CHAPTER 4


by Joshua Louis Moss

It’s like phallus is to crucifix as vagina is to Holocaust.
— Ali Pfefferman (Season 2 of Transparent)

After winning the 2015 Golden Globe for Best Television Series, Musical or Comedy, and Best Performance by an Actor in a Television Series—Comedy or Musical, Transparent (2014–) creator Jill Soloway and star Jeffrey Tambor both profusely thanked the transgender community for their support (Riley 1). An emotional Tambor even made sure to credit Rhys Ernst, Zackary Drucker, and Jenny Boylan, three of the show’s transgender consultants, as essential elements of the production team. The show’s unapologetic exploration of fluid gender and sexual identities focused on the late-life decision by retired professor and family patriarch Mort Pfefferman (Tambor) to begin to live her life as Maura, an openly transsexual woman. Various plotlines followed Maura’s transition and explored the ramifications taking place with her ex-wife and three adult children. The innovative semi-comedic tone and experimental form not only produced a landmark in transgender visibility on television but also established Amazon Studios as a viable producer of quality television. Yet rather than referring to the creative process or taking credit for their work on the show, both Soloway and Tambor
spent the majority of their Golden Globe speeches transferring credit to the marginalized status and struggles of transgender and transsexual communities. Soloway even concluded by dedicating her award to the memory of Leelah Alcorn, a young transgender woman that had recently committed suicide.

As Soloway and Tambor’s speeches made clear, *Transparent’s* critical success was directly tied to its role in breaking the taboo on transgender representations on television. In a profile in the *New York Times* in advance of season two, *Transparent* was praised for breaking new ground by visualizing previously marginalized gender identities without resorting to clichés or stereotypes (Rochlin 9). Similarly, in the *Los Angeles Times*, Tre’vell Anderson praised *Transparent* as part of an overdue Hollywood corrective taking place across film and television (Anderson 10, 20). Culture critic Wesley Morris went even further, championing *Transparent* as the most visible example of a “galactic conjuring of female energy,” aligned with shows such as *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–), *Being Mary Jane* (2013–), *Broad City* (2014–), *Inside Amy Schumer* (2013–), and films such as Todd Hayne’s *Carol* (2015) (11). Morris argued that *Transparent* was at the center of a pop culture movement that had launched a national discussion on gender and sexuality through the previously unseen female gaze (Morris 11). Soloway agreed with Morris, stating in an interview with *Ms. Magazine* that the show was attempting to subvert the male gaze in an effort to free storytelling from “the straight white cis male paradigm” (Kamen 1).

Remarkably, outside of Jewish publications such as *The Forward* and *Tablet*, the importance of the Jewishness of the Pfefferman family was left nearly completely out of this debate (Cohen; Ivry). The rhetoric of gender advancement credited to the show is understood as independent of any Jewish subject matter. Todd VanDerWerff’s gushing tribute in *Vox*, “*Transparent* Season 2 is the Best TV Show of the Year,” analyzes the show’s link between the epic sweep of historical events and the individual narrative without once mentioning the word “Jew” or “Jewish.” A tribute by Sonia Saraiya in *Salon* credits *Transparent* with developing the female gaze by building on the nuanced work of shows such as *Mad Men* (2006–14). But despite an extensive examination of how season two engages Weimar-era Berlin’s rising Nazi threat as the origins of the Pfefferman diaspora, the article does not mention Jewishness as an important distinction (VanDerWerff 1). When Jewishness is mentioned, such as in Emily Nussbaum’s *New Yorker* article, “Inside Out: The Emotional Acrobatics of *Transparent*,” it is positioned only as the means to extend the specificity of historical Jewish trauma into a queer space (Nussbaum 2). In these readings,
The Jewishness of the Pfeffermans is simply biographical detail. It provides a lens to explore what the reviewers regard as the show’s real innovation, the introduction of complex transgender characters within mainstream television entertainment.

This rhetorical absence is striking. Not only because of the indelible historical link between Jewish activism and gender rights movements, but also because Jewish subject matter and motifs are so visible and centralized throughout the first two seasons. Numerous episodes are titled and structured around Jewish subjects such as sitting shiva (“Why Do We Cover the Mirrors?” season 1, episode 10), Talmudic metaphors (“The Wilderness,” season 1, episode 6 and “Symbolic Exemplar,” season 1, episode 7), Jewish weddings (“Kina Hora,” season 2, episode 1) and attending synagogue services on the High Holidays (“The Book of Life,” season 2, episode 7). Maura’s son, Josh Pfefferman, begins an unlikely love affair and engagement to Raquel, one of the rabbis at a Conservative synagogue. Season 2’s flashbacks to Weimar-era Berlin focus even more explicitly on the connection between libertine sexual exploration, European Jewish radicalism, and the reactionary backlash against both that the Nazis represented.

Soloway herself has repeatedly referenced the importance of Jewishness to the show. She has described it as “religious programming,” discussed the importance of her Jewish background in formulating the show, and repeatedly emphasized the important connection of the Jewish diaspora to gender fluid visibility in the twentieth century (Clark and Zaritt 1). The Jewish-transgender link was also celebrated throughout Season 2’s marketing campaign. One prominent billboard campaign featured the slogan “Seduce Your Rabbi!” as a Jewish joke on the taboo sexuality featured in the show. Another print campaign prominently featured in the New York Times, among many other publications, depicted the entire Pfefferman family posing in a Last Supper configuration in a deli booth with latkes, pickles, and pastrami sandwiches spread in front of them (New York Times, 6 Dec. 2015). The subversion of Christian iconography through the Pfeffermans’ overt Jewishness operated as comedic incongruity, a metaphor for the usurpation of gender norms exemplified by Maura and her children.

