

# **Up Next: Representations of the Underrepresented in Streaming Film and Television**

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## Abstract

Throughout the history of the entertainment industry, the competitive pursuit of market share has dictated a consistent reproduction and employment of those whose narratives mirror the cultural dominant, constructing a dynamic whereby the popular film and television of America overwhelmingly recreate a single social perspective, regardless of the plurality of cultural backgrounds among members of the audience. The recent introduction of streaming original series into the landscape of popular entertainment, however, has radically altered this paradigm.

As the traditional platforms of national entertainment such as film, broadcast television, and cable television struggle to adapt to the new conditions placed upon the market by streaming companies Netflix and Amazon, the original series produced by these streaming studios unabashedly embrace difference, a strategy that is aided by their alternative profit models. Indeed, these streaming studios actively compete to become positioned as the purveyor of narratives predicated upon minority perspectives through programming and marketing. Additionally, Netflix and Amazon employ a greater plurality of underrepresented voices among the creative staff producing original series. Streaming platforms thus not only portray and interrogate the experiences of minority communities, they additionally employ those whose cultural perspectives mirror the narratives appearing in streaming content. The series and films produced by Netflix and Amazon can thus demonstrate the manifestation of the audacious representation of underrepresented voices on streaming original content. Additionally, a close analysis of Netflix's original series *Grace and Frankie* and Amazon's *Transparent* will investigate the differing approaches to the representation of difference employed by each streaming studio.

In this way, streaming platforms like Netflix and Amazon represent a new frontier within the entertainment industry in the representation of minority identities, a potential enabled by the very profit structure of streaming services. This thesis will therefore seek to investigate the quickly approaching horizon of altered dynamics of minority representation created by the production of Netflix and Amazon original series which are predicated upon representations of cultural difference.

## **Introduction: Inclusivity in Streaming**

### **An Economic Predisposition**

Renowned film scholar Siegfried Kracauer once noted, “the films of a nation reflect its mentality in a more direct way than any other artistic medium” (Toplin 117). Indeed, throughout the history of film and television, the culture-making of Hollywood is structured in society as a consistent reintroduction and affirmation of American identity, a measure of the concerns and ideals of a nation. Thus, film and television not only create social discussions of cultural concerns, but also the very lexicon in which these concerns are discussed. But if the films and television of a nation are to accurately reflect its mentality, they must similarly mirror its population. Historically, the accurate portrayal of American diversity has been a pursuit with which Hollywood has struggled, creating an enduring dynamic whereby a single perspective tenaciously resurrects itself again and again to become the monolithic identity of American film and television. Given the plurality of the society these cultural products endeavor to represent, the scarcity of minority perspectives not only limits the narratives Hollywood produces, it also restricts the participation of minority actors, producers, and audience members in the conversations surrounding film. Surely, if film reflects the mentality of the nation, then all constituent points of view within that nation must be inherent in its reproduction.

Additionally, while film and television persist in neglecting the narratives of many members of the population, the potentials for empathetic understanding inherent in the cinematic recreation of narratives of subaltern communities remain latent. Conversely, when film and television do embrace the vibrant diversity of the society in which they are immersed, original and vivid narratives induct the concerns and hopes of the traditionally overlooked into the national discourse. In introducing unfamiliar perspectives to popular artistic works in the form of

protagonism, viewers are confronted with the realities of those with whom they may otherwise have no contact, facilitating constructive social conversations. In this way, the representation of diversity in American film and television is a fundamental act of compassion which engages the strengths of cinema in aid of increased cultural awareness.

Though traditional media sources like film, broadcast, and cable television have tended to eschew minority representation in favor of familiar narratives and characters, such a propensity is strikingly absent in the recent introduction of streaming original content. Though the three primary streaming companies Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu began exclusively as online distribution platforms, each constructed its own studio and began producing original content within the last seven years. These films and series are distributed through each company's streaming platform, access to which can be purchased with a monthly subscription. Additionally, all episodes of streaming original series are released at once and episodes are occasionally produced in unconventional lengths. Thus, the original series and films created by streaming companies depart from industry norms, but there is perhaps no innovation as striking as the way that these companies employ, represent, and study cultural diversity.

The plurality of perspectives represented across the original series of streaming platforms is evident not only in the casting of many of the companies' films and television, but also in the way that many foreground experiences of cultural difference as their chosen subject matter. Netflix and Amazon particularly display an affinity for narratives constructed upon themes of identity, ostracization, and community. Indeed, both have created a great number of original series organized around investigations of minority experiences. Though Hulu displays a burgeoning potential within the market of original content, it has produced series and films at a far less robust rate than Amazon or Netflix and few of the series it has produced have lasted

more than one season. Therefore, for the purposes of consistency and clarity, Amazon and Netflix will be the primary foci of this analysis.

Additionally, in order to formulate a thorough and comprehensive illustration of the differing approaches to the representation of subaltern identities employed by Netflix and Amazon, this study will examine streaming original series *Grace and Frankie*, produced by Netflix, and *Transparent*, created by Amazon Studios. Each of these shows narrativizes the experiences of members of the LGBTQ community who reveal aspects of their identity to their family in the later years of their lives. Both find echoes in one another in themes of alienation, labeling, aging, and hope, and therefore embody ideal points of comparison with one another. Additionally, each show employs unusually high numbers of female and queer perspectives. Thus, by examining the dynamics of difference within the construction of *Grace and Frankie* and *Transparent*, a view to the attitude of each company concerning minority representation and employment may be obtained.

In order to appreciate the industrial factors driving the diversity among streaming original services, however, it is first necessary to outline the differences between traditional media and streaming platforms, as well as the consequences of these disparities. The economic paradigm in which a streaming service creates its own digital content that can only be accessed through a subscription to a website represents a relatively new development within the entertainment industry and stands in opposition to existing models. Throughout the history of the film industry, the quality and fiscal success of the cultural products disseminated by Hollywood have been largely measured by rates of audience attendance, quantifiable in the metric of box office ticket sales. Similarly, broadcast television relies on measures of audience viewership garnered through Nielson ratings, which determine the valuation of the advertisements that are sold during a given

program. Thus, “networks do not sell programs to audiences, but rather sell audiences to advertisers” (Green 112). Finally, cable networks operate in a similar manner, relying on Nielson ratings to sell advertisements while supplementing this income with the addition of subscription or pay-per-view fees which allow the viewer to access the network’s channel. In this way, film, broadcast television, and cable television all heavily rely on rates of viewership in order to market the advertisements upon which their revenue model is predicated.

Thus, traditional media platforms define success through ticket sales and viewership metrics, but as there is an inflexible number of audience members at any given time, each company must vigorously compete to gain the attention and favor of potential customers. A highly pluralistic industry climate is therefore created, whereby market share becomes a defining standard of a studio’s success, a model in which, “though profit-seeking is only comparative, it is as desperate and ruthless as if it were absolute” (Green 112). Additionally, each studio or network can produce a limited number of films or series at a given time. For example, television stations can only air one or two shows per hour and the number of films available to watch in movie theaters is finite. Thus, given the dictate that market share is to be maintained, a television channel or film studio has a restricted range of content with which to capture a viewer’s attention. Of course, this model has been altered somewhat in the proliferation of cable and broadcast television websites through which a viewer can access content online even when it is not airing on the network’s channel, but the studio’s website is nevertheless confined to content that it broadcasts one at a time on air.

As the level of competition for audience members among film and television studios is so fierce, every company aims to capture the largest target market possible with each of its products. In this way, Hollywood tends to endeavor to create narratives that will appeal to the



widest possible audience, and, more importantly, the audience that is most likely to spend money on discretionary items like entertainment products. Therefore, “if profits are to be maximized, the basic task becomes one of responding to the concerns of a segmented, but decidedly white, middle-class public” (Toplin 34). In attempting to appeal to the greatest number of potential customers as a result of the intense drive to maintain market share, a homogenization process thus occurs among the cultural products of Hollywood. Consequently, the perspectives and narratives of those making up a lesser degree of the potential audience are passed over in favor of offerings that appeal to and reflect the cultural dominant. This fact is evident in the stiflingly low rates of representation among people of color, women, and sexual and gender minorities both in front of and behind Hollywood’s cameras. Because studios “cannot cater to minority or exceptional tastes unless those can be isolated as an identifiable group of potential customers,” the representation of these minorities remains deflated throughout the industry (Green 113).

Indeed, in one examination of the standards of minority representation in the entertainment industry conducted by the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California, all major film, broadcast, and cable television studios were proven to employ and represent minority figures in miniscule rates. The survey, which catalogued the films and series distributed by prevailing Hollywood studios between September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014 and August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2015 revealed that the majority of film studios do not remotely resemble the diversity of the American population, as illustrated by the 2010 Census, in regards to both on-screen representation and off-screen employment. Only two film companies (Sony and Viacom) were proven to approach an accurate balance, and did so only in regards to the on-screen depiction of racial minorities (Smith). Cable and Broadcast television performed marginally better, but the limited inclusivity displayed was frequently confined to on-screen

representation, with the employment of minority directors, writers, and creators dipping considerably lower.

This inequality of representation and employment is a striking figure, but even more telling is the correlation found between the employment of minority creative staff and the resulting depiction of underrepresented figures on screen. Of the surveyed series, “the percentage of onscreen underrepresented characters increases 17.5% when an underrepresented director is at the helm of a scripted episode or film” (Smith). Similarly, “stories with a female director attached had 5.4% more girls/women on screen than those stories without female direction...For writers and creators, the relationship was more pronounced (10.7% and 12.6% increase, respectively)” (Smith). Thus, when members of a minority community are employed in the creation of film and television, they enthusiastically affirm their own cultural experiences in the work they produce. Considering the dearth of minority and female creative staff employed in the film industry, it is therefore hardly a surprise that the study found that, throughout all major companies performing in the entertainment industry, no studio or network accurately depicted the diversity inherent in American society.

The results of the survey conducted by USC’s Annenberg School demonstrate that the stories the entertainment industry tells almost inevitably are created by and relate to the experiences of straight, white, cisgender males. Of course, the creation of narratives about straight white males is not inherently pernicious, but when Hollywood doggedly performs a perspective informed by and concerning a single demographic, the presentation of those outside this context becomes problematic because “every representation of the Other stands in for the particular version of otherness as a whole, in a way that (non-ethnic) white men never do” (Green 75). The overabundance of films and series concerning the dominant narrative therefore

not only overemphasizes the experience of those who are white men, it simultaneously devalues the work of those who are not. The portrayal of minority perspective becomes a performance of difference, rather than a constituent contribution to the narrative and themes of the film or series. The limitations inherent in this condition become apparent in the fact that minority characters are rarely presented as “the iconographic idols who give a narrative its moral center” (Green 49). Thus, by formulating minority characters as alien due to its competition for market share, the entertainment industry in turn alienates the minority actors, producers, and audience members who perform in, create, and consume their cultural product.

While the lack of individuality among the representations of subaltern communities in traditional film and television manifests an objectification of difference, the economic model employed by streaming services enables an intrepid avowal of the experiences of those outside of the cultural dominant. Indeed, the revenue models of streaming services are so different from those of traditional media sources as to even encourage diversity in original streaming programming. One stark difference between the model upon which streaming services are predicated and the model of industry counterparts is that streaming platforms do not have the limited offerings that confine film companies or television stations. Streaming services are therefore liberated in the content they can deliver at any given time. For example, if a viewer watching a television channel wasn't satisfied with the program that was airing, he or she would switch to another channel, a detrimental trend for the first channel's broadcast company. The audience member watching a streaming service, however, is able to access the content that he or she wishes to choose at any time. In this way, the large number of choices available at any given time on a streaming platform eliminates the need for a series or film to provide a narrative that is a familiar construction of prevailing themes and cultures.

Additionally, by relying only on a monthly subscription fee, streaming services have freed themselves from the subservience to viewership metrics that has defined the choices of the broadcast, cable, and film industries alike. In establishing a steady source of funding through subscription, Netflix and Amazon are able to place less credence in viewership numbers when developing original content and renewing existing programs. Of course, streaming services consider viewership in programming decisions, but can additionally weigh factors external to these metrics. For example, when speaking about elements of decision-making that supplement the creation of new original content, Netflix executive Cindy Holland noted that the company ensures “that we’re talking to the great media leaders of tomorrow who may not look like us and who may not be from here” (Ryan). Indeed, the altered relationship of streaming services to viewership numbers is demonstrable in the fact that Netflix is notoriously opaque about the audience size of its various programming series; the company does not use the figure as a means of competing in the market, preferring to keep the information internal so that content decisions are not unduly affected by the measurements.

Thus, in consequence of its altered revenue model and its profusion of content alternatives, streaming platforms need rarely be concerned with the possibility that the creation of an original streaming program will negatively affect their income. If Netflix or Amazon decides to produce an original film or series in which a given customer has no interest, it is unlikely he or she will rescind membership. Unlike broadcast, film, or cable networks, in which the lost interest of a potential customer translates to lost revenue, the customer of a streaming service will still pay a subscription fee because the series and films that she or he paid to watch are still accessible regardless of new original programming. Thus, while the production of new original series may result in a poor investment of funds, it is unlikely that such an endeavor will

decrease the flow of revenue itself; indeed, the proliferation of original series and films that are accessible only through a subscription to the streaming website will likely increase membership, rather than decrease it. Thus, while traditional media must court the risk of lost revenue upon the premiere of every new film or series, streaming platforms can comfortably anticipate the much more likely result of increased market saturation and income. This new freedom in turn allows the studio to implement “programming for diverse and eclectic tastes and for an increasingly global audience,” a goal of original content as cited by Netflix’s Cindy Holland (Ryan). The potential for the production of narratives exploring the experiences of people of color, females, members of the LGBTQ community and other underrepresented groups is therefore intrinsic to the very model of streaming.

Finally, streaming series are emancipated from the requirement that broadcast or cable television “whether imaginative or mindless, is ideologically unambiguous and without irony” so that episodes can conclude within the time limit (Green 143). As all episodes of a season of a streaming series are released at once, there is no need for the simplicity of narrative demanded by the weekly gaps between traditional cable and broadcast episodes. Thus, streaming services are free to produce complex stories representing, interrogating, and embracing subaltern and otherwise invisible identities within their original streaming series. What is more, they are capable of addressing the very experience of difference, riddled as it is with ambiguity, uncertainty, and controversy. In this way, the revenue models of streaming services decentralize the role of viewership metrics due to the implementation of a subscription fee, allow a multiplicity of audience choice, and embrace systems of distribution ideally suited to the presentation of ambiguous and complex subject matter, creating a fertile environment for the production of minority narratives.

If the unique economic system of streaming allows Netflix and Amazon to produce stories constructed by more diverse characters, cast, and crew than those found in film or on broadcast and cable television, this fact should be apparent from the content of their original series and films. In the aforementioned survey of film and television studios conducted by USC entitled “The Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment (CARD)”, Hulu, Amazon, and Netflix were examined as the three main streaming services producing regular original content. Though the findings of the survey are undoubtedly illuminating, it must be noted that the three studios had been producing original material for less than a year and a half at the time the study began, and consequently provided a sample of content that was less than half the size of that examined for all other platforms. Nevertheless, USC’s CARD report highlighted the extent to which Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu present and employ minority perspectives in comparison with the measure of American diversity as furnished by the 2010 US Census.

Within certain metrics, streaming services provided representation unparalleled by any of its counterparts. The onscreen representation of females in streaming original content, for example, far outperformed the offerings of other platforms and even behind the screen, the presence of women was far above the standard; indeed, Amazon was the only company rated Fully Inclusive (a designation signifying the correspondence of the percentage of representation to the US census) for hiring female directors (Smith). Additionally, streaming services tended to represent females over the age of forty with striking consistency, despite the fact that the study called this metric “one of the most politicized areas in Hollywood” (Smith). In fact, the representation of females was so consistent at streaming studios that the study noted that “clearly, the contributions and presence of women are valued at each of these companies” (Smith).

In addition to the uncommon frequency of gender equality at streaming studios, the content produced in them presents an egalitarian notion of gender and sexual identity. Indeed, of all of the series and films reviewed in the CARD report, “all but one of the transgender characters appeared on streaming series” (Smith). In addition, though the survey found that “LGBT characters can be shown in domestic partnerships or marriage but depicting this community raising children on screen is largely avoided in media storytelling,” this assertion is not consistent with the productions of streaming services. Of the fifty-one streaming series included in the study, several feature members of the LGBTQ community acting as concerned and engaged parents, both in flashback and within the timeline of the narrative; indeed, the parenting of LGBTQ members will figure largely in the themes of both *Grace and Frankie* and *Transparent*.

While streaming services were proven to excel in many areas of diversity representation and employment, there were other metrics in which it lagged. Though it provided the highest percentage of series with racially underrepresented main characters, its employment of racially diverse and female writers was starkly lacking. Perhaps no group was as underrepresented industry-wide and especially within streaming as women of color, who enjoyed almost no representation behind the camera. This gaping absence is a gulf which plagues the entirety of the entertainment industry, and which highlights the increased barriers to entry in place for women of color, whose perspectives are clearly overlooked. This disparity embodies a clear area of improvement available for the streaming industry, and indeed one that it must endeavor to address if it is to maintain its position as an industry leader in diversity.

In fact, these specific weaknesses have been cited as areas of potential future growth by streaming administrations. When asked if she was satisfied with the diversity of Netflix

directors, executive Cindy Holland replied, “No, we absolutely want to increase it further.” Additionally, streaming services are frequently indicated as companies that offer a specter of hope in diversity of representation and employment. Darnell Hunt, lead author of UCLA’s recent “Hollywood Diversity Report”, “feels the medium is becoming more inclusive with the bevy of new distributors and producers, particularly such digital platforms as Netflix and Amazon” (Siegemund-Broka). Similarly, the CARD report itself cited Amazon as one of the four companies which “demonstrated strong performances across television and digital programming” (Smith). In this way, though clear areas for improvement are evident, streaming services are aware of the need for development of these areas, a recognition that industry experts indicate as a positive sign in the progression towards representational egalitarianism within the industry.

