move forward. The doctor tells Maura, "Just because you can't have this surgery doesn't mean you can't have a happy life." However, it's clear by Maura's expression that she does not feel the same way. I contend that for a character as entrenched in the gender binary, and as indoctrinated by an essentialist conceptualization of gender, this news does, indeed, jeopardize Maura's ability to

feel happy and comfortable in her body. However, as the episode ends there is an interesting turn of events.

Maura, newly single after a big fight with Vicki, decides to go out with her friends for a night of drinking and dancing. While they are on the dance floor, Maura is approached by a man named Donald (played by John Getz). The audience watches this approach happen in the reflection of a mirrored wall near the dance floor, which is no mistake. The shot implies that Donald sees Maura just as she sees herself. As the two begin dancing, it is clear that Maura is facing an internal struggle. However, before the scene ends, it appears that Maura has embraced this destabilization of her sexual desire, that had previously been reserved for women. Then, the stakes are further raised as the episode ends with Donald and Maura engaging in passionate kissing and foreplay. At one point Donald says to Maura, "I want to taste that big clit" (28:18-28:20), before performing oral sex on her. Is it possible that this linguistic reframing of Maura's anatomy could supplement her ability to accept the unintelligibility of her trans body? Does the attraction of a man help to reconstitute Maura's own gender identity?

In the next episode, the season three finale "Exciting and New," Soloway and her writers seem to have answers to those questions. The episode focuses on a cruise vacation taken by all four of the Pfeffermans. As each member of the family explores the ship, Maura finds herself in a clothing store onboard. She spots an outfit that she likes and when an employee of the store approaches to help, Maura asks, "Is this for men or for women?" The employee responds, "For both, either," in perhaps the most direct challenge to the sartorial codes that have plagued Maura's ability to perform her "core" identity since childhood.

Maura buys the outfit and in the next scene, we see her wearing it as she walks along the deck of the ship. As she walks near the railing, Ali approaches her and compliments the new

purchase. As they talk, Maura informs Ali that her surgery had been denied and explains the reasons why the doctors came to that decision for her. Additionally, she tells her she is going to stop wearing her “spandex and feminine shapewear” because, “it’s one thing to wear this stuff if you, uh, know you’re going to transform into a new shape, but, uh, otherwise it just feels like a costume. It feels like I’m hiding. It feels like—it feels wrong.” Maura goes on to describe an empty feeling, saying, “I feel like I’m—like I’m nothing. I feel nothing. It sucks. And now I don’t know what or who I want anymore.” This admission of not knowing “what or who” she wants can be read to suggest that Maura is perhaps abandoning her essentialist worldview, and acknowledging the destabilization her identity in a number of ways. As the scene progresses, there is a very poignant moment between Maura and Ali, that will likely be discussed again in the next chapter.

In response to Maura’s comments, Ali asks if the two can say a prayer together. Ali’s prayer starts:

Great Mystery, Goddess, let us mark this moment to say goodbye to these tight, terrible Spanx. Deliver us from feeling bunched up in the ass! And restricted and confined! Let us just be! Set us free!

Maura and Ali close the prayer by shouting together, hand in hand, “set us free!” I believe this moment marks an emancipatory moment for both Ali and Maura. We’ll get to Ali later, but for Maura, this moment sets in motion an acceptance of her trans body. There is no doubt that Maura still struggles with her identity, but from this moment forward in the show she seems to become more and more comfortable in her own skin.

Judaica and Fatherhood

The search for inner peace continues for Maura in the fourth season. In fact, much of the season takes place in Israel, further underscoring the “spiritual” journey that Maura finds herself on. Chaney (2017) writes:

Dualities, particularly with regard to gender, have always been present in *Transparent*, but that motif is dialed up a few notches this season, via everything from various characters’ shifting ideas about their own sexual orientations to arguments about whether Israelis or Palestinians deserve to occupy the West Bank. (p.5)

Without seeming flippant, or that a detailed analysis of season four is unneeded, much of Maura’s journey has been completed by this season. The narrative in the fourth season, situated in the context of Israeli and Palestinian conflict, seems to suggest that Maura has accepted that she will likely never be a member of a “stable” gender category in the widely accepted binary model. In other words, there is no “two-state” solution; rather, there a fluidity to culture and identity that we must navigate on our own terms.

To illustrate this acceptance, consider a scene in the season’s second episode, entitled “Groin Anomaly.” Toward the end of the episode, Maura and Ali are at LAX to catch their flight to Israel. As the two move through security, Maura encounters some trouble when the body scanner picks up what the TSA agent describes as a “groin anomaly.” Maura informs the security guard of her being trans, which prompts the female agent to call for a male agent to perform a pat down. This confusion leads to an uncomfortable moment for each party involved over who is appropriate to touch Maura’s body. This frustration leads Maura to shouting, “If you want me to be a man to pat me down, I’ll be a man. If you want me to be a woman, I’ll be a woman.”

Admittedly, Maura's identity does face other major challenges in season four, particularly when Maura is reunited with her estranged father, Moshe (played by Jerry Adler), and his Israeli family. Furthermore, in meeting her biological father, she learns for the first time about Gittel and the family history of transgenderism. In a scene with Ali and Maura after learning of the Gershon/Gittel family secret, Maura says to Ali, "My whole life, I thought I was alone in this. Imagine if I'd known." Which does lead us to wonder, how would Maura's conceptualization of gender changed if she had known? Would it have changed the feelings of otherness that Maura felt her whole life? It is hard to say, but I feel confident that, even armed with this knowledge, Maura would have still faced major obstacles as a trans individual in the "heterosexual matrix."

If there is one take away from this chapter, it would be that Maura's experiences shed an interesting light on the lives of transgender people in this country. Many of her hardships are hardships that have been well-documented by the media, such as bathroom bills, medical discrimination, and ignorant policies that ostracize trans individuals. Certainly, Maura is not representative of all trans individuals, especially in terms of her socio-economic status, as well as her unwavering support from family, but this character does seem to be an important one on television. Perhaps, through Maura's journey, we can all learn something about the fragility of our own identities. Furthermore, as a result of Maura's gender destabilization, another central character from show, Ali, begins to question her own identity in terms of sexuality and gender. In the next chapter, I will investigate Ali's reaction to the news of her parent's transition and her own conceptions of sexuality and gender identity becoming destabilized.

CHAPTER 3

As much as *Transparent* is a show about Maura Pfefferman's late-in-life transition from male to female, the show is really, as described by Levy (2015), "at its core, a family drama about California Jews who have a standing order at Canter's Deli." In other words, as important as Maura's story is to the show's overall narrative, it is not the only story that is being told. Nonetheless, her transition is certainly intertwined with each journey on which the show's other central characters find themselves embarked. In this chapter, we'll discuss one of those characters who, in my opinion, is most affected in terms of their own identity by Maura's newly revealed transgender status. Specifically, this chapter will focus on Ali Pfefferman and the destabilizing effect that her parent's transition has on her own sexuality and gender identification. However, before getting into a detailed analysis of the primary text, I think it's important to give some context to Ali's character and the actress that plays her, Gaby Hoffmann.

