

AN ANALYSIS OF *TRANSPARENT* THROUGH DISPOSSESSION

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ABSTRACT

Using dispossession as an analytical lens, this essay problematizes the way in which the transgender “coming out” experience is depicted on the Amazon original serial, *Transparent* (2014-). Contextualizing Butler and Anathasiou’s (2013) work

on dispossession within the history of the pathologization of gender expansiveness in the United States of America, this essay argues that *Transparent*’s use of “coming out” rhetoric dispossesses the transgender protagonist, Maura (Jeffrey Tambor), of the very gender autonomy the show has the potential to portray. While *Transparent* undoubtedly increases visibility for gender expansive individuals in the media, and often renders Maura in a sympathetic manner, its pilot season ignores the history of the pathologization of gender expansiveness while often reinforcing “wrong body” rhetoric concerning transgender individuals. *Transparent* depicts Maura as a dynamic character, yet it also depicts her dispossession that results from sociocultural forces and from her own internalized transphobia (cissexism) as a “normal” part of “coming out”. The authors conclude that exposing the transgender dispossession depicted in *Transparent* could disrupt the normality of cisgender privilege to open a critical dialogue about the reification of the gender binary in media.

Everyone around me is trying to tell me that it gets better when you get older, but I gotta wonder how much older do I have to be? (Malice, 2012)

Underscoring the significance of *Transparent* (2014-) in its Network Responsibility Index, GLAAD (formerly the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) reported that 2014 “signified the beginning of a trans ‘media moment’ (...). Public awareness of the transgender community is swiftly on the rise, and more forward thinking programs and networks would be wise to capitalize on that” (2014: 4). While most American portrayals of transgender individuals in news, film, and television vilify, mock, or dismiss them and the significant social issues they face (Jobe, 2013), *Transparent*, an Amazon original televised serial (produced by Jill Soloway) featuring a male to female (MTF) transgender woman, Maura Pfefferman (nee “Mort”) (Jeffrey Tambor), as its protagonist, presents Maura as a complex and nuanced character (Lambe, 2014). Commending this portrayal, *The Rolling Stone* (Grow, 2014) declares the show is “making the world safer for transpeople,” while *The Advocate* (Anderson-Minshall, 2014) dubs the show “television revolution.” *Transparent* has increased visibility for LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual) individuals and underscored the need for a deep exploration of the heterosexism (homophobia) and cissexism (transphobia) that pervade much mainstream American programming (Lee and Meyer, 2010; Manuel, 2009).

For many LGBTQIA individuals and the people who support their struggle for identity affirmation and legal rights, *Transparent* reflects progress and offers proof that the dominant cultural narrative is broadening and expanding by depicting alternative representations of sexuality and gender identity. Concurrently developing during the recent rise in visibility of LGBTQIA characters and themes among television programming, a humanistic discourse in feminist theory has tried to account for the various ways in which the corporeal body is exposed, made vulnerable, and often dispossessed of capital, property, legal rights, and autonomy. This discourse, often called “corporeal humanism”, acknowledges the human experience as one steeped in vulnerability and contingent upon human relations, all the while considering implications of globalization and the imperfection of the human imaginary to conceptualize what it means to be an individual (Bergoffen, 2000; Brown, 2006; Butler, 2004, 2006; Murphy, 2011; Said, 1995). When contextualized through the framework of corporeal humanism, and more specifically, dispossession (Butler &

Athanasίου, 2013), *Transparent* highlights the countless ways in which the transgender individual is continually depicted as a figure of privation, lacking stability, incapable of claiming authenticity or anonymity, and devoid of recognition as comprehensible. *Transparent* underscores the need for a critical reconsideration of media (mis)representations of gender expansive¹ individuals, especially considering the program’s cisgender² discourse of “coming out” and the way in which “coming out” embodies dispossession and (dis)embodies its gender expansive protagonist, Maura.

DISPOSSESSION AS TRANSGENDER “COMING OUT”

In *Dispossession: The Performative and the Political*, Butler and Athanasίου ask readers to consider, “what happens to the language of representation when it encounters the marked corporeality—at once all too represented and radically unrepresentable” (2013:132). Gender expansive people, so regularly defined by and through their bodies, illustrate the “radically unrepresentable”. As their genitals are invariably used to signify their identity, they are dispossessed of the autonomy to name themselves. Butler and Athanasίου (2013) define dispossession as a precarious state that denies one’s readability as a human being worthy of rights. They explain, “It is through stabilizing norms of gender, sexuality, nationality, raciality, able-bodiedness, land and capital ownership that subjects are interpellated to fulfill the conditions of possibility for their appearance to be recognized as human” (Butler and Athanasίου, 2013: 195). The transgender body, as text, is unintelligible in the dominant, cisgender, heteronormative media discourse, which frames it as an anomaly or an aberration and focuses on the physicality of the text, or body (ie one’s Adam’s apple, chest, hairline, voice pitch, etc.). The cisgender reading of the transgender body as seemingly incompatible with the binary, or dominant ideology of gender, leads to a preoccupation, particularly among media representations,

