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“My whole life I’ve been dressing up like a man”: Negotiations of Queer Aging and Queer Temporality in the TV Series *Transparent*¹

Linda M. Hess

Future People²: American Television’s First Aging Transgender Protagonist

- ¹ The camera slowly sweeps along a wall lined with books bearing titles such as *Sexual Education for Seniors*, *Reconstructive Plastic Surgery*, and *Care of the Surgical Patient* before briefly resting on a poster of four trans-women and the caption “Please treat me as you would anyone with respect and dignity” followed by the hashtag “TransRespect.” The camera then cuts to Maura Pfefferman (Jeffrey Tambor), a seventy-year-old transgender woman, sitting across from a young doctor with whom she has made an appointment to discuss hormone treatments. Maura begins to explain, “The people in my group, at the LGBT center, they say that you have to have a letter, if you’re gonna physically...” when the doctor matter-of-factly interrupts, “We don’t need that anymore.” Maura barely has time to utter a surprised “Well, that’s progress” before the doctor adds, “I’d like to begin you on a low dose of a testosterone blocker” (“Cherry Blossoms”). When she starts going down a checklist of questions about Maura’s transition, such as “Are you sexually active?” “Do you plan on getting breasts?” “Do you plan on undergoing gender reassignment surgery?” it becomes clear that, even given the doctor’s routine and given recent cultural changes with regard to America’s position concerning LGBTQ issues that have removed some obstacles on the path to gender reassignment, Maura, who has only recently come out, is entering entirely new territory and finds herself rather unprepared. The doctor leaves Maura with the advice, “Mrs. Pfefferman, do yourself a favor, and get to know your body” (“Cherry Blossoms”).

Maura (formerly Mort) Pfefferman, retired professor of politics, divorced, with three adult children, is the main character of the Amazon-produced TV series *Transparent* (2014-2016) and American television's first aging transgender protagonist. The show's two seasons available to date present Maura's coming out and her new life in transition. Finally claiming the identity that has seemed out of reach for so much of her life is liberating, yet at the same time a complex and challenging process, as the above scene (from Season 2) illustrates. But the narrative also focuses on Maura's adult children, Sarah, Josh, and Ali, as well as on her ex-wife, Shelly, and their tumultuous lives. Notwithstanding some criticism,³ the show has been widely acclaimed and has won many distinctions, such as Emmy Awards, Golden Globe Awards, and GLAAD Media Awards, for both seasons. Reviewers have praised its originality (Travers), its willingness to be risky (Nussbaum), its "radical honesty," its thoughtfulness, and, not least, its currency (Kornhaber).

Transparent's relevance with regard to current political and legal debates is easily apparent given recent legislation, such as North Carolina's Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act, which prevents persons from using any public bathroom other than the one corresponding to their biological sex. Given also the storm of discussion in social media and news reporting such legislation has generated, and not least of all, the lawsuit that the U.S. Justice Department filed against North Carolina in reaction to the passing of the bill, the debate has clearly reached national proportions. I want to argue in this article that *Transparent* also embodies new and current directions for queer narratives and the representation of LGBTQ persons, particularly with regard to a topic that, until recently, presented a blind spot in American culture: queer aging.⁴ Since the late 1990s, America has been assessed as a "graying" nation with increasing frequency and urgency,⁵ while the topic of queer aging has remained invisible or, at best, marginalized in media representations until the 2010s. Older persons are still frequently imagined and represented as asexual, and wherever continued sexual activity at an older age is considered an indicator of "successful aging," it is exclusively imagined as "heterosexual competence," including "[p]enile-vaginal intercourse [as] the assumed goal of arousal (Katz and Marshall 61, 65-66, emphasis added). Romantic comedies like *Something's Gotta Give* (2003) or *The Bucket List* (2007), but also more dramatic films like *Away from Her* (2006) or *Elsa and Fred* (2014) are recent examples of such heterosexual age narratives that build on tropes of monogamy, caretaking, and heterosexual competence. The ubiquity of this kind of narrative largely preserves queer old age as an "unintelligible identity," a term Judith Butler defines in *Undoing Gender* as an identity that "the laws of culture and language find... to be an impossibility" (30). Conversely, where the existence of old LGBTQ persons is acknowledged, it is often restricted to negative stereotypes of loneliness, unhappiness, and tragic endings.

I do not, however, understand queer aging to be a concept that applies solely to persons who are chronologically considered old.⁶ Aging is a lifelong process, and cultural discourses provide scripts at any "stage" for what is considered age-appropriate. Queer studies scholars, such as Dustin Goltz, Lee Edelman, and J. Jack Halberstam, have furthermore illustrated that societal perceptions and evaluation of age-appropriate behavior are closely linked to heteronormative discourses. Not only does *Transparent* redress the invisibility of older LGBTQ persons, but it also *queers* aging and temporality in three significant ways: (a) through its emphasis on the complex

intersections of aging, sexuality, and gender identity embodied by the show's aging transgender protagonist; (b) through the ways in which various members of the Pfefferman family (especially Maura's daughter Ali) challenge linear trajectories of the life course; and (c) through the show's own narrative queering of time that interweaves the past with the present. While aging, at first glance, often seems to take the back seat to the series' focus on sexuality and identity, upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that it is not only central to the story but also deeply entangled with the other issues explored in the series. The show's embodiment of a new variety of transgender representation⁷ also links it to two topics of abiding as well as current national significance: sexuality and aging.

