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“Trial and Error”: The Representation of Identity in the TV Show *Transparent*

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Table of Contents.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Literature Review.....	9
Theoretical Framework.....	14
Methodology.....	18
Reception and Contextualisation of Debates Around <i>Transparent</i>	21
Queer Failure and the Complex Representation of Identity.....	24
Trans Identity Opened Up and Scrutinised.....	30
Conclusion.....	39
Bibliography.....	43

Introduction

This thesis has emerged out of my frustrations of the categorisation of gender into strict codes of what is masculine and feminine which are embedded in society and have been reflected in the representations of trans characters on TV. Those whose identity falls outside of the acceptable realms of being are erased in the mainstream and are subjected to violence and humiliation both on screen and in everyday life. Very rarely is the complexity and multiplicity of identity conveyed in a thoughtful way which allows for the diversity of gender to be realised. Identification in itself can be a contentious issue which has the potential to offer validation and community but also be used as a weapon of exclusion with the ability to undermine a person's existence and sense of belonging. Specifically in relation to TV my aim is to explore the recurring stereotypes that popular representations fall into in order to critically analyse transgender identification and the possibilities that can emerge when it is opened up to less restrictive boundaries of categorisation. I approach this research project as someone who does not identify as trans and therefore I cannot speak from a first-hand perspective. However, I find comfort in stepping outside of the realms of binary gender categorisation and my desire is to shift the idea around identity from conformity to open ended possibility.

In this thesis I will be questioning and interrogating the boundaries and limitations of identity categorisation and how this manifests through representations on TV. Additionally, I will be arguing that trans as a category should be opened up in order to allow for more complex and non-normative identities to be included. In order to do this it is important to first define what is meant by transgender identity as it can be interpreted in different ways. In *Transgender Liberation*, Leslie Feinberg expressed that, "Transgendered people are demanding the right to choose our own self definitions. The language used in this pamphlet may quickly become outdated as the gender community coalesces and organises – a wonderful problem." (Feinberg, 1992:6). This quote exemplifies that terminology for gender identification is constantly evolving and that one term cannot meet the needs of everyone. Additionally, terms can become outdated or change their meaning over time, just as people's identities can shift and grow as they go through life. Thus, for the purpose of this thesis I will be using the terms "trans" and "transgender" interchangeably and intend them to be read as umbrella terms that include a myriad of identities.¹ My definition complies with Sally Hines who states, "some

¹ I define cisgender as the opposite of trans in that they identify with the gender they were assigned to at birth

transgender identity positions offer the possibility of transgressing the fixed binary categories of male and female to different degrees and with varying levels of permanence.” (Hines, 2007: 4). Thus, each individual should be in control of the terminology they use and how they define it in relation to themselves, and with this is the recognition of the fluidity and expansiveness of identity.

The purpose of the umbrella grouping of trans identity is to allow for variations and contentions to exist. Nevertheless, I am aware that there is criticism of grouping identity in this way. Niall Richardson believes that umbrella terms “conveniently gloss over very pronounced personal differences in specific groups.” (Richardson, 2010: 122). Feinberg also stated that “zie/she had “never been in search of a common umbrella identity, or even an umbrella term, that brings together people of oppressed sexes, gender expressions, and sexualities...”” (Feinberg, 2014). My intention in using trans and transgender as an umbrella term is not to generalise, oversimplify or eliminate anyone’s identity. Rather, the goal is to create a term that can unite all non-normative identities that fall outside of the restrictive binary system in order to open up identification to a limitless and ever-changing process of possibility. This accounts for the complexity of gender and its incompatibility with rigid gender codes. Under this umbrella is the freedom of self-identification, expression and fluidity in which a person can move within, between and outside of gender categories.

Additionally, I recognise that some people’s identities naturally reflect the binary and that many trans people are put in situations where they have to ‘pass’ as cisgender for safety reasons. José Muñoz states that “queers of color and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere.” (Muñoz, 1999:5). Trans people, in particular trans women, can be at risk of violence, being fired from their job, denied access to housing and healthcare. (Human Rights Campaign, 2018). Feinberg also maintains that in the case of transgender women economic inequity contributes to their decision to ‘pass’. (Feinberg, 1992: 7). Thus, passing can be necessary for survival due to the oppressions that can be inflicted on an individual for not adhering to normative social codes of gender presentation. The intention of viewing gender as a spectrum wherein multiple and convoluted identities are recognised does not seek to make trans people more vulnerable to being ‘caught’. In fact, if identity is opened up and representations on TV reflect the diversity and non-conformity that exists, then people who do not adhere to the binary could be humanised and normalised to an audience. Thus, people could be deemed less of a threat for

defying social norms which in turn has the potential to reduce the violence and oppression that people with non-normative identities face.

Ultimately my argument is that the binary system is not sufficient enough to encapsulate the complexity and nuances of identity and the ever-changing process of gender. The instability of gender identification is rarely portrayed on TV and through my analysis of the TV series *Transparent* I would like to re-evaluate the boundaries placed on identity by opening up trans as a category. *Transparent* is one of Amazon's first original television shows which premiered in 2014 and has had four seasons to date. It centres around the Pfefferman family that consists of Maura, who comes out as trans after her retirement, and her three children; Sarah, Josh and Ali. The show explores themes of gender, identity formation, family and boundaries and features several trans actors in trans roles including Alexandra Billings as Davina, Trace Lysette playing Shea, and Ian Harvie who portrays Dale. (Amazon *Transparent*, 2014-2017). In addition, to Maura and the recurring trans characters in the supporting cast, Ali challenges the gender binary throughout the four seasons and is on a continuous process to question and discover her identity. Although it is suggested by her family members in Season 4 that Ali likely identifies as non-binary and uses pronouns 'they/them' it is never confirmed by Ali whose identity remains ambiguous. ("They Is on the Way"). Further, creator of *Transparent*, Jill Soloway who identifies as non-binary and uses 'they/them' pronouns clarified in an interview that Ali is on a journey towards a non-binary identity, which reflects their own experience, but the character has not reached the final destination yet. Speaking to *The Hollywood Reporter* Soloway stated:

By the end, we got close. I think we had written that Ali was going to be identifying as non-binary by the end of the season, but then as we started to really write it and live it, it just felt fast. (Strause, 2017).

Thus, when referring to Ali's character throughout the thesis I will be using 'she/her' pronouns with the acknowledgment that her character's identity remains unstable and ambivalent.

The issue of transgender representation on TV is a highly relevant topic due to the rising prevalence of trans rights in the Western world. Despite this, depictions of trans people on TV remain minute and often fall into degrading and harmful stereotypes. The most recent "Where We Are on TV" report by *GLAAD* for the period 2017-2018 shows that out of the 329 recurring LGBT characters on TV, 5% of them are transgender, with the majority of

those transgender women. (GLAAD, 2018). When transgender characters do appear on TV they are often played by a cisgender actor and their storyline commonly ends in tragedy. As transgender actress, Jen Richards vocalises, “the anonymous trans people who are used as punch lines or tragic plot points. Even if they have a name or face, then they’re not really human and are only serving a function.” (O’Donnell, 2014). In 2012 GLAAD conducted research into transgender representation on TV in the ten years prior and found that 40% of transgender characters are cast in victim roles and 21% are cast as villains. (GLAAD, 2012). In addition, one fifth of trans characters were sex workers and slurs against trans people were very common in the episodes where a trans character featured. (ibid). Six years later, in 2018, the situation has not improved significantly with Phaylen Fairchild noting that her transgender friends who are actresses are only offered roles as “a prostitute, a mistress, a self-hating trans person, dead or dying of AIDS, or willing to be ridiculed for comedic value.” (Fairchild, 2018). Within this limited scope, trans characters are not portrayed as human which prevents trans people from seeing themselves represented and promotes misconceptions about gender identity to the wider population.

Through using the case study of *Transparent*, I hope to demonstrate the complexity of identity and how it can be represented in a more nuanced way through the act of queer failure. As defined by Jack Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure*, “gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals,” (Halberstam, 2011: 4). He also states that. “in losing we will find another way of making meaning.” (ibid: 25). Therefore, failing can allow for more possibilities to emerge which were not available under the conditions of conventional ways of being. I will also frame my theoretical framework around Halberstam’s most recent publication *Trans**, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and José Muñoz’s *Disidentifications* in order to interrogate gender identification and question the stability of the gender binary. Thus, I pose the following research questions:

- To what extent can queer failure help us understand the complex representation of identity in *Transparent*?
- To what extent is trans as an identity category opened up and scrutinised on *Transparent* and what is the social impact of it for trans communities?