Interestingly, Ali is the very first of the Pfefferman family to be on screen. I believe it can be argued that this establishes her as the show's central protagonist, and representative of Jill Soloway's own unique perspective in the semi-autobiographical narrative. However, this paper is not an exploration of auteurism, though it is interesting to note the connections between Soloway and Ali. Especially, considering Soloway's own identification as gender non-binary.

In an interview done for *The Hollywood Reporter*, the creator of *Transparent*, Jill Soloway, discusses casting Hoffmann for the role. The interviewer asks "Did you write the role for Gaby?" Soloway responds, "Totally. 100 percent" (Katz, 2014). Furthermore, while discussing the costuming on the show, Soloway acknowledges that Ali is meant to be the character that most obviously experiences what she calls an "inheritance of gender queerness" (Katz, 2014). This casting choice may very well have been, in part, due to Hoffmann's unusual upbringing in 1980s New York. Hoffmann, the daughter of Andy Warhol superstar Viva, spent

much of her youth living in the Chelsea Hotel. In an article written for *Vogue Magazine*, Hoffmann shares this about the community of her childhood, “I have a friend who also grew up in Lower Manhattan, and she puts it very succinctly: If you grew up the way we did in the eighties in New York and you weren’t trans, bi, queer, drug addict, or an artist, *you* were the freak” (Garcia, 201, p. 4). Hoffmann echoes these sentiments in another article done for *The Guardian* where she explains, “I was given an incredible gift growing up in the Chelsea, a space where it is completely fine to be yourself, you just had to figure out what that was” (Moylan, 2015, p.10). Furthermore, she suggests that, “Ali is coming to those questions now in life. I don’t know that anyone in the family had to ask themselves these questions until Maura came out. I feel like I just had a leg-up in that department” (Moylan, 2015).

As mentioned before, this chapter will map the progression of Ali Pfefferman throughout the four seasons of *Transparent*. What I aim to show is that Ali’s journey toward gender expansiveness can be read as a post-modern, constructivist conceptualization. In the following subsections, I will discuss Ali’s reaction to Maura’s coming out in terms of “Destabilization,” “The New School Dynamics of Love,” “Finding the Goddess,” and “Abandoning the Binary.” The sections will follow, more or less, a chronological structure and will address the major themes along Ali’s path to a gender non-binary identity.

Destabilization

Ali’s characterization as sexually promiscuous begins within the first five minutes of the pilot episode. After brief introductions to each of the Pfefferman children, Ali and her friend, Syd (played by Carrie Brownstein), walk and talk through a park. During this time, Ali pitches

Syd an idea that she has for a book parodying the children's book *Are You My Mother*. Ali describes the book as, "sort of Urban Outfitters' checkout line book... called *Are You My Soulmate*... sort of a cautionary tale about slutting around and being me." In fact, during this pitch to Syd, Ali's attention is broken when she notices a man at the park looking at her; a man that will eventually become a sexual partner for Ali. Keeping this in mind, let's move our discussion forward by examining Ali's reaction to Mort's coming out.

In the first season's third episode, Ali takes hallucinogenic drugs with the intention of engaging in sexual behavior with the man she met in the park and his roommate. The plan is foiled after Ali suggests an underlying homoeroticism between the man and his roommate in the encounter and they force her to leave. While still under the influence of the drugs, Ali is contacted by Mort and the two agree to meet up as the episode ends. The next episode, "Moppa," begins with Ali seeing Mort as Maura for the very first time. Ali exclaims, "You finally make sense to me." And she goes onto make comments like, "I see you completely. It's like I have never seen you before." Finally, just as the cold open ends, Ali asks, "Daddy, oh my God, what am I supposed to call you now?"

However, the warmth from Ali is not long-lived. Later in the episode, Ali and Sarah, who already knows about their parent's transgender status, discuss the revelation. From the very beginning of the scene, it's obvious that Ali, having sobered up, is now repulsed by the notion of her father transitioning. She mocks Maura's attempts to feminize her body, criticizing her choice to paint her toenails and "toe skin," and openly contests the appropriate pronoun that she should use in reference to Maura. Further, Ali reveals to Sarah the name that she had come up with to better identify their father during this time of transitioning, Moppa. Ali explains, "Yeah. Like momma and papa." When Sarah suggests that it's sweet, Ali argues, "It's not sweet. It's

insanity!” Shortly after, Maura contacts Sarah and Ali and the three go out for brunch and a shopping excursion. Ali is noticeably distant to Maura the entire day, and even manipulates her parent into buying cosmetics that she later returns for cash.

However, despite Ali’s seeming disgust, Maura’s coming out has initiated in her what Oswald et al. (2005) call “queering processes.” As that team of researchers explains, ‘queering processes refers to acts and ideas that resist heteronormativity by challenging the gender, sexuality, and/or family binaries’ (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005, p. 146). Evidence of this happening within the Pfefferman family can be seen most obviously in Ali. For example, consider her actions following the news of Mort’s transition. As we have discussed, Ali’s reaction shifts from warm and accepting, at first, to cold and suspicious the next time she and Maura interact. Beyond the way Ali treats Maura, though, let’s consider a radical change in her appearance shortly after Maura’s coming out.

Later in the same episode, Ali visits a barbershop to have a significant amount of her hair cut off. In the next scene, Ali is bathing in the tub and scrubbing off the makeup that she, Sarah, and Maura had applied during the shopping spree. This moment can be read as the initial steps to Ali’s “queering” of her own identity. In both a literal and metaphorical sense, Ali challenges cultural expectations of femininity by cutting her hair short and washing away the makeup. However, the destabilization of her identity does not end at a surface level change to her presentation of self.

The New School Dynamics of Love

In season one episode six, entitled “The Wilderness,” Ali and Maura have a conversation about Ali’s plans to go back to school. Ali explains, “it’s women’s studies and gender studies”

and that much of her newly found inspiration to pursue this scholarship is thanks to Maura's transitioning. As the two speak about the program, Maura tells Ali, "You know, I saw so much of myself in you when you were just young and growing up and experimenting in your gender confusion." Maura goes even further to suggest that, "some people say it runs in the family." This obviously makes Ali uncomfortable, as it is perhaps the very first time that the stability of her gender identity has been challenged.

Shortly after this scene, Ali and her friend Syd audit a women's studies class, teasing the professor most of the time. After the class ends, Ali introduces herself to the teaching assistant for the class, who happens to be a transman named Dale. The two hit it off and decide to go for a walk to continue the conversation about transgender experience. As they speak, Ali's identity is challenged yet again by Dale when he asks, "You're a dyke, right?" When Ali protests this classification, Dale replies, "You kind of give off those vibes." Ali further defends her heterosexuality by claiming to prefer sexual partners that are highly masculine.