"Distant Sures": Queer Aging in the New Millennium

For much of the twentieth century, going through life and aging as an LGBTQ person was perceived as "the harder path" (Goltz 17) that would await those who lived their lives at odds with the heteronormative timeline. Building on Tom Boellstorff's concept of "straight time" (228), as he calls such heteronormative perceptions of the life course, Dustin Goltz elaborates that this kind of

temporal trajectory... relies upon the assumed naturalness, correctness, and inevitability of heteronormative time orientation. Central to the logics of straight time are cultural understandings of childhood, adulthood, marriage, procreation, and productive citizenship, which work to define and cultivate limited and linear engagements with time, and thus future. (117)

- 6 In a society in which aging beyond youth is largely perceived in terms of decline, and in which the notion of "successful aging" is consequently linked to remaining perpetually youthful (Gullette 22, 29), aging is a topic laden with stereotypes regardless of one's sexual orientation. However, the ideology of straight time and its vision of "reproductive futurism," as Lee Edelman has called the societal fixation on children and the next generation (14), script the life course and futurity in the U.S. in terms that, for the most part, either categorically exclude images of queer aging or construct aging outside the heteronormative timeline as highly undesirable.

Numerous works of fiction from the twentieth century confirm and perpetuate these dominant discourses, which imagine making one's way through life as an LGBTQ person at best as a path full of obstacles and at worst as a guaranty for catastrophe. Examples of the "tragic queer," who dies a violent death at a young age, abounded in Hollywood movies over the years, as Vito Russo has demonstrated in his documentary *The Celluloid Closet* (1995). His findings also reveal that images of queer aging are by no means exclusively tied to chronologically old characters. Images of young LGBTQ characters being murdered or committing suicide likewise send a clear message about queer aging, namely that it will not happen, as LGBTQ persons presumably have no future to look forward to. Furthermore, various novels, plays, and films included stereotypes such as the predatory old lesbian, the aging queen, and the self-loathing gay man,⁸ which present queer aging as a miserable process of decline. As Goltz has shown in his research, such stereotypes have continued to be employed well into the twenty-first century. At the same time, I argue that the mere visibility of older LGBTQ persons, even when confined to negative stereotypes, ultimately carries the potential

to challenge heteronormative imaginaries of concepts such as "the future," or "the life course," and hence the ability to *queer* imaginaries of aging.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, not only have older LGBTQ persons become increasingly visible, but portrayals have also opposed the old stereotypes with positive and multifaceted depictions. The increasing acknowledgement and representation of older LGBTQ persons at this moment in time might not be altogether surprising since, in addition to a steadily increasing presence of (heterosexual) aging and (young) LGBTQ persons in the media over the course of the 1990s, "the 2000s can broadly be defined as the decade when a first generation of self-identified gay men and lesbians reached old age" (Krainitzki 13). In any case, this new visibility has also led to the inclusion of LGBTQ persons in media discourses concerned with the "graying of America." Various news articles, but also full-length documentaries such as Stu Maddux's *Gen Silent* (2010) and PJ Raval's *Before You Know It* (2013), have focused on pertinent issues, for example, questions of health care and housing for older LGBTQ persons.

An event that boosted visibility of older LGBTQ people in the U.S. in particular was the Supreme Court debate of the DOMA case in 2013.⁹ Edith Windsor filed her lawsuit against the United States at age eighty-three, when she was denied the federal tax exemption for surviving spouses after her longtime partner and wife, Thea Spyer, died in 2009.¹⁰ While the court negotiated the case, a large number of newspaper and magazine articles appeared that focused on aging long-term LGBTQ couples who hoped to get married if DOMA were struck down. Thus Windsor, an aging lesbian woman, became the poster child of twenty-first century gay rights activism. At the same time, older LGBTQ persons also became increasingly represented in fictional works (particularly in film and television) in the 2010s. The first aging LGBTQ protagonists appeared in Mike Mills's *Beginners* (2010) and Thom Fitzgerald's *Cloudburst* (2011). Since then, films such as *Tru Love* (2013), *Love Is Strange* (2014), and *Freeheld* (2015), together with serial productions such as *Grace and Frankie* (2015), have featured aging gay and lesbian protagonists and have brought these characters to a large number of movie theatres and television screens.¹¹ In the middle of this new wave of narratives that focus on older LGBTQ protagonists, *Transparent* stands out as an exceptional work that foregrounds a trans-person and that also strikes a balance between reaching out to a large audience and pushing the norms of contemporary American culture. It not only renders queer aging visible, but also challenges and interrogates the heteronormative timeline as a societal blueprint.

"I'm Every Woman": When a Privileged Man Becomes an Old Woman

From its first episode, *Transparent* merges the topics of aging, sexuality, and gender identity in a way that confronts stereotypes of aging as marked by decline and asexuality, or as heterosexually-marked perpetual youthfulness. In her research about cinematic representations of old age, Sally Chivers has illustrated that "visual markers [such] as grey hair and wrinkles" frequently function as "abbreviated symbols that connote decay, decline, and death" (xix), which consequently portray aging chiefly as a biological process. Audiences have no trouble "decoding" such abbreviated symbols because the idea that "old age is physical and physically demeaning" (xviii) is deeply

engrained in modern U.S. culture. *Transparent* counters this understanding. Maura has grey hair, wrinkles, loose skin, and veiny hands; even so, her story is not framed as one of decay and decline. The scene in which she visits the doctor to get a prescription for testosterone blockers shows that Maura does not consider herself too old for a new beginning. Neither does the doctor perceive sexual activity or the wish to transition at an older age as unusual.

The first step of *Transparent*'s dismantling of "straight time" consists of making internalized norms visible. After Maura's coming out, her daughters comment respectively, "Why is he doing this now?" and "Why did he wait so long?" ("Moppa"). Both comments suggest that this is the *wrong* time. In their opinion, Maura should either have come out much earlier or not at all. However, *Transparent* puts such generalizing views under critical scrutiny. In a similar vein, the show's challenge to discourses of decline can already be seen in the pilot episode, when Maura (then still dressed as Mort) calls her three children and invites them over for dinner, planning to finally come out to them. Associating age with illness, however, Josh, Sarah, and Ali immediately assume that their father must have cancer. For the viewers, on the other hand, who at this point already suspect the true reason for Maura's dinner invitation, *Transparent* turns the ubiquitous narrative of aging as decline into a narrative of aging as a queer beginning.