1 For more on the use of the terms “trans*”, “transgender”, and “gender expansiveness”, see Ehrensaft (2011), Battles & Hilton-Morrow (2015), and Gender Spectrum (2016). Believing that the term “gender expansive” captures the positive connotation of an identity marker that challenges the gender binary, the authors use this term throughout this paper while occasionally using “transgender,” the term used on *Transparent*.

2 This term is an adjective marking one whose gender identity remains consistent with their sex assignment at birth. It is an antonym to “transgender”. For more, see Brydum (2015).

with what a transgender individual could conceal and/or lack (ie. phallus, womb, or the capacity to sexually reproduce), especially regarding their genitalia.

According to Gozlan (2011), post-operative transgender individuals, in having no fertile reproductive organs, represent inadequacy or deprivation. Summarizing dispossession, Butler and Athanasiou explain, “being is defined as having; having is constructed as an essential prerequisite of proper human being” (2013: 13). Being in a state of not having what is considered a prerequisite to establish gender identity, the transgender individual is dispossessed of authenticity, often regarded as using “preferred” pronouns, or as a “Frankenstein version of the real thing” (Mandell, 2016). Gozlan calls post-operative genitalia “a reminder of impossibility and meaninglessness, a hole leading to no certain place (...) a sort of leftover of an impossible wish, carrying the mark of the endless desire concealed in the wish” (2011: 50). This dispossession of the transgender body, coupled with the assumption that “coming out” is requisite for the transgender individual, underscores what Butler and Athanasiou call the “conceit” of self-transparency, whereby those whose lives and bodies appear transparent gain greater autonomy and power in society (2013: 14). “Coming out” is often portrayed in media as the means by which one may achieve this autonomy through transparency.

“Coming out” to share atypical sex and/or gender identity markers has recently been popularized by the “It Gets Better Project” (Savage and Terry, 2016), a website dedicated to archiving the “coming out” stories of LGBTQIA individuals and promising people that through “coming out” life dramatically improves³. Despite giving seemingly positive media attention to gender expansive people, this “coming out” rhetoric perfectly illustrates the othering of the transgender body as *something* that requires an announcement or a warning.

To elucidate the dispossession and vulnerability of a transgender character “coming out,” Butler and Athanasiou (2013) analyze *Strella* (P. H. Koutras, 2009), a film about a transgender (MTF) sex worker in 21st century Athens. They call the film’s “coming out” scene “the revelation of the transgender

secret—a scene that plays cinematographically with light and shadows, bodies and specters—de-mythifies and re-mythifies a desire for recognition that lays bare the limits of the representable and the effaceable and defies the elementary structures of kinship intelligibility” (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013: 57). This moment of the transgender “coming out” is precisely what *Transparent* reiterates and reconstructs throughout its pilot season. Aligned with the neoliberal virtues of individualism and exceptionalism (Gill, 1995; Springer, 2012), the show depicts Maura’s gender transition as one that is isolated from the long history (and current state) of systemic prejudice and ideological violence perpetrated, especially by influential mental and medical health professionals, against gender expansive people in the United States and globally. As Wallace and Alexander argue, “Exposing this history has the potential not only to challenge the supposed naturalness of the hetero/homo binary but also to illustrate the basic parameters of moving from a position of marginalized invisibility into a public discourse” (2015:808). The narrative arc of the pathologization of gender expansiveness in America as well as the phrase “coming out” must be considered in order to contextualize Maura’s character within the larger framework of the American “transgender experience” that *Transparent* ignores in its pilot season.

TRANSGENDER DISPOSSESSION THROUGH PATHOLOGIZATION

Created by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 1952, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), has been used as a manual, or “gold standard,” for mental health professionals to create terminology and systems of classification for mental illnesses. Although in 1973 homosexuality was declassified in the DSMII as a mental disturbance (APA, 1973: 44), non-normative sexual desires (such as “transvestic fetishism” and “hypersexuality”) and gender expansiveness continue to be pathologized. According to the first version of the DSM, or DSM-I, homosexuality was defined as a “personality disorder” (APA, 1952: 13), which was lumped under “sexual deviations”⁴. The APA considered “cross dressing” a mental illness comparable to pedophilia and rape.