The centrality of Jewishness to Transparent cannot simply be dismissed as biographical narrative filler. The queer-Jewish connection is the overlooked technique that allows Transparent to successfully problematize transgender identity through the familiar tropes of sitcom. The Jewishness of the Pfeffermans plays a critical role in the successful integration of gender and genre fluidity within the text. It produces, and then subverts, established comedic clichés. In
invoking the familiar (wacky TV Jews) to examine previously unseen screen subject matter (complex gender fluidity without obvious resolution), the show produces an uncanny tension between form and representation that echoes its thematic engagement with the fluidity of problematic concepts such as diaspora and queerness. Transgender identity becomes safer when performed by screen Jews, the privileged avatars of historical televisual transgression. Transparent's groundbreaking experimentations with form and subject matter required a familiar, already “deviant,” framing. Given the history of popular American film and television, it should be no surprise that that agent was the unruly, comedic Jew.³

TRANSCOMEDY AND TRANSSEXUALITY
The comedic-neurotic Jewishness of the five immediate members of the Pfefferman family follows six decades of established sitcom tradition. Creator Jill Soloway based Transparent on her father’s real-life experiences transitioning into living openly as a woman. This art-into-life polysemy harks back to classic early sitcoms that featured real-life couples and families, such as The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show (1950–58) and The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet (1952–66). Although Transparent has no laugh track, features magic realist and surrealistic forays, and intersperses broad comedy with melodrama and pathos, the show returns over and over to its sitcom origins. Set pieces such as family culture clash (“Mee-Maw,” season 2, episode 5), ruined family dinners (“Why Do We Cover The Mirrors?” season 1, episode 10; “The Book of Life,” season 2, episode 7), and embarrassing meltdowns in front of large crowds (“Kina Hora,” season 2, episode 1; “Cherry Blossums,” season 2, episode 4) are straight out of the established tropes of situation comedy form.

The impact of the transgender journey of Mort into openly living as Maura, or Moppa to her children, serves as the program’s central narrative spine. But despite this gender-bending premise and the complex and deft development of Maura’s character in Season 1, she also follows established, family sitcom patriarch/matriarch tropes. Season 1 establishes Mort/Maura as an ironic twist on Father Knows Best (1954–62), a patriarch-turned-matriarch with a better understanding of gender fluidity than her clueless, befuddled children. But Season 2 undermines this through increasingly comedic self-effacement. Maura struggles with her new identity, often falling back on her established
patriarchal status when confronted or in trouble. These comedic sequences suggest the familiar sitcom parent comically out of touch both with her children's needs and the contemporary pop culture landscape she clings to. While the show takes great pains not to reduce Maura to a comedic stereotype, her journey is also not idealized or romanticized. Her residual masculine privilege eventually becomes, in season two, the central character flaw mined for comedy in classic sitcom tradition. She resembles a diverse series of sitcom protagonists including Ralph Kramden (Jackie Gleason) in *The Honeymooners* (1955–56), Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy* (1951–57), Archie Bunker (Carol O’Connor) in *All in the Family* (1971–81), the crotchety Costanza parents (Estelle Warner and Jerry Stiller) in *Seinfeld* (1990–98), and Jay Pritchett (Ed O’Neill) in *Modern Family* (2009–).

One of the central techniques of *Transparent’s* sitcom identification locates in the incongruity between Mort’s already flawed, neurotic Jewish masculinity and Maura’s efforts to reject that history once she has fully transitioned. Mort/Maura’s problematic inability to fully transition is an example of what Lee Edelman describes as the heterosexual gender binarism that remains at work in most queer formulations (207). In Edelman’s understanding, the heterosexual male can safely masquerade as a female because the very boldness of this choice reinforces a variation of hetero-masculine confidence. To address this problematic, the show focuses on the Jewishness of Maura and, by extension, the other Pfeffermans. Maura’s ex-wife, Shelly (Judith Light), a Yiddish-cracking Jewish mother, is an even more identifiable sitcom stereotype. She exemplifies the archetype of the Jewish matriarch, a mix of the folksy Yiddishe Mama wisdom of Molly Berg (Gertrude Berg) on *The Goldbergs* (1949–57) with the abrasive sarcasm of Silvia Fine (Renee Taylor) on *The Nanny* (1993–99). But Maura and Shelly are not stable sitcom stereotypes. They are presented as confounding mixes of contradictions and confusion. They are at times savvy elders. At other times they are embarrassingly inadequate parent figures. They offer updated versions of six decades of sitcom patriarchs and matriarchs. But these clichés are presented as fractured and incomplete. The sitcom archetypes that they both evoke and subvert exist as unstable genre signifiers. Just as Mort transitions uneasily into Maura, *Transparent* transitions uneasily between comedic and dramatic forms.

The archetype of comedic-neurotic Jewishness is central to this thematic link between destabilized gender and genre. The adult Pfefferman children, the eldest, Sarah (Amy Landecker), the middle child, Josh (Jay Duplass) and the youngest, Ali (Gaby Hoffman), are next-generation urban Jewish characters
straight out of this heyday of urban Jewish visibility in the 1990s sitcom. But, as Vincent Brook has shown, visible Jewishness in 1990s-era situation comedies was a complex mix of ethnic otherness and assimilated whiteness that reflected an emphasis on pluralist multiculturalism (16–20). The Jewishness and sexual confusion of the Pfefferman children resurrect and reproduce this ambiguity between visible difference and polyglot inclusion. Each is triggered by Maura’s transition to reevaluate their connections between love, intimacy, sexuality, and gender identity. Sarah’s relationship and divorce from Len (Rob Huebel) and aborted wedding to Tammy (Melora Hardin) follow comedic Christian-Jewish weddings from *Rhoda* (1974–78) to *Will and Grace* (1998–2004). Jay’s romance, engagement, failed pregnancy, and breakup with Rabbi Raquel (Kathryn Hann) come across as updated variations of the intense comedic banter between Paul (Paul Reiser) and Jamie (Helen Hunt) on *Mad About You* (1992–99). Ali’s childlike refusal to commit to a career and cruel indifference to her worshipping friend-turned-lover Sydney Feldman (Carrie Brownstein) recalls the immature, narcissistic single life as depicted on *Seinfeld* (1990–98) and *Friends* (1994–2004). The transgressive sexual subject matter of *Transparent* is given breathability due to these familiar Jewish sitcom set pieces and archetypes.