Nevertheless, the lateness of Maura's transition does create its own specific consequences. Its ramifications are already implied during Maura's coming-out scene. After aborting her first attempt to come out to her children, Maura accidentally runs into Sarah while wearing women's clothes and decides to seize the moment. When Sarah, somewhat bewildered by this surprise, asks, "Are you saying that you're going to start dressing up as a lady all the time?" Maura answers, "No, honey. All my life, my whole life, I've been dressing up like a man. *This is me*" ("The Letting Go"). While first of all providing an educational moment by questioning definitions of "dressing up" and "authentic identity," Maura's statement also emphasizes that she has endured many decades of closeted suffering while living as a heterosexual family father. Here, *Transparent*'s narrative contests not only imaginaries of the linear life course but also a binary understanding of queer temporality vs. a heteronormative life course. In several flashbacks that occur throughout Season 1, Mort Pfefferman is shown to secretly explore his feminine identity, buying trans-magazines, trying on women's clothes, and sneaking away to a weekend retreat of cross-dressers.¹² Conversely, Maura continues to play the "patriarchal" father role after her transition, for example by supporting her children financially and by making use of her connections at the university to help Ali apply for graduate school. In its emphasis on the simultaneous existence of both Maura and Mort, *Transparent* can be read as queering the binary of queer vs. straight time itself.

Indeed, a second aspect of Maura's late transition that the series foregrounds is the fact that she has enjoyed a career as a professor of politics at prestigious universities, together with the privileges of being a white, middle-class man, for most of her life. When Maura takes Ali to lunch with former university colleagues, Leslie Mackinaw, a lesbian-feminist poet who teaches gender studies at UCLA and who remembers Maura from Berkeley, approaches the table and confronts her with the fact that Mort Pfefferman was a sexist person. Leslie tells Maura, I know you. You edited *Perspectives on Politics*.... I applied for the editorial board. And you blocked me.... Me and

my sisters-in-arms applied and applied and applied, and you took only men" ("New World Coming"). When Maura tries to apologize, saying, "I don't stand behind what I did back then.... I actually don't remember much of it," Leslie simply asks, "Why would you remember it?" pointing out with her question that, as a man, Mort had the luxury to discriminate against women without even taking much notice of it. Now Maura comes to the painful realization, "I hurt people."

In fact, Maura still profits from Mort's privilege after her transition, but she does not realize it until her friend Davina (who is also a trans-person) points it out to her. When Maura thinks she is giving Davina good advice, telling her "she can do better" than her current boyfriend, Davina retorts, "Mind your own goddamn business. You have no right. We don't all have your family, we don't all have your money. I'm a fifty-three-year-old ex-prostitute HIV-positive woman with a dick. And I know what I want and I know what I need" ("The Book of Life"). This scene demonstrates that most transgender persons do not share Maura's comfortably secure situation and also that Maura has not shed her sense of entitlement with her transition. Davina's comment suggests she could simply not afford gender reassignment surgery, whereas Maura can freely think about her options. Nevertheless, Maura also has to endure several rude awakenings in her new life as an old woman. Following her doctor's advice to "get to know [her] body," she tries to flirt with a younger woman in a restaurant. Maura strikes up a conversation and buys her a glass of wine, and then, when she gladly accepts, Maura suggests that they order some tapas. The same behavior might have worked well enough for Mort Pfefferman, but the woman quickly turns Maura down. As Gaby Dunn observes in her review of the episode, as a seventy-year-old man, Maura would be judged not for her looks but "for money, power, and education." But now "Maura presents as a woman in her seventies and nobody wants to sleep with her" (Dunn). The scene at the restaurant illustrates that the "double standard of aging" that Susan Sontag discussed in her eponymous 1972 article still prevails widely over four decades later. As an older trans-woman, Maura consequently faces a twofold loss of status: as an older woman and as a transgender person.

While the inclusion of these various facets alone pushes *Transparent's* portrayal of queer aging beyond previously available representations, two scenes are particularly noteworthy in this respect. Not only do they confront the stereotype of asexuality in old age and erase the stark absence of sex scenes in films with older protagonists (older LGBTQ protagonists in particular), but they also profoundly question categories like "man," "woman," or "same-sex desire." The first of these scenes occurs at the beginning of the second season, after Maura has lost her apartment (because of a condo development) and moved in with her ex-wife, Shelly. Despite having been estranged for years following the divorce, after the death of Shelly's second husband and after Maura's coming out, they have grown close again. While Maura seems to be much more wary about falling into old patterns than Shelly, she also clings to the support and familiarity that Shelly offers. In the scene, Maura tries on a bathing suit while Shelly is taking a bath, and, unable to reject Shelly's advances, Maura ends up masturbating Shelly while she is lying in the bathtub. The moment brings together intimacy, loneliness, nostalgia, and sexual interaction between an aging ex-husband and ex-wife, both of whom identify as women, and thus not only demonstrates that personal bonds exceed the expressive possibilities of institutions like marriage or divorce, but also dissolves the heterosexual matrix of biological sex, gender, and sexual desire.

The second sex scene occurs in the final episode of Season 2 in the wake of Maura's precipitous flight from Idyllwild Wimmen's Music Festival, a feminist festival Maura attends together with her daughters, which, however, as she finds out, has a "women-born-women" policy. After Maura is confronted with the fact that many older lesbian feminists regard her as an unwelcome intruder, a discussion ensues among Maura, Ali, and several older women. Their dispute about the restrictive policy is particularly significant because, for the audience, it brings up the question of whether the mechanisms of exclusion Maura faces as a trans-person at the women's festival are entirely different from the sexist exclusion Maura practiced as Mort. Furthermore, Ali's question, "does that mean if you have a hysterectomy you are not a woman?" raises a central point about biological essentialism. Maura, upset by the women's attitude, leaves the festival in the middle of the night with the help of Vicki, another woman whom she met earlier the same day, who openly disapproves of the festival policy. In the final episode, Vicki and Maura end up having sex in a motel room, confronting the audience with a sex scene between two persons over sixty, one of whom is a transgender woman who has not had sexual re-assignment surgery (i.e., who still has a penis), and one of whom is a cis-woman who has had a double-mastectomy. Moreover, the scene harks back to Ali's doubts about the legitimacy of the biological determination of one's gender, which, as the series illustrates, remains an issue that needs to be discussed, even in queer theory's third decade. Through the inclusion of these scenes the narrative puts a truly queer spin on the idea of "heterosexual functionality" in old age.