Another encouraging element of streaming services noted by industry experts is the fact that, though the creation of original streaming content is a relatively new endeavor, Netflix and Amazon already display striking momentum in their efforts for diversification. Given the fact that streaming services are still solidifying their position within the market, it is perhaps even more promising that Amazon and Netflix have created a host of shows that have garnered both popular and critical acclaim for their presentations and employment of othered people and communities. Indeed, within the first year of premiering the flagship series of its original content, Netflix and Amazon both aired programs that explored racial, gendered, and sexual difference; Netflix aired *Orange is the New Black*, featuring a heavily diverse cast of females and transwomen, and garnered much support from audiences, critics, and groups like GLAAD. Similarly, Amazon’s *Man in the High Castle* has become a perennial standby and has garnered



several Emmy awards for its depiction of revolutionary forces attempting to uproot a totalitarian regime.

Amazon and Netflix have not only endeavored to position themselves as the providers of diverse original content through their productions, both have unabashedly aligned themselves with the aesthetics minority representation through their advertisements as well. In this way, even their marketing techniques are frequently predicated upon a timely affirmation of the perspectives of those who are frequently underrepresented in the industry. Additionally, both services deploy these advertisements which focus on marginalized voices in coy response to current social and political climates. Of course, film and television have always been in conversation with current events, but the use of advertising as a form of layered political commentary, particularly through social media, is implemented in exceptionally pointed fashions by both Amazon and Netflix.

For example, Netflix has initiated a series of advertising campaigns which air on social media that cleverly respond to the tumultuous political situations of the day by employing clips from their original series. Following a recent scandal in which President Donald Trump was revealed to have privately endorsed nonconsensual sexual contact, Netflix aired a short video captioned only with the slogan “#sherules”. This advertisement featured the strong female characters of original series and films such as *The Crown*, *Orange is the New Black*, *What Happened*, *Miss Simone*, and *Grace and Frankie* with a female voiceover overlaid listing the various settings and climates in which the characters assert their power. These videos emphasize diversity, featuring women of color, pregnant women, women over the age of seventy, and transwomen. They pluck various lines spoken by these women in the context of the original content in order to create a pastiche of clips as an ode to the strength of female characters within

their programming. These clips reflect a quiet self-awareness, an assertion of Netflix's position in culture-making and an acknowledgement of the responsibility this entails. A clip of Nina Simone asking, "How can you be an artist and not reflect the times?" is followed by female superhero Jessica Jones saying, "Respect. Get some" in an editing choice that appears to directly address the apropos political conversation. Finally, the promotional video ends with the comment that, "Revolution must come from within," spoken over the words, "Here's to the women that rule our screens". In this way, Netflix uses even its promotional materials as an endorsement of the female agency that was categorically impugned on the contemporary political scene.

Netflix recently aired a similar endorsement of their female characters on March 8<sup>th</sup>, International Women's Day and the date set for a nation-wide strike of female workers in protest of the administration of President Donald Trump. In the video, the female characters of popular shows like *Stranger Things*, *House of Cards*, and *The Crown* walk out of the frame. Their male counterparts are left behind, calling their names before the show freezes. The video ends with the assertion, "Our stories don't work without women. And the world wouldn't, either." In this way, Netflix capitalized upon the political discourse of the day to demonstrate its commitment to affirming feminist ideals. In recognizing the strong female characters central to its most popular shows, Netflix invokes the iconography of International Women's Day, but by proving that its shows would not be the same in their absence, it made allusion to the much more politically oriented strike that occurred on the same date. Thus, Netflix provided both an affirmation of some of the traditionally underrepresented characters in its series as well as a tacit political statement about the company's alignment with a national protest in this brief marketing campaign.

Finally, in perhaps its most ringing political response, Netflix posted a promotion on social media for its popular dark political drama *House of Cards* on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017. The date of this advertisement coincided with the presidential inauguration of Donald Trump, an event that was widely construed as detrimental to many minority groups. The video begins with a close-up of the violently waving red and white stripes of an American flag accompanied by an ominous rendition of the Pledge of Allegiance recited by young children. The frame slowly zooms out to reveal that the flag is hanging upside down outside of the white house, festooning a stormy sky. The video ends with the release date for the next season of *House of Cards*. When the advertisement appeared on social media, it was accompanied with the caption “We couldn’t possibly comment”. Of course, each of these promotions in themselves function as standard, if surprisingly pointed, marketing. But when taken in consideration with one another and with current events, timing and content seem far from serendipitous. Indeed, Netflix deliberately positions its marketing campaigns as responses to the contemporary political climate, particularly in regards to the discussion and treatment of minority groups. Thus, Netflix not only produces original content that narrativizes difference with diverse production teams, it further wishes to position itself in the market as a studio whose starkly vocal interest in the issues of minority representation set it apart from its competitors.

If Netflix is attempting to be the only studio in the original streaming market with a strongly stated and highly political position in the cultural conversation surrounding the treatment of subaltern communities, then it is finding fierce competition with Amazon, whose advertisements are similarly assertive. Rather than providing a stirring collage of their amassed original series as Netflix does, Amazon instead allows its individual series and films to speak for themselves. As many of Amazon’s original series are depictions of incitations to revolution by

marginalized groups, its original content provides plenty of material for its own brand of political advertising. Indeed, Netflix's messages of latent female insurgency find an echo in the advertisements of Amazon. For example, much of the marketing for Amazon Studios' new series *Z: The Beginning of Everything* about the life of Zelda Fitzgerald centers around the phrase "Well-behaved women don't make history". Additionally, trailers emphasize a deconstruction of F. Scott Fitzgerald's work as having been largely supplemented by the writing of Zelda.

In a similar narrative about female authorship, the Amazon series *Good Girls Revolt* tells the story of the impact of second-wave feminism on female researchers and writers at Newsweek in 1969. Its plot centers on the strife engendered by the attempts of female writers to get credited in the magazine with their own writing. In its very title, *Good Girls Revolt* rebuts the standard that television "cannot offer any series that would permanently place [a female character] in the role of angry social reformer, dissident, or revolutionary; that is not a state of mind in which to find the kind of distraction that advertisers want us to find" (Green 159). Yet the marketing for the series clearly outlines the growing social and political awareness of its on-screen females, who, even within the trajectory of the trailer, increasingly refuse their own erasure.

Finally, a promotional campaign for Amazon's *The Man in the High Castle*, which aired on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017, even inspired its own political controversy. The series explores the dystopian potentials of an America ruled by Axis forces following the defeat of the Allies in World War II, and thus reflects on themes of totalitarianism, xenophobia, and resistance. As a facet of the marketing campaign for the premiere of season three, Amazon created a website that functions as an amalgam of the "Resistance Radio" deployed in season three. Between song sets, the false radio station aired messages such as, "hijacking the airwaves, a secret network of DJs broadcast messages of hope to keep the memory of a former America alive" in an invocation of

the show's themes of resistance (Andrews). This message, however, was misconstrued when "some Trump supporters seemingly mistook it for an anti-Trump radio station and expressed their displeasure" (Andrews). In this way, the latent political content of Amazon's programming can even be mistaken for political rhetoric when taken out of context.

Netflix and Amazon thus both display marketing techniques in which they attempt to position themselves as the dominant voices in the industry on the subject of minority representation and its ensuing political themes. Of course, this is not to say that other industry platforms like film, cable, and broadcast television do not offer political messages in their fictional scripted films and shows, but in competing to become widely acknowledged and respected voices in the representation of minority characters, Netflix and Amazon present an uncommon model in marketing. Traditionally, "for structural reasons, the producers of commercial visual culture cannot afford to become too immersed in any subcultural nuances that can't be quantified as part of the audience for their product" (Green 102). For this reason, studios have tended to sequester themselves from narratives predicated upon specific social subgroups, yet Netflix and Amazon staunchly vie for the positioning of their content as the product that most emphatically represents difference.

Nor does it appear as if Netflix and Amazon are in error as they pursue a market position as the purveyor of uniquely diverse stories. Indeed, the "Second Annual Diversity Report" by UCLA recently found that "viewers preferred films and television shows with moderately diverse casts, according to Nielsen Ratings and box-office reports" (Siegemund-Broka). Thus, audiences desire the unique narratives inherent in the presentation of unfamiliar perspectives, narratives that the economic innovations of the streaming platform have allowed Netflix and Amazon to embrace. It is this eagerness for plurality shared by streaming companies and

audiences alike that defines narratives such as *Grace and Frankie* and *Transparent*. Indeed, this analysis will seek to prove that it is the affirmation of identity over traditionalism that continually imbues these series with the passion and warmth for which they have been praised. The dauntless spirit of their protagonists, whose resolute declarations of selfhood in the face of occasionally overwhelming cultural retribution presents an indefatigable call to compassion and understanding, in relation to the self as well as others. Finally, this irresistible presentation of intrepid honesty provides a vehicle for the empathy intrinsic to the formulation of these series. Thus, in the performance of the graceful and tenacious subjectivity of characters whose identities rest outside cultural norms, Netflix and Amazon herald their own compassionate approaches to the portrayal of diversity in their original series, an attitude that permeates Netflix's *Grace and Frankie* and Amazon's *Transparent*.

## **Part I: *Grace and Frankie***

### **Queer Identities and Baby Boomers**

Though the quantitative data surrounding the offerings of Amazon and Netflix provide an illustrative map of the trajectory of each company's overall commitment to diversity, it is additionally vital to examine the ways that otherness is presented in the original content itself. If streaming platforms indeed circumvent the norm that "there is something in the nature of American popular culture—or in the relationship between commercial filmmakers and their audience—that predisposes the popular film medium toward the traditional rather than the innovative," then the streaming content must tangibly embody this innovation in its treatment of difference (Toplin 33). In order to garner an understanding of each company's conception of difference, an examination of its original content is therefore necessary. Both Amazon and Netflix have a vast array of original content, so the programs chosen for close reading are those created by each company that most strongly reflect one another's themes and subject matter. In 2014, Amazon introduced its original series *Transparent* and 2015 saw Netflix premiere *Grace and Frankie*. Both shows examine the familial repercussions of a late-in-life announcement of nontraditional sexual or gender identity, and thus provide good context and points of comparison for one another.

In *Grace and Frankie*, Netflix posits a nontraditional sitcom whose continued existence would be difficult to imagine on network television. The show features four main characters, all above the age of seventy. When the show opens, Grace, played by Jane Fonda, is married to Robert, a successful divorce lawyer played by Martin Sheen. Robert's law partner Sol, played by Sam Waterston, is married to Lily Tomlin's Frankie, an aging hippie. These four characters form the structure of the narrative and amiably depict respectable septuagenarian life, a dynamic the

show is quick to deconstruct. In the opening scene of the pilot, which is titled “The End,” Grace and Frankie wait at an upscale restaurant for their husbands to arrive. Despite their clear disdain for one another, they make strained conversation, each agreeing that the big announcement promised by their husbands is that they will retire from their law firm. Robert and Sol arrive looking nervous, greet their wives, and announce over lobster that they have been carrying on a homosexual affair for the past twenty years. The understandable shock of Grace and Frankie is aggravated when they go on to announce that they each wish to divorce their respective wives and marry one another.

It is upon this revelation that the rest of the show is built. Grace and Frankie, each in a state of shock, flee to the beach house that is mutually owned by their families, and eventually take up permanent residence there. Robert and Sol, meanwhile, move in together and begin the process of learning to negotiate not only their newly visible relationship, but also their altered social positions as openly gay men. As the men increasingly occupy the identities they have hidden for years, their former wives must adapt to the benefits and drawbacks of their newfound positions of sexual and quotidian independence. Consequently, they discover facets of themselves they had long since sacrificed to matrimonial harmony, and find their horizons broadening while simultaneously grieving for their lost familial traditions and stability.

In this way, Netflix posits its second original comedy as an exploration of deviant sexualities, the complications of aging, and familial locations of identity. Though queer identities are seen with increasing frequency on network and cable television, Netflix gives the series exceptional freedom in regards to representation and language, as well as control over and diversity within production. Additionally, the show attempts to appeal to an older generation of viewers, a demographic not typically sought in standard models of television development. By



reimagining its audience, the show aimed for a unique iteration of its themes, which co-creator Marta Kauffman, of *Friends* fame, described in an interview: “As good as *Girls* and *Transparent* and all those shows are, there’s a chill to them. They are not centered in a warm, happy, loving place” (Koblin). It is this warmth that she hoped would appeal to Baby Boomers. Additionally, Netflix Chief Content Officer Ted Sarandos said of the series, “The show created for [Fonda and Tomlin] by Marta and Howard is warm, very funny, and anything but wholesome. We can’t wait” (Netflix, Inc.). In this way, Netflix facilitated the production of *Grace and Frankie* by allowing it linguistic and creative freedom in regards to representations of sexuality and aging as well as creating a platform for a new iteration of a show designed to appeal to an unconventional demographic.

Considering *Grace and Frankie*’s non-normative demographic, subject matter, and sexually deviant characters, the show is primed to explore themes surrounding appearance and its social consequences. The structure of the narrative is built upon the otherness of nontraditional and indeed controversial sexuality, and yet it is an otherness that has no external markers. This condition is highlighted by the fact that Frankie and Grace both spent forty years with their respective husbands without identifying their partners’ true sexual orientations, although, they later admit, there were relational signs that they did not want to acknowledge. The identities persistently kept invisible by Robert and Sol thus prove problematic in the representation of difference because “it is almost entirely through one’s physical appearance that one manifests one’s identity and emotional state” in social relations and particularly in film (Greven 78). The crevasse between appearance and identity is therefore thematized in the series, in regards not only to depictions of queer sexuality, but to normative orientations as well.

Additionally, as the show endeavors to portray an identity that is so absolute and yet so concealable, it naturally integrates the motif of communication. The characters relentlessly find themselves challenged to communicate the realities of their inner landscape to others. Indeed, the narrative consistently implies that Robert and Sol's failure to do so kept them sequestered in failing marriages for so many years. Similarly, however, Grace and Frankie's cluelessness surrounding their husbands' sexuality is implied to be a result of the realities that they chose to impose upon their husbands, consequently ignoring nonverbal cues. In this way, the show traces the characters' growing ability to express their needs and identities, as well as their propensity for listening when others are being expressed to them.

Of course, the structure of the show hangs upon the revelation of the characters' queer identity, so naturally one of its foremost concerns is the experiences and social realities surrounding its gay protagonists. Throughout the two seasons of *Grace and Frankie*, Robert and Sol each attempt to reconcile their identities with both the cultural implication of their newly announced sexuality and the gay subculture into which they find themselves initiated. Robert and Sol, both in their seventies, are suddenly cut adrift from the social position to which they have been accustomed and consequently, they try on various roles and expressions associated with queer culture as they come across them. The second episode of the show, for example, finds them trying to reestablish normalcy following the separation from their wives. The opening sequence shows Robert and Sol waking up next to one another for the first time as an open couple, and thus the commencement of their lives as openly gay men. They begin to try to locate and measure their relationship to cultural standards and stereotypes of gayness almost immediately. Robert, emerging from the shower, says, "Just because we're out now doesn't mean we're going to be gay with a vengeance" but as he announces this, he walks into the frame

and reveals that he is wearing a downy bathrobe, holding tea, with a towel wrapped around his head. The audience does not need Sol's following laugh to understand that Robert, finally free to embody stereotypical gay attributes, is displaying outer markers associated with gayness while simultaneously disavowing them.

Thus, many episodes find Robert and Sol attempting to locate their personalities and identities among the varied cultural expectations of queer culture. The process is not easy nor is it ever solidified. Robert observes in the first season that he will "never not be coming out." They experience both friction with straight culture and dysphoria within gay culture, forever caught between the two. Sometimes, the resulting manifestation of their attempts to define themselves are joyful, such as when they happily discuss how they will introduce one another to friends. Sol suggests "boyfriend," but Robert says that he is too old to be anyone's boyfriend, and they agree that "longtime companion" is from "before famous people played gay in movies." Thus, Robert and Sol are allowed to relish the reinvention that accompanies their new openness about their identities. Simultaneously, the audience is allowed to relish the self-awareness of both the characters and narrative, which playfully indicates that it is aware that it is representing gayness in a cultural climate of increasing representative freedom.

In other instances, however, Robert and Sol find the labels associated with gayness to be offensive and distasteful. When Sol finds out that Robert slept with someone else many years before when they were broken up, a gay friend answers Sol's outrage with the comment, "Oh, come on. If you can't shed the conventions of a hetero life, what's the fun?" When confronted by someone from his own subculture with a stereotypical expectation of the promiscuity associated with gayness, Sol is appalled, responding, "I'm not gay to shed conventions, I'm gay because I love this man." As they reconcile, Robert reassures Sol, "There are a lot of ways to be a couple.

We just have to find the best way for us.” Thus, Robert and Sol find themselves endlessly defining themselves against the expectations of gayness that meet them within both heterosexual and homosexual culture.

Finally, Robert and Sol occasionally incorporate new characteristics into their identities and open themselves up to the novel experiences unique to queer culture. In episode three of the second season, for example, Robert is in the hospital following surgery. His young gay nurse recommends that he go to Drag Queen Bingo, a local gay social event where they play bingo, drink, and “sing show tunes.” Sol bristles at the flirtatious attendant and says, “We’re not that kind of gay.” Hurt, the nurse leaves the room and, when Robert says he’d like to attend, Sol says “But you’re hardly grand marshal of the gay parade.” Robert responds that he had to pretend for many years that he wasn’t interested in things like that, saying, “Hey, we’re out, so let’s go out.” In a typical sitcom resolution, Sol reconciles by bringing Drag Queen Bingo to Robert’s hospital room. In this way, Robert and Sol adapt to their new social positions and explore the subculture that was denied to them when they were constrained by the necessity of performing heterosexuality.