In addition to the above research questions, throughout my thesis I will address the stereotypical tropes that have been prescribed to trans characters on TV in the past. The aim

is to evaluate to what extent *Transparent* opens up identity and allows its representations of trans characters to depart from previous depictions.

In the following chapters, I will outline my literature review, theoretical framework and methodology. I will then move on to look at the contextualisation of debates surrounding the show before analysing my two research questions. In my final chapter, I will conclude by giving a summary of each chapter, stating the limitations of my thesis and giving recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

Before analysing how transgender identities have been represented in *Transparent* it is important to establish what has been written about transgender representation in popular culture. As mentioned in the introduction the vast majority of representations of transgender people have been negative wherein they reinforce a victim and villain dichotomy. Niall Richardson in his book *Transgressive Bodies* speaks of the two recurring stereotypes of trans people coined by Julia Serano. The first is the “pathetic” wherein the trans character fails to meet stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity and as a result is ridiculed for it. The second is the “deceiving” transgender character that tricks people into believing them as one gender and is later revealed to be trans and thus deceitful. (Richardson, 2010: 128-129). Richardson adds another stereotype of the “spinster” trans character who is not interested in having a sexual relationship with anyone. (ibid: p.129). Each of these tropes promotes a negative image of trans people and reduces transgender identity to a subhuman character to be feared or laughed at.

Jack Halberstam has also written about transgender representation in his book *Trans**. He cites the movie *Boys Don't Cry* as a breakthrough as it departed from other films which “featured transgender people only as monsters, killers, sociopaths, or isolated misfits.” (Halberstam, 2018:102). Even though the transgender male lead in *Boys Don't Cry* was played by a cisgender woman and the story ends in tragedy, Halberstam warns against boycotting representations such as this and argues it should be situated in the time it was released. He points to a generational divide within the queer and trans community wherein opinion is split by the quality of representation. (ibid: 105-106). Halberstam calls upon younger trans people to appreciate the film for what it was at the time, a departure from the negative trope of representing trans people as villains. (ibid: 102). In addition, *Boys Don't Cry* is still among the few films which represent trans men, however, it can be said that the film upholds the trope of trans people being the victim and also continues the recurring trend of casting non-trans people in trans roles.

In “Transgender Transitions: Sex/Gender Binaries in the Digital Age”, Kay Siebler argues that “transqueers of the 21st century are being denied queer representations and ways of being that defy the gender/sex/sexuality binaries.” (Siebler, 2012: 95). Most representations of trans characters reinforce a stereotypical image of masculinity and femininity and thus do not allow for any nuances of identity to occur. With this is the idea that to be trans you have

to modify your body through hormones and surgery. (ibid: 78-79). She asserts that, “Popular television shows and film reinforce gender rigidity,” and that “The mandate is clear in the Digital Age: trans is okay, but that means a specific body aesthetic that mimics the heteronormative, misogynist culture of masculine and feminine ideals.” (ibid: 88). Thus, it can be said that even when trans characters defy the negative stereotypes of victim, villain or spinster, the trans identity is being represented in one form that promotes consumption of hormones, surgery and beauty products to achieve normality and ‘pass’ as cisgender. This erases the ambiguity of gender identity and promotes the idea that “transitioning defines trans identity.” (ibid:76). Therefore, it is clear there is a specific trans person that is deemed acceptable for mainstream consumption and that is someone who conforms to binary systems of identity. I intend to analyse *Transparent* in order to demonstrate how it scrutinises this norm to allow for other identities to exist.

Michael Lovelock has a similar argument to Siebler wherein he argues that pushing the ‘wrong body’ narrative is profitable not only to companies wishing to financially benefit from trans people’s transitions but also to a cisgender audience of a television programme who subscribe to social ideals of gender and being authentic. (Lovelock, 2017: 677). Thus, trans women have to be marketable towards cisgender people in order to have a presence in the mainstream. Lovelock states, “Trans women such as [Caitlyn] Jenner are accepted as women as long as they adhere to the visual codes of female attractiveness.” (ibid:680). If they fail to live up to these codes of femininity they are then subject to ridicule and represented as a joke or presented as a threat which falls into the tropes already discussed. On the other hand, trans men are often invisible in representations of trans people on television because they “are not readily commodifiable through the thematic tropes of body culture media”. (ibid:677). I believe what is refreshing about *Transparent* is that it does not portray its trans characters as needing to be ‘fixed’ and it has multiple trans characters that subscribe to gender codes to varying degrees.

Lauren B McInroy and Shelley Craig interviewed trans youth about their opinions of trans representation in the media. The overall consensus was that there was not a visible presence of trans men on TV and that trans characters’ identities were “oversimplified... to reinforce heterosexual, cisgender notions of gender presentation, behavior, and intimate relationships.” (McInroy and Craig, 2015: 610). Thus, a major problem with transgender representation on television is that the characters are often constructed by cisgender people for a cisgender

audience and do not allow for the character to develop or have a narrative outside of their identity. This results in the trans character being victimised, portrayed as a villain, a tokenistic prop, a comical caricature or one dimensional. Within these stereotypes there is no scope for the trans character to have agency or to become anything more than an overused trope, therefore, being represented and perceived as not human. McInroy and Craig's study stressed the importance of moving away from "limited, problematic and stereotypical" (ibid) portrayals towards "depicting characters as complex individuals instead of disproportionately focusing on their transgender identification." (ibid: 612). With this thesis I hope to highlight how characters with multifaceted identities can be showcased when their narrative is not restricted by societal expectations or reduced down to tokenistic qualities.

In the previous section I gave an overview of what had been written about transgender representation in popular culture and the common tropes that are subscribed to trans characters which are overwhelmingly negative. In this section I will discuss three perspectives of the representation in *Transparent* and position myself within their arguments.

Jack Halberstam believes that *Transparent* is "unique in the media history of queer representation" due to its positive depiction of trans people as well as other minority groups. (Halberstam, 2018:97). While praising the show for breaking new ground, he states that, "The challenge for *Transparent* lies in its ability to represent a specific trans experience without making it representative of *all* trans experience." (ibid). Thus, it can be said that due to the scarce representation of transgender people on TV, any portrayal has to tread delicately in order to ensure it is not reproducing negative stereotypes or tropes. Additionally, it is important for TV shows to represent the trans experience as diverse and not claim to be speaking on behalf of all trans people.

I believe that *Transparent* succeeds in departing from traditional tropes by giving the character of Maura agency to tell her own story and exist outside of her identity. Despite the show being about her life as a transgender parent transitioning late in life she is allowed to have flaws without them defining her character and she is granted a narrative outside of her transition. I would argue the real breakthrough of the show is the presence of more than one trans character which allows for trans people's identities to be seen as unique as well as avoiding tokenising the characters. Nevertheless, the central focus of the show are the characters Maura and Ali that are both played by cisgender actors. In comparison, the trans characters who are portrayed by trans actors remain side characters throughout the whole four

seasons which limits their reach and makes it clear that even in a show about trans experience it is cis actors who are given the most screen time.

Steven Funk and Jaydi Funk have written about the ways in which *Transparent's* focus on "coming out" dispossesses the lead character, Maura. In "Transgender Dispossession in *Transparent*: Coming out as a Euphemism for Honesty" they argue that the normative is established as the cisgender characters and that Maura is contrasted against this to show the trans-loathing and self-loathing that trans people experience. (Funk and Funk, 2016: 880). They state:

Although Transparent has the potential to reveal the human condition as one precariously bound up in social practices and punitive norms, and to challenge those inequities, it simply mimics tabloid culture, playing into the public's fears of gender expansiveness by normalising internalised trans self-loathing.* (ibid: 887).

They believe the focus on Maura coming out ties her story to the cisgender characters and how they feel about it, this leaves the trans character having to prove herself as authentic and being perceived as deceitful. Thus, in Funk's opinion, the trans character's story is told through a cisgender gaze and her worth and authenticity is defined by cisgender characters. (ibid:890). Ultimately the potential of the show is ruined for Jaydi and Steven Funk who believe that *Transparent* actually cements the binary and "recycles many of the narrative tropes employed in media "coming out" rhetoric since the 1990s." (ibid:901). Nevertheless, I believe that this analysis assumes Maura to be a victim within her own narrative, which is not the case, she is wealthy, privileged and independent and always has control over her own coming out. Additionally, the show actively problematises the binary and includes scenes between trans characters without the presence of cis characters to provide the gaze. I argue that coming out is never a focus for *Transparent*, rather it is the scrutinization of gender and showcasing the continuous exploration of identity through the lens of trans and questioning characters that is central to the show.