3 “It does get better, for some people, some of the time. And sometimes, it even gets better all on its own. But things are far more likely to improve for children in crisis if someone makes things better; if change isn’t just something for those bullied teens to look forward to, but something that all of us have the responsibility to create” (Doyle, 2010). “The ‘it gets better’ line is an evocative and hopeful promise, but it announces a dubious progress narrative. The campaign promulgates a homonormative set of instructions that includes urban migration, social mobility, romantic partnerships, and general mimicry of white, Protestant, American heterosexuals” (Kruttsch, 2014).

4 “The diagnosis will specify the type of the pathologic behavior, such as homosexuality, transvestism, pedophilia, fetishism and sexual sadism (including rape, sexual assault, mutilation)” (DSM, 1952, 39).

The pathologization of gender expansiveness led to utter privation for individuals constructing their identity outside of the binary of heteronormativity during the middle of the 20th century⁵. In 2014, the APA developed the term “Gender Dysphoria”⁶ in the DSM-5 to “diagnose” those who seek to transition genders. The DSM-5 has moved away from focusing on one’s personality or sexual identity as being disordered and instead concentrates on the psychological distress one may encounter prior to transitioning. Thus, although the semantics surrounding the “diagnosis” of gender expansiveness have seen a tremendous mutation over time, the mental health community has tenaciously held fast to the belief that every individual should identify as *either male or female*⁷.

This gender policing has led to complex systems and criteria that one must navigate and meet in order to maneuver through the transition process, one that is costly and difficult due to the professional intervention required by the health care industry⁸ as well as the discriminatory practices committed against gender expansive patients by medical professionals and physicians⁹. It is important to note that although

heterosexism and xenophobia are both known contributing factors to the struggles gender expansive people often encounter, neither heterosexism nor xenophobia has been categorized by the APA as a mental or personality disorder.

Thus, it is imperative that the historical trajectory be accounted for when examining the current medical response to, discriminatory practices against, and media representations of gender expansive individuals. “If one examines the historical trajectory of LGBT[QIA] populations in the United States, it is clear that stigma has exerted an enormous and continuing influence on the life and consequently the health status of LGBT[QIA] individuals” (Institute of Medicine, 2011). Gender expansive people face discriminatory practices in settings traditionally known to “do no harm,” and they are often thereby dispossessed of the opportunity to practice self-care¹⁰.

When media depictions of the “transgender experience”¹¹ ignore systemic discrimination against transgender people, the construction of a hatred that was, and is, so pervasive throughout mental health and medical professional communities, they risk reinforcing transgender hatred as being a “normal” cisgender reaction to gender expansiveness. The failure of *Transparent*, in season one, to address the social and political implications of atypical gender performance, especially when characterizing its protagonist as a professor of Political Science, may reflect a mere oversight or, in fact, reveal the how ubiquitous cisgender privilege is in the way that it routinely dispossesses gender expansive individuals.

“COMING OUT” AS DISPOSSESSION IN *TRANSPARENT*

Butler and Athanasiou assert that dispossession can occur through “self-policing guilt and shame” (2013: 55). As Maura prepares herself to “come out” as identifying as female, she expresses her guilt and shame at a support group meeting at the Los Angeles LGBT Center. Maura laments over the time that passes while she does not speak with her children and

5 LGBTQIA Americans were dishonorably discharged from the U.S. military, fired from the federal government under Eisenhower’s executive order 10450 (1953 - 1993), discriminated against in every conceivable manner, and are still often blocked from procuring legal forms of identification (Milan, 2014) and using public restrooms (Ford, 2015).

6 The DSM-III (1980) classified gender expansive people as having “Gender Identity Disorder” or “GID” rather than as being afflicted with “transsexualism.” As opposed to being considered a Personality Disorder, GID was placed in the category of Sexual Disorders.

7 The preferred mode of being in this binary is a state in which one’s sex labeled by a medical doctor at one’s birth remains congruent with one’s gender identity throughout life.

8 According to the World Professional Association for Transgender Health, Inc. (WPATH), formerly, the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, Inc., HBIGDA (2011), people seeking to affirm their gender as one not listed on their birth certificates are required to garner letters of recommendation from mental healthcare providers to change legal identification cards, receive hormone therapy, or undergo sexual reassignment surgery. Mental health clinicians are thus in the position of gatekeeper, with the authority to permit or deny people the experience to live as to they deem appropriate. This is a lucrative process for therapists who recommend a longer, more protracted transition phase.

9 The Institute of Medicine (2011) reports that gender expansive people face protracted opprobrium from physicians, dentists, nurses, pharmacists, and generally all health care practitioners. Most medical insurance providers buttress the ideological stance against transgender patients by “severely limit[ing] transgender people’s access to sex reassignment surgery or other treatments related to transgender status . . . Medicare contain[s] explicit exclusions for such treatments” (Institute of Medicine, 2011). A medical system that refuses to acknowledge the need for gender reassignment procedures thereby relegates all such procedures, and the people who seek to have them, to the frivolous fringes of society.