Perhaps the most condensed presentation of Sol’s and Robert’s negotiations of their identity as it intersects with heterosexual and homosexual cultures occurs in an episode titled “The Bachelor Party” in which Sol’s sons Bud and Coyote try to throw the classy, fashionable bachelor party that Robert and Sol have requested. Ultimately, they succeed and the party turns out to be terribly boring. As people begin to leave, Bud and Coyote ask for help from Brianna, Robert’s daughter. Brianna, taking the concept of a bachelor party to the extreme (amid interesting conversations as to whether the party should be treated as a bachelor party or a bachelorette party), rents a mechanical bull in the shape of a penis and installs it in the front yard.

The excited guests stream onto lawn, leaving Robert and Sol inside, along with one other guest; Nelson, a retired partner at Robert and Sol's law firm who Robert has been trying to impress all night, expresses his disapproval in no uncertain terms. Robert tells Nelson that it was never their intention to offend, even offering to show him out the back so he doesn't have to look at the phallus. Sol says, "Just to be clear, we have the right to celebrate any way that we want." Nelson bridles at this statement, and responds in a tirade that is unique; no other character expresses the feelings that Nelson does, and his speech, the finale of the episode preceding the long-awaited wedding, is carefully timed to undercut the new victories and freedoms experienced thus far by Robert and Sol:

You know, Robert, you and I go a ways back. And I have to admit, every once in a while, I began to wonder about you. The pocket squares, always humming opera, the beautiful wife you never paid that much attention to. Then I heard about you and Sol and I thought, the less I know about that, the better. But I came tonight because I am your friend. And then what do you do? You throw your lifestyle in my face. I don't have a problem with you being a homosexual, but when did you become such a faggot?

Thus, the most vitriolic opposition to Robert and Sol is expressed as the emotional finale to an episode celebrating the upcoming wedding of the protagonists. It is a sentiment that has been a persistent undercurrent to the narrative, but never before has it manifested at the level of speech or character. Additionally, the markers of gayness with which the show has been contending suddenly connote xenophobia when invoked in the midst of social backlash. Previous comedic playing of these stereotypes becomes retroactively suspect in light of the real consequences of their existence.

When confronted with the first aggressive response to homosexuality, the show's carefully constructed answer reasserts the independence of Sol and Robert's identities. Following Nelson's tirade, Robert takes a swing at him in true melodramatic fashion, only to be stopped by

Sol. Robert, disheveled from the scuffle, says to Nelson, “You’re right. And you’re just lucky that that faggot stopped this faggot from knocking you on your ass.” This scene represents a very different construction of labeling from that which is playfully displayed when Robert and Sol decide how to introduce each other, and consequently, the denouement of the episode is structured to respond to the accusations leveled against Robert and Sol by Nelson. As the social consequences and mores surrounding Robert and Sol’s deviant sexuality palpably hang in the atmosphere, the two look at one another for a moment, their surroundings manifested mostly in the distant cheers from the outside crowd. Sol grabs Robert and kisses him, then asks if he would like to go outside and take part in the festivities surrounding the phallic party inflatable. “Oh God no,” Robert responds and Sol says, “Neither do I.” In this way, the episode allows Robert and Sol to be defined not just by their justifiable outrage at Nelson’s attitude toward them, but also by the choices they make that set them apart from the stereotyping Nelson portrays.

Indeed, *Grace and Frankie* as a whole continually grapples with the concept of gay stereotype, frequently endeavoring to overcome it only to later succumb to standardized cultural expectations of gayness. As is illustrated by Nelson’s tirade, the show invokes stereotype in order to rebuff it and demonstrate the shortcomings of presumptive labeling. But it just as frequently embeds stereotype into its examination of how Robert and Sol measure themselves and their identities against the gay community. Implications of promiscuity abound, as well as overly flamboyant characterization of incidental gay characters. Additionally, Robert and Sol occasionally identify such stereotypical characteristics within themselves when defining their identities to others and themselves. Fashion expertise, disregard for standards of masculinity, and associations with musical theater are all cited by Robert and Sol as markers of their own sexuality. While this type of cultural shorthand is perhaps expedient for the narrative to employ

in order to present unambiguous character development for Robert and Sol, it simultaneously complicates the picture of nuanced and highly individual sex and gender identity that the show attempts to convey.

In this way, the characterizations of *Grace and Frankie* are fraught with a strange double standard; it seems that Robert and Sol are free to express their sexuality as they see fit, but other members of the queer community that they encounter tend to adhere rigidly to the social delineations of cultural expectation. While the show excels at deconstructing the propensity in film in which “non-straight characters are defined primarily (if not solely) by their sexuality” in regards to Sol and Robert, its incidental queer characters are not granted the same freedoms (Benshoff 310). Sol is portrayed as a Jewish man of devout faith, an excellent lawyer, and a caring father in equal measure to his sexuality, and Robert appears stubborn, argumentative, and emotionally inaccessible throughout both seasons. Thus, *Grace and Frankie* works to present a varied and multifaceted idea of the lives of its leading men, defying cultural expectations regarding both the social roles and personality characteristics associated with queerness.

If Robert and Sol are afforded a rich complexity of strengths and foibles, however, the other gay characters—the gay friends of Robert, Sol, and Frankie, the gay nurse, and the gay caterers—are all mere markers of the gay community. The show is never subtle in its presentation of themes and motivations, and this awkwardness is perhaps nowhere as obvious as it is its deployment of representatives from the gay community. If, “in order to construct ‘visible’ sexuality, characters must ‘perform’ sexuality,” then these characters are performing as caricatures of themselves (Benshoff 310). Defined solely by their sexuality, they exist for Robert and Sol to either embrace or disavow the choices and characteristics they represent. Of course, this is not particularly surprising, as the characters exist in the framework of the show too briefly

to afford them time for character development. But surely this is an unproductive exercise in which the show indulges to provide easy character growth for its main characters. While the narrative's focus on Robert's and Sol's endeavors to situate their personal and cultural identities is insightful and interesting, such a complex illustration of inner landscapes must be at least hinted at in all the characters, to ensure tonal continuity at the very least. More significantly, the narrative's limited allocation of depth in conjunction with gay characters can undermine the very fluidity of identity that it invokes these characters to portray.

Additionally, the visual presentation of homosexuality self-consciously lags behind the show's occasional representations of heterosexual sex. Robert and Sol are candidly depicted kissing and holding hands, sometimes multiple times an episode. The rest is to be inferred when the couple are shown sharing the same bed. In fact, the show is careful to highlight the way that these newly public displays of affection and terms of endearment unsettle their family members. However, the same discomfort displayed by family unnerved by these manifestations of Robert's and Sol's relationship are echoed in the text's visual treatment of the relationship itself. Though the two freely engage in the types of physical contact that, in their heterosexual equivalent, would have easily cleared even the most stringent measures of the Production Code, they seem after that to hit a glass ceiling. The show does not depict any sex acts more involved than a kiss between their two homosexual protagonists, a structure that is surprising considering the fact that the premise of the show is built on their twenty-year affair.

While Grace and Frankie's visual representation of homosexual sexuality slightly lags behind its depictions of the heterosexual equivalent, it must be noted that these representations nevertheless mark progress. As recently as 1981, a made-for-television movie "could not depict any scenes of affection between characters of the same sex" (MediaSmarts). The later popularity



of series such as *Will and Grace*, which featured homosexual characters, prompted networks to recognize that portrayals of homosexuality could be lucrative, but “this profit-motivation means that networks are careful in their portrayals of queer characters” (MediaSmarts). Even on current network television, similar such displays of same-sex affection are not to be found in many network shows, the exception perhaps being ABC’s *Modern Family*. Thus, network television is bound to its profit margin, and indeed, the great cost of creating a television series “may be the greatest hurdle to any minority group gaining widespread and fair exposure on television” (MediaSmarts).

Fortunately, a recent study by GLAAD found that representations of queer characters have increased on network, cable, and streaming television, to reach record levels of representation. Simultaneously, however, it noted a disturbing trend that “broadcast series more specifically—failed queer women this year, as character after character died, continuing the harmful ‘bury your guys’ trope” (GLAAD). It also noted that, while numbers may be increasing, it is additionally important to locate original characterization not constructed upon stereotype. Thus, broadcast television inhabits a tentative space in regards to representations of queer characters; it enjoys the profit that some of the more popular queer portrayals have garnered, but is careful never to overstep the cultural status quo. While broadcast series “continue to ‘sanitize’ the portrayal of gay and lesbian life, specialty and pay-TV channels have begun to show more cutting-edge, controversial and critically acclaimed series about gays and lesbians” (MediaSmarts). In this way, the exorbitant costs of television production increase the risk associated with its failure, causing networks to remain in step with cultural norms. Platforms like Netflix with alternative profit models, however, have enjoyed an exploration of new and increasingly rich portrayals of queer culture and characters.

While Robert and Sol remain somewhat chaste in onscreen representation, it is Grace the divorcee who is afforded both of the representations of sex that occur in the show's two seasons. And in fairness, the show as a whole does not present as entirely comfortable with the subject of sex, whether heterosexual or homosexual. In the entirety of its thirteen hours, there are only two scenes visually devoted to sex, both between Grace and her boyfriend. One is played as a comedic commentary on the effects of aging, and one is presented in earnest. Both are extremely brief. It is therefore exclusively through Grace that the show's representations of sex are mediated; the camera stays out of everyone else's bedroom. When a plot point involving sex must be established, there is a typical cut to post-coital discussion in which each participant is covered and separate. Grace's daughters Brianna and Mallory are never even shown kissing their respective boyfriends or husband. Thus, for a show whose discussions of sex are frank and integral to the plot, its depictions of them are surprisingly celibate in regards to heterosexual and homosexual sex alike.

If the show is shy about visual representations of sex, it joyfully avows frank discussion of the topic. Frankie, depicted as an open, sex-positive hippy, cajoles Grace into embracing her own sexuality. Indeed, many of Frankie's hobbies concern sexual realities; she makes her own lube and, later, goes into business with Brianna to market it. She paints vaginas, discusses the female orgasm with an uncomfortable Grace, and acts as the show's voice for issues regarding sex and aging. Grace is allowed her share of the conversation as well, after she is gifted a vibrator that aggravates her arthritis. In fact, the second season ends with Grace and Frankie's pledge to create a vibrator that is easier for the elderly to use. This strategy of open discussions about typically avoided topics is a key component of the show for creator Marta Kauffman, who insists that "no subject be taboo" for the narrative to highlight (Blythe). In this way, the series

speaks loudly on subjects that rarely enter public discussion while simultaneously displaying an unsurprising lack of depictions of sexual activity, considering the trends of the sitcom genre. One factor that may in part be responsible for this dynamic is the show's unconventional demographic; older viewers might be uncomfortable with visual representations even as they identify with the sexual problems that the characters experience as symptomatic of aging.

In this way, Grace and Frankie tend to control the representation of and discourse about sex, and it is not only through depictions of sex that the females are afforded more attention. Though it is the homosexual relationship between Robert and Sol that forms the foundation of the series, the show's focus is in fact on the nonsexual relationship between Grace and Frankie. This is made clear not only by the title, but by the title sequence as well, which features the opening verse of the Stealer's Wheel song "Stuck in the Middle with You." The title sequence pictures a wedding cake with marriage figurines on it, and shows in each successive cake tier the progression of the characters' lives previous to the show. It begins with the traditional marriage cake-toppers of the two heterosexual couples, moves up a tier to show the figurines holding babies, moves up again to show the two groomsmen figures getting closer, and by the next layer they are kissing to the astonishment of the female statuettes. Finally, the top tier of the cake shows only the two female figurines, who stand side by side with their backs to the camera, facing an uncertain future together. In this evocative image, it is not an invocation of heterosexual or even homosexual union that tops the traditional wedding cake, but one of nonsexual female friendship.

In fact, by the time the show opens, Sol and Robert have solidified their relationship and begin seamlessly operating as a couple after they come out; it is therefore the relationship between their two marooned ex-wives that forms the basis of the relational and personal growth

of the show. Of course, as people with stark differences in personality, taste, and communication styles, Grace and Frankie begin the show with barely concealed animosity, a dynamic the pilot takes care to highlight even before the revelation of the affair is announced. The audience understands as soon as Grace and Frankie greet each other at the restaurant with unconvincing warmth that the show will invest the majority of its emotional currency in their relationship. As each struggles to confront the new realities of their single lives, and finds inadequate support from their children and friends, each ends up turning to the other. By cheering each other back to emotional health, they provide adamant counterpoint to the fact that “women rarely right wrongs against women directly on TV” (Green 94). As each falteringly becomes the other’s confidant and advisor, they begin to advocate for one another’s interests. Indeed, the second season finale finds them choosing the company of one another over that of their families when they storm out together following a domestic dispute. Thus, Grace and Frankie’s relationship is placed at the emotional center of the show, despite its variety of homosexual and heterosexual relationships.

What is more, *Grace and Frankie* narratively and visually presents the relationship between its title characters with an egalitarian balance reserved from all other characters. While the rest of the cast persist in power struggles and secrecy, Grace and Frankie seem to have nothing to prove to one another and therefore are able to communicate and address conflict openly. For example, after she gets a new boyfriend, Grace pretends to enjoy activities and foods she despises in order to appease him. When Frankie confronts her about it, she says that she worries that if she doesn’t do the things her boyfriend likes, “he will find someone else who will.” She never hesitates in criticizing Frankie’s clothes, food, and habits, however, and never falsely represents herself to Frankie. It is therefore implied that she never worries that Frankie

will replace her, perhaps because, in their unique situation, both knows that the other is irreplaceable.

Additionally, whenever the two women appear on frame together, they are presented symmetrically. Their figures walking down the screen are always equidistant from the center of the frame and two empty chairs balance the shots of the living room. Indeed, the final shot of the first season shows the two walking away from the camera on the beach, sharing a blanket and framed in the center, their two figures having become one. This visual treatment is reserved to Grace and Frankie, as the other characters find relationships with one another entrenched in conflict that is reflected in their framing. Only when Robert and Sol are getting married are they afforded a symmetrical composition. Grace and Frankie's relationship thus is granted exclusive narrative and visual equality, despite and perhaps because of their platonic status.

In this way, the nonsexual relationship between Grace and Frankie takes priority throughout the show and even the focus on Robert and Sol's relationship is occasionally displaced in order to explore other issues relevant to the characters. If *Grace and Frankie* professes to be an examination of queerness in a family setting, it hides an even closer look at a reality not often discussed or represented in mainstream American film and television; the show is almost unparalleled in its unblinking scrutiny of the process of aging. All of the main characters are over seventy years old, and while there is a healthy company of young supporting characters, the show's clear focus is on the trials experienced by those well past middle age. This narrative attention is rare in an industry in which protagonists tend to be only slightly over the legal drinking age, if not younger.

Though all of the main characters of the show experience the difficulties of aging, there are perhaps none who feel its harsh realities as sharply as Grace, played by Jane Fonda. Again

and again, she encounters obstacles and prejudice because of her age. As an actress renowned in the beginning of her career for her beauty, she represents an ideal embodiment of the themes of aging expressed throughout the show. Indeed, one source used in research, which was published in 1998, specifically cites her when it says that film “subjects women in visual culture to the tyranny of age, so that women who were once major performers (Elizabeth Taylor, Bridgette Bardot, Jane Fonda) tend to disappear from view” (Green 40). It is true that Jane Fonda, though prodigiously prolific throughout her early career, experienced a steep drop off in film appearances as she aged. Of course, her lack of film credits between 1990 and 2005 can be in part attributed to her then-husband Ted Turner’s assertions that he needed her in the home. (French 25). Nevertheless, she remembers the trials of aging in an image-focused industry, citing standards of appearance as her motivation in 1987 to get the plastic surgery that she had previously so staunchly disavowed.

Another indication of Fonda’s increased agency is the very fact that her character is granted a place in the title. Previous, sexualized works such as *Barbarella* allowed her role to title the film, but more serious roles were sequestered from that privilege. When, for example, she appears as prostitute Bree Daniels, “the very title, *Klute*, suggested that it was really about the detective, John Klute” (French 86). Yet there are few viewers of the movie that would attribute the narrative of the film to the stoic and reserved private eye, especially after seeing Fonda’s surpassing performance in the climactic scene. In fact, it was Fonda rather than Donald Sutherland who was granted the Oscar for her performance, and it is her expert control over the character that “forces the viewer to reconsider the notion of women in the movies” (French 91). Therefore, Fonda’s very appearance in the title role of *Grace and Frankie* represents a departure from industry trends. By recognizing the centrality of her performance to the series, the title

orients the audience into alignment with its two female protagonists and signals its intention to preferentially highlight their experiences.

As a renowned former beauty, Jane Fonda's Grace is perfectly poised to provide a marked visual representation of the way that she has aged, and the show wastes no time in deconstructing her image. In the first seven minutes of the show's pilot, titled "The End" in an invocation not only of the episode's subject but also of the stage of life of its protagonists, the ways that Grace has sought to combat aging are highlighted. Grace looks pristine when the show opens at the restaurant in which Robert and Sol announce their longstanding affair, the picture of keeping-it-tight and impossible standards. Her blonde hair is voluminous, her skin remarkably smooth, and her figure is trim. Later, after she has returned from the dinner, she sits alone at her vanity, facing the camera, her softly lit bedroom behind her. In a silent long take, the camera tilts up from Grace's upside-down reflection in the metallic top of her make-up table to rest on her face, frontally framed and staring into the camera. She reaches up and takes off her false eyelashes, one by one, and then removes the hairpiece that had gone undetected until now, never breaking her steady gaze at the camera and the audience.

A reverse shot over Grace's shoulder shows her taking off the hairpiece in her mirrored reflection, and ensures that the audience knows that their viewpoint was previously positioned in the place of her mirror. Having divested herself of the false hair, Grace sits in her chair and regards her reflection. The camera resumes its position as her mirror, this time framing her face more closely. Beyond her plain makeup, there are no more beauty enhancements that can be envisioned, but Grace once again reaches behind her head and detaches an elastic strap stuck to her skin but hidden under her hairline. As she pulls it off, her taut skin is released and visibly

wrinkles. She again looks closely into the camera at her reflection with the elastic still hanging off her and sighs, the first noise to punctuate the sequence.