But *Transparent* not only queers aging by confronting prevalent norms and stereotypes. It also challenges viewers to critically examine the paradigms of different generations and underlines the fact that the LGBTQ community itself has a history. The older lesbian-feminist women at the Idyllwild festival call themselves the "last remaining radicals," and, like Leslie Mackinaw, who is among them, they have fought long and hard against sexist and homophobic attitudes. Leslie explains to Ali, "There are ladies here who save up all year long, and they get here, and they feel protective, and they end up just spewing hate" ("Man on the Land"). Given their experiences, these women are not willing to adopt fluid gender concepts that, in their opinion, obscure the discrimination women still suffer. At the same time, Leslie's explanation highlights Maura's advantageous economic situation: many of the older lesbian women at the festival do not have a great income, likely as a consequence of just the sort of job discrimination in which—as we know at this point—Maura took part.

As the above examples have shown, *Transparent* uses its portrayal of Maura Pfefferman as a starting point to critically scrutinize constructions of aging, gender, and sexuality, as well as to highlight exclusionary mechanisms that result from dogmatic worldviews, leaving it up to viewers, however, whether or not to pick sides. In this way, *Transparent* differs decidedly from previous depictions of transgender characters, who have most often fallen into the category of either victim (as in *Boys Don't Cry*, 1999) or villain (like the character of Cece Drake in *Pretty Little Liars*, 2010-2016). Moving beyond this binary dichotomy, *Transparent* makes use of Maura's conflicted personality to examine concepts of temporality, community, and generativity. Revisions of temporality are strengthened in particular, since several characters are presented as falling outside linear trajectories of time, thus continually challenging heteronormative markers of "successful" adulthood in America.

"Oh Sister": Queering the Family

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam notes: "The deployment of the concept of family, whether in hetero- or homo-contexts, almost always introduces normative understandings of time and transmission [from one generation to the next]" (71). The family stands at *Transparent's* center: already its title alludes to it, marking Maura not as a transgender individual but as a trans-parent. In some ways, the series' portrayal of family as a "natural" and elementary bond risks falling into the kind of heteronormative logic of kinship that various queer scholars have criticized, inasmuch as the Pfefferman family union is depicted as trumping other relations. However, I want to suggest that *Transparent* also questions the concept of family from within, pushing its boundaries and examining its relations to inheritance, generativity, and history with regard to non-normative sexualities. One scene that humorously marks the permeability of family boundaries in the show occurs at the very beginning of Season 2, when family pictures are taken at Sarah's lesbian wedding. Various members of the wedding party keep interrupting the photographer in order to add more people into the picture, including two ex-wives of Tammy, Sarah's new spouse. While the wedding planner pleads, "Only family," an exasperated Ali finally asks, "Anybody else want in?" ("Kina Hora").

Transparent moreover interrupts ideas of "progression" and "continuity," which characterize hegemonic concepts of family and temporality (Halberstam 70, 74). In Season 1, Josh, who finds it particularly difficult to accept or understand his father's transition, asks his sisters in frustration, "So what does this mean? Everything Dad has said and done before this moment is a sham? Like he was acting the whole time?" Ali's answer—"No. It just means we all have to start over" ("The Wilderness")—underlines the significant impact that Maura's transition has on her family, but it also interrupts the ideal of linear continuity proposed by the cultural blueprint of the heteronormative timeline. This interruption is visually supported by the fact that all three "children" are hanging out at the playground behind their childhood home during this conversation. Anita Wohlmann has argued that references to age (with regard to feelings, behavior, appearance) perform "a metaphorical function" in narratives (27), a function that "may point to the psychology of a character,... to a particular (social or cultural) atmosphere or setting" (252), and that may serve to indicate a crisis (252). The playground setting constitutes such an indicator, emphasizing that, while Sarah, Josh, and Ali are adults, they who now have to renegotiate their parent-child relationship with their father.

All three of Maura's children exhibit "age-inappropriate" behavior as they try to come to terms with the new perspective on their childhood that opens up with Maura's coming out. They behave like self-involved teenagers more often than not, blurring the lines between childhood and adulthood. They fail to fulfill and sometimes even to recognize responsibilities that society doles out to its adults with regard to such matters as family, relationships, personal accountability, and gainful employment. Borrowing from Halberstam's analysis of queer time, one may also read Ali's, Josh's, and Sarah's exhibitions of "age-inappropriateness" as an illustration of "immaturity and a refusal of adulthood," characteristic elements of queer culture (73).¹³

When Ali follows her statement about the whole family having to "start over" by announcing that she is "going back to school," this announcement elicits only laughter from her siblings, who proceed to tease her about never following through with any of her plans. At age thirty-three, Ali lives off Maura's financial handouts and has no job and no clear idea of what she wants to do with her life. Not surprisingly, Maura describes her daughter as someone "who just doesn't seem to be able to land" ("Pilot"), a characterization which itself signals deviance from a normative expectation. Over the course of the two seasons, Ali becomes a key figure as she begins to explore her sexuality, her Jewish heritage, and her family history in the wake of her father's coming out. She experiments sexually, begins a lesbian relationship with her best friend, Syd, only to abandon her shortly afterwards, and then develops a crush on Leslie Mackinaw, the gender studies professor at UCLA. Ali's attraction to Leslie is particularly noteworthy because her interest in the older woman, whom she describes as "extremely sexy" and "very smart" ("Oscillate"), not only confronts the once dominant negative stereotype of the older lesbian predator, but also suggests that the ideas of the "last remaining radicals" of feminism have not lost their attraction for women in the twenty-first century. When Ali realizes that she has already encountered Leslie's poetry in one of her college classes, she comments, "I'm so pissed at myself for having a drunken date-rapey freshman year" ("New World Coming"), a comment that highlights the continuing presence of sexism in the twenty-first century and marks the beginning of Ali's interest in feminism and in exploring gender binaries.