Linda Hess has also written about *Transparent* in her article entitled "Negotiations of Queer Aging and Queer Temporality in the TV Series *Transparent*." Hess's perspective of *Transparent* differs greatly from Steven and Jaydi Funk's as it is overall very positive. She claims that it sets itself apart from other LGBT shows on television through its portrayal of queer aging (Hess, 2017: 2) and its departure from the typical victim and villain dichotomy. (ibid:8). Additionally, she argues that it "challenges and interrogates the heteronormative

timeline as a social blueprint” primarily through the character of Ali. (ibid:4). She maintains that the show “deconstructs clear-cut binary opposition” and the characters are unique as they do not have to be liked. (ibid: 15). In this thesis, I wish to build upon the point made by Linda Hess in the show’s ability to break the binary through its portrayal of trans characters as complex and flawed without demonizing them. Additionally, I will look into the ways in which *Transparent* uses the concept of failure and highlights the instable process of identity formation to allow for new beginnings and characters that reject normative notions of gender as well as lifestyle. Lastly, I believe that *Transparent* not only rejects the victim and villain dichotomy but goes further to destabilise identity and binary categorisation altogether in order to open up multiple ways of identifying that are not usually seen on screen.

Theoretical Framework

In this chapter I will discuss three key theorists who will inform my thesis; Jack Halberstam, José Muñoz and Judith Butler. I aim to use their concepts of queer failure, trans*, disidentification, and gender performativity in order to scrutinise gender and demonstrate how *Transparent* subverts identity in order to complexify it and open it up to more diverse ways of being.

The first chapter of analysis will address the question: To what extent can queer failure help us understand the complex representation of identity in *Transparent*? In order to investigate the notion of failure I will refer to Jack Halberstam's text *The Queer Art of Failure* in which he states that failure can open up new possibilities and signify an act of becoming. (Halberstam, 2011:25). Additionally, he argues that failure is associated with, "nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique." (ibid: 89). Halberstam maintains that:

rather than searching for ways around death and disappointment, the queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd, the silly, and the hopelessly goofy. Rather than resisting endings and limits, let us instead revel in and cleave to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures. (ibid:187).

Thus, failure is an inevitable part of engaging in non-normative practices and it should be embraced and utilised to allow us to be freed from the norms that constrict the ways we live. The goal is to discover new ways of being in the world that defy stereotypical notions of success in order to break free from the confinements that binary categorisations impose. (ibid:2). While failure is an ongoing theme throughout *Transparent* and is prescribed to many of the characters, I would like to focus on Ali. By not fulfilling commitments, not knowing and being unsuccessful in regards to heteronormative standards of life, she explores different avenues of her identity and comes closer to realising the truth about herself and her relation to the world. Arguably more than any other character, she resists the binary and the stereotypically successful life in order to walk her own path. Therefore, by showcasing a character that fails to adhere to the 'norm', *Transparent* offers a more complex representation of identity.

Additionally, in this chapter I will use Jack Halberstam's other text *Trans** to argue that *Transparent* deconstructs gender to reveal identities that do not conform to an assimilationist

narrative typically portrayed in on screen depictions of gender. Halberstam explores gender ambiguity, stressing the need to recognise “trans*” as a capacious and fluid category rather than a diagnosis.” (Halberstam, 2018: 88). He explains, “the asterisk modifies the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity.” (ibid: 4). Therefore, this opens up trans* as an identity category, allowing for more nuances within gender as well as accounting for a process of continued identity exploration wherein a person’s gender identity is never fixed or final but instead is afforded the ability to be more fluid.

I will apply this concept to Ali to showcase her journey of identity exploration throughout the four seasons and her resistance to be confined to a fixed gender category. Halberstam maintains, “The terminology, trans*, stands at odds with the history of gender variance, which has been collapsed into concise definitions, sure medical pronouncements, and fierce exclusions.” (ibid:5). It contests the idea of surgery as a signifier of a complete transition. Through expanding the definition of trans* it gives agency back to transgender people to identify themselves on their own terms (ibid:4) and allows the inclusion of those that do not fit into the rigid binary system. Thus, this helps us to understand Ali’s identity better by exploring the significance of her never ending exploration of gender. By applying both of Halberstam’s theories to the character of Ali, I intend to argue that *Transparent* showcases identity formation as a never-ending process and gives representation to trans people whose identity falls outside of binary classifications of gender.

Further, in this chapter, I argue that *Transparent* problematises the binary to create a new way of existing within the norm. José Muñoz’s theory of disidentification accounts for the way minority subjects challenge the normative structures that rule the way we exist in the world in order to adapt and expand them to suit identities that are not accepted in the public sphere. Muñoz states:

Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship. (Muñoz, 1999: 4).

He maintains that the process of disidentification does not require one to assimilate with or reject the dominant sphere, rather, it “is a remaking and rewriting of the dominant script”

(ibid:23) which aims “to resist and confound socially prescriptive patterns of identification.” (ibid: 28). Thus, disidentification contests the binary and reconfigures normative practices in order to create new identity formations within existing structures. Muñoz explains that “these identities in-difference” are created out of a failure to adhere to the norms dictated by the dominant majority. (ibid: 7). Additionally, he attests that disidentification accounts for variations within identity and is inclusive of intersecting identities. (ibid:28). Thus, it can be said that disidentification gives space to those identities and minority subjects that are excluded and not represented fully by the mainstream due to their inability or refusal to assimilate. It reimagines the normative structures of the public sphere in order to open it up to new possibilities of identity formation. I wish to argue that while transgender identity can often be represented through an assimilationist framework, *Transparent* showcases processes of disidentification to represent the nuances of gender identity and the differing experiences of being transgender.

My second chapter of analysis aims to address the question: To what extent is trans as an identity category opened up and scrutinised on *Transparent* and what is the social impact for trans communities? I argue that the diversity of identities under the trans umbrella is showcased through the characters of Marcy, Dale, Maura, and Davina. In one instance I link back to Jack Halberstam’s *Trans** concept in order to demonstrate how the show opens up identity to allow for representations of transwomen that don’t align to strict codes of femininity. Nevertheless, this chapter focuses on the performativity of gender and the extreme examples of femininity and masculinity that are depicted in *Transparent* in order to expose gender stereotypes.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler problematises the idea of a gender binary:

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one. (Butler, 1999: 10).

Viewing gender as separate from sex allows us to dismantle the male/female binary in order to give way to a more fluid gender outlook wherein the sex of a body does not determine the gender of a person. Butler continues:

Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time. An open coalition, then, will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure. (ibid: 22).

Thus, in Butler's opinion gender is open-ended and unfinished which allows for other categories and identities to be created. Her theorising of gender lifts the constraints placed on identity by normativity and gives way to new possibilities of being, where people are not restricted by their body and wherein sex and gender do not have to match in order to be deemed authentic. All three theorists view gender not in binary terms, but as opening up the possibilities of new identities and ways of being that contest the rigid gender norms. This is central to the perspective of the representation of transgender identities on television and through taking the case study of *Transparent* I will demonstrate how it dismantles the idea of gender being stable and binary through its deconstruction of gender.

Methodology

I will be using content analysis in order to answer my research questions: To what extent can queer failure help us understand the complex representation of identity in *Transparent*? To what extent is trans as an identity category opened up and scrutinised on *Transparent* and what is the social impact for trans communities?

As defined by William Neuman, “Content analysis is a technique for examining the content or information and symbols contained in written documents or other communication media ...” (Neuman, 2014: 49). For my thesis I have chosen to focus on the television series *Transparent* and online articles that have been written about the show. *Transparent* has had four seasons that contain ten episodes each, and has run from 2014-2017, with a fifth and final season scheduled for next year. Content analysis is a valuable method for a feminist researcher. Reinharz states that, “Cultural documents...shape norms; they do not just reflect them.” (Reinharz, 1992: 151). Additionally, Patricia Leavy asserts that through analysing pop culture, “dominant narratives, images, ideas, and stereotyped representations can be exposed and challenged.” (Leavy, 2007: 224). Therefore, television has the ability to change mainstream narratives about gender identity and through my analysis I will be able to determine how far the limits of identity categorisation are scrutinised and opened up to a variety of possibilities. Content analysis is beneficial in that it is unobtrusive (ibid: 229) as the text being analysed has not been influenced by the researcher which provides validity to the findings. (Leavy, 2000: 4).