In this way, Jane Fonda looks into the camera and visibly ages as we watch. It is a moment of vulnerability for a spikey character who has just received shocking news, but even more than that, it is an announcement of the show's intentions regarding the treatment of aging. Fonda, an actress famous for her scanty or nonexistent outfits in *Barbarella* and other films of her husband Roger Vadim, for arousing a decency outcry after appearing semi-nude on a billboard, and for appearing on the cover of *Penthouse Magazine* exposing a false carved breast, has just methodically undressed before the camera in order to reveal an entirely different kind of bareness. It is a simple and realistic onscreen confession, informed by the fact that when "taking the sheer gamut of Hollywood history into consideration, the theme of female transformation seems to be everywhere" (Greven 59). Yet this is a kind of transformation rarely seen on American screens, even if it is performed in real time, as is evidenced by rampant career stagnation of aging stars. And, to ensure that the audience is aware that such a metamorphosis is an illicit one, Grace quickly hides her beauty aids in a drawer when Robert enters the room.

Additionally, one would be hard-pressed to imagine a star whose image is as controversial and paradoxically vulnerable as that of Jane Fonda. As the face of the Vietnam protests, "Hanoi Jane" is no stranger to the incisive deployment of her fame in the aid of a political cause. Though it has been over forty years since she broadcast messages of peace over Radio Hanoi, she has remained for some an unforgivable radical. Nevertheless, her political zeal has not waned with her increasing age, as she has championed women's rights, fought against teen pregnancy, and even spent her seventy-ninth birthday protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline. While some see Jane Fonda inspecting a North Korean anti-aircraft gun and others



imagine her at a podium with her fist raised in the air, her radical image is coupled with openness and accessibility. She is the same actress who, in the finale of *Klute*, allowed her nose to run freely while she cried. Her body is frankly displayed in her workout videos, and she has been open about her past eating disorders, plastic surgery choices, and body image struggles. Thus, Jane Fonda's image is simultaneously constructed from her indefatigable activism and her insecurities and vulnerabilities.

This sequence is additionally narratively significant, a prefiguration of the themes that *Grace and Frankie* will later explore. By inhabiting the gulf between appearance and reality, the show can effectively highlight the societal pressures experienced and occasionally given into by the characters. Of course, this sequence illustrates how Grace, having just discovered her longtime husband's homosexuality and affair, is taking a look at herself and her life. Moments later, she admits, "I thought we were normal. I thought we were like everybody else. I thought this was life." This statement, shortly following the demonstration of her herculean efforts to conform to social standards regarding her appearance, heralds the freedom that Grace will experience because of her forced departure from the norm. It is revealed later in the episode that Grace is the retired CEO of a beauty company. While grocery shopping, she comes across a shelf with her products, all emblazoned with her face. A fellow customer asks, "Is that you?" to which she responds, "It used to be." Grace's make-up table transformation grants an understanding that this reinvention will benefit her, even if her character is devastated in the moment. In this way, the pilot's visual treatment of Grace's age heralds the themes and tone that will carry the show.

*Grace and Frankie* thus announces its intention to closely examine the aging process within its first minutes, and indeed, the subject is unshakeable for the duration of the series. A similar sequence to that of the pilot appears later in the season, in an episode called "The Sex," in

which Grace anticipates having sex with a straight man for the first time since she married her husband forty years ago. Her nerves build throughout the episode, culminating in her pre-coital preparations. In a similar shot structure to the pilot, the camera pans right from billowing white curtains to reveal Grace stepping out of the bathroom into her empty room, dressed in a floor length sleeveless nightgown. She self-consciously walks toward the camera, again in the position of the mirror. Light music signals the fact that the subject is being treated humorously this time, but the unflinching gaze of the camera is no different. A reverse shot of Grace's reflection over her shoulder shows her trying different poses in an attempt to look alluring. Each one she tries she finds inadequate, struggling to hide her spider veins and loose skin. Now on the bed, a shot of Grace looking off-screen at her reflection further details her attempts, and as she shakes out her hair, she hurts her neck. When she brings her hand up to her neck, she notices the loose skin hanging off her upper arm. She bats at it and it shakes, the high-key lighting revealing its gelatinous wobbling, before she finally decides to turn the lights off and call her partner in.

In this way, Fonda's body is accessible to the audience in a way that it is not to her sexual partner. Indeed, as he fumbles through the dark room, she will consent to him turning on the lights only for a moment, and only after she is under the covers. The episode thus grants a privileged look at an exposed female body. Unlike the traditional filmic gaze so famously defined by Laura Mulvey in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, however, Fonda's image does not seem to be "coded for strong visual and erotic impact" but rather is marked as the opposite (Mulvey 837). In fact, shots of a woman preparing for sex, familiar to any filmgoer, are almost parodied in this presentation. Though she was once undeniably an object of erotic spectacle (and her later career likely suffered because of it), Fonda here rewrites her filmic representation with a vengeance. By exposing the flaws of her aging body, Fonda undermines the

potential for traditional sexual objectification. This represents a fairly radical paradigm for television, as even “seemingly socially critical television series with beautiful stars... can only repeat the essential relationship of cultural patriarchy while seeming superficially to question it” (Green 155). But, in a subversion of the dynamic highlighted by Mulvey, if she is not the object of the camera, then she must be its subject. In this way, Fonda deconstructs her own erotic image in order to be the subject of the audience’s identification.

In addition to a presentation of the appearance of age, *Grace and Frankie* examines its physical and cultural implications. Many jokes are made about deafness, technological illiteracy, and back problems, frequently at the same time that the show critiques the larger social structures surrounding aging. In one striking episode, Grace fights to be noticed, finding that the roles of her younger self have expired. Feeling at loose ends, she decides that she will go back to work at the company that she handed down to her daughter Brianna. When she arrives at Brianna’s office, she discovers that the packaging of her product, which was previously branded with her face, now shows a plant. Brianna tells Grace that the new packaging is in pursuit of “a younger customer,” to which Grace replies, “I’ve been erased.” Later, she calls her other daughter, Mallory, and asks if she is irrelevant. Busy with her own children, Mallory responds, “Mom, not to me. I gotta go.” Thus Grace finds that the seminal positions of her middle-aged life—that of a CEO and a mother—are no longer needed, and indeed are in danger of literal erasure.

Later, as Grace and Frankie wait at the register of a store to buy cigarettes, they grow increasingly frustrated when the clerk, who is shelving products, doesn’t notice them. After they have called to him several times, he appears to be coming over to help, only to help a young woman in a tight shirt instead. Grace, losing patience entirely, yells, “Do you not see me? Do I not exist? You think it’s all right to ignore us just because she’s got grey hair [indicating

Frankie] and I don't look like her [pointing at the young customer]?" Grace, incensed, storms out, leaving the clerk and his customer confused and irritated. In the car, Grace says, "That lacked poise and I'm sorry, but I refuse to be irrelevant." Next to her, Frankie lights up a cigarette that she has stolen from the store, replying, "Can't see me, can't stop me."

Thus, though Grace fails to resurrect the structures of her younger life, Frankie demonstrates to her the alternatives enabled by old age. Frankie's illicit procurement of the cigarettes additionally demonstrates that the two, though unable to change the social mores reinforcing their erasure, will nevertheless creatively defy this framework in order to meet their own needs. Implicit in the episode is the assumption that it is this very act of defiance that will allow the characters to retain their social power. Finally, the episode can be read as an embodiment of the methods of the show; though both Fonda and Tomlin experienced in traditional Hollywood the erasure that Grace encounters, they nevertheless find alternative routes for self-expression in the original streaming series platform.

Indeed, *Grace and Frankie* seems to have found its ideal home in Netflix. Though HBO and ABC both wanted to give the show a pilot, it was ultimately awarded to Netflix, partly because of Netflix's promise to get the show running without a lengthy development stage. Additionally, co-creator Marta Kauffman, cites Netflix's freedom from censorship and obscenity regulations present in network and some cable television as one of the main boons of working with the streaming service. Indeed, Kauffman says that this freedom is key to her "approach to this show that no subject be taboo, and Netflix has been the perfect platform for this purpose" (Blythe). In an interview concerning Grace and Frankie's open treatment of older female sexuality, vibrators, and facilitators, Kauffman said,

"It's not there because it's shocking. It's there because it's real...It's really cool to be able to go all the way and not use the word 'showerhead'

instead of ‘vibrator’ or whatever it is. You couldn’t do that on network television. You can barely do it on a lot of cable TV shows” (Blythe).

Thus, the open atmosphere enabled by Netflix’s agency concerning language has allowed a more honest portrayal not only of homosexuality and aging, but of sex itself.

In addition to allowing greater linguistic and representational freedom on the show, Netflix has granted *Grace and Frankie* diversity in its production team that is rare elsewhere. Of course, this diversity begins with Fonda and Tomlin themselves, as “Ms. Kauffman and Mr. Morris created the show just for them.” (Koblin). Both credited as executive producers, they each have discussed how they have brought personal experience with aging, independence, and, in the case of Tomlin, homosexuality into the plots of the show. Additionally, an aberrant number of producers, writers, and directors on the show are female, and even a visiting reporter noted “the crew looks to be around 60% women—still a relatively unusual sight on a set” (Blythe). Kauffman attributes the egalitarian atmosphere of her set to the fact that “we don’t allow intolerance on the set, and women have an equal voice to men. That’s just how it should be” (Blythe). Thus, *Grace and Frankie*’s production team is not only diverse, but remains actively committed to standards of inclusion.

In fact, Tomlin’s and Fonda’s control over and centrality to the plot of *Grace and Frankie* indicates a new freedom afforded to them by the streaming platform. For example, Fonda’s previous experiences clearly inform the transformation and growth of Grace, a fact that is not surprising considering Fonda’s background in Method acting. Even more than acting technique, however, many plot points seem to be taken directly from Fonda’s speeches and blog. Indeed, Grace’s comments about her efforts to please her boyfriend by adapting to his hobbies and preferences almost copy Fonda’s previous assertion in a speech to a women’s group in which she says, “I thought if I didn’t become whatever he wanted me to be, I’d be alone, and

then I wouldn't exist" (Hershberger 142). Grace's struggle to find what she wants, which is a controlling theme of season two is echoed in her assertion that "after a certain point, age eleven to be exact, I didn't know what I wanted anymore" (Hershberger 77). Finally, Fonda's own blog describes her own experience with a late-in-life divorce, citing her need to seek a kind of wholeness after she turned 60, a pursuit previously hindered by her desires for validation and perfection. Indeed, as Grace separates from her past life, she embodies the way that Fonda describes "becoming the subject of [her] own life" following the split (Fonda.com).

Of course, Fonda's influence over the experiences of the characters is matched only by the input of Lily Tomlin, whose sexuality remained, until recently, an open secret in Hollywood for decades. Tomlin, who has been with her wife Jane Wagner for forty-five years, was married to her on December 31, 2013 (McNeice). Indeed, she is hailed as a "figurehead for lesbians in Hollywood," as she carried on her relationship despite cultural and social pressures. When speaking about her communication of the topic earlier in her career, Tomlin said, "I wasn't totally forthcoming. Everybody in the business knew I was gay, and certainly everybody I worked with and everything like that. I just never had a press conference to announce it" (Buxton). Indeed, she was so well known as a member of queer culture that Time Magazine approached her in 1975, telling her that she could be on the cover if she came out. Tomlin demurred because she "wanted to be acknowledged for [her] work" rather than her sexual identity (Buxton). She adds that she doubts her career would have been as long if she had chosen to come out so early. Thus, Tomlin's presence playing a straight character in a narrative about queer identities informs the series with both authenticity and irony. The series thus not only gives a voice to fictional perspectives of gay characters, but real experiences as well by affirming Tomlin as one of the central figures and executive producers of the show.

Finally, *Grace and Frankie* confronts a series of other nonconventional identities and social issues throughout its trajectory. In one episode, Sol complains that someone he hasn't seen for while still thinks of him as "the hippie Jew with the black son and the communist wife." And the narrative does indeed explore these multifaceted aspects of the characters' lives. Due to Frankie's inability to have children, Sol and Frankie have adopted both of their boys, a fact which provides the show with the rich outlet to explore issues of identity both inherent and external. In an episode in which Coyote is trying to find his birth mother, he tells his brother Bud, "I just want to sit across the table from someone that looks like me. Can't you understand that?" Bud, who is African American, replies, "No, what would an adopted black Ashkenazi Jew living in San Diego understand about that?" In this way, the series postulates a formation of identity that is based both around something inherent and balanced with external influencers. As Sol and Robert try to find their place in the queer community as well as the mainstream through the identifiers of their identity, Bud and Coyote demonstrate that they are doing exactly the same. The show thus postulates an image of identity as relational, an ever-changing landscape in which one must simply relate to those who mirror themselves, whether externally or internally.

Another social issue the series ambivalently addresses is that of substance use. One of the underlying themes of season two is Grace's increasing reliance upon alcohol to help her through difficult emotional times. This culminates when Grace goes on a bender, insulting and alienating Frankie, who finally addresses the issue of her drinking. Even the beginning of the show, however, insinuates substance as a universal means of emotional coping. Upon the revelation of Robert's and Sol's affair, almost all of the family turns to alcohol and prescription drugs to cope, an issue that remains unaddressed. Finally, the most striking example of the series' demonstration of substance abuse is embodied in Coyote, who is newly released from rehab

following a years-long descent into addiction. Due to Netflix's freedom from the decency dictations of the FCC and other industry forces, flashback episodes explicitly depict Coyote's use of narcotics. Thus, the series can explore themes of addiction and recovery through its unique focus on substance use.

Despite its foregrounding of non-normative sexuality and its radical treatment of advanced age, *Grace and Frankie* constructs its narrative and themes upon cultural assumptions that enable and mediate some of the minority representations. After Robert and Sol's announcement, Grace and Frankie flee to the beach house shared by their families. This would, of course, not be possible if both families were not upper middle class. Indeed, many of the show's plots are enabled by the fact that its characters have abundant financial resources. The only reference to financial hardship occurs when Sol must confront the insurance company over an exorbitant bill following a medical procedure in season two. Indeed, it is only Frankie whose career is not implied to be hugely lucrative and she comes into money of her own when she begins to sell her lube. Sol and Robert are partners in a law firm specializing in divorce, Grace was a CEO of her own company, and even most of the kids are shown to have high-paying jobs.

Another concession made in the first season of *Grace and Frankie* is to the representations of social roles of women. Any allusions to Grace's time as a CEO perfectly illustrates the template for depictions of working women in which "primary emphasis [is] placed on their difficulties in balancing dual roles" and in fact it is only after she almost misses a family event that Grace decides to retire in a flashback episode (Green 70). Later in the same episode, when discussing Brianna's clashes with her male boss, Brianna says that the problem stems from the fact that she is, "hypercompetent, intuitive, and assertive," traits that she has indeed previously demonstrated. Grace replies, "Yeah, which translates as intimidating, argumentative,



and strident.” Grace thus acknowledges the double-standard in place for working women, but goes on to say, “You have got to figure out how to play well with others,” reinforcing the very principle she has critiqued. Brianna, in a representation of the season’s conflicting ambivalence regarding women in the workplace, responds, “Or figure out how to be the boss.” The audience is aware from previous episodes that Brianna will go on to make an excellent CEO, but the verbal and visual pushback to her position is constant. Additionally, the show’s title sequence reinforces traditional gender roles in the home.

Finally, if Grace and her daughter Brianna clash over Brianna’s professional life, such conflict is absent in Grace’s relationship with her other daughter Mallory because Mallory is a stay-at-home mother. This fact is relentlessly illustrated by the fact that, whenever Mallory is not with the family, she is depicted doing housework. Not a minute of the show depicts Mallory taking care of her own needs, and though this is perhaps an accurate depiction of the life of a mother, it nevertheless represents a depressing route to personal fulfillment. What is more, Mallory is consistently praised and inhabits the position of the dutiful daughter, while Brianna is undoubtedly the rebel of the family. In this way, the season takes a skeptical look at working females, affirming their competence but withholding its endorsement.

Season two, however, makes visible efforts to change its message regarding women in the workplace. Grace mentors an incorrigible young woman attempting to get a professional job in one episode, and Frankie’s business acumen is tested as she goes to market her lube with Brianna’s company. Brianna herself is shown increasingly in the setting of her office as CEO, effectively managing the company. Thus, the show balances its portrayals of its workingwomen and presents more narrative affirmation of female characters actively pursuing their own interests. Meanwhile, however, Mallory has become pregnant again, and is sentenced by her

doctor to bed rest. While motherhood is of course as valid a route for a female character to choose as professionalism, Mallory is consequently sequestered from the narrative and once again disappears into her role as wife and mother. Nevertheless, the previous season's ambivalence regarding the roles of women is solidified in season two as an affirmation of the tenacity and activity of its female characters.

In this way, *Grace and Frankie* makes a bold, if occasionally flawed, attempt at portraying the realities of two groups not often seen on network television: that of the gay community and that of females over seventy. Of course, as queer culture has become increasingly accepted among the mainstream, LGBTQ characters have enjoyed expanded visibility in film and on American network television. Nevertheless, they remain a group that is underrepresented and the inadequate representation they are afforded is riddled with stereotype, a fact that *Grace and Frankie* attempts, if not entirely successfully, to address. Perhaps more significantly, *Grace and Frankie* takes an honest look at aging which is unparalleled in works of its genre, except, perhaps, for *The Golden Girls*. Its stark visual presentation of physical attributes attendant with advanced age, as well as its defiance of the traditional relationship between the female body and the camera elide into a fresh aesthetic that encourages identification with old women, a thoroughly invisible demographic. This fact, combined with the presentation of nontraditional sexual identity and its aim at targeting an unpopular demographic, would make its appearance on network television surprising. In an increasingly young cast of film and television actors, *Grace and Frankie's* direct confrontation with the norms surrounding the portrayal of age as well as cultural attitudes toward aging, sex, and sexual identity would be out of place. Its position as a streaming original series on Netflix thus affords *Grace and Frankie* a platform that would otherwise be lacking.