But Ali is not the only one whom the series locates outside linear trajectories of the life course. Sarah, who is about forty, goes from having a nuclear family (husband and two children) at the beginning of Season 1 to marrying her college girlfriend, Tammy, who already has a patchwork family, at the beginning of Season 2. However, while everyone is still dancing and celebrating, Sarah suddenly decides that the wedding is a mistake. For the remainder of the second season, Sarah oscillates between falling apart publicly, overwhelmed with being a divorced single mother, and smoking a lot of pot to calm down. Josh, the middle child, in his late thirties and trying to get his career as a music producer off the ground, wants nothing more than a wife and a family of his own, yet repeatedly fails to live up to the commitment required to establish long-term relationships. In the course of the second season he discovers that he fathered a child when he was fifteen and had sex with Rita, the family babysitter, and that his own parents paid Rita to keep her pregnancy a secret and to give the baby up for adoption. In the end, the most meaningful relationship that he achieves is a father-son-like bonding with his mother's new boyfriend, Buzz. While I think it might be far-fetched to claim that the protagonists should be regarded as purposely alluding to queer culture, their unwillingness (or inability) to conform to societal expectations or norms highlights at once the oppressiveness of those norms and the disorientation that easily ensues in the absence of normative guidelines.

As⁴ Alisa Solomon points out, *Transparent* repeatedly highlights cultural institutions such as individual rites of passage or seasonal holidays structuring communal life as binary structures, only to subsequently intervene and tamper with them. One scene that questions the inherent meaningfulness of such landmarks is Sarah's wedding celebration. After her siblings find her in tears in the bathroom, lamenting that she does not want to be married to Tammy, the Rabbi explains to Sarah that she is not legally married yet because the license has not been dropped off at city

hall to receive the official seal. Ali asks, dejectedly, "What is a wedding, then?" to which the Rabbi replies, "It's a ritual, a pageant. It's like a very expensive play." Sarah chimes in, relieved, "It's a play. And we're just in costume" ("Kina Hora"). The scene exposes social and cultural conventions (like marriage) as collective and performative constructions. Moreover, it highlights Sarah's self-serving rejection of accountability as she simply ignores that rituals are indeed meant to have binding character. At the same time, the focus on Sarah's sweaty skin, as well as the use of successive close-ups and an unsteady camera perspective (largely Sarah's perspective on the scene) during the wedding ceremony, produces a stifling atmosphere that conveys Sarah's fear of being confined by marriage, whether heterosexual or lesbian.

Transparent uses instances like the ones examined above to confront the idea of progress in terms of heteronormative markers of futurity and to interrogate the logic of family. The self-involvement of all Pfefferman protagonists causes hurt feelings and some profound emotional suffering. The plotlines constantly demand the viewers' critical distance at the same time as their empathy. Spencer Kornhaber observes that various elements of the story also serve as a "reminder of how many of today's cultural norms, and ongoing cultural debates, have roots in the Baby Boomer heyday," and that it "also examines, quite provocatively, how the mentality of constant revolution and social permissiveness has filtered into a generation's personal decision-making – in ways that are not altogether good." Indeed, the show's plot is filled with uneven developments, setbacks, false starts, messy emotions, and undecided sexual allegiances. It does not try to make the audience comfortable, nor does it claim universality for the experiences it portrays. In addition, however, Kornhaber's observation underlines how *Transparent's* negotiation of generationality and legacy not only takes these concepts beyond their heterosexual parameters, but also emphasizes that (queer) resistance to social norms is of course not without history either, pointing to forms of tradition and inheritance that are not anchored in the family. While the series thus does not discard or disavow concepts such as family or generation, it interrogates them and challenges their normative boundaries.

In addition to revealing the complex and conflicting facets of Maura's identity, and to repeatedly challenging heteronormative constructions of concepts like family, life course, and generation, in Season 2 *Transparent* also begins to interrogate temporality itself.

"Closer To Fine": Narrative Interventions into Straight Time

Early in Season 2, Ali takes several university classes in order to finally finish her undergraduate degree. We see her sitting in an auditorium, looking at a screen full of stars while the professor's voice elaborates: "When we look up at the sky, we're not seeing the universe as it is today, but as it was, hundreds, thousands, millions of years ago – the multitudinous past of every star sending photons hurtling through space, each of them a clue as to our origins. What you are looking at is the past" ("Flicky-Flicky-Thumb-Thumb"). The present's relation to the past develops into a central, and perhaps the most continuous, theme of Season 2. *Transparent* not only introduces the notion of inherited trauma; it also folds the Pfefferman's past onto the present so that, in several scenes, Ali is literally looking at the past.

Whereas Season 1 included several flashbacks from the 1990s, showing Mort Pfefferman's secret escapes from his family to try out his feminine side, Season 2 takes the audience all the way back to Berlin in the early 1930s, to the teenage life of Maura's mother, Rose, and her older brother, Gershon, who (to the dismay of their mother, Yetta) has adopted the name Gittel, lives at Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute of Sexual Research, and carries an official passport as a transvestite.¹⁴ These are also the scenes that give the Pfefferman's Jewish heritage, mostly played up for comic effect in Season 1, a heightened significance.