*Transparent* relies on, but also subverts and fractures these familiar sitcom elements. Following the experimentations of innovative quasi-sitcoms such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (HBO, 2000–11), *Louie* (FX, 2010–) and *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013) episodes break away from comedic genre traditions to blend pathos and melodrama with formal experimentation. Languid pacing and elliptical cutting repeatedly blur or disrupt coherent screen time and environment. Scenes that begin as comedic set pieces often transition into dreamlike theatricality or thematic cross cutting. These deviations from conventional sitcom expectations become an extension of both characters and subject matter. They produce a hybrid show that ultimately and uneasily situates between comedy and drama. One of the show’s writers, Cate Haight, described how Soloway likes to refer to this tense form of humor with the term, “funcomfortable” (Thurm). Soloway’s neologism is important. It appears to identify incomplete, semi-humor as an intentionally transgressive comedy technique. In keeping with experimental sitcoms in the quality television era, “funcomfortable” humor accompanies *Transparent’s* break from both normative comedy and sitcom genre traditions.

Fragmented, transgressive humor in contemporary global media is a concept that I have previously defined as “transcomedy” (Moss 2–4).
Transcomedy is intentionally unresolved humor fragments that emerge as both a reaction and a response to the circulations and collisions of transnational media across both spatial and imagined borders. Transcomedy produces comedic incongruity not in the catharsis of resolution but in the tension state of the unresolved, half-formed joke. This visualizes conflicting constructions of power and marginalization at work within presumptively singular or cohesive media artifacts. It does this by removing, and therefore critiquing, the presumption that all humor has a dominant (singular) reading strategy. The audience waits for a clear comedic catharsis that never arrives. The lack of comedic catharsis becomes its own joke, a representation of what Frantz Fanon describes as the fractured duplicity of the postcolonial subject (169–171). In post-Fanonian postcolonial theory, the marginalized figure can never fully congeal within the dominant ideological framework in which they reside. Transcomedy exemplifies this paradox. It produces humor when the spectator recognizes fracture as an irreducible form. The joke is that the joke, much like the subaltern, marginalized figure, can never fully resolve.

The “funcomfortable” humor technique on Transparent exemplifies transcomedy. The comedic fumbling, narcissism, and myopia of the Pfeffermans at first appears to mimic the dysfunctional family paradigm of sitcom tradition. But laughing at the Pfeffermans as they explore various queer and transgender identities is also potentially an act of cruelty. This destabilization of whether it is okay to laugh at the everyday foibles of queer, taboo, and transgressive gender and sexual formulations destabilizes the good/evil binaries inherent to social problem entertainment. It also challenges established sitcom tropes. The lens of marginalization removes clear comedic context. It remains unclear whether Maura and her family are the subject of comedic catharsis. They operate as wandering comedic signifiers, fractured exemplars of both Jewish and sitcom identities that oscillate uneasily between comedic and dramatic states. Yet this oscillation is critical. It allows Transparent to expand its musings on fluid identity beyond the text and into the show’s themes of transgression and allusionism to sitcom past.

Transparent establishes this link between genre disruption and gender fluidity in the pilot episode (“Pilot”). The episode follows two simultaneous transitions as parallel intergenerational narratives. Mort Pfefferman makes the determination that after years of secretly living as transgender, he will now begin to openly transition to a female identity. At the same time, Mort’s oldest daughter, Sarah, is coming to terms with the fact that not only that she is cheating on her husband with Tammy, her college girlfriend (Gillian Vigman
in the pilot, Melora Hardin in the series), but may actually be falling in love with her. As a mother of two, Sarah is transitioning from heterosexual suburban marriage into a new LGBT identity. The pilot ends at the moment both father and daughter discovers the other’s hidden identity. This comedic set piece, the mutual revelation as both narrative and comedic catharsis, could easily be at home in an episode of *Friends* or *Seinfeld*. Except that *Transparent* problematizes humor in the exchange. The conclusion remains uneasy, both semi-comedic and semi-tragic.

The next four episodes of season one (“The Letting Go,” “Rollin,” “Moppa,” and “Wedge”) are primarily character and plot specific. They focus on Mort’s transition into Maura, and how, to varying degrees, it is received by and subsequently affects his ex-wife and three children. In episode six, “The Wilderness,” *Transparent* begins to introduce the entangled history of twentieth century Jewish visibility and sexual transgression in both Europe and the United States. Josh, a successful record producer, emotionally immature man-child, and mostly disconnected Jew, decides to seek help for his distraught state over his father’s transformation by consulting a young female rabbi, Raquel. Ali begins her emotional investigation of issues dredged up by Maura by going back to college and eventually pursuing a graduate degree in gender studies. Both institutions, the synagogue and the academy, offer Jewish traces for the Pfefferman children to unearth the source of the emotional struggles experienced by their patriarch-turning-matriarch. Both intellectual/spiritual pursuits quickly transition into romantic ones. Josh begins to date Raquel. Ali begins a flirtatious relationship with one of the teaching assistants in the gender studies program, Sydney.