## **Part II: *Transparent***

### **Deviant Identities and the Indefatigable Presence of Self**

As comedies focalized around the familial consequences of a late-in-life announcement of deviant sexual and gender identity, Netflix's *Grace and Frankie* and Amazon Studio's *Transparent* represent two iterations of the portrayal of similar perspectives, themes, and phenomena. They therefore present an ideal point of comparison between the methods of these two original streaming platforms in approaching a narrativization of otherness. Indeed, the two shows share a great deal; both detail the lives of three generations of an affluent family living in California in which the patriarch has revealed him or herself to be queer. Both share the typical thirty-minute structure of an original streaming sitcom, yet both find that comedy is eclipsed by the looming themes and realities associated with their chosen subject matter. Finally, both shows attempt to analyze and deconstruct traditional trends apparent in network and cable television's approach to appearance and gender. In this way, *Transparent* can partner with *Grace and Frankie* to provide a glimpse into the unique constructions of otherness presented on the original streaming platforms created by Netflix and Amazon.

In *Transparent*, Amazon Studios presents an intimate examination of a Jewish family whose normative lives are disrupted when their father Mort, played by Jeffery Tambor, suddenly announces that he is a woman, and has privately identified as a woman for the entirety of his life. Mort and Shelley (Judith Light), who met and married in their early twenties, have raised three children and finally divorced by the time the show opens. Their children, Sarah (Amy Landecker), Josh (Jay Duplass), and Ali (Gaby Hoffman) are all adults living in Californian suburbs, firmly rooted in their routines yet simultaneously unmoored and apparently unhappy. Sarah is married with two children, Josh is successful in the music industry, and Ali is drifting

and dependent. As Maura gradually comes out to each of her children, they begin to question their own identities; Sarah feels the decay of her marriage and the pull of deviant sexualities, Josh begins to question his past and his relationship with women, and Ali explores her own gendered and sexual preferences. In this way, the announcement and ensuing alteration of the family's patriarch leads the family to embark upon their own pursuit of self-awareness.

In fact, it is a similar pursuit of awareness that facilitated the creation of *Transparent*; the story featured in the series is inspired by creator Jill Soloway's own experience with a transitioning father. Her own parent came out as transgender at age 75, after forty years of marriage, a reality that informs the entirety of the series. With episodes directed and written by both Soloway and her sister Faith, the series occasionally feels like a confessional documentation of the results of a confusing and fractured youth, with an emphasis on the centrality of a flawed but supportive family. The series does not belong exclusively to the Soloway sisters, however; a battalion of queer and transgender consultants, cast members, and crew ensure that the story is accessible and accurate for both cisgendered and transgendered viewers. Indeed, the initiative, spearheaded by Soloway and trans associate producers Zackary Druker and Rhys Ernst, has been dubbed the "transfirmative action program" and has "led to the hiring of more trans people than on any other show in TV history, including fifteen speaking roles and one hundred extras" (Kang). In addition to the cast, Druker and Ernst have emphasized the hiring of ten trans members of the crew. In this way, *Transparent* endeavors not only to bring the issues relevant to transgendered life to the screen, but also attempts to amplify the often-ignored voices of real transmen and transwomen working in the industry.

Indeed, the title sequence of the series manifests this hybrid creation of Soloway and her team of consultants on the transgendered experience. Created by Ernst and Druker, the sequence

combines found footage of bat and bar mitzvahs with clips from Frank Simon's influential film *The Queen*. Premiering in 1968, *The Queen* is "one of the earliest screen portrayals of 'female impersonators'" (Vider). The title sequence is accordingly populated with grainy close-ups of early drag queen stars, including Crystal LaBeija<sup>1</sup>. These iconic clips are interspersed with party scenes in the first season, and with historic and personal moments in queer history like marches, kisses, and marriages in later seasons. The depiction of queerness is therefore manifold and vital, but is also carefully interwoven with images of family and the humbler pageantry of family gatherings; indeed, Soloway's own cousin is shown expressively dancing by himself in one of the clips. As the nostalgic tone and seamless editing of the title sequence blends queer and family histories, the words of the title cascade down from the top of the frame, repeating in unique shades of orange, red, or pink in a tasteful invocation of the pride flag. Thus, the themes of the show as well as a brief history of 'female impersonators' are catalyzed in the title sequence to picture the dialectic between family and gender identity that will carry the series.

*Transparent* thus handles the presentation of queerness and gender dysphoria with a careful and loving touch, informed by the experiences of the crew and their loved ones. Perhaps it is for this reason that the show places at its focal point the structure of a dysfunctional but loving family. The beginning of *Transparent* figures the Pfefferman family as deeply divided and aggressively self-interested. In the pilot, each is factitiously concerned with their own lives and when their father calls asking them to dinner, they speculate that he has cancer. Their expected emotional reaction is foregone in favor of discussions of inheritance and tax incentives. They arrive at his house and, while sloppily eating prime rib, Mort endeavors to come out to his children while they argue over the likelihood of Mort's potential diagnoses. Frustrated, Mort instead announces that he plans to move out and offers the house to Sarah and her husband. His

children listen with barbeque sauce smeared over their faces, the picture of a sloppy lack of situational and self-awareness. Finally, they begin to argue over his decision to gift the house to Sarah. Exhausted, Mort falls back in his chair.

As the family dinner comes to a close, Mort sees his children off and closes the door after them. At the decisive snap of the front door, he immediately unbuttons and removes his shirt. Bare-chested, he picks up the phone and his shirt drops to the ground. The phone speed dials and Mort says, “I couldn’t do it. My God, I had no idea it was gonna be so hard.” As he speaks, he walks off screen and into an adjoining room. A cut to a low angle shows his feet emerging again into the hall, the shot offering an understated visual pun as Mort literally comes out of the closet. In the foreground, his discarded shirt remains out of focus, and the folksy music swells as the camera reveals the hem of a skirt floating at his calves. The skirt is colored in stark pinks, oranges, and reds, inserting the first burst of color in the otherwise monotone scene and evoking the red-tinted rainbow of the title sequence. The skirt swirls around his legs as he turns and shuffles away from the camera, his crumpled shirt, and our previous conceptions of him. The nightgown is subsequently revealed in full as Mort lies in bed reading, his white comforter covered by the nightgown, unfurled and hanging over the side. In this way, this early scene in the pilot does not hesitate to explicitly represent how repellant the external trappings of masculinity are to Mort, and furthermore, the scene visually signals his intention to leave them behind.

Though the scene announces an early manifestation of Mort’s dysphoria regarding gender, it defines his activity with equal weight as solitary, and allows the audience an understanding of Mort that has not yet been extended to his family members. He waits to indulge in outward expressions of non-normative gender identity until after he is alone, and the audience is privileged with insight into his identity through an activity that has been carefully sequestered

from the eyes of his family and friends. Interestingly, it is an act that is subsequently echoed by both Josh and Ali. In the very next scene, Josh enters a room only to remove his flannel shirt and drop it to the ground. Later, Ali walks into her apartment and quickly strips, leaving her clothes in her entryway and examining her naked body in front of a full-length mirror. Thus, the pilot takes care not only in providing clear parallels between his plight and those of his children, but also in indicating that it is not only Mort who is confined by strict necessities of appearance. Yet each of these characters appears in the frame alone when they bare themselves in this way; the close binding of clothes is abhorred by everyone and yet this detestation is kept completely private. In this way, clothes gradually become equated in the pilot with the strict social confines that prevent the characters from inhabiting the liminal spaces in which they can access a truer expression and understanding of self.

Though Mort's nocturnal cross-dressing signifies the first representation of non-normative sexual or gender identity as connected with the family's patriarch, Mort's physical appearance remains firmly rooted in the masculine even after he dons the nightgown. It is not until several minutes later that the pilot presents Mort dressed as herself, in full avowal physically and narratively of her femininity. An establishing shot of a Los Angeles LGBT center alerts audiences to the forthcoming representations of queer identity and a long take of the meeting room within follows. The shot allows the stark whiteness of the room to invade the screen, disrupted only by sparse clutter along the far wall and the meeting group, who sit in a circle at a considerable distance from the camera. The small group of LGBT members is dwarfed by the vastness of the space, and the frame is balanced by two objects hanging on the walls above the group: to the right of the circle hangs a crucifix and on the left rests an American flag. Thus, even within their own space, the congregation of queer Californians is not free from these

two monolithic influences upon their subaltern existence. The size of the room combined with the imposing presence of these two emblems insinuates an uncomfortable bareness onto the huddled group.

The physical vulnerability of the meeting visually foreshadows the narrative impact of the scene, which begins with a story relayed by Mort, who the audience cannot yet see among the gathered community members. As he speaks, the camera pans in close-up over the faces of his rapt listeners. They smile and nod in an understanding and solidarity that the audience, not yet privileged with a glimpse at the speaker, does not have access to. His tone is conversational, but his speech provides the dawning realization upon which the series will build:

“I went to Target and I just—I took her out—you know what I mean. And I got into a—you know—a checkout line and the girl at the cash register said ‘I need to see some ID with that credit card of yours’ and um—you know what that’s like, right? And I just knew. I said, ‘This is gonna be good. This is gonna get ugly,’ and so she just kept looking at me—”

It is at this point in Mort’s speech that the camera comes to rest on his face. Any questions left unresolved by Mort’s proclivity for women’s nightwear are answered immediately and the context for Mort’s story is provided. She, as the audience now understands her to be, is framed in a medium close-up against a wall of white tile, staring into the camera. Her hand is raised to chest height, mimicking the credit card inspection performed by the employee. She is dressed in a gray wrap, the hair of her brown wig stylishly waved. She wears make-up, earrings, and feminine rings. She continues her story after a brief pause and provides an uncomfortably accurate vocalization of the audience’s very feelings of realization upon being presented with the image of Mort’s physically avowed identity: “—and then she said, ‘Oh,’ like that, you know? And she rung up the—batteries—something. And that was—I mean, that was a big victory. And I didn’t, uh, I was like, ‘Do not cry in front of this woman.’” This visual confession of Mort’s



identity is quickly followed by another revelation of her character when the group leader says, “Thank you for your share, Maura.”<sup>1</sup> In this way, the pilot carefully acquaints the audience with Maura’s character and habits before confronting the camera with a physical manifestation of her previously inaccessible interiority.

Additionally, by providing Maura not only with physical anonymity for the duration of her tale but also with a sympathetic and engaged audience in the support group, she is allowed to be both vulnerable and resolutely herself. The camera meticulously documents the reactions of her queer audience before it reveals her to the series’ audience, thus underlining the empathy felt by those who have experienced similar moments to that which is detailed in Maura’s quotidian tale. Though many of the series’ viewers have no personal background in gendered dysphoria and its social consequences, the preemptive representation of universal understanding in the LGBT center both aligns the audience to Maura’s plight and presents a distinctly othered community. Though the transgendered members of the group are not visually differentiated from the cisgendered members with deviant sexuality, the assembled community is nevertheless coherent, each identifying with the experience of social friction because of one’s expression of self. The ingrained empathy of the support group encourages a similar reaction in the audience, but is accompanied by a realization that all members of the group have some experience of her struggle. Thus, they share a commonality that is denied to the straight cisgendered audience member. The audience thus is simultaneously aligned with and distanced from the details of

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, the family’s father will be referred to as Maura and with a feminine pronoun, except for instances in which she is interacting with someone to whom she has not yet come out, in which case she will be referenced as Mort/he for analytic clarity, despite her clear identification as a female.

Maura's struggles as a transwoman, which consequently appear more immense for their triviality.

In this way, the pilot details the quotidian struggles of Maura as she embarks on her physical avowal of her own femininity, but the next episode takes care to underscore the larger consequences of her new externalization of identity. After Maura successfully comes out to Sarah, she visits the house of Divina (played by transwoman Alexandra Billings), a woman she meets at the support group, to indulge in a celebratory drink. As Maura admires Divina's apartment, Divina, who will go on to become a mentor for Maura, gently warns Maura of the upcoming trials associated with transitioning. As Maura sits at Divina's vanity and examines herself in the mirror, Divina speaks from the other side a partition, saying,

“You know, sweetie, this is a really big journey that we're on, and you've just started on it so you've got to learn to let go of everything anybody thinks of you. A really, really good friend of mine said this to me when I first transitioned—she said, ‘You know, in five years, you're going to look up, and not one of your family members is still going to be there. Not one.’”

Divina thus heralds a warning that will imbue the rest of the series with a sense of looming dread. Divina goes on to affirm that she has retained none of her family members since becoming a woman. This quiet expectation immediately solidifies the final consequence of queerness as the show posits it in the loss of loved ones. Following episodes and seasons capitulate upon the henceforth unnamed fear that Maura's family will dissolve upon the roiling sea of uncertainty, prejudice, and past injury in which they endlessly find themselves adrift. The survival of the family is never assumed, and each subsequent disappointment endured by Maura or her children seems a death knell for the Pfefferman family's continued cohesion. When all of her children leave Maura's talent show early, when flashback scenes show the persistent absence

of parental guidance, and when Josh struggles with the consequences of past romantic encounters, the friction of the family seems corrosive.

These frequent scenes of disconnection and pain are, however, mitigated by the occasional affirming image of familial solidarity. Sarah can be counted on to support Maura in fiercely vocal defense whenever she is accosted by family or strangers, Ali and Josh unhesitatingly stage an impromptu therapy session in a bathroom when Sarah has matrimonial regrets, and all three children openly welcome Maura's new girlfriend Vicky. Sometimes, this solidarity comes as a simple affirmation of identity; for example, when Maura is feeling dejected after she fights with Divina in season two, Ali and Sarah invite her to a women's music retreat. Similarly, this unyielding support is pictured as all the more loving when its attendant challenges are acknowledged; after Maura announces her intention to begin medically transitioning, Josh privately says, "I mean honestly, does it matter how I feel? She's got to do her." In this way, the conflict of the show is bound together by fleeting images of complete understanding not afforded to the characters in settings outside the family. Additionally, the family is fluid in its acceptance of new members. When Josh finds out he has a son, for example, the teenager is quickly adopted into the larger family unit. The final image of the first season provides a resounding assertion of familial union when the family is asked to join hands in a rare protestant prayer, led by Josh's newfound son. Ali, who has just fought with Maura, grabs a strand of Sarah's hair when she is told to connect herself to the prayer circle. Thus, the season provides a final solace in an image of disjointed but resolute family coherence.

Of course, the model of the family as a haven for self and a spring of happiness is not unfamiliar in film and television. Indeed, "Hollywood cinema (and television even more so) regularly attests that happiness, or even survival, can only be framed within some version of the

family and normalized sexuality” (Green 29). In this way, the family is typically structured as a return to normalcy through which any previous endorsement of aberrant behavior that occurs in the film or series can be suppressed in a reassertion of heterosexual homeostasis. The role of family in *Transparent*, however, presents a stark departure from this norm. It cannot be said that even half of the family exhibits the normalized sexuality attendant on this model. What is more, the family does not function as a suppressor of honest self-expression, but rather a facilitator of it, particularly after Maura embodies herself. When Sarah asks Ali why she suddenly began to explore lesbianism, Ali says, “I guess I just crossed a line that I always had there for some reason”. Later in the same episode, Sarah admits, “I used to have, you know, the perfect house, the perfect husband. I liked to compartmentalize, but I don’t anymore. I’m very—I’m living—I mean, it’s a mess”. Indeed, the new freedom felt by the family upon Maura’s announcement was experienced by creator Jill Soloway after her own parent came out. When speaking about her newfound willingness to present as butch, Soloway observes, “By blood, I come by my non-binariness...I just got this news, you know, it’s okay to be this way.” (Soloway and Myles). Thus, both Sarah and Ali are implied to have been freed by their parent’s example of affirmation of self over conformity to an ideal.

As is indicated by Soloway’s conception of her inheritance of queer identity, family appears not only as a site of personal and cultural exploration, but also as the conduit of a stalwart past. Each character is both benefited and trapped by the historical context of their genetic roots. Of course, as a Jewish family whose ancestors fled Nazi Germany, a certain cultural and familial trauma is imbued in the rituals and memories of the Pfefferman family. But, as Ali observes when speaking of her lineage, “this whole pain and anxiety that’s been passed down through the generations, and not just the Holocaust or the pogroms or the Jew shoes, it’s

sort of more like, uh, like metaphorical Holocaust.” And while the series details the hesitating steps of its protagonists as they forge ahead with new identities, it keeps one eye on the family’s heritage.

Indeed, the past stubbornly manifests itself in the family’s present and future. Many episodes in the second season are devoted to detailing the flight of Maura’s mother from Nazi Germany, and prove that Maura’s transgendered identification was shared by her aunt, who perished under the Third Reich. In flashback, cast from previous episodes portray the ancestors of the Pfefferman family and those surrounding the queer culture of Weimar Germany; the actress who plays young Ali here appears as her grandmother Rose, incidental characters from previous episodes play the LGBT scholars of the Magnus Hirschfield Institute, and Hari Nef, a prominent transwoman, plays Rose’s sister, who has been designated “transsexual”. Remnants of the past materialize in the present endlessly; a burlesque player lounges on a modern hotel balcony, Nazi youth follow Ali through the forest, and a campfire becomes the burning of LGBT literature in Nazi Germany. In this way, the Pfefferman family is caught in its legacy. Their actions and identities are informed by the liminal ghosts of the past, yet they are largely unacquainted with their stories.