Nevertheless, Leavy emphasises the importance of feminist researchers giving “a brief personal ‘biography’ including why they have chosen to research a given topic,” as well as stating “the vantage point from which they will begin the inquiry.” (ibid). I will be approaching my analysis from an intersectional feminist lens and as someone who has watched the television show recreationally as a viewer before deciding to approach it from a critical viewpoint. My intention is to subvert gender as a category and question how it is represented on television and whether it serves the purpose of opening up identity to a more fluid and non-normative process. My episode selection reflects my position and has been chosen in order to further my argument and demonstrate the diverse representation of identities. It is by no means exhaustive and I recognise that some characters have been

omitted or not explored as thoroughly as Ali, however, in the scope of this thesis it was not possible to cover every mention of gender and identity considering the nature of the show. Thus, I have decided to focus on the key moments that define Ali's characterisation in regards to her identity exploration and failure to conform as well as include a selection of other characters that challenge the traditionally accepted ways of being in the world. I believe that the episodes I chose to focus on demonstrate identity formation and challenge the idea of a static gender identity within a binary system. Therefore, I will be analysing three episodes of the first season, two from season two, and three from season four. I did not intentionally omit analysis on season three, rather, the episodes that I believed were most crucial to analysis were predominantly from the other seasons. Further, I intentionally chose episodes from a variety of seasons in order to showcase the character progression of Ali and Maura wherein they both become more comfortable displaying their nuanced gender that contests with traditional ideals of binary identification.

In my first chapter of analysis I will be analysing Season 1 Episode 6 *The Wilderness*, Season 2 Episode 5 *Mee-Maw*, Season 4 Episode 6 *I Never Promised You a Promise Land*, and Season 4 Episode 7 *Babar the Horrible*. I have selected these episodes because they show Ali defying stereotypical notions of success which leads her to question the binary classifications that are embedded across society. I analyse specific scenes within these episodes that show Ali failing to conform and thus discovering new ways of being in the world that help to form her identity and question the stability of gender. In my second chapter of analysis I have chosen to focus on Season 1 Episode 8 *Best New Girl*, Season 1 Episode 7 *Symbolic Exemplar*, and Season 4 Episode 2 *Groin Anomaly*. I will also mention Season 2 Episode 7 *The Book of Life*. The intention of this chapter is to analyse individual characters that deconstruct identity in order to give the audience a more nuanced picture of gender. Here I discuss gender performativity as well as extreme displays of femininity and masculinity that serve to undermine gender rigidity. The characters addressed in this chapter are Marcy, Dale, Maura and Davina. With my episode selection I hope to demonstrate that *Transparent* departs from stereotypical portrayals of trans people in favour of deconstructing identity to open it up to numerous possibilities that shows the audience that gender is more complex than can be seen within the limited scope of characters that comply to strict gender norms.

In the next chapter I will contextualise the debates surrounding the programme. My intention is to address the controversy in the casting of Tambor and his subsequent sexual harassment allegations in order to determine how it impacted *Transparent's* reception. For this section I

will analyse *The Hollywood Reporter* interview with Tambor to expose the differences in how he was framed in the media compared to his alleged victims. I will also touch upon the social impact of the show in the second chapter of analysis in which I will include the reception to the depiction of a trans male character as well as the lack of people of colour included in the show. In order to do this, I will refer to the opinions of trans people, in particular, Alexandra Billings and Jen Richards, who are both actresses and prominent voices in the fight for trans rights and representation. My intention is to conclude the extent the show served the trans community and opened up a conversation in the mainstream about gender identity as well as the importance of representation that reflects the diversity of the trans experience.

Reception and Contextualisation of Debates Around *Transparent*

Before analysing the episodes and how identity is represented in relation to the characters I will contextualise *Transparent* by examining the debates around it and the impact it had. The main contention surrounding the show was the casting of Jeffrey Tambor, a cisgender man, in the lead role of a trans woman, Maura Pfefferman. The reason given for this decision was that he was a recognisable name that could reach a wider audience. Alexandra Billings has stated that “you couldn’t get the story made” if she had been cast in the lead role. (Sobel, 2017). Additionally, a transwoman, using the pseudonym Nicola Fierce, that interviewed Tambor for the online publication *Junkee* lifted the brunt of the criticism from him:

It would have been almost impossible to find a trans person of that age, at that stage of their life, who also had the acting chops to tackle the role (and moreover would be in an emotionally good place to portray their life on screen). (Fierce, 2015).

Therefore, it can be said that despite initial criticisms *Transparent* had overall support across the board from online media and the trans community. One of the reasons for this is because of the casting of all the other trans roles with trans actors. Davina and Shea are recurring roles and there are several other trans characters that appear throughout the series. Jen Richards excuses the casting of Tambor because of this and also due to the character of Maura being based on reality in which Soloway’s parent came out as trans late in life. Richards states that “it made sense to cast a cis male” as the character was pre-transition. (Richards, 2015). This reception from trans actresses is surprising considering the history of cis actors in trans roles which has been openly criticised by Richards and Billings. However, *Transparent* did intentionally include trans people in all stages of production in which there were consultants and writers hired to ensure authenticity. (ibid). Additionally, it is very telling of the previous depictions of trans people on television that *Transparent* was lauded despite falling into a common trope.

Nevertheless, a cisgender man portraying a trans woman did impact the show in a manner that would not have been the case had a trans actress been cast. In her review of the show for *Vulture*, Gaby Dunn vocalised the impact in character dynamics of this casting decision. Referencing one scene in particular wherein Maura is learning about trans culture and community from Shea and Davina, Dunn argues that it comes across as “appropriative” and “highlights an uncomfortable flaw in Tambor's Maura that could have been avoided with

different casting.” (Dunn, 2015). It can be argued that this was the show’s biggest misstep as it devalued its authenticity. The repercussions of this decision were seen with Scarlett Johansson’s latest project where she was cast as a trans man. In response to the backlash she released a statement saying, "Tell them that they can be directed to Jeffrey Tambor, Jared Leto, and Felicity Huffman's reps for comment." (Diller, 2018). Thus, *Transparent* set a precedent in which it was considered acceptable for cis actors to play trans roles and deny trans people the ability to tell their own stories.

However, it is important to note that Johansson eventually stepped down from the role which is a victory that can be attributed to the conversation that was opened up about trans casting by *Transparent*. Since 2014 the public dialogue around trans people has become more prominent and has developed to the point that even *Transparent* creator Jill Soloway, who cast Tambor, has denounced the practice, claiming that, “it is absolutely unacceptable to cast a cis man in the role of a trans woman.” (Russell, 2016). This demonstrates the progress that has been made since the show premiered. Nonetheless, Soloway did not recast Tambor even though they changed their stance on his involvement in the show. The feminist publication *The Establishment* has accused them of “lip service” as a result which can be viewed as *Transparent* alienating the audience it originally intended to represent. (Clements, 2016). Thus, it can be said that Tambor’s casting affected how the show was received but as one of the few shows bringing trans stories to the mainstream there were a lot of expectations that were perhaps unfairly projected onto it. As E. Oliver Whitney expressed, “Maybe it’s asking too much of *Transparent* to cover *all* the bases, but there’s surely room for it to grow, and other series to learn from it.” (Whitney, 2016). Thus, *Transparent*’s mistakes should be interpreted as the dire need for more representation of trans voices in the mainstream so that one show does not have to be everything for everyone. It exposed the large gap within the television industry and provided a clear example of the difficulty of representing a diverse community that had never been given a voice.

In November 2017 Jeffrey Tambor was accused of sexual harassment by Trace Lysette (who plays Shea) and his PA Van Barnes, which subsequently led to Tambor’s firing and the uncertainty over the future of the show. (Guardian, 2018). Both Lysette and Barnes are trans women which affected the portrayal of the allegations in the media. Tambor was allowed to continue his career and was given a favourable interview in *The Hollywood Reporter* which allowed him to defend himself. The writer of the article portrayed him in a positive light in

which his wife and children were mentioned several times and his many acting accolades were stressed. (Abramovitch, 2018). He was described as a “veteran actor” and positioned as a victim who went from “LGBTQ folk hero to fugitive” as a result of the allegations. (ibid). Lysette and Barnes, on the other hand, were not treated with the same respect. The writer suggested that they were benefitting from the events and had moved on with their lives:

Lysette is still pursuing acting in L.A. and has become politically active, speaking at events like the Las Vegas Women’s March and attending Time’s Up meetings. Barnes has returned to Missouri and enrolled in cosmetology school. “I have turned a new leaf!” (ibid).

Tambor on the other hand is described as “wounded” and in mourning for his character that he is no longer allowed to play. (ibid). There is a clear discrepancy in the manner the trans women are treated compared to Tambor, who is the one in the position of power. Alexandra Billings and Jen Richards have both spoken out about the fact that Tambor was one of the only men accused of sexual harassment that was able to continue his career due to the fact his accusers were trans women. (Billings and Variety, 2018). It must also be noted that Lysette and Barnes are exclusively referred to as ‘accusers’ and not ‘victims’ when spoken about in the press as the allegations were never proved. This serves as a blatant example of the power structures in operation and the extremely marginalised position trans women have in society.