Interestingly enough, though not surprising for Ali's character, her actions following this conversation with Dale are further evidence of Maura's transgender status "decentering heteronormativity" (Oswald et al., 2005). In season one episode seven, entitled "Symbolic Exemplar," Ali and Syd search a vintage clothing store for a "high fem" look that Dale told Ali he preferred in women. As they peruse the clothing, Syd explains "high fem" and "low fem" and even classifies Ali as "middle Earth fem" to poke fun at her usual sloppy attire. The scene cuts to Ali and Syd in a dressing room with Syd tying the straps to Ali's bright red dress. The dress is undoubtedly "high fem" with plenty of cleavage to showcase Ali's "authentic womanhood." And, as if that were not enough, Ali finishes the look with hot red lipstick. Syd tells her, "You look hot as shit, Al."

In terms of the narrative, what follows this scene is important insight into Ali's childhood and her relationship to Judaism. In it, she expresses dread over having to wear a dress and participate in her bat mitzvah. However, for the sake of the structure of this chapter, we will wait until a later subsection to discuss this scene. Instead, I aim to keep our focus on Ali's present-day timeline. This timeline moves forward when Ali and Dale connect for an evening together, Ali dressed as "high fem" as she could muster. The two arrive at Dale's house, a log cabin furnished in an extremely masculine way, the aesthetic even completed with neon beer signs. During the time at Dale's house, there is an interesting power dynamic between the two. At one point, Dale insists that Ali call him "daddy." Ali allows Dale the opportunity to act dominating over her, solidifying him as the powerful, masculine presence that he presents himself to be; especially with the beard and frequent wearing of flannel shirts. Continuing in this fashion, Ali allows Dale to make choices for her body and he shaves Ali's pubic hair. Ali exclaims, "Not what I had in mind, but I have to admit it's pretty hot." Sure enough, Ali's exploration of this power dynamic is taken a step further when she and Dale make a trip to a sex shop to purchase a dildo. As they check out, Ali says that she will buy everything and explains, "This is on daddy, Daddy."

There is no doubt that this act is in direct response to Maura's transition. I contend that this sexual exploration with a transman, and particularly the willingness to be dominated by a masculine presence, happen because Ali is struggling with a perceived loss of her own father's masculinity. Ali, who acknowledges her own promiscuity in the pilot episode, seeks to understand this loss through sexual experimentation. In fact, as the episode continues, Ali and Dale, along with Ali's siblings, Sarah and Josh, attend the talent show where Maura is performing. As Ali watches, she becomes uncomfortable to the point that she feels the need to leave the room. Dale follows after her, and they wind up in the bathroom where Dale suggests

moving things “into a stall” as he holds the newly purchased sex toy. Ali agrees to this nonchalantly, and the two prepare to have sex. Though, the sex never happens due to some comedic mishandlings of the sex toy and a moment of realization from Ali who is no longer thrilled by the idea of this sexual endeavor. Next, as they drive home, Dale suggests that Ali is a “trans chaser” or, “someone who likes trans people because they’re trans.” Ali seems perturbed by the comment and then violently adjusts her restrictive clothing. When her and Dale arrive back at his home, it is not the same place as before, nor is Dale driving the old pickup truck that he was moments ago, rather he is in a four-door sedan. This incongruity in setting and aesthetic suggest that Ali is becoming unhinged. The subtext here is obvious, Ali no longer sees the world as she once did. Her framework has been “queered.”

The destabilization of Ali’s gender and sexuality continue through the next seasons, especially through two lesbian relationships. The first of these relationships is with Ali’s longtime friend, Syd, after they reconnect in season two following a falling out over Syd’s sexual intimacy with Ali’s brother, Josh. The second homosexual relationship that Ali enters is with Leslie Mackinaw, a poet and a professor of Women’s and Gender Studies at UCLA, who she meets on a lunch date set up by one of Maura’s old colleagues. As you may recall from the previous chapter, during this lunch meeting Maura is challenged by Leslie for her misogynistic actions in the past while presenting as Mort.

While the romantic parts of these relationships do happen at different points in the season, Ali’s infatuation with Leslie coincides with her blossoming relationship with Syd. In fact, in a scene shortly following Ali and Leslie’s initial meeting, Ali reads one of Leslie’s poems to Syd and a group of lesbian friends at a bowling alley. As the poem becomes voice-over narration, the scene becomes a montage juxtaposing Ali’s attention to the group of women

around her and the group of women seeing and sizing up Ali. The scene, in an episode entitled “New World Coming,” indicates a shift in Ali that transcends the changes she has made to her appearance. Not only has Ali’s clothing and body become more “masculine,” but now her desire is beginning to reflect her inner feelings of identity confusion. This relationship between gender performance and desire is noted by Butler (1999) when she writes that a binary gender system “presupposes not only a causal relation among sex, gender, and desire, but suggests as well that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desire” (p. 31).

Ali and Syd’s relationship progresses, and the two make a trip to see Maura’s mother, Rose. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this meeting provides an interesting moment of foreshadowing when Ali is misidentified by Rose as Gershon. If you will recall from the last chapter, Gershon is the given name of Rose’s transgender sibling who went by the name Gittel. At the time of this meeting, neither Ali, nor any of the other Pfeffermans, know that Gershon and Gittel were the same person. This misidentification seems to underscore the idea that Ali is on her way to identifying as trans or, more accurately in her case, gender-nonconforming.

Ali addresses this change in her identity in the opening scene of the next episode while she and Sarah sit in a steam room. Sarah asks Ali about her new relationship with Syd by asking, “So, what, you just changed?” Ali answers in a way that suggests she “finally crossed a line that I always had there for some reason.” This answer indicates that Ali is willing to acknowledge the idea that she may well have had homosexual desires long before her willingness to engage in homoerotic behaviors.

In terms of Ali’s rewritten rules of sexual attraction, the shift from heterosexual to homosexual behavior also initiated an openness to an array of sexual possibilities. During her relationship with Syd, Ali works on her application for UCLA and begins seeing and speaking

with Leslie more and more. This relationship begins to interfere with Ali and Syd's budding romance when Ali spends the night at Leslie's home after going there to seek advice about her application essay. Not only does it create friction between Ali and Syd, it also pushes Ali further into a destabilized sexuality. When Syd informs Ali that she is upset about the lack of communication that has led to her jealous feelings, Ali responds by saying, "So, what if I *was* vaguely attracted to her? What if? What if we could just talk about it, process it together, maybe even get turned on by it?" At this suggestion, Syd asks Ali if this means that she wants to engage in a polyamory, as opposed to the more widely practiced monogamy. Ali begins to respond by questioning Syd's "knee-jerk, heteronormative" reaction. Syd becomes increasingly annoyed and asserts that Ali has "only been queer for like thirty seconds." At this, Ali takes the conversation down a route of philosophical marveling at the meaning of queerness. She declares, "What is being queer, if not questioning everything, right? What it means to be in a relationship that's loving and trusting and generous... and we can do that however we want! We can make up our own rules." In this way, Ali is actively engaged in what McGuire et al. (2016) call the "dismantling" of cisnormativity and heteronormativity.