Episodes 7 (“Symbolic Exemplar”) and 8 (“The Wilderness”) bring Jewish themes to the center of this interplay between intellectual, spiritual, and erotic drives. Josh’s romance and seduction of Rabbi Raquel and Ali’s journey into queer academia are both acts of intergenerational Jewish diaspora disconnected from its past. Josh’s erotic fixation on Raquel is tied both to her Jewishness and his panic at his father’s transition from male to female. The erotic-traumatic link is made clear when Raquel visits Josh early in their courtship and he encourages her to put on her *kippah* (skull cap) because it turns him on sexually. When Josh accidentally impregnates Raquel, he learns of the news as both sit in an empty *mikvah*, the ritual Jewish purification bath reserved for orthodox women. The empty *mikvah* externalizes the incomplete Jewishness both are experiencing. As *The Forward* points out, Josh interrupts Raquel as she is preparing to read the Torah portion “Bemidbar,” or “The
Wilderness,” also the title of the episode (Cohen). The Torah portion refers to how God came to Moses in the wilderness and spoke to him of those that would gain entrance into the Promised Land. Josh and Raquel are framed as wandering diaspora searching for meaning through romantic and sexual desire. But this sublimation of inherited trauma is alienation redirected into the erotic/sexual realm.

The tenth episode of season one concludes this thematic link between Jewishness and the broken family unit in “Why Do We Cover the Mirrors?” After the death of Ed, Shelly’s second husband, the Pfeffermans prepare to sit Shiva, a Jewish mourning ritual. The various broken relationships of each Pfefferman children converge as they gather around the proverbial family dinner table. Raquel refuses to continue her relationship with Josh. Ali struggles with her desires for Sydney. Sarah considers leaving Tammy and returning to her husband. Another facet of the fractured Jewishness of the Pfeffermans emerges in the form of Colton (Alex MacNicoll), a teenage evangelical Christian who is revealed to be Josh’s previously unknown son from his teenage affair with his mid-twenties former babysitter, Rita (Brett Paesel), seventeen years earlier. Rita gave the child up for adoption, something the Pfeffermans purportedly did not know about. A family in Overland Park, Kansas, raised him, but Colton was determined to meet his biological parents and locates Josh.

The devoutly Christian Colton enters the Pfefferman family as a classic sitcom incongruity. He serves as an ironic physiognomic contrast, a conventionally masculine American opposite to both Maura’s transgender identity and Josh’s Jewish nebbish. In the final sequence of the episode, Colton joins the Pfeffermans when they sit down to a Shiva meal of bagels and lox. Colton wears a cross around his neck. He is tall, with short hair and striking blue eyes. He signifies normativity as its own form of intervention and transgression, an abstract, noble Christian purity entering the neurotic, self-contained world of the Jewish Pfeffermans. Colton is a haunting specter, the product of Josh’s illicit teenage sexual experiences at the hands of his babysitter while his indifferent parents were focused on their own lives and issues. Yet Colton is also there to forgive them for their sins. As an embodiment of heterosexual Christian purity entering a Jewish Shiva meal, Colton contrasts with but also reveals the Jewish-queer link at work through multiple generations of Pfeffermans.
TRANSETHNICITY

The first episode of season two ("Kina Hora") solidified this link between gender fluidity and the crisis of Jewish identity in the Pfefferman clan. The title of the episode, “Kina Hora,” is a Jewish expression that warns one not to brag about good fortune lest that good fortune turn bad. The episode begins as one of good fortune for the Pfefferman family attending the beautiful wedding of Sarah and her fiancée Tammy Cashman (Melora Hardin) at a lavish reception in Palm Springs. The joyous embrace of Sarah and Tammy’s families serve as an idyllic introduction in which gay marriage rights, thanks to Obergefell v. Hodges, finally have been achieved. No social, moral, or cultural obstacles, at least in Southern California, exist to prevent the legal union of Sarah and Tammy. Yet, as the episode title suggests, the crime of hubris soon leads to disaster. The insurmountable obstacle to the marriage of Tammy and Sarah is not simply Sarah’s incomplete acceptance of her lesbianism/bisexuality. It is also compounded by the incompatible WASP/Jewish interplay of the two families.

This incompatibility is established in the episode’s opening shot, a nearly four minute long take in which the neurotic Pfeffermans are asked to pose for the wedding photographer. The dysfunctional nature of the family is revealed as they banter and struggle to pose with varying degrees of frustration, narcissism, and confusion. The increasingly frustrated photographer struggles to focus the Pfefferman family long enough to smile for the picture. The photographer starts by asking them to say “Sydney Loo,” a confusing request that none of the Pfeffermans understand. Shelly responds with the tart, “How about a Jewish reference?” The apparently non-Jewish photographer responds by requesting they shout out, “I want a little wine.” Shelly’s response, “That’s a little antisemitic,” inspires the frustrated photographer to conclude by requesting they all just say “Happy Hanukah!” The Pfeffermans quickly give up and walk away in different directions. The Cashman family, filled with smiling people, then enters to pose for their family photograph. The contrast is striking. The joke of the sequence is clear. Even as prohibitions on gay marriage give way to new freedoms, other cultural conflicts remain.

Transparent’s deployment of WASP/Jewish wedding conflict solidified the show’s link between genre traditions and gender transgression. The wedding plays out as a disjointed, dream-like sequence in which the calm, blonde-haired, blue-eyed Tammy stares blissfully into the camera, while Sarah experiences panic, fear, and crisis. These feelings are amplified when she witnesses Tammy perform the “traditional father-daughter dance” with her gender normative, Anglo-Saxon father at the reception. The camera lingers on
Sarah as she watches Tammy dance with her father. Sarah then turns and looks at her “Moppa,” Maura. Much of the humor of the sequence locates in Sarah seeing her father-turned-mother not through her own eyes but through that of the Christian-normative gaze. The contrast between Tammy’s masculine square-jawed, silver-haired, Christian father relocates Maura into the embodiment of the Jewish deviant.