These events have greatly impacted the show and its ability to represent the trans community. The reality of being trans in America, that was never directly addressed in the show, has been showcased in the treatment of both Lysette and Barnes. Trans women hold little power and are therefore not believed or supported when they speak out. Thus, Tambor’s presence in the show and his actions have unintentionally launched a conversation about the erasure of trans voices from the mainstream. As a result, the last season of the show could potentially be the most representative of trans lives with the creators having the opportunity to bring trans voices to the forefront following the departure of Tambor. Therefore, it can be said that the complex nature of *Transparent*, both in its content as well as the debates surrounding it, makes it the perfect case study for analysing the issues that trans people face and the importance of ensuring stories are told authentically.

Queer Failure and the Complex Representation of Identity

This chapter aims to analyse my first research question: To what extent can queer failure help us understand the complex representation of identity in *Transparent*? I will focus solely on the character of Ali and her identity exploration from Season One to Season Four. In the next chapter I will answer the second part of my research question and explore additional characters in relation to the opening up and scrutiny of identity.

Jack Halberstam defines the queer art of failure as something that “dismantles the logics of success and failure with which we currently live” and “allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. (Halberstam, 2011: 2). Therefore, the queer art of failure steps outside of the rules that govern society and prompts us to define our own idea of what is ‘normal’. It lets go of the expectations that restrict how we live and removes the dichotomy of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in order to move towards a freer approach of living that is not dictated by the notion of success. In *Transparent* gender identification is explored and represented in a nuanced way that does not rely on conformity to the gender binary. It subverts gender rigidity in favour of gender fluidity in which identity formation is represented as an ongoing process. Further, ambiguous gender identity is given a space to thrive without being deemed wrong or invalid. Trans people who are questioning their identity, or who are in a place of not knowing and that hold traits which confuse the binary modes of gender can exist and are being represented due to the removal of the idea of ‘succeeding’ by assimilating into a cisgender way of being in the world. By applying the queer art of failure to the character development in *Transparent* it can allow us to understand how the representation of identity defies a conformist approach, thus, giving way to representations that showcase more than one way of being trans.

Looking at the development of the character Ali Pfefferman in the show can help us understand the queer art of failure and the impact it can have on the way we view identity. Halberstam states that, “Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.” (Halberstam, 2011: 2-3). At the beginning of Season 1 Maura describes Ali as “out of the box smart, she just doesn’t seem to be able to...to land.” (“The Letting Go”). She is in her mid-thirties which under the traditional path of success she would be expected to have an established career and be at least thinking about having a

family, however, she is still living recklessly and is uncertain about what she wants to do. This state of directionless is related to Ali not knowing how she fits in the world or how she identifies. She defies the traditional ways of living and holds many of the qualities outlined by Halberstam. Throughout the four seasons she embarks on a journey of self-discovery by pursuing new experiences which help her to explore her identity. Ali cannot commit or follow anything through to completion and, from a normative standpoint, she is viewed as a failure who is not responsible enough to manage her own life or finances. Halberstam argues that failure is associated “with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique.” (Halberstam, 2011: 89). In Season 1 Episode 6, *The Wilderness*, she decides to sign up for a Gender Studies course telling Maura that she finally feels she is on the right path. However, her siblings, Josh and Sarah, mock her when she tells them:

Josh: *Here we go*

Sarah: *Ali's got an interest*

Josh: *Oh yeah, she's gonna sign up, buy some books*

Sarah: *Dad's gonna pay the registration fee*

Josh: *Oh yeah, she's gonna need a new wardrobe*

Sarah: *Dad's gonna get her some school shoes. Dad's gotta buy some clothes. When-what about when Dad got her the loom? (“The Wilderness”).*

This scene demonstrates that Ali is always repeating the same pattern of committing to but not completing a task, her intentions are there at the beginning, but she never follows through. This is highlighted further, at the end of the scene, when Josh points out that Ali is eating an ice cream thus eating dairy again, another commitment that she has broken. Ali's cycle of having new interests and becoming fixated on new projects that are never followed through to completion is an attribute of queer failure that, as Halberstam argues above, opens up new ways of being in the world. As a result of her actions, which are often interpreted by those around her as failures and the inability to commit, she enters onto a path of exploration and discovery which leads her to become more aware of her identity. Each experience is a queer process of figuring out her identity and her relationship to the world around her. She is constantly looking for the next project whether it is a person or an experience in order to understand her messy gender identity that cannot be boxed into a binary perception of gender

or normative notions of success. Thus, Ali represents the journey of gender exploration and the process of identity formation that is often omitted in representations of trans identity on television. Although not aware that she is questioning her own identity at this point in the series, she exhibits an acute interest in gender and a desire to learn more. This is then transferred onto her relationships as she continues to discover more about her identity.

Ali's newfound interest in gender is a drive in her romantic relationships in which she experiments with queer life by dating a Gender Studies teaching assistant, Dale², who is a transman, and then her best friend Syd. When questioned by Sarah about whether her sexuality has changed she responds "I don't know, I just...crossed a line that I guess I always had there for some reason. I don't know why. Also I've realised I just – I can't have real emotional intimacy with somebody who hasn't suffered under the patriarchy." ("Mee-Maw"). This uncertainty that is vocalised in Ali's conversation with Sarah is evident in her relationship with Syd, in that she is trying to extract something from it that will help her to make sense of her own identity. In each encounter Ali is playing with gender roles and it is visible that she is not settled in the relationships, she is always trying to find something from her experiences and when she begins to feel unsatisfied she leaves to discover something else that will help her understand herself. Halberstam maintains, "Rather than resisting endings and limits, let us instead revel in and cleave to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures." (Halberstam, 2011: 187). Each of Ali's relationships end in failure as she is using them as a basis to explore her own identity and relationship to gender and sexuality. However, the result of this repeated failure is growth as it opens up the possibility to develop her identity. The trait that is crucial to Ali's character and the representation of identity in *Transparent* is her refusal to comply to societal codes which in turn promotes a fluid approach to gender and sexuality. She is not restricted by what is deemed acceptable and instead paves her own path by questioning the structures that uphold the binary. By allowing Ali to exist in her flawed unknowing state of being, *Transparent* provides representation for trans people who do not fit into the rigid gender constructs and have difficulty navigating the world as a result.

José Muñoz's theory of Disidentifications also provides a useful framework for looking at how identity is represented in *Transparent*. He speaks of the "disidentificatory subject" who tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form." (Muñoz, 1999: 12). Rather than simply opposing the prescribed norms that dominate the public sphere,

² I will analyse Dale and his relationship with Ali in more detail in the following chapter.

Muñoz suggests that a minority subject can use them to create a counter culture. By subverting the gender system, it can be reclaimed and redefined in order to serve those who fall outside of the gender binary. Ali plays with gender norms both using them and going against them throughout the series. She experiments with her gender presentation by dressing androgynous and challenging the limits imposed on her as a woman. This is most evident in Season 4 Episode 6 when she visits the Western Wall in Jerusalem with her family. On the journey there she is vocalising her outrage with the binary order of the world and upon arriving at the wall she discovers that it is also segregated by gender with the women having a third of the space that the men have. Although Ali reluctantly enters the women's side, her frustration with the divide causes her to look over to the men's side which she discovers is animated compared to the solemn and reserved atmosphere of the side she is in. In an act of defiance, which can be classified in terms of disidentification with the binary modes that govern the world, Ali leaves the women's side and crosses over to the men's side with a look of possibility on her face. ("I Never Promised You a Promised Land"). This can be seen as a way of working with and against the binary in order to create a space where she can exist without the restrictions that cultural and societal norms impose. As Muñoz explains, "Disidentification is about expanding and problematising identity and identification, not abandoning any socially prescribed identity component." (ibid: 29). By crossing over to the other side, Ali is problematising the binary structures in place that govern what is acceptable. This challenges the narrative that is commonly portrayed which encourages trans people to assimilate into the norm. A disidentificatory subject, such as Ali, subverts identity in order to create a new norm within the existing system. Ali's journey of identity demonstrates that gender identity can take many forms and does not have to operate within the binary.

Transparent deconstructs identity in order to reveal it as an ongoing process and a constant becoming wherein growth and change are inevitable. This departs from the stereotypical notion of conformity and assimilation that gender identification is often framed around. Opening up gender identity in this way offers representation of alternative possibilities of being for those, who Halberstam states in *Trans**, historically, "fell between the cracks of the classifications systems designed to explain their plight and found themselves stranded in unnameable realms of embodiment." (Halberstam, 2018: 4). Ali's characterisation throughout the four seasons exemplifies the development of identity wherein there may never be an end point or 'final' answer. Her failure to conform within the binary and thus disidentify with the norms that dominate the world leads her to explore possibilities in life and within her own

identity, which would not have been open to her otherwise. Therefore, identity does not have to make sense within the confines of normative world structures. Ali gives representation and validation to those who cannot assimilate and gives permission to people exploring their identity to question and challenge the rigidity of gender.