As one can imagine, despite Syd's identity as queer, her feelings and expectations for relationships are well-defined by Butler's (1999) heterosexual matrix which normalizes concepts like monogamy. Due to these deep-seeded conceptualizations of romance, the relationship between Ali and Syd ends, giving license to Ali to explore other options as a queer person. As expected, Ali sets her sights on Leslie, continuing to seek her counsel on the application process among other things. Take for example, Ali's desire to attend a women's music festival where Leslie will be reading selections of her poetry.

During the festival, Ali spends a considerable amount of time with Leslie and her group of friends, a self-described group of “the last remaining extremists.” As I discussed in the previous chapter, these “extremists” turn out to have an issue with Maura’s attendance at the festival, which is supposed to be for “women born women” only. Despite this hostility toward her vulnerable parent, Ali stays in the company of Leslie and the other women. This time spent together leads to the start of the romantic relationship between Leslie and Ali, complete with a caveat from the former about relationships between teachers and students being inappropriate.

And throughout the third season, Ali and Leslie’s relationship provides an arena for Ali’s newly queer identity to take hold. Take for example, a conversation between the couple in the fourth episode of season three, entitled “Just the Facts,” where Ali confides in Leslie about a moment of possible infidelity. When Leslie does not respond with the jealous reaction that Ali says, “I know that we have our thing, and I totally appreciate your rejection of traditional romantic relationships from a socio-political standpoint. And, I agree! But, I just... I really really like you, a lot. And I don’t like having to pretend and I don’t want to.” Notice that this short monologue from Ali shares a commonality with the conversation that was ultimately responsible for the break-up with Syd, where the key difference between the two scenes is Ali’s position of power. In her relationship with Syd, a newly queer Ali was excited by the seemingly endless ways of engaging in relationships that challenge the status quo. However, in the relationship with Leslie this is no longer the case. In this moment, Ali chooses to be vulnerable and shares that she is, in fact, not excited by a radical reformation of the heteronormative romantic ideal.

Later in the same episode, the couple again have a conversation about expectations of a relationship. The scene begins as Ali and Leslie, freshly showered and sexually satisfied, sit for coffee. Ali exclaims, “My pussy hurts!” Leslie responds, impressed with herself. However, when

it becomes clear that Ali is not sharing this as a compliment, but as a complaint, Leslie becomes concerned and mentions that Ali should have said something. The conversation becomes an analysis of the sexual experience where Ali grows annoyed saying, “This is weird. I don’t want to do a post-game on our fucking.” Leslie shouts back, “Why not? It’s supposed to be a collective experience. There is a difference between fucking and making love.” And just like that, the deterioration of this new relationship begins with Ali insisting that Leslie not call sexual engagement “love making.”

As the season progresses, a distance grows between Ali and Leslie. It seems that while Ali begins to become more authentic to herself, especially in terms of her Judaism and her gender identity, the more independence she wants. Proof of this can be found in the episode “Off the Grid” when Ali decides to travel to Kansas to bring home her struggling brother, Josh. In the last scene that Ali and Leslie share, they have a heated moment where Leslie suggests that she is keen on Ali’s nature. In other words, Ali is once again confronted for her inability to maintain intimate relationships with her romantic partners, and much like Syd we never again see Leslie.

While Syd and Leslie are not the last of the romantic relationships that Ali engages in during the course of the show, I think it is important to move this discussion into the other identity that Ali begins to explore more seriously following Maura’s coming out, her Jewish one. In the next section, I will discuss Ali’s attempt to understand Judaism and what it means to be a Jewish woman.

Finding the Goddess

Ali’s strained relationship to spirituality and Judaism are first introduced in a flashback scene from season one episode “Symbolic Exemplar.” The scene opens with a caption indicating

the year to be 1994, and a young Ali holding a dress and complaining to her father. Indicative of the gender confusion that Maura once spoke to Ali about in earlier episodes from this season, the young girl cries, "It's torture in a dress." However, the conversation quickly moves away from discussion of costume and into a discussion about God and religion. After suggesting that she does not want to have a bat mitzvah, Ali asks Mort, "Honest, do you actually believe in God?" He responds with a moment of real honesty saying, "You know, I sometimes have conflict. You know, sometimes I wonder if there is, uh... You know, with the pain and the suffering and... I struggle with it." Though it cannot be translated well into this quotation, there is a long beat before Mort says, "I struggle with it," meant to underscore the depth of his own feelings of shame and pain for his gender confusion. This honest moment from Mort pushes Ali to challenge the idea of God and religion again by asking, "So, if there's no God, I mean, honestly, like, everything we do, no one sees it?" Mort does not respond, but sits in quiet contemplation.

The flashback scene continues with Mort excitedly encouraging his wife to allow Ali to make this decision. It is important to remember here, that Mort has selfish motives for wanting the bat mitzvah to be cancelled. Recall that earlier in the first season, during the first trip that Mort and his friend Mark take to debut their transvestism publicly, they read about the cross-dressing retreat at Camp Camellia. Mort expresses disappointment in not being able to attend the camp because of the scheduling conflict with Ali's bat mitzvah.

When this flashback begins again in the next episode, "Best New Girl," the weekend of Ali's bat mitzvah has arrived and Mort is getting into the car to leave as his wife, Shelley, airs grievances once again about the how the cancelled event will affect her social life. Meanwhile, Ali and Sarah sit and listen as Mort drives away and Shelley makes plans to visit a friend. As the

episode progresses, each one of the Pfeffermans make plans that leave Ali alone for the weekend.

The abandonment, especially in the context of her relationship to God and Judaism, is explored further in the season one finale, when the Pfefferman family gathers for the funeral of Shelly's second husband, Ed. During the service, Ali confronts Maura after noticing her Star of David necklace by antagonistically asking, "Since when are you into Judaism?" It is worth noting here, that by this point in the season, Ali is directly challenging gender conventions not only with a change to her style of hair, but also in contesting sartorial codes by dressing in a suit and tie. These challenges of the status quo continue from Ali as the episode progresses and she becomes increasingly upset over not having a bat mitzvah. After conversations with the rabbi about her lack of Jewish culture knowledge, and then with Shelley, where Ali learns that the reason her father was willing to cancel the bat mitzvah was in order to attend the cross-dressing retreat at Camp Camellia, Ali angrily makes her way to Maura for a confrontation.