Moments later, Sarah has a panic attack on the toilet and is joined by Josh, Ali, and Raquel. She refuses to go through with the marriage, declaring “I hate her and I hate her stupid family. Those fucking WASPs!” Her meltdown, partially tied to her confusion over her own sexuality, is further triggered by her epiphany that Jewish and WASP queerness produce their own form of incompatibility. The quartet of Jewish singles subsequently begins a near Talmudic debate over when a marriage is technically legal. As the voice of authority, Rabbi Raquel informs Sarah that a Jewish wedding is only a pageant ritual and by itself is not legally binding. The notion of the wedding as theater gives Sarah comfort. She declares the wedding off. An added layer of humor in the sequence locates in the familiarity of the set piece. WASP/Jewish wedding conflict, and such conflict in general, are established comedic tropes. In *Transparent*, Jewish narcissism remains contrasted with Christian decorum even in a queer formulation.

The WASP/Jewish interplay between the Pfeffermans and Cashmans in “Kina Hora” locates *Transparent* once again firmly in American popular entertainment traditions. Israel Zangwill’s highly influential play, *The Melting Pot* (1909), and films such as *The Cohens and the Kellys* (1926), *Private Izzy Murphy* (1926), and *Abie’s Irish Rose* (1928), depicted the madcap banter of Catholic and Jewish families trying to come together around the Christian-Jewish wedding. A generation later, in the late 1960s, neurotic, carnal Jews became the privileged embodiment of counterculture angst and the sexual revolution. In novels, Jewish characters such as Moses Herzog in Saul Bellow’s *Herzog* (1964) and Alexander Portnoy in Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969) used sexuality directed at Christian partners to lash out at the constraints of bourgeois society. Wedding disruption became a frequent visualization of these changing generational mores. Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman) disrupting the wedding of Elaine Robinson (Katherine Ross) to Carl Smith (Brian Avery) in *The Graduate* (1967) and the neurotic altar panic of Jewish lawyer Harold Fine (Peter Sellers) in *I Love You Alice B. Toklas* (1968) offer two prominent feature film examples. The cruel narcissism of nice Jewish boy Lenny Cantrow (Charles Grodin) abandoning his Jewish wife (Jeannie Berlin) on their Miami
honeymoon to chase his “Shiksa” fixation, Kelly Corcoran (Cybill Shepherd) in *The Heartbreak Kid* (1972) offers another.

A more recent update to this comedic conjugal tradition can be seen in the antics between the Jewish Focker family (Ben Stiller, Dustin Hoffman, Barbra Streisand) and the WASP Byrnes family (Teri Polo, Robert DeNiro, Blythe Danner) in *Meet the Parents* (2000), *Meet the Fockers* (2004), and *Little Fockers* (2010). The clash of the WASP Byrnes and Jewish Focker families in those films riffed on the notion of Jews as perverted sexual deviants in the paranoid mind of the Anglo-Saxon patriarch, Jack Byrnes (DeNiro). Similar comedic pairings can be traced throughout television history, from the counterculture ethos of the Irish-Jewish marriage of Bridget (Meredith Baxter) and Bernie (David Birney) at the center of *Bridget Loves Bernie* (1972) to the Larry/Cheryl (Larry David and Cheryl Hines) marriage on *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (1999–). In each of these examples, screen Jews functioned as unruly deviations from the default Anglo-Christians they romance, or, as with Sarah vis-à-vis Tammy in *Transparent*, occasionally disrupt, upset, and reject.

Maura, Josh, Ali, and Sarah operate as continuations of this Jewish-gender unruliness. Each of the adult Pfefferman children seeks out transgressive parent figures as externalizations of neurotic familial fracture. Josh’s teenage relationship with Rita and fixation on a rabbi as his mother/savior are both efforts to locate the parent figure that Mort/Maura was/is unable to fulfill.\(^5\) Ali’s flirtations with older men and women are related events emerging out of a primary traumatic diaspora brought about by the wandering, lost father. The children’s issues problematize the simplification that Mort/Maura’s struggle to realize her inner desires to live as a woman is inherently noble and virtuous. Her efforts at self-fulfillment have a cascading, residual effect on her children. Underage sexuality and oedipal flirtations symbolize related traumas. Mort’s alienation results in intergenerational transference. Sarah, Ali, and Josh’s subsequent confusions and struggles become extensions of Mort’s closeted, alienated lifestyle. This diasporic wound is both self-inflicted and passed onward to the next generation as residual pain and transferred memory.

**EPIGENETICS AND THE DIASPORA PROBLEMATIC**

The first academic definition of diaspora was introduced in the 1930s. It was initially defined by historians as referring only to the Jewish Babylonian exile
in the sixth century BCE. Later uses, again applied only to Jews, referred to networks of Jewish refugees that had spread out across northern Africa and into Europe after the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. By the 1960s, influenced by the work of Frantz Fanon, diaspora studies expanded to consider transnational studies of imagined communities and subcultures in a number of postcolonial and neocolonial contexts. Arjun Appadurai, building on Frederic Jameson and Benedict Anderson, summarizes this shift as a process of locating communities formed outside of spatial, geographic and historical linearity (Appadurai 26–29). Modern Israel’s rise and subsequent military annexation of Gaza and the West Bank, in 1967, undercut Jewishness as a powerless community (Antebiy-Yemin 60–71). These developments led scholars to argue that Jewish diaspora no longer fell under the same rubric as other marginalized cultures and communities. This created a problematic in the academy. William Safran, for example, argues that Jewish diaspora remains discursively distinct and excluded, even as diaspora studies has created a multiethnic reading strategy across numerous global, transnational and displaced peoples and cultures (10–11). Donna Robinson Divine agrees, noting that theorists following Edward Said often exclude Israel from neocolonial discussions (208–9). Divine argues that this fundamentally misreads Said. According to Divine, Said’s notion of a relational Orientalism between both Arab and Jew in Orientalism (1978) “presented an entangled discourse that resisted reading Israel’s occupation of Palestinian lands through a simple colonizer/colonized binary” (Divine 185–86).