The fluidity of gender and the existence of multifaceted identities that fall outside the gender binary are accounted for by Halberstam:

All of these terms have emerged within communities seeking for ways to name and explain their multiplicity: in other words, they are not medical terms or psychiatric terms produced in institutional contexts either to name disorders or to delimit a field of classification; rather, they are terms that emerge from a trial and error, everyday usage, and political expediency (Halberstam, 2018: 10).

Thus, identity formation is a product of being uncertain and failing in order to discover new terms of identification that fall outside the traditional framework of identity. The trial and error approach is specifically addressed in *Transparent* during Ali's encounter with an activist called Lyfe, wherein Ali's eyes are opened to different gender presentations and dynamics. This causes Ali to think about her own relationship with the gender binary and the possibilities that exist outside of it. She is unsure of where she stands in relation to it so asks Lyfe, "How did you...um, figure this out? I mean, when did you make the decision that you were gonna...not take your binder off during sex?" ("Babar The Horrible"). Lyfe responds, "Moments like this. Just exploring. Trial, error. Adventure." (ibid).

This scene explores the active questioning of the gender binary and the uncertainty that comes with falling outside of the norm. Ali realises that she does not have to conform to the societal expectations that have been placed on her. She is in control of her body and her identity and is the one who can make the decision in how her gender is expressed and manifested. This moment validates indecisiveness and inability to commit to one form of identity by informing the audience of the option to figure out gender identity through exploration, uncertainty and failure. Thus, straying from the commonly held belief that gender is static. Presenting the option of not knowing and exploring identity through trial and error destabilises identity as a fixed category that has to be 'known', In addition, it portrays confusion about one's identity in a positive light, that brings about opportunities for adventure and discovery. Failing to subscribe to a concrete identification category provides

the room to investigate gender without the constrictions of the expectations that come with gender codes which are assigned to a particular gender marker.

Therefore, each person, relationship and experience lead Ali closer to the truth about herself and her identity and through failing she is learning more, which opens her up to experiences that allow her to grow and understand the world from different perspectives. Her quest into a queer world leads her to discover her identity, however, she never finds an end point. Rather, she is constantly questioning and looking for the next adventure and because of this her identity is given the freedom to explore and evolve over time. Hence, we can understand *Transparent's* representation of complex identity formations through the lens of queer failure, wherein unknowing and lack of commitment provide the foundation for more interesting ways of being in the world that oppose the assimilationist narrative and 'wrong body trope'. Discovering alternative ways of living and identifying requires one to step outside the confines of boxed gender roles and embrace an illogical existence which goes against the grain of the normative.

Trans Identity Opened Up and Scrutinised

In this chapter I will address the second part of my research question: To what extent is trans as an identity category opened up and scrutinised on *Transparent* and what is the social impact of it for trans communities? In order to do this, I will analyse individual scenes which are central to exploring the identity of the characters; Marcy, Dale, Maura and Davina. I will engage with opinions of the trans community, including two of the cast members, to determine the impact of *Transparent's* exploration of identity.

Trans identity has typically been represented according to the binary wherein a trans character will transition from one gender to the other, most commonly male to female. This narrative is recycled over and over in the mainstream media and creates the perception that there is only one way to be trans. As Kay Siebler expresses, “Because no messy identities (those outside the gender/sex binary) get screen time, people adopt the belief that transitioning defines trans identity.” (Siebler, 2012: 76). This creates an idea in society that a trans person has to comply to a specific checklist in order to be considered authentic and “trans enough.” The consequences of these portrayals are that mainstream society holds a narrow view of trans people which leads to stereotyping and, for those who cannot live up to this ideal, ridicule which, in turn, undermines their identity.

Contrary to this one-dimensional perception of trans people fuelled by the media, Judith Butler theorises that:

Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time. An open coalition, then, will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure. (Butler, 1999: 22).

Thus, gender is open ended and unfinished which allows for other categories and identities to be created. The possibility that a person's gender identity will change and adapt over time is widely erased in representations on TV. Additionally, the variation of trans experience is rarely accounted for which is what makes *Transparent* unique and the first of its kind in its ability to scrutinise and open up trans as an identity category to show the diversity that exists under the trans umbrella. It provides representation of multiple trans people from different

backgrounds and stages in their transition which conveys to an audience that there are many ways to be trans that do not necessarily have to conform to a fixed binary idea of gender identity. Additionally, it humanises and normalises trans people as it lets viewers see trans people live their daily lives.

Transparent intentionally scrutinises the concept of gender in order to reveal its complexity and problematise the binary system of identity. In Season 1 the performativity of gender is explored during a flashback in which Maura and her friend Marcy secretly attend a camp for cross dressers. Marcy is wearing a dress, blonde wig, makeup and jewellery in order to conform to feminine beauty standards with the intention to pass as a woman while at the camp. She calls her wife and son on a payphone to keep up the pretence that she is at a business conference which they believe her to be at. During the phone call her voice and posture change as she comports herself in a stereotypically masculine manner. She adopts a more relaxed and spread out stance and speaks with a deeper voice. In addition, when talking to her son specifically, she reinforces the harmful rhetoric prescribed to men, telling him to “man up” and stand up to his football coach. As soon as she hangs up the phone she reverts back to being softly spoken and appearing gentle and timid. (“Best New Girl”). The stark contrast between the two gender performances and the contradiction of advocating for her son to be more ‘manly’ while standing dressed like a woman highlights the social construction of gender. It demonstrates how superficial gendered attributes are and exposes the deeply ingrained expectations that come with rigid gender roles. Butler asserts:

As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an “act,” as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of “the natural” that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status (Butler, 1999: 187).

Conforming to the set gender codes imposed by society causes the falsity of gender performance to be revealed. *Transparent* examines this by showing the abrupt shift between femininity and masculinity exhibited by one person. While this scene does adhere to a binary understanding of gender, the displays of the hypermasculine and hyperfeminine act as a way to challenge the gender norms upheld by the binary identification system, thus, highlighting their falsehood. Therefore, in this scene, gender is revealed as an act which is performed with the intention to assimilate into societal expectations of behaviour, mentality and appearance.

Further, *Transparent* scrutinises identity categorisation in order to reveal the array of gender presentations and the differences and contentions between them. This helps towards combatting the misconceptions that exist in which many people view drag queens, cross dressers and trans people as the same. (Raun, 2016:25). During dinner at the camp, Maura and Marcy sit with other camp goers who are talking about someone they knew who “decided to go all the way” and “had the nerve to bring hormones to cross dressing camp.” (“Best New Girl”). Giving clarification to Maura who was shocked by the person’s expulsion from the camp and also to viewers who are being informed about the difference between cross-dressers and trans people, the ring leader of the group contends “we are cross dressers, but we’re still men.” (ibid). This scene is important as it demonstrates the discrimination that exists amongst gender variant people who are frequently grouped together. Additionally, the nuances within identity are showcased and, it can be argued that, through scrutinising gender classification and the differences between trans women and men who cross dress, the harmful perception that trans women are “men in dresses” is unpacked and contested. Thus, *Transparent* acknowledges the complexity and diversity of identity and attempts to challenge the preconceived notions about gender identity and trans people.

The character of Dale features briefly in the first season and provides the only representation for trans men in the whole series. His relationship with Ali seeks to highlight and deconstruct stereotypical ideas of masculinity and femininity. Gender roles are pushed to the extreme by Ali who is attempting to be “high femme” in order to attract Dale by wearing a lowcut dress, and red lipstick. (“The Symbolic Exemplar”). This is a departure from her usual androgynous look and a flashback of thirteen-year old Ali informs us that she has always disliked dresses, therefore, her new look is very much a performance. (ibid). Ali creates an illusion of Dale in her head wherein he is the epitome of masculinity, he exerts dominance over her, and everything from his car to his house décor resembles a lumberjack macho style and persona. The whole scenario is exaggerated and a parody of rigid gender norms and stereotypical appearance and behaviour. At the end of their date, Dale accuses Ali of only dating him because he is trans and comments that the “timing is interesting” referring to Maura’s recent coming out. (ibid). The reality of the situation is then revealed as Dale’s pickup truck becomes a regular car and his house which was once wooden is now modern and homely. Further, Dale is no longer ordering Ali about, which is showcased by the fact that he politely invites her into his house and offers her tea. (ibid).