As the scene begins, Maura sits and talks with funeral guests. Ali enters the area and sits on a couch directly across from Maura. In her anger, Ali addresses Maura as "Dad" before asking, "Mom tells me that you cancelled my bat mitzvah to go to some dress-up camp in the woods; is that true?" When Maura responds by suggesting that it was ultimately Ali's decision to cancel, Ali insists that it was inappropriate to allow someone of her young age to make such a decision. As the conversation continues, it devolves into a shouting match between the parent and child. At one point, Maura asks Ali to keep her voice down and she responds by yelling, "Oh, keep my voice down? Because *that's* our family religion: secrecy!" Undoubtedly, this charge of secrecy is a jab at Maura's years of hidden transvestism.

Throughout season two, Ali, in an uncharacteristically healthy way, channels this anger about her religion into a desire to learn. Interestingly, this eagerness to learn about Judaism happens simultaneously with the destabilization of Ali's sexuality and gender identification. During this time, Ali begins to present herself in very masculine dress and style and as noted by Garber (1992) "one mode of Jewish 'manliness' mandated a life of study" (p.227). At several points in the season, Ali discusses her new interest in Judaism and an intersectionality that she sees between it and womanhood. This is addressed most directly in the episode "The Book of Life" during a Yom Kippur break fast meal. Prior to dinner, Ali stands to give a blessing and says, "I've just started, sort of, investigating and wondering about my Jewish-ness." She goes onto explain the meaning behind the holiday of Yom Kippur, the most holy day of the Jewish year, as a day of atonement. During the speech, Ali goes as far as to openly question the gendering of God as masculine/male. With arms outstretched, as to suggest an eagerness to receive answers, Ali tries to identify the unidentifiable, "God, he, she, whatever great energy." However, as the narrative moves into season three, it becomes clear that Ali is coming to a conclusion on this debate.

In the third episode of season three, entitled "To Sardines and Back," Ali visits the dentist for a routine cleaning. The scene opens with Ali filling the dentist in on what she is up to with work and school. The conversation leads to an uncomfortable moment where Ali corrects the dentist, a black woman, on the title of Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When The Rainbow Is Enuf*, which is a Tony Award nominated play that critiques the politics of race and gender. Not allowing this awkwardness to get in the way of business, the dentist moves on. Meanwhile, Ali admits to some anxiety about being in the chair and having her teeth cleaned, so the dentist offers her some nitrous oxide to "take the edge off."

Ali welcomes the suggestion, and the nurse arrives moments later with music and drugs. As the dentist administers the gas, Ali begins to experience a vivid hallucination where she is a contestant on *Wheel of Fortune*, along with Caitlyn Jenner, arguably the most visible transgender person on television, and the playwright Ntozake Shange. Juxtaposed with an increasingly manic game show setting are shots of Ali, completely nude, wondering around some undisclosed location. Just before the dream sequence ends, both Ali and Jenner look into the camera saying, “God is a woman.”

Three episodes later, Ali is back at the dentist’s office for “some pain.” It’s clear that what Ali has come back for is “some of that gas,” of which she knew the name during her last visit. However, Ali comes to this hallucinatory drug trip with new baggage, namely the unexpected death of Rita (likely due to suicide), the babysitter that Josh had an abusive love affair with in his adolescence. In this dream sequence, Ali is again on *Wheel of Fortune*, but this time is joined by the young and old versions of Rita (played by Annabel Marshall-Roth and Brett Paesel, respectively). Additionally, Josh and his former fiancé, Rabbi Raquel (played by Kathryn Hahn), appear. This is likely because Ali feels concerned for her brother as he grieves the loss of Rita and the miscarriage that drove he and Raquel apart. Again, this hallucination’s intensity increases to mania, but it’s important to note some of the elements of the trip that can be heard and seen. For example, during the trip a voice-over from Ali lists names like, “The Great Mystery, Goddess, Shaheena” while phrases like “There is no binary” and “The Sacred Feminine” appear as answers to puzzles on the game show. The trip ends with Ali envisioning the dentist as God, asking her questions that weigh on her mind.

The dentist removes the nitrous mask from Ali’s face, and says, “You’re back.” Ali looks stunned by this seemingly spiritual revelation. Before the dentist can leave the room, Ali unloads

everything she has just seen on the dentist, explaining that she had seen God, and that God looked exactly like the dentist does. This clearly frustrates the dentist who responds, “I can still tell you’re not flossing.” Ali is left in the room a little embarrassed.

The hallucinations are brought up again during a conversation that Ali and Leslie have while trying on new clothes for an upcoming awards banquet. As Ali describes the experience, she informs Leslie that she has been trying to think of a way to “roll this all together into a thesis.” Ali begins to describe Hebrew gematria, a numerological system used by practitioners of Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism, to interpret biblical texts (Ratzabi, 2018). When Leslie mocks Ali for the idea of writing a “thesis about dentists and the number thirty-six.” Ali defends her idea by suggesting, “It isn’t about the number thirty-six! It’s basically, like, intersectionality as the Holy Other. Right? So, female, black, trans, just any kind of other that the patriarchy would try to objectify or silence. And what if that otherness were the messiah?” Unsurprisingly, Leslie responds in a mocking way, yet again, saying, “You sound nuts.” This reaction is probably the appropriate one to have. In this idea, Ali is not challenging the binary, rather she is bolstering the idea of a binary system by which all marginalized identities, lumped together as some messianic other, stand in opposition to “the patriarchy.”

Before moving into the next section, where I will discuss Ali’s desire to abandon the type of thinking that creates binary all around us, I think it is important to re-examine a scene that I spent time on in the previous chapter where Ali and Maura say a prayer, upon Ali’s suggestion, to commemorate Maura’s decision to stop wearing her feminine shapewear. If you will recall, Ali’s prayer goes:

Great Mystery, Goddess, let us mark this moment to say goodbye to these tight, terrible Spanx. Deliver us from feeling bunched up in the ass! And restricted and confined! Let us just be! Set us free!

Now, as much as this prayer is said for Maura, in the context of shedding a costume of false femininity, it can also be read as an emancipatory moment for Ali as well. Much like Maura is beginning to accept that her body, while not matching how she feels inside, is her body, Ali is also making amends with unresolved questions of identity. In the next section, as mentioned above, I will discuss Ali's attempt at emancipation from the binaries that plague our global culture.

Abandoning the Binary

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the narrative of the fourth season is situated in the context of Israeli and Palestinian conflict, underscoring both Maura and Ali's inward struggles. In terms of analyzing Ali's character development, much like Maura, season four is a culmination of challenges to her stable identity in relation to gender and sexuality. In this season, Ali goes all in on the concept of an oppressive binary that problematizes our ability to relate to each other in the world. As Soloway shared with Jackie Strauss of *The Hollywood Reporter*:

we slowly but surely started to understand that there was no way to do an Israel story about the modern-day queer Jewish people without talking about the way that intersectionality really often pushes people to have to choose. (p. 11).