10 *Findings of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*, (Haas, Rodgers, and Herman, 2014) found that 27% of the study’s participants reported that their physicians had denied them care at least once due to their discomfort in caring for a gender creative individual (12). Additionally, 23% affirmed that they “have postponed or not tried to get needed medical care when [they were] sick or injured because of disrespect or discrimination from doctors or other health care providers” (Haas, et al., 2014, 12).

11 This phrase is often used in media; however, the notion that gender expansive people all share a common narrative or existence is as fictive as any “cisgender experience” would be.

apologizes to the support group for breaking her promise to “come out” (“Pilot” 1.01). Immediately, the power of the cisgender gaze is apparent. According to *Transparent*, cisgender people will have difficulty learning that someone they know is transgender. Moreover, transgender people owe cisgender people an explanation for their transition and must afford cisgender people the time to “process” this change in their reality. This cisgender privilege, resulting from the normalization of the rigid gender binary policed and enforced through various sociopolitical entities, frames Maura’s experience as abnormal, to the extent that she is not cisgender, and dispossesses her of the autonomy to define her gender freely.

Maura must “come out” not merely to live authentically, but to comfort her cisgender family. This “coming out” stimulates within the show’s cisgender characters a quasi-recovery period, during which they grapple with identifying someone else as a different gender¹². Indeed, Soloway’s comment on the matter of her transgender parent’s “coming out” was, “Good thing I have a TV show that I’m writing so that I can process all this stuff” (Grow, 2014). “Coming out” in *Transparent* is an obligatory act performed for cisgender individuals, an act that affords cisgender people the opportunity to wrestle with a change that seems to affect them more than it does the individual in transition.

The phrase “coming out” with its roots in feminism and mental health, highlights the conflation between sexuality and gender and the linkage to mental illness that has historically stigmatized transgender individuals. Repeatedly utilized by the show’s producers, characters, supporters, and critics, “coming out” was borrowed from gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities who coined it during second-wave feminism, which used the phrase to empower women, gays, and lesbians to fight for civil rights through increasing visibility. In recent years, however, the term has been co-opted by mental health professionals employing it to refer to the process by which people with mental illness disclose their statuses to friends and family (Corrigan and Matthew, 2003; Corrigan, Kosyluk, and Rusch, 2013; Moses, 2011; Roe and Davidson, 2005). This new phenomenon is highly problematic for a host of reasons, not the least of which is that it could result in the return to the tightly woven association between being LGBTQIA and being mentally ill, a connection that, because of the pathologization of gender expansive individuals by the APA and medical professionals, was never completely severed.

12 Additionally, Maura’s cisgender relatives must begin to think of Maura as a lesbian, as she remains attracted to women upon transitioning.

In *Transparent*, “coming out” refers to the process through which the lead character, Maura, notifies cisgender friends and family of the intention to gender transition. An inseparable component of this process, as characterized on the show, are the feelings of release, relief, and redemption from an older, inauthentic identity or body. “Coming out” begins for Maura a new manner of relating to and with cisgender family members and friends, and a new process for cisgender family and friends to relate to Maura. It is significant to note that Maura’s family and friends do not view her transition as an opportunity to inquire about the constructed nature of their own gender identities and as to the entitlements they possess resulting from their cisgender identity marker. Instead, much like Soloway (Grow, 2014), they feel they need time to “process” Maura’s gender transition, as if their reaction to, or opinion about, her transition might, or should, have an impact on her gender identity.

Maura first explains her intention to transition when she is surprised by her oldest daughter, Sarah (Amy Landecker). Maura, wearing women’s clothes, walks into her bedroom to discover Sarah (married to husband, Len) and her ex-partner, Tammy (Gillian Vigman) (married to wife, Barb) kissing. Having secretly entered the home when Maura was away, Sarah and Tammy are shocked when Maura finds them in her bedroom. It is significant to note that although this scene features two married women (only one of whom self-identifies as lesbian) kissing, the shock value stems from Sarah’s “father”, legally identified as “Mort”, wearing a floral print dress. Maura’s “coming out”, or “forcing out”, as it were, eclipses the adultery between Sarah and Tammy. Maura is dispossessed of sovereignty in her own home. Maura’s autonomy, represented by her Southern California mansion, is downsized considerably, as she moves into a small apartment in West Hollywood (the stereotypical emblem of all things LGBTQIA). As her former home is invaded, so too is her privacy, and she is forced to unveil what no cisgender person must: a “true” gender identity. Maura’s home becomes a metaphor for the privilege of heterosexual reproductive coupling. As she is dispossessed of a heteronormative gender identity, she dispossesses herself of the home that represents it. This self-dispossession reflects her character’s internalized transphobia, as she moves herself to the fringes of society, literally and metaphorically.