Another aspect of familial inheritance explored by *Transparent* is the concept of a genetic memory of the experiences of ancestors passed on through generations. As Ali begins to research her past in season two, she says to her girlfriend Syd, “Did you know there is such a thing as inherited trauma in your actual DNA?” The concept, still a young scientific field, is called epigenetics, and posits a deep genetic memory reaching as many as seven generations after a deeply affecting event. In this way, the Pfefferman family is not simply influenced by the culture and artifacts of their past, such as the persistent presence of Great Aunt Gittel’s ring, but

also by the very genetics of those who experienced these traumas. The series formulates this relationship with the past as if the family experiences these tragedies as their predecessors did, in some way destined to revive ghosts of the past and live in their shadows.

Additionally, these ancestors are proven to have some shared experiences, proving that the identities with which the characters are struggling are inherent and inescapable. For example, Gittel is pictured being physically dragged away by the Nazis for her deviant sexuality, but her legacy appears a mere episode later, when Gittel's sister gives birth to a baby we know to be Maura. As season three depicts Maura's childhood during the height of Cold War terror, it reveals the struggles of the Pfefferman family to live in an aggressively conformist society. As an elementary aged Mort steals away to the fallout shelter to cross-dress, Rose and Grandma Yetta factitiously conceal his actions from his grandfather. When he is discovered in a dress with jeans around his ankles, Yetta explains to her husband, "All the Boymelgreen men, they want to be women. This—this family is cursed is what." Rose, helping Mort into his jeans, replies, "It's not a curse on our family. This *is* our family." In this way, family appears not only as a contemporary incitation of self, but also as a predictor of it, formulated as fostering descendants.

As each member of the Pfefferman family embarks on their own personal exploration of identity after being catalyzed by Maura's transformation, each becomes increasingly focused on interiority of the self to the exclusion of the requests and feelings of others. In this way, *Transparent* posits an uncomfortable connection between self-discovery and selfishness. The series heralds this theme when, moments after Maura appears as herself onscreen for the first time in the pilot, she says of her children, "They are so selfish. I don't know how it is I raised three people who cannot see beyond themselves." And indeed, future scenes figure Sarah, Ali, and Josh as almost ruthlessly self-involved; Ali casts aside her friend and girlfriend in favor of

sexual freedom, Josh neglects his fiancé, who recently miscarried, so that he can propose a new record label to his friend, and Sarah speaks to a friend about her own sexual explorations while ignoring the existential crisis of her listener. As they increasingly question their own identities following their familial revelation, each becomes self-centered with a directional intensity. Their energies become focused on the reformation of their selves, and externalities quickly fall away in the wake of the new significance inherent in everyday activity.

Of course, though Sarah, Josh, and Ali undoubtedly demonstrate their own tireless pursuit of self-interest time and again, it is Maura who is the first to establish the correlation between self-discovery and self-centeredness. As flashbacks in season one reveal how Maura, then Mort, copes with her concealed transgendered identity, the series underlines her complicated strategies to balance her home life and her interior identity. Early episodes reveal how she longs to integrate the two, but such a union is impossible because it depends upon a revelation that would dismantle the very family from whom she wants recognition. In a brilliant series of shots in the second episode of season one, Mort, presenting as a man in a flashback, gazes into the expansive window of his home after getting out of his car. He has just suffered a disheartening day at work, in which he toyed with wearing a women's shirt in the privacy of his office before finally discarding it. Inside, he can see the figures of his wife and three children eating dinner. A sudden reverse shot reveals Maura standing in front of the car, herself and watching the activity of her children. As she watches, the flashback's Mort enters the scene and kisses his wife and kids. In this way, Maura is shown longing for an irretrievable past in which her hidden identity allows her to interact with her family without breaking them apart.

Despite Maura's yearning to integrate herself with her surroundings, the opposite is frequently the case. Many episodes depict Maura sacrificing elements of herself for her family

or, conversely, the wellbeing of her family for the expression of herself. When the latter is the case, Maura must blatantly suspend her responsibility as a father in order to find shreds of time to become herself. For example, several episodes in season one detail Mort's willingness to let Ali cancel her Bat Mitzvah so that he has the freedom to enjoy a camp for cross-dressers. Josh comments, "It's so obvious now why Dad wasn't around. It's because he was busy playing Little Bo Peep." Even when Maura does not make a conscious decision to allow her newfound identity to supersede the events of her family, her non-normative actions and presentation typically does so anyway. Through no fault of her own, Maura's altered appearance and social position dominate conversation wherever she goes, so that both funerals and weddings find their focal point in her expression of self. In this way, Maura's self-exploration and consequent coming out demand the attention of those around her, monopolizing the lives of her family.

Though Maura's search for identity is frequently linked to the self-centered attitude of many of the characters and can even be destructive in its domineering presence, it is simultaneously formulated as a vital act of courageous parenting. Though her approach to her own final embodiment of self was naturally fallible, Maura nevertheless provides for her children an example of self-examination and honesty that they cannot help but recognize. Following Maura's revelation of herself to Ali, Ali cuts off her ponytail and embraces the gender dysphoria with which she has been struggling. Maura is thus able to exemplify "transformation as a kind of agency and a kind of liberation, even as it inevitably intersects with the very forces of normativity to which it provides an alternative" (Greven 32). And if her early forays into her self-expression were occasionally injurious to her loved ones, they were also intrepid. In this way, Maura's revelation of herself is a manifestation of her leadership as a parent.



In being open with her children about herself and her struggles, Maura tacitly provides an example of the challenging and even ruthless necessity to realize and manifest one's own identity. In the wake of such devastating honesty, Ali, Josh, and Sarah are compelled to examine their own lives and recognize the facets of their identities and pasts that they had previously preferred to leave untouched; Ali explores lesbianism and gender studies and Josh questions his past relationship with the family babysitter. Sarah throws herself into deviant sexual identities and communities, including lesbianism, bisexuality, and sadomasochism. Ali, Sarah, and Josh even begin to explore religion, each taking their own approach to finding something larger than themselves. Indeed, religion becomes the framework in which each character can identify vestiges of self in relation to community; Ali finds Judaism to be ideally correlated to her experience of gender and femininity, Sarah finds purpose and community in hosting religious gatherings, and Josh comes to understand his son through a brief foray into Christianity. In this way, Maura's winding route to coming out forged the way for her children's paths to self-examination and self-discovery.

Thus, Maura's occasional self-centeredness appears in the narrative as a requisite component of necessary introspection, and indeed becomes integrated into the presentation of familial love. As Maura, Shelly, Ali, Josh, and Sarah each embark upon their own interrogation of their lives, the rest of the family can be counted upon to understand the necessary implications of support or space that the character requires. When speaking to a group of women at the temple about her experience as the ex-wife of a transwoman in episode two of season three, Shelly comments, "They say when one person in a family transitions, everyone transitions, and that could not be more true." In this way, though the characters may struggle with external friction regarding their focus on self during their periods of self-discovery, there is an implicit

understanding within familial space regarding this absorption. Though they may let one another down, forgiveness is not far behind. As Josh's ex-girlfriend Raquel preaches in season three, the Torah posits thirty-six people who uphold the righteousness of the world, the identity of whom nobody knows, including the thirty-six sanctified. The point, Raquel explains, is to treat each person as if they are one of the few upon whose actions the divinity of the world depends. It is by this model that each member of the family treats each other's understanding of self. Though they may be disappointed by one another, each nevertheless treats the experience of every other member of the family with latent holiness.

As a series whose exploration of appearance, self-discovery, and self-centeredness is constant, *Transparent* finds its ideal iconography in a set awash with mirrors. Mirrors and reflective surfaces invade the frames of most scenes, and frequently figure as the focal point of the action. Characters both minutely examine their own reflections and catch them by accident at inopportune times, suggesting an omnipresence of unabashed and jagged reflexivity. No character's actions pass unexamined because they cannot escape the glimpses of their mirrored existence. Even if their actions evade the mirrors, they are captured by the tacit camera, whose documentary presence is just as ruthless as the ephemeral commentary provided by the mirrors. This condition is ironically punctuated when in a flashback, young Ali observes, "So if there is no God, I mean, honestly, like everything we do, no one sees it." The scene, however, prefigures Mort's determination to allow Ali to cancel her Bat Mitzvah, a decision which will be unearthed later, after Maura has begun her transition. Thus, all of the actions of the characters are witnessed explicitly by the series' audience and implicitly by its characters, who hold one another accountable for past mistakes.

Frequently, a scene will be pictured almost exclusively in a mirror, with no real-world equivalent provided. For example, when Ali finds herself trying to attract the attention of a transman whose self-professed type is “high-femme,” she remodels her gender-neutral look to highlight her feminine features; she wears make-up, exposes cleavage, and yanks the laces of a dress closed around her waist. In effecting this change in the dressing room of a boutique, Ali and her friend Syd stare into the full-length mirror. The edges of their bodies skirt the sides of the frame, but all of the action and its significance occur in the mirror. In rebuilding her appearance, Ali affects an altered relationship to her gender and her body, attempting to explore through externalities what is inherently internal. Naturally, it is the mirror that best expresses this outside-in approach to identity, and so the entirety of the scene is pictured within mirrored space. Later in the episode, Ali declines getting high with her siblings, remarking, “I feel weird today.” Thus, Ali’s earlier transformation, viewed entirely in the mirror, has alienated her from herself and from her body.

If Ali feels occasionally estranged from her appearance in scenes such as these, Maura is overtly betrayed by her reflection on numerous occasions. Upon entering a female bathroom for the first time on a shopping trip with Ali and Sarah, Maura is immediately accosted with row upon row of highly lit mirrors. In a scene which adroitly prefigures the apropos debate surrounding legislation regarding transgender bathroom use by nearly a year and a half, a pair of girls who are standing in front of their own reflections begin to mock and laugh at Maura. They alert their mother to the situation, who proceeds to berate Maura. Though Sarah comes to her defense without hesitation, Maura’s appearance has already betrayed her, a fact that is made explicit when the hysterical mother says, “That is clearly a man.”

Similarly, in episode five of season one, Maura is having lunch with her trans friends Shea and Divina when a man at the bar begins to ogle Shea. Divina and Shea comfortably laugh about it, Shea commenting that the man is too square to be her type. Both have medically transitioned years ago, and thus have extensive experience in being perceived as women. Maura, whose transition is still new, appears to be enthralled by the novel experience. She says to Shea, “You get that all the time, don’t you, cause you’re so pretty.” Maura’s pleasure quickly turns to dread, however, when the man approaches the table and Maura realizes that she knew him before she transitioned. Maura’s physical transformation is still confined to wigs and jewelry, and as the man flirtatiously greets Divina and Shea, Maura realizes that in close proximity she will be unable to pass. When the man turns to her, she drops her voice to a baritone and greets the man by name, taking his proceeding shock in step. Later in the season, Ali asks Raquel why it is Jewish custom to cover the mirrors during a wake. Raquel responds, “It’s about being free from vanity, about being free from that extra layer of being seen.” But Maura’s previous travails in bathrooms and restaurants have proven that Maura is never free from being seen.

Though Maura’s appearance in this way distances her from the demographic she hopes to join, it simultaneously becomes increasingly pleasing to her as her external condition aligns with her internal identification. Thus, mirrors can be allied with Maura’s steps into femininity as frequently as they can deter them. In flashback episodes in season one, Mort relaxes into herself as she dons outer signifiers of womanhood and sees them reflected back at her in the mirror. When speaking to an early cross-dressing friend, she agrees with her assessment that “Nobody has seen me but me” when both reveal their feminine selves to each other. After Maura transitions, she becomes increasingly adept at styling herself according to female fashions. In season three, she affects a makeover on her birthday that allows for tasteful expression of both

her age and her gender identity in yet another scene that occurs almost exclusively in a mirror. In season two, she is pleased by her silhouette in the mirror when she inserts false breasts into her one-piece bathing suit. Ultimately, the relentless inclusion of mirrors manifests the tenuous relationship between identity and exteriority explored by all of the characters, as well as providing a stark reminder of the dictates of appearance in social interaction.

In this way, mirrors and reflection become a crucial component in measuring personal choices and the relation of self to surroundings, but other doublings are similarly intrinsic to the series. Throughout *Transparent*, Maura is afforded a series of subtle doppelgangers which act as barometers for her own identity and actions. The first of these doubles appears early in the series. Following Divina's warning about the fragility of family during transition, sirens can be heard and an ambulance arrives at Divina's apartment complex, *The Shangri-La*, which is also a small hub of queer culture. It appears that one of Divina's neighbors, a "sweet old queen," has passed away. As the paramedics cart the covered body away, the assembled queer folk of the building gather in an impromptu funeral procession, observing their fallen comrade; Maura holds the doors for the paramedic pallbearers. The late resident, whose name, Murray, offers ample parallel with that of Maura, thus provides the first chilling double for Maura upon her entrance into queer society. Indeed, Maura goes on to rent Murray's apartment, and takes up residence in the absence of her first queer match and predecessor.

Another clear double that Maura encounters on her early investigations into queer culture is Mark, who cross-dresses as Marcy. Shown in flashback in season one, the two are delighted to have found another so similar to themselves; both are middle-aged fathers who experiment with gender fluidity in secret. Again, Mark/Marcy's similarity to Mort/Maura is signaled in the similarity of both their given and chosen names. Additionally, when Mark announces his last

name to be “Pollard,” it is revealed that the two even have the same initials. In this way, Maura is afforded the relief of a likeness, through which she can find elements of herself and adopt figments of her culture. In fact, it is Marcy who bestows Maura’s name upon her. Maura’s original choice, Daphne Sparkles, is presciently rejected by Marcy, who instead says, “You need something elegant. You’re Maura.” Thus, Marcy and Maura build a culture that is exclusive to the two of them, which allows each to receive advice and share their experiences, but most importantly to have their identities validated by one another.

While Maura can locate herself by locating a double, she can similarly position herself by recognizing difference. For example, when Marcy and Maura attend a camp for transvestites, what at first appears to be the perfect locale for Maura to express herself begins to echo the alienation she feels in the outside world. Though she initially understands herself to be surrounded by doubles, she discovers that their aversion to transgendered attendees rivals that of the outside world. Maura’s first inkling that she is not as similar to those around her as she had supposed occurs when Marcy calls home and invokes gender stereotypes to cajole his son about sports. Standing next to the pay phone in a sundress, Marcy drops his voice to talk to his wife, and lowers it even further when he speaks to his son, calling him “man” and responding to his story about how the coach benched him with the assertion, “You gotta man up, you know what I’m saying?”

Maura finds further alienation when a fellow transvestite speaks about how an attendee was kicked out for using hormones at the camp. The transvestite remarks, “We are cross-dressers, but we are still men,” to which Marcy responds, “We are men!” Marcy goes on to say, “that’s not what this place is for...they should be in a different place.” Thus, Maura is confronted with manifestations of transphobia in a group she had previously considered to be her

community. What is more, the similarity of names between Marcy and Maura marks a narrative signal that the two are similar, and yet they sharply diverge in regards to this crucial point. Thus, Maura's search for those who are like her is frequently met with stark alienation, despite the internal and narrative signals that the two are mirrored images of one another.

Names are not only used throughout the narrative to indicate Maura's potential doubles, they are also proven to tacitly contain elements of self within them. For example, Maura's given name, Mort, seems to prefigure both the implication and the fate of the name. As the root of the Latin word meaning "death," the name "Mort" alerts the audience to the figurative death that continuing under a male identity would represent for Maura. Similarly, the etymology of Mort's name augurs its ultimate disposal. In this way, Mort's given name is inextricably linked to elements of her identity and is thus a distillation of the friction of her social standing. By accepting the name "Maura," Mort is freed from the death inherent in her current cultural position, as is represented by her name.

Additionally, the invocation of Maura's chosen name as well as modified titles that acknowledge her altered position are always coded in conversation as respect. Maura finds herself correcting people regarding her name frequently, and the listener's receptivity to her amendment is an infallible prediction of how the rest of the conversation will progress. Even more telling is the implementation of pronouns and terms of endearment. The transwomen that surround Maura waste no time not only in referring to her by her preferred gender and name, but also in applying gendered pet names like "girl" and "honey". Additionally, in a scene that provides a parallel to Robert and Sol's discussion of what to call each other in *Grace and Frankie*, Ali says, "Daddy, oh my God, what am I supposed to call you now?" She finally settles on "Moppa," a combination of Mom and Poppa, which becomes Maura's identifier for her

children for the rest of the season. At the opening of season three, Maura asks her children to discard this pet name in favor of the more straightforward “mom,” an alteration that immediately threatens Shelly. Nevertheless, all members of the family adopt this nomenclature despite their quickly hidden expressions of shock and discomfort.

Conversely, in a heated exchange, Len, Sarah’s ex-husband, yells, “Are we talking about Grandpa Mort? Grandma Mort? What is it exactly?” Maura, presiding at the head of the table, responds, “I’m sorry about the Mort and the Maura and the he and the she. I’m just a person and you’re just a person and here we are.” Similarly, the first character of the series depicted using Maura’s correct pronoun is Tammy, Sarah’s lesbian love interest. Her immediate alliance to Maura as a member of her community announces her empathy for Maura’s situation as well as her adaptability regarding gender fluidity. While Sarah and Ali employ feminine pronouns hesitating only to indicate how initially alien the concept is to them, Josh lingers in his use of male pronouns for much of the first season. This reluctance to transfer linguistic signifiers of gender corresponds to the series’ assertion that sons are always the most difficult to come out to. Thus, the series employs names as an indication of the identity of both the named and the one who does the naming; Maura’s employment of her chosen name presents her feminine identity and outs her queerness, but more importantly, the willingness of those around her to use this name as well as appropriate pronouns outs their adaptability and openness to the topic.

In this way, naming, mirrors, and doubles provide structuring themes for the series and allow an externalization of internal struggles with identity. Of course, another key component of identity and representation of otherness is apparent in the nature of the relationship between the queer bodies that populate the series and the visual depiction of them. In contrast with *Grace and Frankie*, nudity, both sexual and banal, dominate the screen in scene after scene. *Transparent*



delights in depictions of the body both as a means to pleasure and as the frank battleground of identity. An early scene in the pilot which finds Josh and Ali inspecting a Jim Croce album highlights the nature of televisual and filmic depiction of bodies when Josh says, “You could not get that nose on TV today. In a million years”.