Ali is the only one in her family who finds herself haunted by these fragments from the 1930s, when neither she nor her father were alive, and the narrative intricately connects her to this past in several ways. Firstly, the character of young Rose in Season 2 is played by the same actress (Emily Robinson) who plays young Ali in the flashbacks to the 1990s in Season 1. On the level of representation the two characters are thus identical. Secondly, when Ali, who is researching her family history, visits her grandmother Rose in the nursing home, Rose does not recognize Ali, but mistakes her for Gershon. And thirdly, Ali is shown to physically enter the past. At the Idyllwild music festival, as she walks through the woods trying to find Maura, she witnesses a group of SS soldiers burning books from Hirschfeld's Institute and arresting a number of the people who lived at the institute, including Gershon/Gittel. We are in 1933 at this point, and the Nazis have seized power. Rose's mother has procured visas for her and her children to emigrate to America. Gittel, however, refuses to come with her family because her visa is issued in the name of Gershon. In the middle of the night, in the woods at Idyllwild, Ali steps into the 1930s.¹⁵ She sees young Rose standing beside the pyre of books, helplessly witnessing her brother being taken into custody. Ali walks up to Rose, and they stand holding hands, both looking towards Gittel. This is neither a memory nor a dream; rather, it resembles seeing light emanating from distant stars. In these scenes, the past is simultaneous with the present, haunting the present.

The second season's inclusion of scenes showing Rose and Gittel at the Hirschfeld Institute illustrate a significant cultural moment, the Weimar Republic, which was "one of the first examples of public activism by and for trans-identifying individuals anywhere in the world" (Sutton 349). But the intrusion of fascism and the destruction of Hirschfeld's work also emphasize that progress is indeed neither linear nor to be taken for granted. On the narrative level, *Transparent* exhibits a queer engagement with time as Elizabeth Freeman has advocated it. She speaks of "living aslant" and "out of synch" with dominant norms by "inventing possibilities for moving through and with time, encountering pasts, speculating futures, and interpenetrating the two in ways that counter the common sense of the present tense" (xv). That *Transparent*'s narrative disruption of linear time is centered upon Ali makes sense, for she is the one who has begun researching inherited trauma. Freeman argues not only that "the stubborn lingering of pastness is a hallmark of queer affect... a 'revolution' in the old sense of the word, as a turning back" (8), but also that haunting, like reverie and unconsciousness, embodies a nonsequential form of time (xi). This in turn connects to the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit* as "deferred action," meaning that "the mind recorded the signs of an event when the subject could not consciously process its meaning, and preserved the signs for future uses" (Freeman 8). *Nachträglichkeit* is thus an expression of trauma as the belated re-surfacing of disturbing events that could not be comprehended as they occurred (Kaplan 34). *Transparent* presents this belated

resurfacing visually, through Ali's. Ali enters the past for the first time after diving into the Pfefferman pool at a party. Swimming under water, she witnesses several fragments from the 1930s, among them a party at the Hirschfeld Institute and Gittel's giving her sister, Rose, a pearl ring. The scene ends when Ali resurfaces—literally and figuratively—back in the present. Water, diving, and surfacing all can be read as visual representations of the subconscious, relating to the idea of inherited trauma. Several episodes later, the physical transportation into the past becomes even more explicit when Ali physically enters the 1930s and holds hands with Rose, witnessing the book-burning.

In *Transparent*, belatedness emerges as queerness alongside the experience of historical trauma that results from the Pfeffermans' Jewish heritage. Solomon notes in her review that the show's second season constructs a particular connection between Jews and LGBTQ persons as victims of Nazi propaganda, which "cast both groups as dangerous, gender-dysfunctional perverts." Solomon convincingly argues that the Berlin scenes "establish an important queer historical legacy as well as a personal one for the Pfeffermans." It is also important to note, however, that the specific inclusion of the Holocaust ties the individual story of the Pfeffermans to one of the most central examples of trauma with regard to the American national narrative. As scholars such as James E. Young and Lawrence Blum have pointed out, although the Holocaust took place in Europe, it has become an explicit part of American history and cultural memory. Young points to the official reasoning behind the building of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington: "An event of universal significance, the Holocaust has special importance for Americans: in act and word the Nazis denied the deepest tenets of the American people" (73). In this way the Holocaust became understood as "encompass[ing] all the reasons immigrants—past, present, and future—have for seeking refuge in America" (Young 73). *Transparent* at once confirms and denies this image of America as a haven against persecution, a guarantee of undeniable rights (of individuals and communities), and a promise of recognition as fellow humans.

Rose Pfefferman and her mother survive and start over in America, and the painful history of Jewish heritage becomes a locus of national memory; yet important parts of Gittel's story are silenced—her ethnic identity is remembered, whereas her trans-identity is forgotten. For Maura the promise of rights and recognition seems ultimately fulfilled, yet only after many decades of closeted suffering. What's more, it becomes apparent that, for many members of the trans-community, this promise is hardly fulfilled at all; they suffer profound psychological, physical, and economic consequences. Rather than attempting to forge oversimplified comparisons of different traumata, *Transparent's* conjoining of Jewish and queer historical legacies troubles imaginaries of progress as linear or easily graspable while at the same time reminding viewers of the individuality of trauma, even in those cases in which it is communally memorialized.