Each episode that follows exposes Maura’s internalized transphobia as her character is conflicted with incongruities, deceptions, and evasions of the “truth” of her gender identity. Her internalized transphobia is portrayed as customary as Maura tries to explain how she felt as a child. As though read-

ing a passage from the DSM-5 on Gender Dysphoria, Maura explains to Sarah:

When I was a kid, ever since I was five,
I felt that something was not right.
And, uh, I couldn't tell anyone about
my feminine side. It was a different time,
you know, a very different time...
and I just, um, I had to keep it all –
all of those feelings to myself

(“The Letting Go”, 1.02)

By describing how she felt as though something were wrong and that the problem emanated from within her and not from others' gender policing, Maura reinscribes the pathologization of gender expansiveness. Further, by acknowledging that she had “gender dysphoria” and hid it, at the early age of five, nonetheless, she reinforces the rhetoric of concealment. To Maura, her “feminine side” was “not right”. This opportunity is a ripe moment for *Transparent* to explore why that was so, indeed, why femininity itself is still often “not right”. Instead, the topic is brushed aside, as though sexism no longer exists, as though the 21st century has ushered in a new era that is all-accepting and gender blind.

When she says she “had” to keep her feelings to herself, Maura alludes to the socio-political forces at work when she was a child, yet allows room for the audience to speculate any number of reasons for her decision not to live according to her sense of authenticity. In fact, Maura did not “decide” to “keep” all of those “feelings” to herself. It is highly probable that influential people in her life actively taught her how to perform her gender and policed her gender performance. Maura's acknowledgement that something was “not right” *with her* reinforces the “wrong body” rhetoric that constitutes the dominant media discourse on transgender issues today. For Maura's daughter, Sarah, the only way in which to understand the transgender “coming out” process is to describe it as the recognition that something is not right. More specifically, she comes to understand that her father's body is not right. This “wrong body” rhetoric epitomizes the dispossession of the transgender individual by the cisgender normative ideology.

When Sarah tells her husband, Len (Rob Huebel), that Maura announced the intention to transition, Len responds with, “So the fuck what. You're dad's always been creepy” (“The Letting Go”, 1.02). While it could be argued that Len's character is functioning as the antagonistic conservative, or

a foil, to highlight Sarah's progressive positionality (she is having an affair with a lesbian), Sarah's response to him only reinforces the gender binary and pathologization of gender expansiveness. She contends, “This is not about being creepy. This is about being in the wrong body. It's like he's hiding. It's like he's been hiding his whole life” (“The Letting Go”, 1.02). Both Len and Sarah laugh frantically throughout their conversation, highlighting, ostensibly, the absurdity of the idea of gender transition, or revealing their nervousness about the subject. Len and Sarah, positioned as cisgender, heterosexually partnered, and sexually reproductive individuals struggling through the pain of infidelity, communicate the dominant ideology of gender identity and illustrate how being transgender is still a greater social transgression being an adulterer. “Wrong body” rhetoric divests gender expansive individuals who believe it from self-determination and ultimately reinforces internalized transphobia.

Ostensibly in the hopes of garnering sympathy for transgender individuals, hegemonic media rhetoric frequently describes them as “trapped in the wrong body”, effectively depriving transgender subjects of the agency to define themselves. As Mock explains, the “trapped in the wrong body” rhetoric:

places me in the role of victim, and to those who take mainstream media depictions as truth I'm seen as a *human to be pitied* because I'm someone who needs to be saved, rather than a self-determined woman with agency and choice and the ability to define who I am in this society and who I will become in spite of it. (2012)

Employing the “wrong body” rhetoric, *Transparent* places the “blame”, albeit in a sympathetic manner, for gender expansiveness squarely on the shoulders of the gender expansive person. Rather than explaining to her daughter (and the audience) how discrimination and abuse was palpable and prevailing during her childhood, Maura expresses her internalized transphobia (a misnomer for cissexism) and normalizes it as something to be confronted during the “coming out” process.

Maura was five-years-old during the civil rights movement, when the APA was actively defining gender expansiveness as a mental illness so abhorrent that people “suffering” from it could be involuntarily institutionalized, “treated” by electro-shock “therapy”, and lobotomized (Blumenfeld, 2015). By ignoring this history of systemic violence, *Transparent* illustrates more in Maura's “coming out” scene about her lack of self-determination than about her liberation, as she seeks

validation (which will never be authentication) from adulterers in her own home.