By the early 1990s, scholars began to critique the term “diaspora” itself as problematic and overdetermined. It was disparaged as a simplified catch-all expression for numerous distinct cultural formulations. These included a revised focus on voluntary and involuntary labor migrations, cultural and political exiles, and numerous identity-based cultures or subcultures such as marginalized variations of gender and sexuality. In response to this problematic, Hamid Naficy argued for the need to draw distinctions between diaspora and exile (3–5). Naficy argued that conceiving of “diaspora” should not invoke a desire for spatial or geographic return, as would be found in the exile of displaced peoples (5). Instead, “diaspora” should be understood as an internal construction, a relational and fluid understanding of identity in constant negotiation between the individual and the culture in which she resides.

This notion of a fluid, problematic understanding of diaspora recurs throughout Transparent. This locates in the show’s intersection of Jewish and queer themes. In the eighth episode of Season 1 (“Best New Girl”), the show
flashes back to 1994, the same historical period when the term “diaspora” began to be critiqued in the academy. On the cusp of college, eighteen-year-old Sarah (Kelsey Reinhardt) leaves for Santa Barbara to attend a protest over the exploitation of migrant workers. Fifteen-year-old Josh (Dalton Rich) is openly carrying on a sexual affair with the twenty-something Rita (Annabel Marshall-Roth). And thirteen-year-old Ali (Emily Robinson) is halfheartedly preparing for her impending bat mitzvah. Mort has the opportunity to join Mark/Marcie (Bradley Whitford), his newly acquired transgender friend, at a secret cross-dressing resort on the same date of Ali’s bat mitzvah. Mort uses Ali’s expressed disinterest in her bat mitzvah as the excuse to cancel it and begin pursuing his eventual gender transition. This pursuit is at once both a liberating act of a closeted transgender adult and a traumatic act of emotional abuse of his youngest daughter. The canceled bat mitzvah by a transgender woman is also ironic. The female version of the bar mitzvah was a recent development towards gender equality in Reform and Conservative Jewish culture. Mort’s cancellation of the event suggests a paradox, a severing of assimilated Jewish cultural life at the moment each of the Pfeffermans begin to explore their individual sexual identities.

The episode’s historically situated intersection between Maura’s first public emergence as a woman and Ali’s subsequent alienation from her Jewishness follows Naficy’s understanding of diaspora as an internal, subjective experience. Mort leaves for his trip, leaving the young Ali alone at the house. When one of the hired bat mitzvah caterers shows up, having failed to receive notice of the cancellation, she is revealed to be an androgynous woman dressed in a tuxedo. Ali performs her havdalah portion (Torah reading) for the woman as a seductive, implicitly taboo erotic dance. Her improvised ritual of Jewish maturity is not produced in synagogue. Instead it locates in the approving gaze of an adult stranger.

“Best New Girl” articulates the diaspora problematic at the heart of Transparent. Mort’s alienation and wandering are both subjective and individual to his lived experience. Yet this alienation influences his daughter’s isolation from her Jewish identity. This notion of inherited trauma connects Mort’s journey of gender alienation to Ali’s Jewish displacement. The Los Angeles beach serves as the structuring spatial motif for generational alienation. With nothing left to do on what was her bat mitzvah day, Ali leaves her house and travels to the beach. She meets a man in his twenties and flirts with him, lying to him about her age. Mort’s indifference to Ali’s bat mitzvah indirectly contributes to Ali’s first efforts to lie about her identity, a thematic continuation of her father’s
dissimulation. This is presented in tandem with Mort/Maura’s seduction of one of his fellow cross-dresser wives (Michaela Watkins) at his retreat. The crossing of boundaries in this flashback episode, whether married or underage, locates sexual taboo as the expression of thematic and transcultural diaspora being experienced by both generations of Pfeffermans.

In Season 2, Transparent furthers the entanglement between Jewish and queer diaspora when Ali begins researching her academic thesis in feminist studies just weeks after coming out as gay (“New World Coming,” season 2, episode 3). Ali excitedly discovers the concept of “epigenetics,” the theory that inherited trauma is passed generationally to children through DNA. Ali’s search for meaning is once again the impetus to flashback to the intergenerational origins the Pfefferman diaspora. Only this time the episode returns to 1933 where Ali’s grandmother, Rose (Emily Robinson), now a teenager, enters the Institute for Sexual Research run by Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld (Bradley Whitford). The teenage Rose seeks out her brother, Tante Gittel né Gershon (Hari Nef) who has begun living openly as a woman at the institute. The German-Jewish Hirschfeld and his pioneering Institute for Sexual Research, founded in Berlin in 1919, are based on historical fact. This blurring of the show’s exploration of history through fiction. Rose eventually moves over the course of season two from Berlin, where she barely escapes the Nazis, to Boyle Heights, a section of Los Angeles which from the early- to the mid-twentieth century served as the primary residential enclave for Ashkenazi Jews in the city.