Naturally, the show will go on to etch the irony of this statement into its structure, as it joyfully captures masses of bodies that refuse to conform not only to standards of beauty in popular culture, but also to binary conceptions of gender. For example, a series of shots of a group of dancing transvestites mixes close-up shots of curves coded female with the ecstatic male faces of their owners. Similarly, when Ali, Maura, and Sarah attend a Lesbian music festival, shots of the female body en masse flood the screen. This is not such a rare phenomenon, of course, but the starkly varying body types, ages, and gender expressions of the half-naked gyrating women mark a clear departure from the norm. In fact, writer Ali Liebegott remarked of the scene, “Even when we were doing the shooting, and we had 500 background women, we were really trying to capture the freedom that it represented for women of all body sizes and types to be empowered to go naked” (Thomas, Slate). What is more, they all appear in open daylight in long take; there is no coy camerawork that invites a voyeurism of illicit nudity here, but rather an avowal of female agency as regards female bodies.

In this way, *Transparent* proudly depicts bodies clothed and nude, large and small, old and young, in a stark departure from tradition. As an extended meditation on the nature of identity and its expression, *Transparent* additionally claims the body as a conduit to representing inner change. This is a dynamic that has persisted throughout film, as “this is the wrenching core of the phenomenon of transformation, throughout cinematic representation, in so many different genres: physical outward transformation greatly exceeds one on an emotional level” (Greven 78).

Indeed, when Maura finds that she is unable to receive the sexual reassignment surgery she has been longing for, she discards the spandex that give her false breasts and curves in the finale of season three. As she gazes mournfully down at the crumpled wad of tan elastic, she says, “I think it’s one thing to wear this stuff if you know you are going to transform into a new shape, but otherwise it just feels like a costume. It feels like I’m hiding. It feels like—it feels wrong.”

Physical markers of inner change and experience therefore act as the emotional currency of the series, necessitating an altered approach to the traditional relationship between body and camera, especially in regards to the female forms that manifest this change.

As clothing, hairstyles, and the application of make-up work to signify the emotional state of the character, these feminine accoutrements which have typically been used to focus attention on the female form must be appropriated to redirect emphasis onto the female’s interior experience. Indeed, Soloway has admitted, “I feel like it’s really my responsibility as a feminist and as a filmmaker to take the opportunity to place the camera in [terms of] how it feels to be a woman, instead of how women look” (Kang). One of the ways that *Transparent* achieves this altered dynamic is by foregrounding the naked bodies of the characters in moments of heightened vulnerability; Sarah microwaves dinner nude after an embarrassing night at the school fundraiser, Ali walks onto the balcony of a hotel in her underwear after Sarah annuls her marriage, and Maura opts to keep only her bra on as she becomes intimate with her girlfriend Vicky. In this way, the nudity of the female body is reclaimed for emotional expression, rather than employed in its typical function as an object of voyeuristic pleasure.

The altered approach of the camera to its subjects throughout *Transparent* is no accident; indeed, Jill Soloway has created her own answer to the standard structure of filmic representation as identified by Laura Mulvey. In order to deconstruct the male gaze that has dominated the

relationship between a camera, its subject, and the audience, Soloway has formulated her own series of techniques that she implements in writing and on set. She has termed her subversive strategies “the Female Gaze” and has formulated a series of identifying characteristics in tripartite form to mirror the audience-camera-subject dynamic inherent in the male gaze. The first component she describes as an approach in which one remains rooted in one’s body as a way of “feeling seeing” (Soloway). She describes instructing her cinematographer to choose a feeling to embody when filming, so that the frame can evoke a feeling of being in feeling, rather than looking at the characters.

The second element of Soloway’s Female Gaze employs the camera in the pursuit of “the very nuanced and occasionally impossible task of showing us how it feels to be the object of the gaze” (Soloway). In order to accomplish this feat, she positions the camera as the receiver of the look, so that the audience can experience through the characters how it feels to be seen. This represents a stark departure from the traditional formulation, which encourages the audience to perform the act of seeing as a validation of the film dialectic itself. The feeling of being seen is certainly inextricable from scenes in which Maura finds herself being physically assessed by straight and queer characters alike. The phenomenon of being looked at is not exclusively disavowed, however, as Shea enjoys the attention of a man at a nightclub, saying that it feels good to be looked at after she put so much work into looking the way she does. Another method Soloway cites in the creation of this new dynamic is the relation of coming-of-age stories of women, who learn how to become what men see. This dynamic is certainly accessible to the audience as both Ali and Maura cycle through a series of gendered presentations ranging from high-femme to butch to male.

Finally, Jill Soloway enumerates the third aspect of her practice of filming in the Female Gaze as the returning of the gaze. Thus, the characters not only embody what it feels like to be looked at, but acknowledge that they can see others seeing them. Soloway in this way attempts to distill “how it feels to stand here in this world having been seen our entire lives” (Soloway, *Topple Productions*). Additionally, when characters name the sight that has been directed upon them, they reclaim control and agency within the frame. With this control, they are allowed to reject their own objectification in a demand for subjectivity. They are furthermore able to structure others as the object once their self-awareness grants access to subjectivity. What is more, the object of their gaze tends to be those seeking to objectify them. In this reflexive model of a capturing of the male gaze, the female and othered characters of the show are able to embody their own points of view without apology or permission; the presentation of their struggles and their bodies are not filtered through any perspectives but their own. Soloway thus reinvents the dynamic of camerawork involved in the representations of female and othered bodies in order to free their perspectives from the confines of the dominant narrative. She considers this an act of revolution, and figures the Female Gaze as a conscious effort to create empathy as a political tool. In this way, Soloway pioneers not only new subject matter, but new expressions of subjectivity within the very methods of cinematography on *Transparent*.

In addition to altered relationships with the camera, *Transparent* does not hesitate to depict male, female, and non-binary bodies as sexual. In a stark contrast to *Grace and Frankie*, the series visually foregrounds sex as a fluid facet of identity. If “queer theorists have analyzed all gender and sexuality as performative acts,” then *Transparent* wastes no time in presenting the performance of this aspect of the character’s experience of sexuality (Benshoff 342). And, given the orientations and experimentation of the characters, non-normative sexuality is depicted to

perhaps an even greater degree than traditional representations of heterosexual sex. Indeed, the second episode of the series announces the show's intention to focus on non-normative sex by featuring a fairly explicit extramarital sex scene between Sarah and her ex-girlfriend Tammy. The show continues upon this theme by exploring the realities of homosexual and transgender sex, as well as heterosexuality as it applies to transgender attraction. Interestingly, though the series never explicitly shows a penis, the use of dildos and other facilitators abound as both Sarah and Ali have sex with women and transmen.

Even Josh, the only member of the second generation who is presented only in couplings with women or transwomen, is shown to struggle with his sexuality, hysterically admitting in season one that Maura's transition has so unsettled him that he is afraid he will never again get an erection. And when Josh experiences heterosexual attraction to a transwoman, he begins to question his previously normative sexual identity. In a series of shots that perhaps represent the closest dynamic to traditional depictions of sexualized females that occurs on the show, season three finds Josh attending a strip club as transwoman Shea undulates onstage. The camera quickly traverses her bare curves as she maneuvers on the pole on stage while Josh watches, an open avowal of the sexuality of transpeople and a complication of Josh's conceptions of his own mechanisms of sexual attraction. Even Josh's heterosexuality thus appears problematic, and "it is a rare film that actually acknowledges (hetero)sexuality as a complex topic, and not just an unquestioned structuring principle" (Benshoff 353). In this way, visual representations of normative and non-normative sexuality abound, and act as manifestations of the characters' own fears and identifications.

In both its sexual and nonsexual depictions of the female body, *Transparent* must formulate ways to code and represent non-normative expressions of femininity. Of course,

Maura functions as the show's focal point both narratively and in regards to visual representations of the transgendered body. *Transparent* here encounters an obstacle, however, as Jeffrey Tambor plays the trans parent of the title. As a cisgender straight male, Tambor cannot embody the medical and surgical changes that many transwomen embark upon when beginning their transitions. In working to portray the struggles of a transgender woman, both mentally and medically, Tambor has described his extensive education from the show's transgender consultants and producers as invaluable. Indeed, the casting decision of a straight cisgender male in the role of a transwoman has garnered its share of controversy, a perspective acknowledged and validated by both Tambor and Soloway. While accepting his second straight Emmy for the role of Maura, Tambor announced, "I would not be unhappy were I the last cisgender male playing a female transgender on television," a sentiment Soloway has echoed (Miller). Nevertheless, the series must work to code a cisgender male body as female, just as Tambor must work to portray a subaltern identity despite his experience as a straight male.

One of the ways that *Transparent* addresses this gulf is by surrounding Tambor with transwomen playing trans characters, a relatively rare phenomenon in television. In this way, Maura is granted an outlet to compare her physical expression of femininity with those around her. For example, Alexandra Billings, a transwoman who is notable in the LGBTQ community, plays Divina, Maura's guide through her transition. Additionally, transwoman Trace Lysette plays Maura's friend Shea, whose beauty is noted by Maura, Josh, and the camera upon multiple occasions. Thus, the series presents a host of bodies in various stages and manifestations of transgendered transition. An observation that Soloway notes when she received criticism for the casting of Tambor as a transwoman is that there are many ways to express femininity. Indeed, Soloway's own Moppa excused herself from the drugs and surgeries that might be increasingly

considered requisite. Thus, by working to portray multifaceted expressions of gender identity as well as by populating the show with transwomen whose bodies and experiences inform their performances, *Transparent* comfortably presents an ambiguous sliding spectrum of gender presentation.

As Maura finds her way to her own expression of femininity, she finds herself incorporated into two intersecting but distinct identities; in physically and culturally embracing femininity, she gains entrance to womanhood, but as a woman medically designated male since birth, she is also accepted into the queer community. Of course, women and transwomen express many of the same characteristics; throughout the series, transwomen and women are presented styling themselves according to the same cultural standards, being approached by men in similar fashions, and valuing the same traits in themselves and others. Nevertheless, Maura must learn the distinguishing codes and signifiers associated with her distinct positions as a woman and as a transwoman. Just as the queer characters of *Grace and Frankie* must locate their identities as they relate to gay culture, Maura must become acquainted with the customs, expectations, and even the medical facts associated with trans culture. She also, however, must learn how to act, dress, and carry herself as a woman.

As Maura takes some of her first public steps presenting as a woman, she is educated by both transwomen and cisgender females as to the nuances and larger values of femininity. Maura must learn to traverse a gendered landscape fraught with the double standards and barriers associated with her newly expressed gender. In her first shopping trip dressed as a female, Maura is enticed by the facials offered by the employees of a local department store. Sarah, who has been experiencing this kind of advertising her entire life, says to Maura, “Just so you know, like, now that you’re gonna spend time in this world, you—you need to know that the makeover is

free but they expect you to buy everything that they use”. Thus, as a recent inductee into the land of the feminine, Maura must be warned about the advertising schemes directed at women. She is fully incorporated into the world of the female not just as a transwoman, but as a woman.

Though Maura’s femininity can be expressed simply by her womanhood, she similarly encounters spaces in which her transgendered status becomes her defining characteristic. For example, Maura finds herself much less accepted at an all-women lesbian music festival<sup>ii</sup>. This presentation of a “world of women without ‘women’ is off the charts” in its appearance on screen as an affirmation of deviant female forms. (Green 92). Nevertheless, Maura finds out that the policy of the festival is to accept only women born women, and when her status as a transwoman is revealed, many of the assembled women express their displeasure with her presence. One comments on the reality of Maura’s penis, while another says, “I don’t give a shit about your penis. It’s about the privilege.” The attendees of the festival thus strictly define Maura as a transwoman; she may be a woman, but her status as a transwoman redefines all other identifications she may have.

An early scene in season one provides perhaps the best distillation of the interaction between female and transwoman facets of identity occurs as Divina is factitiously coaching Maura on the nuances of both. After she helps Maura insert clip-in hair extensions, she comes to the front of Maura’s chair and examines the way her trainee is sitting. Noting her spread legs, she gently pushes them together, saying, “Your male privilege is leaking all over the place. And you—but you don’t have to slouch. Keep yourself up and owning it. It’s called femininity.” In this way, Divina gives a quick lesson in the hallmarks of proud womanhood, while simultaneously identifying the vestiges of masculinity still clinging to Maura’s bearing. The lesson is purely one in the cultural positioning of females; it is an instruction that could be given



to any female, whether trans or cisgender. Mere moments later, however, as Maura is walking unsteadily in heels, Divina advises her to “try to breathe and be in it.” This is a directive that can almost exclusively be applied to transwomen. Though all gender is performative, Maura here endeavors to enact a performance with which she is unfamiliar. Indeed, when portraying Maura, Tambor “anticipated that his largest challenge would be external...instead, Tambor has been surprised by the ways that his character is exposed emotionally” (NPR, Fresh Air). Even the portrayal of Maura has been accompanied by an unexpected vulnerability in the emotional performance of gender. Thus, Maura’s incorporation into intersecting but diverse identities as both woman and transwoman require her to be mindful of the distinct strictures of both.

Of course, Maura finds similar complications in the interaction between her femininity and her transgendered status when she begins to approach dating again following her transition. When Maura’s ex-wife Shelly reacts to the news of her transition, she quickly asks if she still likes women. Maura responds, “Shel, it’s still me.” Later, Maura admits that she has always been fascinated with the female form. As a transgendered woman, however, questions of sexual identity arise; when Maura and Shelly begin to live together again, Ali asks the pair, “So are you guys lesbians now?” Thus, Maura struggles to find a position for herself in a culture which demands “corporeal coherence and psychic obeisance” of its sexualized women (Greven 32). Though none of the female characters are particularly cohesive, it is Maura who stands out as defying cultural standards. She encounters even more trouble when she discovers that the testosterone blockers she takes lessen sex drive and the ability to get an erection. When Divina says that she needs to listen to her body, Maura responds, “well, my body and I haven’t really been talking.” In this way, Maura struggles throughout the series to locate her identity in regards

to the manifestations of femininity and her transgendered status when they are complicated by her desires for companionship and sex.

Given the inability of the show to express Maura's physical transformation, the presence of other transitioning and transitioned women is crucial to present the very bodies which most closely resemble the interiority of the main character and to provide a platform to discuss key issues of transgendered experience. One key difference in the realities of transgendered individuals as compared with other members of the queer community, for example, is that medicine and surgery are vitally important to identity. Of course, as Tambor cannot embody these physical changes, they cannot be experienced or spoken about by Maura. So, while Maura is free in the third season to explore the possibility of gender reassignment surgery, reality dictates that she cannot perform it. Naturally, the third season ends with her discovery that this is an impossibility. It is not only Tambor's status as a cisgendered male which dictates this plot point; indeed, it is not uncommon for older transpeople to decline surgery and hormones, much as Soloway's own parent did upon transitioning. As *Transparent* faithfully shows, the medical implications of gender reassignment surgery are considerable; consequently, it is not uncommon for older members of the transgendered community to be unwilling or unable to embark upon such a hazardous endeavor.

Nevertheless, the presence of Maura's younger friends who have already transitioned medically provides ample examples of the physical challenges associated with transitioning. The trio discuss breast implants, the weight gain involved in taking estrogen, and the surgical removal of testicles. Divina coaches Maura through giving her an estrogen shot and Maura endeavors to politely inquire as to whether Shea has a real vagina. Shea answers in the affirmative when she says she has a "pussy pussy". And, while Maura experiences her own

unique trials in dating as a male-bodied transwoman, the romantic lives of her friends are anything but simple. Indeed, Shea reveals to Josh the complications she has experienced in romance when she says, “Dating while trans is a real shit show. If you don’t get the pussy, you’re fetishized by a bunch of cock-hungry Johns and if you do get it, you know you’re still stigmatized. It’s like a no-win situation.” Shea thus details the romantic and sexual implications of gender reassignment surgery and goes on to highlight to economic ones when she says, “I even had a trans auntie tell me ‘Miss Shea, girl, don’t you go get that pussy, darling. You know what they say: A chick with a dick is always paid.’” In this way, the show is allowed to explore the romantic, sexual, and economic consequences of the medical implications of queerness while simultaneously exposing and normalizing the physical markers of transgendered transition.

Additionally, the presence of transwomen familiar with the medical implications of transitioning allows the series to assert a cool distance from male influence over the female body. As the transwomen of the series attempt to manipulate their bodies to closer align with their identification, the input of the men surrounding them never seems to be far away. For example, after Maura is prescribed testosterone blockers, she encounters Divina’s boyfriend Sal, who identifies himself as transamorous. Later, Sal seeks a private moment with Maura to discuss the nuance of her physical transition. He proudly cites his previous successes in Divina’s and Shea’s transitions as proof of his own prowess in sculpting the female body. After suggesting a face lift and cheek implants, and specifying the size Maura’s breasts should be, he goes on to extoll the beauty of Shea, his last success. Never breaking his lecherous gaze on Maura, he says, “Shea’s a beautiful girl. Gorgeous. Work of art. When she was done, I felt like fucking Michelangelo. I wanted to sign my name on her ass.” Shea is here presented as own-able and claimable by Sal, who adds her body to his personal accomplishments without hesitation.

This masculine assertion of power over feminine bodies insinuates its implications not just upon the transwomen, but of the cisgendered women of the show as well. Ali frequently notes unhappiness with her weight and modifies her body to suit the desires of her sexual partner. Interestingly, when Ali is attempting to woo Leslie, an older lesbian poet, she encounters a similar pervasive dictation of appearance. Despite Leslie's radical feminism and her status as an aging hippie, one of the primary characteristics noted about Leslie is her propensity to date women considerably younger than herself. Ali's previous visit to Leslie's house has already highlighted Leslie's propensity to minutely analyze lesbian pornography, presumably for academic purposes, but the pictures of naked young women that adorn her house belie her voyeuristic tendencies<sup>iii</sup>. In this way, the traditional depictions of assertions of power over the female body are dislocated from their typical sources, allowing new insight through this unfamiliar representation. Leslie's status as a female and the medical distance afforded by Maura's still male-presenting body alienates the established expectation that such presentation "naturalizes the domination of men over women" (Green 39). In this way, the displacement of an assertion of external control over the body by an outside force or person onto a non-normative body or relationship encourages a more nuanced and personal understanding of the topic.