Maura's dispossession, though epitomized in her "coming out" scene with her daughter Sarah, began when she was a child as she learned how her physical body would cause others to determine her social position and mask the construction of her identity as a "natural" process. As Maura explains the measures she took to "hide" her feminine characteristics out of fear, she illustrates Butler and Athanasiou's concept of dispossession by illustrating how:

our bodies are beyond themselves. Through our bodies we are implicated in thick and intense social processes of relatedness and interdependence; we are exposed, dismembered, given over to others, and undone by the norms that regulate desire, sexual alliance, kinship relations, and conditions of humanness. (2013: 55)

Rather than revealing the human condition as one precariously bound up in social practices and punitive norms for everyone and every body, *Transparent* often mimics tabloid culture, playing into the cisgender fear of gender expansiveness¹³. The pathologization of transgender individuals' gender expression, coupled with their gender "dishonesty", is often normalized as dispossessing them of their families.

In the second episode of *Transparent*, "The Letting Go" (1.02) Maura befriends Davina (Alexandra Billings), a transgender woman working at the Los Angeles LGBT Center, who becomes a mentor figure to Maura, offering lessons on how to walk in heels and how to sit while wearing a dress¹⁴. Davina explains that, prior to her own transition, a good friend of hers said, "In five years, you're going to look up, and not one of your family members is still going to be there –not one"... When Maura asks whether Davina's friend was correct, Davina says she indeed was. Consequently, *Transparent* portrays the transgender figure as one in a double bind –a person known by all, with no hope or ability to regain anonymity after transitioning,

13 See the Jenner media spectacle for more on how this fear is exploited and promulgated. As *People* magazine (Tauber, 2015) put it, "[Jenner] shared a deeply personal truth [Jenner] has been hiding for more than 50 years: [she] is transgender" (53). By describing Jenner as "hiding", media outlets effectively frame Jenner as a stealthy person to be feared.

14 This gender policing, as evidenced through Davina's gender coaching, is also normalized. Maura cannot merely feel like a woman and live legally as one. She must perfect her performance, especially among other transgender women, if she wants to "pass" as cisgender.

yet, dispossessed of the kinship relations which so often serve to protect and insulate individuals from social castigation.

Exploring this double bind of gender expansiveness, Halberstam explains "Eccentric, double, duplicitous, deceptive, odd, self-hating: all of these judgments swirl around the passing woman, the crossdresser, the nonoperative transsexual, the self-defined transgender person, as if other lives –gender normative live– were not odd, not duplicitous, not doubled, and contradictory at every turn" (2005: 57-58). Showing her resignation to the probable trajectory of her own "coming out" narrative, Maura replies to Davina with, "How sad". Again, *Transparent* is faced with a teachable moment, a scene in which Davina could educate Maura (and the audience) about the validity of friendship bonds and queer family constructions, yet the moment is merely used to mourn Davina's loss of her blood relatives as though this loss, too, is a "normal" part of the transgender "coming out" process. Davina's casualness and Maura's resignation during this scene substantiate the "abnormality" of the transgender individual.

As Maura ponders how her own "coming out" narrative will develop compared to Davina's, it is no wonder that she fails time and again to disclose her status as transgender. Her fear of familial rejection silences her while her repeated failure to "come out" to her family reinforces the perceived inauthenticity of her identity. *Transparent* accurately depicts the fear that many gender expansive people experience as they choose to disclose to family members; however, this fear seems to emanate from within Maura and highlight her possible lack of resolve to transition, rather than to be founded in a legitimate concern for her own physical and emotional safety. Moreover, Maura's reflections on these moments of failure frame her as an incompetent character, one who not only disappoints herself with her perceived weakness illustrated by her procrastination in "coming out" but also as one who later disappoints her family by being transgender.

Maura apologizes to her support group, saying "I made a commitment here last week that I was going to come out to my kids and I didn't do it. It just wasn't time" ("The Letting Go", 1.02). On the day Maura plans to disclose to her son, Josh (Jay Duplass), she changes from women's into men's clothing, fearing that Josh would be overwhelmed by seeing her in women's clothing. Once wearing the men's clothing, however, Maura finds it easier to play the role of "Mort" for her son, even though the scent of women's perfume lingers on her neck. Smelling the perfume, Josh assumes "Mort" to be "playing the field", an inference that Maura neither confirms nor denies. This scene sympathetically depicts the courage

it would require for a parent to ask their child to recognize them as a different gender; however, this “courage” is only necessary because of the rigid binary gender system so strictly enforced through social codes and norms, codes and norms that the show’s characters do not interrogate, especially in season one¹⁵. Maura’s lack of determination to confront Josh indicates that her gender identity is something she can seemingly hide, as opposed to Josh’s gender, which appears “natural”. This only reinforces the stereotype of the transgender individual as deceitful. By refusing to deny that she was “playing the field”, Maura sets her son up to see her as fraudulent once she does “come out” to him.