Much of this thought from Ali comes as the result of time spent with a group of activists living in Ramallah. Before asking how Ali came to be associated with a group of anti-Zionist activists, recall the episode described in the last chapter where Maura experiences discrimination

at the hands of the TSA because of a “groin anomaly” (her penis) on the body scanner. During this encounter, Ali responds in the fashion most appropriate in this day and age, by recording the entire ordeal with her cell phone before sharing it to social media.

Upon arriving in Israel, Ali discovers that the video has gone viral due to some retweets from a few highly visible accounts. Describing this to Maura, Ali shares that one of the retweets came from a human rights activist named Lyfe who is at this very moment in Israel and wants to meet. That evening, Ali joins Lyfe and her activist friends for dinner at their camp outside of Ramallah. As they eat and drink, the group expresses the frustrations they feel toward the Israeli government and its policies regarding Palestinians. At one point, a female activist says:

We’re exhausted with having every aspect of our life wrapped up in this political issue. We can’t breathe, we can’t move, we can’t go to the next city, visit friends, get an education, travel abroad, and sometimes we just want to have dinner with our friends.

After the passionate monologue, the camera cuts to Ali sitting in quiet contemplation. It would seem that the issues face by this group are some of the same issues that Ali has felt in relation to her own identity and her own boundaries and borders.

As the season progresses, Ali becomes more and more uncomfortable with classification and adherence to the binary. At one point, while visiting a Jewish settlement in the West Bank, Ali becomes angry with her newly discovered grandfather after he suggests that she would be unsafe to travel alone as a woman. Ali responds by telling him not to call her a woman because she does not care to be a part of his “fucked up math.” After settling down, Maura sits with Ali and tries to comfort her with some empathy. As they speak, Ali tells Maura, “I just don’t feel

good in my body.” Maura asks Ali, very directly, “Do you think your trans?” Ali responds by admitting, “I don’t know if I feel like a woman... whatever that means.”

Shortly after this conversation between parent and child, Ali has another profound experience that challenges the way in which she identifies and is identified by her body. This happens as Ali and Lyfe begin to engage in sexual activity and they have a conversation about the dynamics of the relationship. Ali asks, “Are you always the guy and you’re having sex with the girl?” Lyfe responds to this by suggesting, “I’m just a human person, and I just want to be a body.” In other words, Lyfe is challenging the idea that bodies should be scripted according to their parts. This scene is absolutely evidence of *Transparent*’s shifting to a rejection of essentialism and making a case for structuralism.

While Ali herself never comes out to the family as gender non-binary, the issue is discussed in the penultimate episode, entitled “They is on the Way.” In the episode, the Pfeffermans have made a stop at the Dead Sea for the day. While soaking in the water as they wait for Ali to arrive, Maura informs everyone of the discovery she has made about Gershon being trans. When Shelley wonders what the chances of having generational trans family members, Maura suggests, “Maybe it runs in the family.” She goes on to explain herself by telling the family that, “We need to give Ali some space. She’s kind of going through it, ya know?” As Maura explains herself further, Sarah excitedly chimes in saying, “Wait a second! She’s a they. She’s gender non-conforming, like non-binary, androgynous.”

As the season ends, it is clear that Ali is still in search of answers, deciding to remain in Israel as the rest of the family returns to Los Angeles. And, while it may not be obvious to Ali, it is clear that she too has begun coming to grips with the fragility of her own identity and the queering of her conceptualizations of sexuality and gender.

CHAPTER 4

It has been my goal in this paper to show how *Transparent* provides new ways of understanding gender identity. Hopefully, these past two chapters have illustrated how characters like Maura and Ali give insight into the experiences of individuals that identify as trans or gender non-conforming. This job is an important one because television audiences have rarely seen these kinds of characters developed in meaningful ways. Often times, the portrayal of these identities on television creates further dissonance between the marginalized groups and the so called mainstream culture. However, I believe that *Transparent* accomplishes their goal of creating a narrative that allows non-queer audience members an ability to connect with characters different from themselves, and thus, begin to understand the perplexing and blurry realities of human identity. On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge that problems with masculine power remain, both in the narrative of the show and on the set of its production.

Maura Pfefferman begins as representative of the modernist notions of sexuality and gender, before evolving and exposing the problematic nature of these ideas. In other words, Maura initiates her public transition by addressing the dissonance between her body and her mind. She feels that her essence is feminine, despite the sexual organs that categorized her body as one of a masculine nature. In an effort to resolve this dissonance, Maura begins to perform her identity in a way that reads as female by dressing in women's clothing and exploring options for a surgical transition. However, this effort to adhere to the traditional gender binary exposes the issues with this way of conceptualizing these ideas. As the narrative progresses, Maura begins to understand that gender is not a dichotomous structure between male and female. Arguably, Maura's recognition of gender fluidity is due, in part, to watching her youngest daughter come to

terms with her own identity. In a poignant moment on the deck of a cruise ship, the parent and child come together to denounce the trappings of false identity and commit to being fully themselves.

Ali Pfefferman has her own sexuality and gender identity destabilized by Maura's transition, providing further evidence of the narrative's lesson on post-modernist perceptions of identity. As I discussed in the previous chapter, her journey toward this new identity begins with an exploration of homosexual romance. During this time, Ali's performance of gender also begins to shift away from the femininity that she had once displayed, even if it was, as identified by a friend, "low-fem." Much like Maura, by the end of the fourth season, Ali has also decided to balk at the illusory gender binary and begins to identify as gender-nonconforming. In other words, Ali's character provides a post-structural perspective on the formation of identity by challenging not only gender essentialism, but even the historically produced societal structures that have informed our understandings of human identity.

Suggested Further Research

While I have argued that the show's most intensive exploration of modern day conceptualizations of gender can be found in the characterizations of Maura and Ali, I believe that many of the characters on this show could be used as case studies for identity. In this section, I will offer brief analyses on two of these characters in order to explore possible insights they provide. That said, there is no doubt that Maura's transition also has a destabilizing effect on the identities of her two other children, Sarah and Josh.

With regard to the eldest Pfefferman child, Sarah, it is not her gender that becomes highly destabilized necessarily; rather it is her sexuality and her ability to share intimacy in relationships

that are considered throughout the narrative. That said, it is important to remember that Sarah's exploration of her sexuality, especially in terms of homosexual relationships, started prior to Maura's transition. In fact, if you will recall, Sarah is engaged in an adulterous kiss with another woman when she first sees her father presenting as the female Maura. Perhaps this experience with queer culture is the reason that Sarah responds, more or less, fairly positively to Maura's coming out, and is supportive as her parent prepares to continue coming out to the rest of the family. However, a case could be made that Maura's coming out exacerbated Sarah's sexual confusion.