The temporal-psychological phenomenon of *Nachträglichkeit*—as deferred surfacing—is thus central to the Pfefferman's painful family history. Moreover, it also crystallizes into a main theme with regard to Maura's coming out. Maura transitions only at age seventy, even though she confesses to Sarah that "ever since [she] was five, [she] felt that something was not right" ("Moppa"). Later, Maura also has some of her childhood pictures digitally altered so that they portray her as a little girl, belatedly constructing an alternative version of her life. When Maura shows the pictures to her

daughters, Sarah muses, "Just imagine if you could have been her your whole life" ("Oscillate"), conjuring an alternate universe in which Maura might have grown up as a girl (and neither Sarah nor Ali would exist). Maura's reply to Sarah's remark entangles the two universes (alternate and present). As Sarah and Ali have just told her about their plan of going to the Idyllwild women's festival, Maura thoughtfully answers, "Then I would be shaking my tits in the wilderness... with my daughters." And in the next scene we see Ali, Sarah, and Maura in a van full of camping gear, singing loudly along with the Indigo Girls, "There's more than one answer to these questions / Pointing me in a crooked line / The less I seek my source for some definitive / The closer I am to fine," while driving to the women's festival together. Even though Maura does not get to grow up as a girl, she still gets to do something that she imagines she might have done if she had grown up as a girl. The altered photographs provide images of Maura as she saw herself and wants to remember herself, rather than a literal depiction of how others saw her at the time (as a boy). This is yet another way in which the narrative interrupts the linear logic of past and present, opening up new possibilities for imagining aging and the life course and exploring the mechanics of memory outside of normative confines.

The last scenes of Season 2 truly validate Maura's transition as a "belated" realization when the end of the last episode offers a flashback to Maura's birth. While Rose (her mother) is lying in the hospital bed in labor, her husband assures Rose's mother in the waiting room that "there's nothing to worry about" since he has already picked out a name: "I will call her Fay."¹⁶ To the mother's question, "What makes you so sure it's a girl?" he answers smilingly that "a father knows these things" ("Gray, Green, Brown & Copper"). The scene cuts to the doctor, who, holding the newborn baby, addresses Rose, "Congratulations. It's a boy." The line exemplifies precisely the kind of statement that Judith Butler has identified as the "initiatory performative" sentence that kicks off the process through which gender is continually produced (*Bodies* 232). It is this "initiation" that compels Maura to embody Mort and to "dress up as a man" ("Moppa") for nearly her whole life. It is also this statement that proves the father's confident claim both wrong and right simultaneously, in the queerest way possible.

This concurrence of contradictory elements is indicative of *Transparent's* approach to its narrative matter. Linearity and non-linearity, past and present, queer time and straight time, intersect. In this way, while the individual characters' life courses repeatedly disrupt the heteronormative ideal of the linear life course, *Transparent* nevertheless does not entirely dispense with linearity. For example, Maura's story is evidence of historical progress insofar as Maura is Gittel's heir, belatedly experiencing the fulfillment Gittel was denied. Whereas in the 1930s Gittel dies in Treblinka, murdered by the Nazi regime, Maura gets to live as a woman in LA in the twenty-first century, in a community in which hardly anyone so much as bats an eyelash at lesbian weddings, large patchwork families, or hormone treatments at age seventy. Maura herself sums up her coming out as a result of societal progress in a sweeping statement that at once emphasizes and caricatures the concept of linear progress: "I just had to keep it all, all those feelings to myself, and—people led secret lives, and people led very lonely lives—and then of course the Internet was invented" ("Moppa"). Progress and legacy are also visually depicted; through Gittel's ring—a large pearl ring she wears on a necklace—which becomes a family heirloom. But, even such presumably normative processes as inheritance (as a sign of generational progress) are imbued with a twist in *Transparent*. Gittel gives the ring as a present to young Rose, and

her mother saves it by hiding all jewelry in chocolate bars during their passage to America. A generation later, Maura wanted to propose with this ring to Shelly, and she refused it, not wanting to wear the ring of someone who died in a concentration camp. Josh tries to propose to two different girlfriends with the ring, but is refused both times. Finally, Ali finds the ring and begins wearing it on a necklace. Interestingly the ring never comes to serve as an engagement ring to a heterosexual couple, but is worn in the end by Ali, who has recently begun to explore her queerness and who can thus also be read as Gittel's heiress. Hence, the ring comes to symbolize non-heterosexual inheritance and legacy as well as a connection between different Pfefferman generations.

In addition to its manifold interventions into straight time, in Season 2 *Transparent* uses its engagement with the Pfefferman's heritage to slyly bring queerness and citizenship into dialogue by entangling the Pfefferman's queer history with an immigration/Holocaust-survival narrative exemplifying the kind of narrative that has become so central to America's understanding of itself as a nation. In raising the question about transgender persons' citizenship status in the United States today, the series here once again proves its significance through its connection to current cultural and political debates.

"New World Coming": Things Are Getting Queerer

As America's first TV series with an aging transgender protagonist, *Transparent's* narrative focus and the show's success serve as evidence of the nation's social and political progress in recent decades. *Transparent* provides an exceptional perspective even among the increasing number of works about older LGBTQ persons produced since the 2010s. Not only does it negate the decline narrative of aging and negative stereotypes of older LGBTQ persons through its portrayal of Maura as a complex character who dares to "start over" at age seventy, but it also queers aging throughout the life course, challenging normative interpretations of concepts such as family, legacy, and linear temporality. This challenge is reinforced through other members of the Pfefferman family, who also fall outside linear, heteronormative trajectories of the life course. The series deconstructs clear-cut binary oppositions, instead situating its characters at various intersections of aging, sexuality, and gender: intersections of straight and queer, male and female, past and present. Moreover, it emphasizes these junctures on the narrative level as well, by melding the Pfeffermans' past and present in Season 2. It demands that its audience abandon definitives but also does not obscure the chaos that ensues from this radical step, positioning itself beyond the throng of LGBTQ portrayals whose first goal it is to produce positive images or to "[plead] normalcy to the heterosexual court," as Goltz has called it (84). In this way *Transparent* also differs from so many previous depictions—Goltz names for example *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002) and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003–2007)—in which LGBTQ characters exist as cheerleaders and supporters of heterosexual marriage rather than as protagonists in their own right, as well as from the recurring victim or villain roles mentioned earlier. It also sets itself apart from the recent wave of incredibly fun(ny), likeable, and relatable LGBTQ characters in TV-series like *Modern Family*, *Glee*, *The Fosters*, or *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. Rather, *Transparent's* kind of depiction

entails that the show address class and gender privilege and not portray its protagonists as inevitably likeable or on the right side of arguments.