While explaining the situation with her son to her support group, Maura claims that she wants to make her transition process as easy as possible for Josh, a young man who struggles to maintain healthy relationships with women. Again, the importance of heterosexual coupling among cisgender characters is emphasized and takes primacy over Maura’s needs. In addition to using her son as an excuse to postpone “coming out”, Maura claims that because her youngest daughter, Ali (Gaby Hoffman), is having difficulty finding her own stable identity, the timing is bad. Trying to protect her adult children from the discomfort she assumes they will experience through her “coming out” Maura postpones her own transition. She effectually suspends herself in an identity liminality—being neither male nor female, neither “Mort” nor Maura—only on the brink of becoming an intelligible corporeal body.

During this liminal period, Maura only wears women’s clothing when completely alone and when attending support meetings. The viewer is taught that “coming out” is a prerequisite for Maura to have an identity. Further, any additionally desired efforts to express her feminine gender identity (trachea shaving, electrolysis, hormone therapy, etc.) are to be suspended until Maura’s family has “processed” with her “coming out”. Accordingly, there can be no true identity felt by Maura unless she has her transgender identity known, validated, and affirmed (or rejected) by her cisgender friends and family. “Coming out” for Maura, according to *Transparent*, involves a giving up of everything that once defined her as a person. She retires, changes addresses, changes clothes, and prepares herself for the seemingly inevitable loss of kinship bonds.

While speaking to Sarah about what she knows of transgender people of the past, Maura says, “People led secret

lives. And people led very lonely lives, and then of course the internet was invented” (“The Letting Go”, 1.02). Dispossessed of any authority over her identity, Maura seems to have been held hostage by her body, which is read as male by society. Yet, *Transparent* portrays her as not completely innocent; instead, the show consistently marks her as having been complicit to a degree by “hiding” her “true” gender identity (as if there is such a concept) since she was five. Moreover, she led a secret life, visiting transvestite camps and bars in the 1970s and 1980s, and purchasing women’s clothes to surreptitiously stroke while in her office on her university campus. When *Transparent* allows Maura to claim that the internet was the solution to her years of suffering, the show discounts the decades of gender activism in America and pretends, as does the “It Gets Better” movement, that time, technology, and visibility alone unfetter the rigid constraints of the gender binary.

DISPOSSESSION AS DISIMPRISONMENT

The rhetoric of *Transparent* highlights the lack of ownership, the total dispossession of autonomy (and anatomy), that the transgender person must seemingly acknowledge in order to “come out” to be recognized as a “normal” person; however, what it fails to emphasize is how everyone, regardless of gender identity, is dispossessed of the right to create an authentic sense of selfhood. We are only and always interpreted through, reacting to, and defined according to the gaze of others. As Athanasiou writes, “We are dispossessed by others, affected by others and able to affect others. We are dispossessed by norms, prohibitions, self-policing guilt, and shame, but also by love and desire” (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 55). A close analysis of Maura’s “coming out” reveals how, far from being a liberating act for Maura, one that enables her to own her body and possess a greater level of autonomy, “coming out” actually serves to make the world a safer place for cisgender individuals, individuals who see their process of “coming to terms with” a gender transition as superseding any needs or desires of the individual who transitions. Further, the show never tasks cisgender characters or viewers to defend why they perceive their gender identity to be congruent with their gender assignment at birth. “Coming out”, and the dispossessing process it entails is seen as a process for gender expansive individuals simply because they chafe against the implicit ideology of the heteronormative gender binary.

Transparent depicts “coming out” as a social requirement, one that Maura is contractually obligated to perform if she is

¹⁵ While Maura’s youngest daughter, Ali (Gaby Hoffman), seems to challenge gender roles, her promiscuity, drug use, and general capriciousness only support the stereotype that a gender expansive person may, as Maura describes Ali, “just not be able to land” (“The Letting Go”, 9.26).

to attain recognition as a human being, not as an “it” (which a cisgender woman calls her in a women’s restroom). In *Violence*, Žižek describes the hidden brutality of seemingly benign social habits, particularly those through which “we are effectively obliged to do something, but [we] have to pretend that we are doing it as a free choice” (2008: 158). Maura must act as though she freely discloses her transition status, when in reality, she is obligated to do so because of a tightly knit, unnamed, obligatory set of social regulations that demands people operating outside of the fringes of normality to announce their difference in order to be accepted or rejected by the cisgender gaze¹⁶. This underscores Butler’s notion of the reflexive processes involved in crafting oneself. Butler explains:

So much depends on how we understand the ‘I’ who crafts herself, since it will not be a fully agentic subject who initiates the crafting. It will be an ‘I’ who is already crafted, but also who is compelled to craft again her crafted condition. In this way, we might think of the ‘I’ as an interval or relay in an ongoing process of social crafting – surely dispossessed of the status of an originating power. (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013:70)

Interpreted through Butler and Athanasiou’s lens of dispossession, “coming out” in *Transparent* highlights the ways in which we define (or are coerced to define) ourselves through the gaze of others. It follows, then, that if the “I” who was already crafted through ongoing social processes of definition undergoes a gender transition, it is through the very people who once incorrectly crafted one’s identity that one must stimulate the revision process.