Ali’s exploration of epigenetics is counterpointed by one of Maura’s central plot lines in season two, as to whether she will visit her dying mother and reveal that she is now living as a woman. In the first episode of season two, “Kina Hora,” Maura is shamed by her sister, Bryna (Jenny O’Hara) for not visiting their aged mother, Rose (Shannon Welles), who is approaching death in an assisted living facility. Ali’s academic investigation and personal-is-political flashbacks perform a creative version of epigenetics, reflecting the inherited trauma of Maura and Rose. This crystallizes in flashbacks in which the young Rose witnesses both the personal (her brother) and political (Dr. Hirschfeld) as Jews attempting to sustain their bold effort to liberate sexual identity in the face of the impending crush of Nazism. Rose’s role as witness to the Jewish-queer connection as an inciting incident of her Diasporic wanderings locates the origin trauma of displacement at the dysfunctional center of the Pfefferman family.

In the next episode, (“Bulnerable,” season 2, episode 6), Ali attempts to impress a radical lesbian poet, feminist scholar, and UCLA professor, Leslie
(Cherry Jones), by wooing her with her proposed graduate school thesis. Leslie also happens to be a former academic colleague of Mort’s who once suffered a professional setback due to his (hypocritical) aversion to her sexual politics. Leslie becomes an object of both Ali’s erotic and professional aspirations. At one point, the two are smoking pot and sitting together naked in Leslie’s Jacuzzi. Ali remarks that she’s increasingly thinking about the connection between “the woman thing” and “the Jew thing” and awkwardly proposes her thesis subject as “Phallus is to crucifix as vagina is to Holocaust.” The much older, highly accomplished Leslie laughs off Ali’s flippant reductionism. Instead she suggests that Ali refocus her scholarship on her personal narrative rather than attempting to locate a grand thesis of history. The sequence is both ironic and self-reflexive. Ali’s proposal to Leslie is itself one of eroticism and taboo. She offers facile commentary on the meta-mythic link between multigenerational Jewish displacement trauma and marginalized gender identity not as academic insight but as sexual entendre. Ali’s grand thesis may have validity. But, as Leslie insists, the radical path of the feminist requires a relocation of this inquiry.

Leslie’s dismissal of Ali’s Jewish-gender connection reflects the Jewish diaspora problematic that Naficy describes at the center of diaspora studies. “The Personal is Political” manifesto of second wave feminism also becomes writ, in this exchange, as the artistic creative expressions of counterculture radicalism. Yet Leslie dismisses Ali’s Jewish-queer connection. She instead suggests that Ali pursue a personal story as her thesis concept. This is complicated by the fact that Leslie is also in the process of seducing Ali, itself a taboo act of cultural transgression. Leslie is a venerated scholar with the southern twang of an American cowboy. Her large, upper middle class house is filled with the creature comforts of privilege. This tension between Leslie as a paradoxical embodiment of both institutional Anglo-Saxon academic accomplishment and marginalized, rebellious queer/dyke academic scrambles the boundaries of power and resistance, normativity and taboo as it plays out in her erotic interest in Ali. In Leslie’s erotic courtship of Ali, the personal and the political converge through the crossing of boundaries in the sexual realm. As with Sarah’s rejection of Tammy and Colton’s impact on Josh, Leslie’s Anglo-Saxon otherness becomes the mirror by which Ali pursues the reunification of her fractured self.
TRANSGRESSING THE SITCOM

For over sixty years, American situation comedy has remained one of the most stable and consistent of entertainment genres. Despite ethnic distinctions and changing sociopolitical contexts, the comedic beats and gender interplay of *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* and *I Love Lucy* appear remarkably similar to contemporary prime-time comedies such as *Black-ish* (2014–) and *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015–). But, as Kathleen Rowe’s influential work on gender unruliness on *Roseanne* (1989–97) has demonstrated, the sitcom contains a remarkable ability to introduce transgressive subject matter without offending mainstream audiences. Scholars such as Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Lynn Spigel have shown how fantastical family sitcoms of the 1960s such as *The Munsters* (1964–66), *The Addams Family* (1964–66), *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–70), and *Bewitched* (1964–72) hid transgressive forms of gender in seemingly innocuous sitcom plot lines (Hamamoto 61–65; Spigel 107–10). Norman Lear’s controversial 1970s-era sitcoms privileged feminist icons such as Maude Findlay on *Maude* (1972–78). In the 1980s, alt-families such as same gender parents on *Perfect Strangers* (1986–93), *My Two Dads* (1987–90), and *Full House* (1987–95) and the racially integrated families on *Diff’rent Strokes* (1978–86) and *Webster* (1983–89) subverted the gender and racial codes of the traditional postwar (white) nuclear family. In the 1990s, *Ellen* (1994–98) and *Will and Grace* (1998–2004) brought unapologetic gay representations to the mainstream while HBO’s *Dream On* (1990–96) and *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) demonstrated how the familiar tropes of sitcom humor could easily adapt to explicit subject matter and nudity.

The central strategy sitcoms deploy to engage controversial political and cultural topics focuses on the familiar archetypes of the family. A brief flurry of ethnic, working-class sitcoms in the early 1950s, including the Jewish sitcom *The Goldbergs* (1949–56), gave way to homogenized whiteness throughout the 1960s (*Father Knows Best* [1954–63], *The Dick Van Dyke Show* [1961–66], etc.). Spurred by the Civil Rights movement and identity politics, the 1970s saw a revived ethnic visibility. Black, Latino, Irish, Italian, and Jewish dysfunctional, suburban, middle-class families became a staple of the sitcom approach, as they continue to be, from the aforementioned *Black-ish* and *Fresh Off the Boat* to *Jane, the Virgin* (2014–) and *The Real O’Neals* (2016–). These ethnic families recall the genre’s vaudevillian origins. But they also provide an easily identifiable, safe framework for any subsequent comedic exploration of taboo subject matter. Vaudeville ethnic comedy embraced the profane as part of its burlesque
origins. The prime-time ethnic sitcom hints at these transgressions as one of the central modes of its comedic address.