During the first season, Sarah ends up leaving her husband, Len, for a woman, Tammy, that she had dated years before. As the season progresses, this relationship becomes more and more serious leading to a wedding that opens the second season. However, during the ceremony Sarah realizes that she does not want to be married to Tammy and ends the relationship before the end of the season's opening episode. Much of the second season focuses on Sarah's attempts to move on from both Tammy and Len. As the season progresses, more time is spent on Sarah's experimentation with drugs, a newly discovered interest in BDSM, and her sexual proclivity toward submissiveness. As one can imagine, this exploration becomes problematic as Sarah begins to feel less and less in control of her life. However, toward the end of the second season Sarah becomes more involved with a femme-dominatrix named Pony that helps bring some structure to her seemingly chaotic relationship with sex and intimacy. This relationship continues into the third season, but ends following a hostile situation between the two women where Sarah takes anger over Len's relationship with a younger woman out on Pony and oversteps the consensual power dynamic of the dom/sub relationship. In addition to the stability that Sarah found in her relationship with Pony, she spends much of the third season attempting to find

structure by working closely with the rabbi, Raquel, who had been previously engaged to her younger brother. Meanwhile, Sarah and her husband have returned to a cohabitation relationship to provide some stability for their young children. As the show moves through the narrative of the fourth season, Sarah and Len continue with their attempt to redefine their so called “traditional marriage.” In an attempt to keep their sex lives more interesting, Sarah and Len begin a polyamorous relationship with a younger woman, Lila (played by Alia Shawkat). Using a classic narrative trope, this storyline is left on a cliffhanger with an accidental insemination of Lila, which would certainly force the trio to conceptualize the existing family dynamic.

As I mentioned before, it can certainly be argued that Sarah’s identity was already in question prior to Maura’s coming out; but, as you can see, her behavior following does suggest that the transition forced her to evaluate her identity in new ways. Interestingly, the actress that plays Sarah, Amy Landecker, has discussed her own reevaluation of identity due to playing such a character. For example, consider this interview Landecker did with *Vulture* where she says, “I thought maybe it would make me open to some stuff because I was meeting people and learning about different things. Kink, I’m not interested. Being bi, I’m not interested. I was open to seeing if it was something that maybe I hadn’t looked at” (Jung, 2017, p. 21) However, Landecker goes on to admit that despite these initial curiosities, she is “just a boring cis-gendered straight girl” (Jung, 2017, p. 25).

Speaking of cis-gendered and straight, middle-child and only son, Josh Pfefferman can certainly be helpful in shedding a light on the representation of masculinity in *Transparent*. Throughout the series, Josh continually makes decisions that reify the toxic, hegemonic masculinity that shapes much of our cultural understanding of men and their behaviors. This can be seen in season one as Josh struggles to maintain healthy relationships with several women.

The first, a young musician in a band that Josh manages, is jeopardized by a pregnancy and subsequent abortion. Josh's reaction to this relationship's end and the abortion can be appropriately summed up as problematic. In fact, as an excellent example of Josh's toxic masculinity, consider his response to being removed as the manager for his girlfriend's band. After being informed that his girlfriend communicated to others that Josh had made her feel uncomfortable, Josh erupts into anger about his role in the band's success before trying to throw a chair through a window in the conference room.

The second problematic relationship that is explored for Josh is one with the former family babysitter, Rita (played by Brett Paesel). As the narrative moves through season one, it becomes clear that Josh and Rita's relationship started when Josh was young. Sadly, it is also made clear that the sexual nature of their relationship was well understood by the Pfefferman family. In other words, Josh was the victim of sexual abuse and his family did nothing to stop it. To make matters worse, as the season ends, Josh discovers that he and Rita have a son that has been hidden from him for seventeen years.

For Josh, much of season two is spent trying to reconcile his past with Rita and the missed opportunity to be a father to his son, Colton. During the season, Josh tries to repair his relationship with Colton and Rita while also building a romantic relationship with Rabbi Raquel. Unfortunately for Josh, and everyone close to him for that matter, the deep-seeded and unresolved trauma of the abuse he suffered as a teenager make relationships extremely difficult to maintain. Despite Josh's efforts to "do things right this time," his relationship with Raquel fails following a miscarriage. Again, his actions following this relationship's end are emblematic of hegemonic masculinity. For example, when Josh announces to the family that Raquel and he have split up and that the pregnancy "wasn't viable," his emotional response is so muted that

Maura encourages him by saying, “It’s okay to be sad.” Additionally, Josh takes up the high intensity workout program, cross-fit. While one could argue that exercise is a healthy means of curbing depression, Josh again displays toxic masculinity in a scene where he becomes irritated by a slight traffic jam and has a frightening anxiety attack.

By the end of season four, Josh has been forced to deal with ample loss in his life. He has repeatedly had relationships fail, Rita has committed suicide, and his son has asked him not to continue trying to be a father figure. However, he has also made some progress toward healing his trauma. Josh begins to attend meetings for sex addiction, and in a very poignant moment, acknowledges the reality of being a victim of Rita’s sexual abuse while still accepting his complicated feelings about this relationship.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, the *Transparent* narrative problematizes modernist ideas about gender, in that gender essentialism is challenged or disrupted. However, it is important to note that modifications to gender identity are not a universal solution to Maura’s problems, or the problems of her family. In fact, in many ways, the destabilizing effect of Maura and Ali’s gender expansiveness is shown to exacerbate some of the deeply-seeded issues within the Pfefferman family dynamic.

However, as this paper has shown, *Transparent* is a ground-breaking work of storytelling. Not only in terms of its radical transgender narrative, but also in the way that the show is being produced. To illustrate this profound transformation of production on the show, consider Jill Soloway’s writing staff and her “transfirmative action” program. Levy (2015) explains that this initiative happened because, “Soloway wanted a ‘trans-feminine perspective,’ but couldn’t find a television writer who had one. So, she solicited essays from trans women and

then gave half a dozen of them a weeklong tutorial” (p. 51). This approach to production undoubtedly subverts the patriarchal systems that control television and film production, allowing *Transparent* to explore identity even more truthfully.

Furthermore, as I have discussed before, it is clear that nearly every person involved with the show has high hopes for their work. It would seem that the importance of giving the trans community greater visibility on television has been placed at the forefront of their minds. For example, Amy Landecker shared this in an interview following the release of season four last fall:

There's no exposure. It's all about access. It's all about integration. That's what this show is trying to do. That's what we're doing on set. We talk about that all the time. I have more access to trans people than anyone else I know. They've just been separated. Once you get to know them, that's how we heal everything. That's why we're in Israel. Jill's trying to talk about this original conflict, this never-ending conflict that somehow there's a border and you're different. How are we ever going to get out of that? We still haven't. It's not going to be easy, but we've got to talk about it. (Yakas, 2017)

In other words, *Transparent* is, at its core, about challenging the ways that we think about the world we live in. The show questions our notions of a gender binary, suggesting that the reality of our identities is far more complex than we have allowed with our thinking. The show illustrates many of the ways that this binary-based thinking has reduced our society and the marginalized people in it to something that can be described as problematically simplistic.