The cisgender (and largely heterosexist) individuals who commend Maura for her bravery in transitioning are the ones who originally made her “Mort”. Yet, instead of using Maura’s transition as an opportunity to take a critical inventory of what they consider to be “natural truths”, the characters use it as the impetus to admit to having affairs, engaging in promiscuity, creating unwanted pregnancies, and abusing drugs. According to the show’s summary on Amazon, *Transparent* is about “An LA family with serious boundary issues [who] have

their past and future unravel when a dramatic admission causes everyone’s secrets to spill out” (2016). Maura does not declare, announce, or even share her intention to transition. Rather, she admits it as one would a crime or transgression. *Transparent* seems to suggest that “anything goes” once a family accepts transgender people into their lives with open arms.

Dispossession need not be synonymous with the abnegation of autonomy, or with the acquiescence of a social infraction. On the contrary, Butler and Athanasiou seek to find a way in which the dispossessed, or “non-normative subjects, lives, and intimate ties could be legally, culturally, and affectively recognized [and] also lived beyond the normative propriety and exclusionary proprietariness that govern the operations of liberal recognition” (2013: 83). *Transparent* can offer a mode of representation envisioning how subjects existing outside of normative confines can thrive, not only despite, but indeed *because* of their dispossession. Media depictions of gender expansive individuals may offer cisgender audiences a means by which to examine all the ways in which they themselves are dispossessed by gender and thereby reveal how cisgender “privilege” is, in many ways, a misnomer.

Living under the veil of normality not only privileges cisgender individuals by virtue of offering them a cloak of anonymity, but that very normality also disadvantages them by obscuring the complexity of the construct we call gender identity. In a sense, never having to think about gender means never experiencing the self-poiesis “in which the self acts upon the terms of its formation precisely in order to open in some way to a sociality that exceeds (and possibly precedes) social regulation” (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013: 69-70). In this way, transgender dispossession can function as an ideological emancipation from gender. This reading of *Transparent*, however, depends upon the viewer’s ability to perform an “oppositional decoding” (Hall, 1980). While contemporary programs may have increased the visibility of gender expansive individuals, they have done so predominantly through exoticizing and/or denigrating them. “Each side of this inequity dehumanizes trans people because the elevation of their transgressive bodies to a ‘superior’ position is a fictive projection, and the degeneration of their bodies into threatening ‘inferior’ categories can diminish or erase their claim to humanity” (Shelley, 2009: 388). Emphasizing not Maura’s process of experiencing her gender, but rather her process of “coming out” to and comforting her cisgender family and acquaintances, *Transparent* positions Maura as vying for recognition as human. She desperately seeks cisgender recognition, and cisgender recognition of transgender individuals inherently dispossess transgen-

16 According to Battles and Hilton-Morrrows, LGBTQIA media representation is important for showing LGBTQIA people that they exist and that they matter, and for exposing non-LGBTQIA people to LGBTQIA issues. Battles and Hilton-Morrrows (2015) explain that the cisgender gaze, the dominant perspective through which media narratives are told, is “powerful and disciplining” and often treats the transgender body as a “spectacle” (2015:240).

der individuals of self agency, as they must accede to medical and mental pathologization, “wrong body” rhetoric, social castigation, and alienation as they “come out”.

When analyzed through the framework of dispossession, *Transparent* offers a foray into gender performance that can be used to interrupt the hegemonic forces of cissexism and heterosexism. Yet, media representation and increased visibility does not necessarily reflect social progress. Kessler reminds us that, “In many ways we [LGBTQIA people] are now as disproportionately represented as the straight folks” (2011: 9). Incongruent with the gender binary, transgender bodies have long been sensationalized in the media for their difference; however, if we acknowledge that our bodies are constructed outside of ourselves by linguistic, social, legal, and political regulatory practices, then we may reveal how these practices enact a certain degree of dispossession on us all – and this dispossession may indeed emancipate us from the ideological confines gender. While *Transparent* depicts Maura as a dynamic character, it also depicts her dispossession that results from sociocultural forces and from her own internalized transphobia (cissexism) as a “normal” part of “coming out”. Exposing transgender dispossession in *Transparent* could disrupt the normality of cisgender privilege to open a critical dialogue about the reification of the gender binary in media.

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