*Transparent* fits in with these genre traditions at the moment it appears to break from them. The show can only uneasily be classified as a sitcom. The deployment of uncomfortable transcomedy tropes prevents resolution and scrambles genre identification. But this resistance to narrative norms is in keeping with the long history of the sitcom as one of television’s boldest and most controversial forms. The unapologetic, everyday Jewishness of the Pfefferman family grounds the show’s exploration of various configurations of gender and sexual identity. Yet, as creator Jill Soloway has noted, it is the show’s Jewishness, not queerness that has provoked the most profound backlash on social media. One reason may be that *Transparent* looks back at the twentieth century from a perspective of sublimated trauma and displaced identities. It returns to the twentieth–century diaspora problematic explored from both Jewish and academic perspectives. But it does so by collapsing the grand sweep of history into the fictionalized, neurotic, familiar, yet non-normative Jewish sitcom family. The wandering diasporic Jewishness foregrounded by the Pfefferman family operates as the central framing device for the show’s formal and thematic experimentations. By privileging screen Jews as safely neurotic sitcom archetypes, *Transparent* opens space for an expansive exploration of previously overlooked communities. The Jewishness of the Pfeffermans is critical precisely because the comedic-neurotic insider/outsider duality of screen Jewishness has been used for decades to queer dominant Anglo-Saxon power in popular screen media. *Transparent* identifies and embraces this tradition while also transporting it into new, expansive comedic, and Jewish, territory.
“The Woman Thing and the Jew Thing”: Subversive Jewishness in Transparent

Notes

1. “Cis-gender” refers to one who identifies with the biological and culturally coded gender one was assigned at birth.

2. Emily Nussbaum cites the moment Sarah visits her spurned (non-Jewish) fiancé Tammy (Melora Hardin) on Yom Kippur to ask for forgiveness for canceling their wedding a few weeks earlier. Tammy’s refusal to forgive Sarah’s narcissism, her flippant “Happy Yom Kippur,” is understood by Nussbaum as a sitcom trope. Nussbaum describes Sarah as an updated version of Larry David and of Hanna Horvath, Lena Dunham’s narcissistic character on Girls (HBO, 2012–). Despite this obvious Jewish connection, Sarah’s misanthrope is a comedic experimentation of form. In this reading, Jewishness on Transparent presents nothing more than biographical filler, elements necessary for narrative specificity but only superficially relevant to the real cultural innovation that the program performs.

3. The timing of the show’s subject matter was also fortunate. Not only did the Supreme Court legalize gay marriage months after the show premiered, but popular Olympian and tabloid centerpiece Bruce Jenner began to transition into openly living as a woman, Kaitlyn Jenner.

4. This ambiguity of form is certainly not unique to Transparent. The two most prominent innovators of streaming television, Amazon and Netflix, both rely on what Jason Mittell calls “Forensic Fandom,” a quality television marketing strategy in which programs require dedicated viewership to unpack the complexity and nuances within the text (263–68).

5. This culminates at the end of Season 2 when Shelly’s new boyfriend, Buzz (Richard Masur), a Jewish volunteer Shelly meets at synagogue, tells Josh that he has to begin the process of mourning the loss of his father, causing Josh to break down crying. The emotional sequence takes place after Buzz and Josh have rescued a duck with a broken wing from Shelly’s condo pond. The metaphor of the broken wing exemplifies the trauma Josh has carried in the absence of engaged parenting and how it informs his subsequent efforts (and failures) at sustaining relationships.

6. Sander Gilman locates a solution to this diaspora problematic, arguing that Fanon’s psychoanalytic reading of colonialism required him to “decorporealize the Jew, to remove the Jewish body from the category of the body at risk” (198–99). Once modern Israel was founded, Jewish bodies could no longer locate within the Fanonian double readings of the colonized other. Gilman argues that Jewish bodies play a critical and contested role in negotiating the legacy of European colonial violence in the mass media age.

7. Said points out that what the western Jew gained in the new masculinities bestowed on him as a result of Israeli military success, the Arab (male) lost, noting (his) shift
from exoticized and fetishized (as in The Sheik) to that of defeated, emasculated and militarily weak (186).

8. 1994 had already been established as an important date, the only time stamp visible in the otherwise abstract collection of home movie VHS images that made up the opening title sequence in Season 1.

9. Furthering the link between Ali’s diasporic wanderings and inherited memory, the teenage Rose is played by Emily Robinson, the same actress that played the teenage Ali in “Best New Girl.” Another actor from that episode, Bradley Whitford, appears as Magnus Hirschfeld. This example of casting fluidity shows how Transparent scrambles the signifiers of the historical, the fictive, and the imagined as poetic exemplars of the fluidity of identity.

10. For more on the how Boyle Heights developed its Jewish identity, see Sanchez.

11. Sander Gilman (244) and Daniel Boyarin (85) have shown how feminist and Jewish movements were conflated in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century through discourses of queerness. The simultaneous emerging of the Zionist and Suffragette movements increased associations between the already suspect masculinity of increasingly emancipated Jewish men and the rising visibility of female agency. However, as Boyarin has shown, the notion of Jewish men as passive and resistant to confrontation was also central to Talmudic Jewishness, a philosophy that embraced meekness as an exemplar of Jewish masculinity.

12. Further blurring the art-into-life experimentation of the show, Soloway modeled Leslie on Eileen Myles, a radical feminist poet with whom she had entered into a romantic relationship with during the writing of Season 2 (Barnes).

13. In regard to the volume of vehement antisemitic commentary directed at the show, Soloway observed, “It’s more controversial to be ‘Jewy’ these days than to be trans” (Kamen 2).
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