I am fully aware that this show is far from a perfect representation of the transgender experience. There are many aspects of the Pfefferman family that are not subject to the hardships

that many trans individuals face, because of their wealth and access to power. And while these criticisms are fair and deserve to be discussed and addressed, it is important to recognize the impact that a show like *Transparent* is capable of having. It is undeniable that these narratives shape the ways in which audiences think about the characters in them. With that said, I do believe that *Transparent* is worthy of praise, if only for trying to make the world slightly more accepting and, thus, safer for people who look and act differently from what we have so long considered normal.

In fact, the power of the work that this show is doing for recognition of the trans experience has consistently been echoed by cast, crew, and critics alike. For example, consider these comments from Tambor's acceptance speech for his Emmy in 2015, "I had a teacher who used to say, 'You know, when you act, you have to act as if your life depends on it.' And now, I've been given the opportunity to act *because* people's lives depend on it ([CITATION](#)). Additionally, the responsibility of this show as a service to the trans community was documented by media critic and blogger, Teresa Jusino. In a piece written for the popular culture blog, TheMarySue.com, Jusino writes about her experience as an extra on the show saying, "[t]he *Transparent* cast and crew are like the most awesome, tolerant, open-minded, queer-friendly, sex-positive family you'd ever want to be a part of!" (p. 6). Jusino recalls several instances on set that served to underscore the importance of inclusivity and acceptance surrounding the show's production. For example, she describes meeting Gaby Hoffmann, Amy Landecker, and Jeffrey Tambor during the shoot and shares positive experiences with all three. Particularly interesting, the blogger shares a conversation she had with Tambor that touches on one of the major criticisms of the show. Jusino (2015) writes:

Then, I wondered aloud how it feels to know that there are many trans people who aren't happy with the fact that he was cast at all, and he said, "I think about that all the time." He seemed at once guilty and hopeful that, despite a trans actress not having his role, that his performance would do some good. He was very conscious of "doing things right" and proceeded to list off a bunch of recommended reading to me about transgender issues that he found helpful when navigating Maura. (p. 24)

This indignation toward the choice to cast Tambor, a cisgender male, is well-documented. In an article written for the same blog, and mentioned by Jusino (2015) in her own piece, the trans writer and activist Marcy Cook argues, "public opinion on *Transparent* is split: to cisgender people, it's a positive accurate portrayal of the 'trans experience'; to transgender people, it's a lot less accurate and positive" (Cook, 2015, p. 1).

Unfortunately, this criticism regarding Tambor has been validated in a way that has disappointed people, regardless of their feelings about the show's ability to be positive for the transgender community. As I mentioned in a previous chapter, Tambor and *Transparent* became embroiled in a progressive social media movement dubbed "#MeToo," that aimed to expose the rampant sexual assault and harassment happening in the workplace. Tambor was first accused by his personal assistant, a trans woman named Van Barnes, in a Facebook post published in October 2017. While Tambor was not mentioned by name, the post was enough to initiate an investigation by Amazon Studios. In response, Tambor released a statement denying the allegations from Barnes, calling them "baseless" and referring to Barnes as "a disgruntled former employee" (CITATION). However, shortly after this initial allegation, a second accuser, Trace Lysette, came forward to claim that she was also sexually harassed by Tambor on the set of

Transparent. Lysette, also a trans woman, plays recurring character Shea on the show, and describes the harassment in detail. She alleges, “He came in close, put his bare feet on top of mine so I could not move, leaned his body against me, and began quick, discreet thrust back and forth against my body. I felt his penis on my hip through his thin pajamas and I pushed him off me” (tracelysette, 2017).

Following this second allegation, Tambor released another statement reiterating his innocence. This time, using a more diplomatic tone, Tambor and his public relations team issued this statement:

For the past four years, I’ve had the huge privilege — and huge responsibility — of playing Maura Pfefferman, a transgender woman, in a show that I know has had an enormous, positive impact on a community that has been too long dismissed and misunderstood. Now I find myself accused of behavior that any civilized person would condemn unreservedly. I know I haven’t always been the easiest person to work with. I can be volatile and ill-tempered, and too often I express my opinions harshly and without tact. But I have never been a predator — ever. I am deeply sorry if any action of mine was ever misinterpreted by anyone as being sexually aggressive or if I ever offended or hurt anyone. But the fact is, for all my flaws, I am not a predator and the idea that someone might see me in that way is more distressing than I can express. (Abramovitch, 2017, p. 22)

However, the conclusion of Amazon Studio’s internal investigation came to light just weeks ago with an announcement that Tambor would no longer be involved with the show. The

speculation and the recent announcement has been received with mixed emotions by many. For example, consider this excerpt from Lysette's statement where she writes:

Don't let the trans community suffer for the actions of one cis male actor.

Transparent has been a guiding light in the industry, by employing more trans people in Hollywood than any other production in history, which made it even more difficult to speak out. (tracelysette, 2017)

This sentiment was echoed more recently in an interview Van Barnes did with Megyn Kelly in March 2018. After Barnes speaks about her experience with Tambor's harassment and the subsequent investigation, Kelly asserts, "It's a shame for many reasons, including that this show has been a vehicle for... it's been a lens on what it means to be transgender, and it employs a lot of transgender people. Now, [Tambor] has been fired and that does not work to the advantage of those employees."

Ultimately, what can be surmised from these allegations and Tambor's firing is that despite all of its critical-acclaim, *Transparent* should still be closely scrutinized. The sad truth is that despite idealistic and progressive goals of inclusivity and normalization, a show like *Transparent* can still be plagued by the toxic masculinity of our patriarchal society. In other words, it is important to remember that no television show exists inside of a vacuum, and that all media and their messages should be studied and criticized as to ensure the creation of a more accepting and empathetic world.

In fact, in an article recently published to *The Huffington Post*, a claim was made that even the discourse of the #MeToo movement needs close scrutiny. Mamone (2018) argues that despite the empowering nature it has for women, "the movement has been silent at best — and hostile at worst — when it comes to the experiences of transgender people" (p.1) Evidence of

this can be found in the rhetoric of discourse surrounding sexual harassment and assault, which Marmone (2018) argues is very much centered on cis-gender women. So, much like *Transparent* attempts to subvert the binary-based conceptualizations we have of gender through narrative, we must recontextualize all discourse in order to foster progressive social change.

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