Thus, Ali has projected preconceived ideas about gender onto Dale which has caused her to create a hypermasculine version of him in her head. It can be said that this episode seeks to undermine the idea of pervasive gender stereotypes and confronts the view that trans people need to adopt specific gender traits in order to be accepted and treated as ‘real’. Thus, by displaying extreme versions of gender dynamics and behaviour, *Transparent* is problematising them and opening identity up to various other possibilities. It scrutinises masculinity and femininity and in doing so reveals that they can take many forms that may go against outside expectations and social norms. Therefore, this episode emphasises the social construction of gender and the implications of adhering to rigid identification categories and extreme conformity to the gender binary.

Nevertheless, the representation of trans men in *Transparent* is limited to this one storyline and character of Dale which verges on tokenism and has been heavily criticised by the trans community. Cael Keegan believes that while the show can be credited with casting a trans man in a trans role in which he was “depicted as dateable and sexually desirable” (Keegan, 2014), this was undercut by the storyline which:

...rapidly becomes a fetish that reflects some of the most negative stereotypes about trans men: That we're open to discussing our genitals with strangers, that we all view ourselves as "men with vaginas," that the only reason anyone would want to sleep with us is out of curiosity, that we exist to fulfill others' sexual fantasies of experimenting with "safe" masculinity, and that we're ultimately sexually defective because we do not have "normal" penises. (ibid).

Thus, this representation can be considered exploitative and limits the views of trans men to harmful tropes and strips them of their humanity wherein they only exist to be demeaned, laughed at or to serve another character. In all cases trans men are ‘othered’. Given the rarity of trans male representation on TV, Dale’s character contributes to providing a narrow view of trans men. Comparing Dale’s portrayal to that of the other trans characters in the show Keegan asserts that “Objectification, fetishization, and obsession with genitals that all feed transphobia are still present in *Transparent* — but they are directed away from trans women and toward trans men.” (ibid). Therefore, this representation can be considered damaging and harmful to trans men and demonstrates how much more work needs to be done on giving authentic and well-rounded portrayals to the trans community.

However, *Transparent* gives visibility to an often erased identity and it can be said that the negative portrayal is used to highlight Ali's fetishization and is countered by a contrasted picture of Dale at the end of the episode giving way to a nuanced depiction of gender identity which unpacks stereotypes and preconceived ideas about what it means to be masculine and trans. The writer behind the episode, Rhys Ernst, who also identifies as a trans man has addressed the criticism of the character and has said he was wary that the character would not be accepted by all of the trans community. (Kellaway, 2014). He states:

I think a criticism of Transparent could be that it's ahead of its time. Instead of Trans 101 or 201, we're jumped several steps to 501: A more advanced conversation about trans identity, one that shows trans characters in all their flaws, complexity, incongruence, and awkward moments. (ibid).

Thus, *Transparent* represents Dale as a fully formed person and the show has intentionally allowed its characters, particularly the trans characters, to be seen as multi-layered humans who can exist in their flaws without being demonized and can be liked without being put on a pedestal. It can be said it is one of the first shows to portray trans characters with depth and complexity and portrays their identity as part of a process which allows them to progress, adapt and change and make mistakes along the way.

Additionally, in relation to Dale's storyline, *Transparent* does not show the negative stereotypes as a product of being trans, instead it examines these misconceptions and holds Ali accountable for seeing him in this way. Dale gives representation to other trans men who never see themselves on TV and informs the audience that being a trans man is an option. This could potentially validate the existence of a trans man watching the show. The actor, Ian Harvie, who portrays Dale on the show has expressed how important the character is for him describing the "human depictions" as "a life vest" for trans people watching the show. (ibid). Additionally, he believes that Dale's character is historical in that he showcases positive qualities as opposed to the depiction of Max in *The L Word* which showed trans men as "anxious, unhappy, resentful, misunderstood" (ibid). Therefore, this reveals the sheer progression of trans representation on TV in the last ten years.

While there are issues with the characterisation of Dale and there is definitely room to grow and learn from past mistakes, the fact that *Transparent* created a trans male character played by a trans male actor that showed him as stable and happy but also with human imperfections

is ground breaking. As Halberstam maintains, “the scene must be considered in context.” (Halberstam, 2015). Nevertheless, the depiction of a trans male character was met with mixed reviews precisely because the storyline was only given a limited amount of time to unfold which was not enough to represent the complexity of what the writers claim they wanted to express. The foundations were there but character growth and further conversation about gender in relation to trans men were very much forgotten after this moment, thus, limiting the social impact and preventing the opportunity to scrutinise the narrow scope of representation of trans men in the mainstream.

I will now move on to look at the lead character of Maura, who is a trans woman that has transitioned late in life. Her narrative in the show gives representation to the journey of transition and opens up identity as a category and what constitutes trans. She has not medically transitioned and, after experimenting with her gender presentation, she decides on a neutral look which does not play into the hyper feminine persona that many trans characters are prescribed. The concept of trans* which was coined by Jack Halberstam in order to open up the category of trans and free it from outside regulation is what *Transparent* manifests in its characters and the representation of identity as a multitude of presentations and possibilities. Halberstam explains, “The terminology, trans*, stands at odds with the history of gender variance, which has been collapsed into concise definitions, sure medical pronouncements, and fierce exclusions.” (Halberstam, 2018: 5). *Transparent* showcases the contentions of gender with normative ways of being and gives a platform to trans people who cannot assimilate.

In Season 4 Maura’s identity and embodiment is challenged when she goes through airport security and cannot conform to the gender they want her to be. (“Groin Anomaly”). She confuses the traditional binary system of identification system that governs society and as a result she becomes a problem. Maura is passed between the male and female security agents and because of her “groin anomaly” she does not fit into either category. Judith Butler maintains:

If one thinks that one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term of each of those perceptions as the “reality” of gender: the gender that is introduced through the simile lacks “reality,” and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance... we think we know what the reality is, and take the secondary appearance of gender to be mere artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion. (Butler, 1999: xxii).

Thus, Maura represents trans people who cannot easily assimilate as they confuse the binary modes of being which means they are not believed as the gender they identify with when they cannot conform to societal expectations. This scene acts as a way to scrutinise gender categorisation and opens up identity to varying forms. It brings the nuances of gender identity to the audience and prompts them to reflect the systems of gender binary that are embedded into daily life. Those who fall outside of the acceptable and easily boxable become a problem to be solved and they are no longer treated with dignity or respect.

The diversity of the trans community can be seen due to the multiple trans characters of different ages that have not all opted to surgically transition. This is often lacking in other representations wherein there is only one trans character that is tokenised, fetishized or hyperfeminized as a parody of themselves in order to highlight how different they are from the cisgender characters. Alexandra Billings states:

Maura falls into the container of not passable. Shea, played by Trace Lysette, falls into the passable... Maura's [transness] is very, very visible. Then you look at Davina -- and this has been true of my life -- and I'm on a spectrum. (Coker, 2017).

The character of Davina is played by a trans woman of colour and thus provides representation on the show to the most vulnerable section of the trans community. Trans women of colour are often excluded or forgotten in society as well as on TV. Thus, the inclusion of Davina is central in order to portray trans identity. José Muñoz asserts “difference has many shades and any narrative of identification that does not account for variables of race, class, and sexuality, as well as gender, is incomplete.” (Muñoz, 1999: 28). In Season 2, the disparity between Maura and Davina’s life experiences are revealed in a scene where Davina informs Maura that not all trans people are as lucky to have the money and family support that she has. (“The Book of Life”). This brings issues facing the trans community to the audience and highlights the privileged position of Maura compared to the other trans characters. This scrutiny of the trans experience allows for stories to be told outside of a white privileged lens. Billings has spoken about the social impact of her character, “I don’t think there has ever been a transgender woman, first of all my age, who is pre-op and who is someone who had HIV.” (Strause, 2017). It can be said that *Transparent* has tread new ground by casting two trans actresses in recurring guest roles in which they play openly trans women.

Nevertheless, the extent of the impact is limited in that after four seasons they both remain side characters. Their characters are developed slightly in which they are each given their own storyline which deals with the struggles they have faced in being trans, however, it is minimal and is showcased in the confinements of a single episode. Additionally, Davina's status as a trans woman of colour is never directly mentioned and, apart from one other instance, she is the only trans character of colour included in *Transparent*.³ For a TV show that was created with the purpose of bringing trans stories to screen I believe it falls short on delivering a show from a trans perspective. The representation remains limited due to its ongoing focus on Maura's white privileged life without allowing the stories of the other trans characters of the show to take precedence. While different variations of trans identity are showcased and the reality of the majority of trans peoples' lives are acknowledged, the characters are not given full agency to tell their story.