One of the primary issues implicitly and explicitly woven into many of the conversations surrounding queer and female bodies throughout *Transparent* is the issue of age, an organizing theme which finds a clear echo in *Grace and Frankie*. Much as Grace and Frankie find themselves limited romantically, sexually, and socially by the realities and cultural perceptions concerning their status as septuagenarians, the cast of *Transparent* is endlessly frustrated and confused by the implications of their various ages. Of course, there is no character who feels the sting of aging as acutely as Maura, whose condensation of her preferred form occurs in her

seventies. Not only is she frustrated by the medical limitations of her aging body, she struggles to find her place in the queer community because she is several decades older than many of her peers. Indeed, one of Tambor's favorite aspects of playing Maura is that "she doesn't know where her friends are, she doesn't know where her home is, she doesn't know what to do at the LGBTQ center." (NPR, Fresh Air). Additionally, within the queer community, Maura is subject to "the ways that queers have submitted themselves to the beauty myth, with all of its attendant exclusivities, disciplinary standards, and disastrous emotional consequences" (Greven 79). Because she does not exhibit the "conformity to gay-culture-established standards of beauty and physical finesse" required of the transwomen who are deemed sexually attractive, she struggles to find romantic partners within the community (Greven 79). In this way, Maura's age manifests itself as yet another marginalizing agent within a marginalized community.

As *Transparent* carefully inscribes the detriments of advanced age both within and outside of the LGBTQ community into its narratives, it simultaneously disavows the very distaste for aging bodies to which its characters fall prey. Indeed, in season two, as Ali is becoming acquainted with Leslie, Ali is warned that "Leslie harbors a little disdain for the aging female body". Nevertheless, just as *Grace and Frankie* takes care to frequently confront its audience with images of aging women, *Transparent* delights in the portrayal of older bodies. Ali, whose journey through gender fluidity frequently finds a foil in Maura's, thus experiences the same prejudices that Maura does when attempting to initiate queer sex. Ali spends the show in her early thirties and is the youngest of the family, while Maura is the oldest, and yet both find their age to be a sexual barrier. Though the narrative portrays the frequent rejection of older bodies within the queer community, the screen presents no shortage of older female and queer forms. Indeed, though Ali is implied to be unacceptably old in soliciting Leslie's interest, this

declaration comes only three episodes after an extremely long take of Sarah and Ali conversing naked in a sauna. The series thus is freely inscribed with images of naked female and queer bodies whose age might, in a different series, preclude their depiction. In this way, *Transparent* invokes the complications of aging attendant on queer and female bodies while simultaneously portraying the rejected bodies with gusto.

If the exploration of the nuance of aging for transgendered women allows an uncommon analysis of the assertion of control over the female body, it also garners a much more solemn glance into the darker realities of the community. As a demographic burdened with high rates of HIV and AIDS, the LGBTQ characters of the show are depicted struggling with their own experiences of the condition. When Maura suggests in episode seven of season two that Divina could find a better romantic partner following Sal's cosmetic analysis of Maura, Divina says, "My God. Who do you think you are talking to?...I'm a 53-year-old ex-prostitute HIV-positive woman with a dick. And I know what I want and I know what I need." In this way, Divina cites her diagnosis as a factor limiting her realistic romantic options, and simultaneously underlines the facets of privilege tacitly implicit in Maura's life. The romantic and sexual problems associated with an HIV-positive partner are further highlighted when Shea reveals to Josh that she is HIV positive after the two begin to explore the possibility of a physical relationship in season three, episode six. Josh, who is fairly uneducated about the nature of HIV, additionally provides a phenomenal platform for the series to enhance awareness surrounding the realities of the disease. Through Josh, *Transparent* is able to debunk false notions, such as the widespread misconception that the disease can be transferred through saliva.

Finally, the illumination the series provides on topics of medication and other realities experienced by transgendered people allow an exploration of another rampant issue that plagues

the transgender community. When Maura begins work at a hotline for troubled trans youth, she begins to encounter the crippling rates of suicidal thoughts and tendencies present among her community. Indeed, while Shea aids Maura in training for the position, Shea admits, “I’ve had those thoughts—suicide and—sometimes I feel like it would be easier if I just wasn’t here.” Shea goes on to reveal a long struggle with suicidal tendencies, beginning in high school and persisting to present day. When Maura gets a call from a suicidal transgirl named Elizah, she embarks on an odyssey to find and prevent the young woman from killing herself. Such narratives additionally highlight the privilege that has enabled Maura’s transition, though personally difficult, to never prove life threatening. Those who are shown to be struggling the most are those who do not have the family or the money that Maura does; Elizah is an African American teenager who has migrated through a slew of foster families throughout her lifetime and Shea construes her new position at a strip club as an occupational improvement. In this way, *Transparent* takes care to depict the consequences experienced by those in the transgender community whose struggles were not alleviated by the aspects of Maura’s life which enabled her to have a relatively uncomplicated transition.

*Transparent* thus provides a rare outlet for transgender stories and transgender voices. It complicates and personalizes the location of identity, depicting it as an occasionally destructive but ultimately courageous and necessary pursuit. It employs and presents prominent members of the transgender community, whose influence over narratives told about their demographic has previously been limited. Most importantly, *Transparent* provides a representation of a flawed but loving family whose actions coalesce into a plea for empathy in interaction and honesty in self-reflection. In creating its own space in which stories about subaltern identities can be told by those who have experienced the cultural consequences of their own marginalization, Amazon

Studio's *Transparent* thus embodies a uniquely joyful affirmation of those whose voices have not been heard on other platforms.

In this way, *Transparent* earnestly represents the struggles, loves, and triumphs of a subaltern community. When asked about how she felt working for Amazon, Jill Soloway responded, "I can't believe the whole world is seeing some of the stuff on *Transparent*" (Hammer Museum). Similarly, writer Ali Liebegott has commented, "I'm mostly astounded that I've lived long enough that my queer experience has become a commodity" (Thomas, Slate). And indeed, it is difficult to imagine a series on any platform other than Amazon Studios that offers the content that has led the show to become a perennial winner of critics' awards, GLAAD recognitions, and audience favor while simultaneously commodifying queer voices. Soloway frequently and effusively acknowledges the impact of the streaming platform not only upon the staff and cast of the show, but upon its very existence. For example, when speaking at the Toronto International Film Festival, she observed,

"As recently as five years ago, I was told 'You need to have a rootable white, you know, handsome man at the center of this story and he needs to feel good—we need to feel good about him or we can't put this on television.' That was five years ago. And then—Amazon and Jeff Bezos who completely, you know, upends and reinvents everything" (Soloway).

Soloway thus credits the very appearance of the series, centered as it is upon the tumultuous lives of flawed but courageous queer people, females, and transwomen, to the novel approach of Amazon to the very concept of protagonism.

Amazon's approach to filmmaking is in fact so innovative that it is difficult to find its match on network television or even in Hollywood filmmaking. The series' widespread employment of trans actors, producers, and writers and the revolutionary value it places on marginalized voices has excited frequent comment. In granting Jill Soloway access to its



considerable resources as well as phenomenal creative agency, Amazon created a thoroughly unique iteration of television. Indeed, “Soloway made choices that none in Hollywood have before...holistic trans inclusion in big-budget film was unknown until *Transparent*” (Tourjee). Soloway herself imagines the products of Amazon Studios as transcendent of the very word used to describe the industry when she comments,

“You know, we’re using the word ‘TV’, but it couldn’t be more different from CBS and NBC and ABC. [Amazon producers and executives] are people who come from the world of connecting with and recognizing and inspiring and being inspired by artists and finding a really amazing way to distribute that quickly and effectively, so ‘TV’—I don’t even know if that’s the right word.” (Soloway).

In this way, Amazon Studios has not only produced a thoroughly unique series whose depiction of queer and female perspectives is unprecedented, it has done so by reimagining the role of the studio in the dynamic between a creator and her work.

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<sup>i</sup> Crystal LaBeija was the founder of the formulated family of queer youths called the House of LaBeija, which was later popularized in *Paris is Burning* (Jennie Livingston, 1991).

<sup>ii</sup> The festival is mentioned throughout season two and is explicitly portrayed in episode nine of season two, called “Man on the Land”. In fact, this portrayal of all-women’s clothing-optional music festival is a parody of a festival that, until 2015, occurred annually in Michigan. The festival, called “Michfest,” which began in 1976, “has been the crucible for nearly every critical cultural and political issue the lesbian feminist community has grappled with for four decades,” said founder Lisa Vogel (Ring, Advocate). Indeed, the festival has sparked controversy that is echoed in the episode because of its guideline that only “womyn-born-womyn” are allowed to attend, a stark exclusion of transwomen. Vogel has defended the statement as an intention rather than a rule, but many artists have consequently boycotted the festival. Interestingly, the Indigo Girls, who appear in “Man on the Land,” are among the boycotters. In an interview, band member Amy Ray admitted that she worried that appearing in the satire of the festival would offend its loyal following, but cited the series’ employment of transgender people as one of her main incentives to appear on the episode. Michfest held its last gathering in 2015, the same year “Man on the Land” aired.

<sup>iii</sup> The formation of the character of Leslie, played by the notable lesbian actress Cherry Jones, created another parallel between the experiences of the characters and the biography of Soloway. When formulating ideas for potential love interests for Ali, the concept of an older academic lesbian character prompted one of the writers, Ali Liebegott, to mention the work of renowned feminist poet Eileen Myles. Soloway researched Myles and happened to be speaking on a panel with her several weeks later, which she admits to attending with the intention of seducing Myles. Indeed, Myles would go on to become Soloway's girlfriend, as well as the key inspiration in the creation of Leslie. *Transparent* even features multiple poems by Myles. In an interesting parallel, Soloway admits to being the oldest woman Myles has ever dated, despite being nearly twenty years her junior. Additionally, Soloway cites the period of her romantic relationship with Myles as the last time she presented "high femme". During their relationship, the pair penned a feminist manifesto on female influence in art and politics, one of their primary subjects being porn. The two have since separated, but remain on friendly terms.

## **Conclusion:**

### **Potentials in the Mechanics of Empathy**

When addressing her audience at the Toronto International Film Festival, Jill Soloway asserted that “all TV, all filmmaking, all culture-making is people going, ‘I’m okay, and people who are similar to me are okay’” (Soloway). In Netflix’s *Grace and Frankie* and Amazon Studios’ *Transparent*, two streaming platforms take their first steps into original content creation by positing stories predicated upon experiences of otherness. The subjects of the series are those whose identities place them outside standards of normativity, yet each show endeavors to perform a kind of intrepid social boundary maintenance. They carefully etch the pains, pleasures, and dreams of those whose previous cultural appearances have been inscribed only with difference. In placing as protagonists those who are most underrepresented and stereotyped, *Grace and Frankie* and *Transparent* bravely deconstruct previous conceptions of marginalized demographics and their communities, celebrating individuality while simultaneously reclaiming the right to portray both self and difference as a cohesive force. Both *Grace and Frankie* and *Transparent* portray the constant struggle of the characters in their relation to the cultural dominant as a reclamation of personhood, a disavowal of the latent causticity in allowing identity to be asserted upon oneself from outside societal forces.

What is more, *Grace and Frankie* and *Transparent* are constructed by producers, writers, and creators who wish to question the very nature of protagonism and representation; Jane Fonda’s stark activist background has led the content of her work to be informed by the politics of the otherwise voiceless and Jill Soloway named her studio “Topple” as an incitation to “topple the patriarchy”. In this way, the presentation of subaltern communities on both *Grace and Frankie* and *Transparent* is a directional illustration of radical difference. As is apparent in

*Grace and Frankie*'s intricate examination of stereotype as well as *Transparent*'s formulation of an entirely new filming style, these series are not content to merely provide superficial placeholders of marginalized characters to satisfy the demands of their demographic and media watch-groups. Rather, they actively engage in discussions of gender identity, age, sexual preference, racial difference, and cultural conceptions of gender in order to formulate a rich and vital narrative of the nature of inhabiting an identity that is separate from the dominant order.

In this way, Netflix and Amazon present series which approach the representation of subaltern communities in narrative as an inherent and demanding element of the vitality of their programming, necessitating an altered approach even to the nature of production itself. Further, this radical approach to the presentation of difference is not merely confined to *Grace and Frankie* and *Transparent*, nor even to presentations of the LGBTQ community; Netflix and Amazon have consistently produced original series with rich presentations of ethnic, gendered, and sexual diversity. What is more, both companies show every sign of continuing to pioneer series and films which give voice to under-examined cultural perspectives and investigate the nature of difference.

Indeed, the upcoming Netflix original series *Dear White People* is an adaptation of the 2014 film of the same name, and positions itself as a direct address from a position of otherness to the dominant order. Additionally, Netflix series such as *The Get Down* populates the screen with the music and trials of African American musicians in the 1980s and the short documentary *The White Helmets* recently garnered an Oscar for its depiction of the challenges faced by Syrian crisis workers. Even within original Netflix series that don't specifically focus on the experience of othered characters, the studio demonstrates its commitment to diversity; its thriller hit *Stranger Things* tirelessly deconstructs the heterosexist formation of the horror genre's treatment

of women, *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* underlines the racial prejudices experienced by its African American protagonist, and *Master of None* examines the experience of Southwest Asian immigrants in America.

It is not only Netflix original series which etch observations concerning identity politics into its series; Amazon Studios is similarly oriented towards the presentations of underrepresented identities and realities. Indeed, the productions of Amazon are perhaps even more vehement in their endorsement of the affirmation of self over societal pressures. In shows such as *Good Girls Revolt*, a distillation of second wave feminism occurs in the writer's room at Newsweek. In *Man in the High Castle*, the protagonists attempt to foment hopeful resistance to the fascist regime through pirate radio. *I Love Dick*, another offering by Jill Soloway which was created by an all-female writer's room, was affirmed by Soloway as "a tool of the matriarchal revolution" (Staff, *Variety*). In this way, Amazon similarly offers series which emphasize the empowerment of the culturally oppressed through an indefatigable assertion of voice. Even Hulu, which was not examined in detail in this analysis due to its dearth of original material, is beginning to formulate its own position in the paradigm of presentations of otherness on streaming platforms. The studio will soon begin to air its adaptation of Margaret Atwood's dystopian feminist novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, which examines a reality in which women have exclusively inhabited the roles that they have been culturally proscribed, consequently living as servants and near-prostitutes.

Of course, this is not to say that both Amazon and Netflix are devoid of aspects in which they could improve their diversity; both would undoubtedly benefit from expanding their hiring practices to include more people of color, more women, more members of the LGBTQ community, and especially more women of color, whose representation industry-wide is

indefensibly scarce. Nevertheless, through the efforts of Netflix and Amazon, offerings of film and television series find a respite from the traditionally hegemonic standards of production and representation in companies whose presence in the market of original series and film is less than five years old. While more than a century of film history and more than half a century of broadcast television have produced an abysmal representation of minorities both on screen and behind it, streaming services have introduced a model of production wherein minority representation frequently surpasses the industry standard. Thus, in the last five years, Netflix and Amazon have achieved the unthinkable dual task of breaking into a century-old market in which the major industry influencers have remained unaltered since the nascence of cable while simultaneously outperforming its predecessors in many measures of minority representation.

Roger Ebert once famously commented, “The purpose of civilization and growth is to be able to reach out and empathize a little bit with other people. And for me, the movies are like a machine that generates empathy” (Collette). In fact, Jill Soloway said of the quote, “Roger Ebert said film is an empathy machine and this is true of television, and all story” (Soloway). Indeed, empathy is so intrinsic to the creation of cultural products that it can hardly be separated from narrative or themes; it weaves its way into the structure of the story, becoming a purpose unto itself. In the production, distribution, and viewing of shows like *Transparent* and *Grace and Frankie*, which respectfully consider as their subject the lives of those whose legitimacy within cultural narratives is relentlessly questioned, a graceful induction into the experience of empathy for the traditionally invisible occurs. Of course, it is vital for viewers to see affirmations of their own identities onscreen, but similarly essential is the frequent engagement with narratives that skillfully represent those with whom the viewer is unfamiliar.

One of the stories frequently told by Jeffrey Tambor in interviews about the experience of playing Maura concerns the moment a man assessed by Tambor as “obviously a CEO or hedge fund guy” recognized Tambor on a flight (Fallon). Anticipating a xenophobic criticism of his performance as a transwoman, Tambor was surprised when the man instead said, “I want to thank you for teaching me something I had no idea about” (Fallon). In this way, the creation of stories about the experience and circumstances of otherness not only affirms the reality of those who have lived within subaltern identities, it simultaneously generates awareness and understanding among those who have not.

In another stirring affirmation of the powers of art, Roger Ebert said, “Art is the closest we can come to understanding how a stranger feels”. And while the entertainment industry has generated stories for generations about remarkable lives and interesting people, the stories it has neglected, those concerning people whose narratives have been consistently overwritten and ignored, represent an opportunity in the creation of empathy which has yet to be mined. Thus, the production of stories surrounding those whose experiences have yet to become part of the dominant cultural narrative embodies a vital effort to create empathy for those least likely to receive it. By engaging with minority characters for the duration of each episode and each season, viewers are thus interpolated into a practice of intimate and vulnerable identification. The honest portrayal of realities of social difference is thus not only an economic boon enabled by the revenue model employed by streaming services, it is a bold contradiction of the familiar in an attempt to pioneer new mechanics of empathy.

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