It attests to strange temporal coincidences in the real world that such a radical TV show enjoys its present success in the United States (and in nine other countries that provide the Amazon Prime streaming service) at the same time as Mississippi tried to enact its Protecting Freedom of Conscience from Government Discrimination Act (House Bill 1523) to allow individuals and businesses to refuse to provide services to LGBTQ persons on the basis of religious beliefs, and as North Carolina passed its Public Facilities and Security Act stating that individuals have to use the women's or men's bathroom according to their biological sex. On the other hand, 2016, a year in which such measures have been answered by vocal protests from a number of large companies, as well as countering legal action by the federal government, is perhaps the perfect time for a TV show about a seventy-year-old transgender person to emphasize (specifically through flashbacks to the 1930s) that progress is neither linear nor guaranteed and to include a cover of Nina Simone in order to claim that "There's a new world coming / And it's just around the bend." *Transparent* has much to contribute to current LGBTQ social, cultural and political issues by opening up fresh perspectives on the intersections of sexuality and age/aging in America and by complicating these wide-reaching concepts in the best sense.

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NOTES

1. This article was developed on the basis of findings that appear in a different form in the conclusion of my dissertation project "No Place for Sissies? Queer Aging in North American Fiction."
2. All section titles are partially titles of songs included in the *Transparent* soundtrack: "Future People," by the Alabama Shakes; "Distant Sures," by the Cave Singers; "I'm Every Woman," by Chaka Khan; "Oh Sister," by Bob Dylan; "Closer to Fine," by the Indigo Girls; "New World Coming," by Nina Simone. The soundtrack forms an important part of the show that also serves to provide links between the past and the present.
3. One of the biggest criticisms has been that the show casts a cis-man (Jeffrey Tambor) as a transgender person. Other points of critique concern, for example, the show's silence about transgender men and its allegedly greater focus on how non-transgender persons feel about trans-people than on trans-persons themselves. These are valid points of criticism, particularly since they largely originate from within the transgender community. I argue, however, that such objections are partially redressed because *Transparent* emphatically does not try to claim that its story represents a universal trans-experience, and that the series, despite its shortcomings, achieves a new and significant representation of queer aging and queer temporality that deserves to be considered closely.
4. I use the term *queer* according to the definition David Halperin proposes in *Saint = Foucault* (1997), in which he posits that "Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant," marking "a positionality *vis-à-vis* the normative [and a] horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance" (62).
5. A Google search on 15 April 2016 for the phrase "graying of America" limited to the period between 1980 and 1999 returns 2,280 search results. In the period between 2000 and 2010 one finds 35,000 search results, and in the period between 2010 and April 2016 the same search elicits 71,000 search results.
6. Such a societal chronological marker would be age sixty-six as official retirement age, or age fifty, which is the age at which it is possible to become a member of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP).
7. Transgender characters have appeared increasingly on television in recent years, in shows like *Glee*, (Fox), *The Fosters* (ABC), *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix), or *Sens8* (Netflix). However, with few exceptions (*OITNB*) all those transgender characters are explicitly young and none of their narratives focus on aging.
8. Examples can be found in works such as Dorothy Baker's *Trio* (1945), Robert Aldrich's *The Killing of Sister George* (1968), John Rechy's *City of Night* (1963), and Andrew Holleran's *The Beauty of Men* (1996). I provide a detailed analysis of fictional representations of queer aging throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century in my dissertation "No Place for Sissies? Queer Aging in North American Fiction."
9. DOMA stands for Defense of Marriage Act. Enacted in September 1996, this federal law defined marriage as the union between one man and one woman. Before it was ruled unconstitutional in 2013, this meant that married same-sex couples were not recognized as spouses by federal law.
10. The couple had gotten married in Toronto in 2007, and the state of New York recognized the marriage.

11. While none of these films are Hollywood blockbusters, they were screened in a large number of movie theatres and are now available on DVD, on Blu-ray, and/or via online streaming services like Netflix or Amazon Prime.

12. Maura (as Mort) participates in the cross-dressing retreat only to find out that this is decidedly not what she seeks. In this way the show explicitly emphasizes the difference between cross-dressing and being trans.

13. Halberstam connotes those elements positively, as ways to resist heteronormative models of maturation and adulthood.

14. Hirschfeld published *Die Transvestiten (The Transvestites)* in 1910. He was the first to distinguish trans-identity from male homosexuality. He also lobbied for the abolition of the German sodomy law, also known as Paragraph 175. Men who identified as transvestites could obtain special passes to carry on the street so that they would not be harassed by police (Marhoefer 61, Sutton 335).

15. She suddenly finds herself wearing old-fashioned shoes with bells on them. This alludes to her earlier discovery that in the Middle Ages Jewish women were forced to wear one black and one red shoe with bells on them as a racialized distinguishing mark.

16. The name of course also alludes to slang terms such as "fay" or "fairy" for effeminate men.

ABSTRACTS

At a time when America is increasingly regarded as a "graying nation," but aging LGBTQ persons often remain marginalized in discourses of aging, the TV series *Transparent* takes portrayals of queer aging in new directions. *Transparent* not only redresses this invisibility of older LGBTQ persons, but also questions heteronormative, linear understandings of life courses. The show *queers* the cultural constructs of aging and temporality in significant ways: by emphasizing the complex intersections of aging, sexuality, and gender identity embodied by the show's aging transgender protagonist; by foregrounding the ways in which various members of the Pfefferman family (especially Maura's daughter Ali) challenge linear trajectories of the life course; and by introducing, in Season 2, a narrative queering of time that interweaves the past with the present.

INDEX

Keywords: decline, heteronormative, LGBT, life course, old age, queer aging, queer time, television, transgender, *Transparent*

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