This brings up the question of what audience *Transparent* is aimed at? Jack Halberstam argues that "the show seems to orient too much to a straight audience" that identify with Josh's character⁴ the most. (Halberstam, 2015) It can be said that although it is a show focusing on trans stories it serves as a means to educate and appeal to a straight white cisgender audience. For this reason, the social impact of the show on the trans community is limited and at times the show actually alienates trans people in its attempts to attract a wider audience. The mistrust in the media as a result of previous depictions of trans characters is a difficult obstacle to overcome which affects the relationship of the show to a trans audience. Many will not see themselves represented in Maura and the other side characters are not explored enough to fully make a lasting impact. *The Establishment* have critiqued the show's ability to address "issues of race, class, cissexism and transmisogyny" ultimately stating that "the show is about a white, wealthy, mostly cisgender family." (Clements, 2016). However, the task of representing a diverse community is not something that one show can achieve and *Transparent* should be given recognition for trying to create a space where non-normative identities can exist and a conversation about representation can begin. After the success of *Transparent* trans issues were brought to the public sphere which allowed for shows, such as

³ In Season 3 Episode 1 a black trans teenager called Eliza appears. However, her narrative serves to further Maura's character and she is never seen or mentioned in the show after this episode.

⁴ Josh is Maura's son who represents the straight white cisgender male

Pose,⁵ to emerge that continue the centring of trans voices in the mainstream and can learn from its predecessor's mistakes.

⁵ *Pose* premiered this year and centres around the stories of five black trans women in the 1980s ballroom scene in New York, one of the consultants on the show is a writer on *Transparent* (Fasanella, 2018).

Conclusion

In this thesis I aimed to demonstrate the representation of trans identity in the TV show *Transparent* by analysing the ways it complexified identity and opened it up to multiple possibilities that could not fit within the binary systems of gender. I also aimed to show the ways that this representation departed from previous depictions of trans people on television. My intention was to answer the questions: To what extent can queer failure help us understand the complex representation of identity in *Transparent*? To what extent is trans as an identity category opened up and scrutinised on *Transparent* and what is the social impact of it for trans communities?

In the introduction I stressed the relevance of this topic, stating that identities which fall outside of the gender binary are often erased in the mainstream in favour of stereotypical tropes that promote negative images of trans people as victims and villains. I also justified my choice to investigate this topic by discussing the limitations that binary systems of identification impose and advocating for the re-evaluation of gender as more complex and fluid to allow for the inclusion of multiple variations of identity. Lastly, I introduced the concept of queer failure as coined by Jack Halberstam and linked it to the process of discovering new possibilities for identity.

My literature review was twofold; first I mapped out what had already been written about trans representation in popular culture and then I moved on to look more closely at what had been written about *Transparent* specifically. For the first part I explored in more detail the tropes that had been traditionally prescribed to trans characters in order to establish the negative stereotypes that existed in previous depictions which sought to dehumanise, commodify and pigeon-hole trans identity. The second part addressed three interpretations of *Transparent* from Halberstam, Steven and Jaydi Funk, and Linda Hess. In response to their viewpoints I argued that *Transparent* succeeded in departing from stereotypical representations by including multiple trans characters that were not portrayed within a victim and villain dichotomy. Additionally, I outlined my viewpoint that the show actively problematised the binary and scrutinised gender but that the characters played by trans actors were side lined.

In the theoretical framework I discussed the concepts that would inform my analysis. I looked at *The Queer Art of Failure* in more depth and applied the concept to the character of Ali. I also used Halberstam's *Trans** to account for the opening up of identity categorisation to

represent the complexity of gender. Analysing Muñoz's *Disidentifications* allowed me to explain *Transparent*'s opposition to an assimilationist narrative and its ability to represent the diversity of identities under the trans umbrella. Finally, I turned to Butler's theorisation in *Gender Trouble* to remove the barriers imposed by gender norms and reconsider gender as open ended and fluid.

My methodology justified my use of content analysis through discussing the benefits of the method and explaining my selection of episodes. I also affirmed the importance of including trans voices in order to gauge the social impact that the show made on the trans community. In the following chapter I contextualised the debates surrounding the show wherein I argued that the casting of a cisgender actor in the lead trans role devalued the authenticity of the character but also opened up a conversation about trans representation in the public domain. Additionally, I argued that *Transparent* was one of the first TV shows that centred transgender stories which meant that it had a lot of expectations to live up to. As a result, it exposed the dire need for more trans representations in the mainstream so that the responsibility is not solely directed to one show. This chapter also addressed the impact of Tambor's sexual assault allegations which I believe prompted a conversation about the erasure of trans voices and gives *Transparent* the rare opportunity to amplify them in the upcoming final season.

The first chapter of episode analysis aimed to answer the question: To what extent can queer failure help us understand the complex representation of identity in *Transparent*? I demonstrated how the concept of queer failure contributed to the understanding of Ali and her ongoing process of identity exploration. Through showcasing the flaws of the character, *Transparent* provides representation of non-normative identity and portrays gender outside of the confinements of the binary in which identity is viewed as a process of becoming which is achieved through trial and error. Thus, identity is destabilised which provides the freedom to explore, develop and change gender over time. Therefore, through the lens of queer failure the show is able to represent the complexity of the gender spectrum wherein multiple possibilities and ways of being exist outside of the rigid norms.

My final chapter analysed: To what extent is trans as an identity category opened up and scrutinised on *Transparent* and what is the social impact of it for trans communities? I argued that *Transparent* succeeded in scrutinising identity by showcasing extreme gender presentations that exposed gender as a performance and undermined the binary systems of

identification. It was able to unpack the stereotypes and false perceptions about trans identity in relation to trans women which can be largely credited to the presence of more than one trans actress playing a trans character in the show. This allowed for the diversity of the trans experience to be portrayed in which not every trans woman had the desire to surgically transition or conform to the societal expectations of femininity.

However, the social impact of the show was minimised in its inability to commit to the stories of the most marginalised members of the trans community, in particular trans women of colour and trans men. The reception of the trans community to the depiction of Dale was overwhelmingly negative which should be viewed in the context of the historic erasure of trans men on television, thus, causing any depiction to be received with the highest criticism. I argue that the main downfall of the show was the fact it did not continue to increase the representation and characterisation of the trans characters played by trans actors as the seasons progressed. This limited the social impact of the show and prevented it from being a truly ground-breaking cultural moment for trans representation on television.

Transparent should be recognised for its achievement of deconstructing gender to account for the nuances of identity that exists outside of the binary categorisation system. It provided a complex representation of trans experiences in which the characters were humanized, and their identities were scrutinised in order to open up different possibilities of being. Nevertheless, due to the scarce amount of television programmes centring trans characters *Transparent* tried to do too much and crumbled in its attempt to showcase trans stories but appeal them to a mass audience. By doing this, they jeopardised their relationship with the trans community in favour of attempting to educate and market to a straight, white, cisgender audience. I believe *Transparent*'s major social impact is the space it claimed for trans stories in the public sphere that allowed for other shows to push the boundaries further. It put trans issues on the agenda and created a conversation about the need for authentic stories by and for a diverse community of trans people. Since beginning this thesis; the TV show *Pose* has broken new ground in casting trans women of colour in the lead roles (Fasanella, 2018), Scarlett Johansson has stepped down from her role in which she played a trans man (Hicklin, 2018), the first ever transgender actor roundtable took place which amplified trans voices (Variety, 2018), and a letter demanding the inclusion of trans voices in the media was signed by 45 major Hollywood production companies. (Yacka-Bible, 2018). In my opinion, this ongoing attention of trans issues in the media can be considered a result of the social impact of *Transparent* in its achievement of bringing trans issues to the mainstream.

It is important to note that this thesis is a product of my own unique perspective and interpretation of *Transparent* and the results have been influenced by the episodes and characters I chose to analyse. The findings are specific to the TV show, time context, theories and my perspective and if any of these variables were changed the conclusion would likely be different. In using content analysis as my method of inquiry I was only able to include the voices and opinions of trans actors and writers which I recognise is not representative of the diversity of the trans community. If I had chosen to engage directly with trans people by conducting an interview, focus group or survey, I believe the results in regards to the social impact would have been altered significantly and it would have provided a means to determine whether the show is succeeding in representing trans stories.

Nevertheless, the intention of this thesis was to showcase the complexity of identity and the importance of scrutinising gender categorisation to ensure that representations are reflective of the nuances of identity. The binary system is insufficient to understand the variations within identity which is why opening gender up to multiple ways of being can allow for often erased voices to be represented in the mainstream. I believe there is room for further research on this topic in order to determine the tangible result of this representation and to question whether the vast diversity of identity can ever be truly represented within the medium of television wherein the stories are written and created by and for marginalised identities.

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