Who do you think you're talking to?

Transgender representation on the television show *Transparent*

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Abstract

Despite increasing visibility, members of the transgender community continue to experience discrimination and exclusion in many areas of public life. This marginalisation could be ameliorated by more, and better quality, television representations of transgender people. Such representations have the power to increase understanding around gender diversity and challenge transphobic attitudes. Negative representations can further stigmatise transgender people. Media representations of transgender people need to be evaluated closely, with a focus on whether they are progressive, or unhelpful, in order to promote equality.

Transparent (2014-) is an American television show that revolves around Maura Pfefferman, a recently retired professor and newly transitioned trans woman, and her three adult children. The show has largely been well received by the press and viewers for its treatment of trans issues, its strong queer themes and unconventional storytelling style, but it has also had some criticism. This show is significant in that it is one of the first on American television to feature a transgender character as its main protagonist. Past scholarship around *Transparent* has taken several approaches but none focused solely on the transgender themes addressed by the show or how these reflect or deny transgender lived experiences, which this thesis attempts.

The present thesis research has sought to identify if the television show *Transparent* is a progressive depiction of transgender realities. It has been guided by critical discourse analysis, which has the goal of analysing language and discourse to reveal ideology and structures of power and oppression. Scenes were analysed for linguistic and thematic features and compared with records of trans people's experiences. The analyses led to the conclusion that while the show *Transparent* is largely progressive in its depiction of transgender issues and realities, it is unrepresentative of typical transgender experiences in the USA, given the show's focus on a wealthy, white, trans woman who has experienced almost none of the barriers to health care, education, safety and justice that are characteristic of the trans experience.

This research provides a meaningful contribution to media studies and the rapidly growing field of transgender studies. It is unique in its methodological approach of using positive critical discourse analysis, and in its aim to closely analyse the treatment of transgender themes rather than review the show in its entirety. It contributes in a novel way to the contemporary discourse around transgender people in society and their representations in the media. Future research might look at other important transgender issues raised by the show *Transparent* or utilise a similar methodology to analyse other examples of transgender representation. As new representations continue to be produced, the opportunities for critical analysis motivated by a wish for social equality are great.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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Chapter one: Introduction

1.1 A sign of the times

Transgender people in the USA and worldwide are experiencing increased visibility, with attitudes towards transgender people evolving to allow for greater trans participation in mainstream society. In 2017, *TIME Magazine* ran its first cover story on trans issues, and *National Geographic* devoted an entire issue and space on their website to the topic of gender inequality and transgender people (Goldberg, 2017; Steinmetz, 2017). High profile transgender people such as model and author Janet Mock, actor Laverne Cox, and former athlete and reality television star Caitlyn Jenner continue to use their platforms to educate the public and advocate for trans rights (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; Serano, 2016). There are also more trans people and characters on American television shows than ever before, notable examples include athlete-turned-reality-television star Caitlin Jenner, and Laverne Cox as Sophia Burset on the scripted comedy drama Orange is the New Black (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; GLAAD, 2016a). *Transparent* (2014-), a widely acclaimed web-based television show and the subject of this research, has contributed greatly to this increased representation of trans experiences (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; GLAAD, 2016a).

While improved visibility is a positive step towards the goal of equality for trans people, marginalisation continues in myriad ways. While this thesis was being written, guidelines instated by President Obama that would ensure trans students in the USA could use their gendered bathroom of choice have been revoked by President Trump, with public support in some quarters (Trotta, 2017). At a state level in the USA, proposals to introduce laws to protect trans people from discrimination were hotly contested (Z. Ford, 2015). Trans people worldwide continued to regularly face barriers when seeking health care, education, employment and justice, and were the victims of murder and other violence at much higher rates than the general population (C. Lee & Kwan, 2014; Rose, 2016; Vitulli, 2010). One US study found that 41 percent of trans youth had attempted suicide and suggested this was due to the stress of ongoing discrimination and threat of violence (Herman, 2013). There is a long road ahead before all trans people can routinely thrive in mainstream society without anxiety or fear (Lane, 2009).

Representation plays an enormous role in promoting the social equality of trans people (Saunders, 2014). More ethical representation can increase understanding around gender diversity and challenge transphobic attitudes (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017), while negative representation can have the opposite effect. It has also been shown that the self-esteem of gender variant people is improved when they can see people like themselves presented in varied and positive ways in the media (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015; Lester, 2015). But harmful depictions of trans people have long been pervasive, not only in television but in all media. For example, James Baldwin (1956), the widely respected American writer and outspoken civil rights activist, included overtly transphobic descriptions in his acclaimed 1956 novel *Giovanni's Room.* The gay male protagonist berates and misgenders[1] someone who would likely identify as a trans woman in today's parlance, "confess[ing] that his [sic] utter grotesqueness made me uneasy" (Baldwin, 1956, p. 30). Russo (1987), too, reported a number of film characters who would now be called transgender being depicted as murderous and crazy or miserable and pathetic. These representations contribute to a discourse that mocks and humiliates transgender people, contributing to their ongoing dehumanisation by the cisgender majority. Language and discourse can either reproduce or challenge accepted belief systems (Fairclough, 2001b), so cultural artefacts that dehumanise trans characters succeed in reproducing the established status of transgender people as outsiders to the dominant society (Lester, 2015). At this time when trans people are more visible in US-centric popular culture than ever before, this research analyses one television programme's representation of trans people. The thesis seeks to encourage further critique and discussion around trans media representations.

1.2   Terminology

Terms pertinent to this thesis will be defined in greater detail in Chapter two's literature review, but key terms will be introduced briefly here for clarity. While some of these terms are in mainstream usage, others are in their infancy, so defining them early on is useful.

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[1] While it is not certain that the character being described would use female or neutral pronouns, we can make an educated guess from other features that they were transgender, therefore, [sic] has been used to indicate that the protagonist is using male pronouns.

The terms "transgender" or "trans" will be used interchangeably in this thesis, following the lead of Vitulli (2010) and Lester (2015). Transgender is a term that has become popular as a grouping that can include transsexual people and gender diverse people (Serano, 2016). Transgender people do not identify completely with the gender they were assigned at birth. Transgender status is self-defined; regardless of the level of transitional hormones, other medication or surgery they have received, any given person who identifies as trans must be accepted as such (Kaufmann, 2010; Serano, 2016). "Cisgender" denotes somebody for whom their sex assigned at birth matches their felt gender. Transsexual people specifically identify as the gender opposite to their birth sex, and comprise a subset of transgender – some transgender people may identify with both male and female genders or neither. This thesis will sometimes talk about trans men and trans women, who are people who have transitioned or wish to transition from their birth sex to living as their felt gender.

LGBTIQ is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans- or transgender, intersex and queer. Several variations of this acronym exist, but this thesis will use LGBTIQ. "Lesbian", "gay", and "bisexual" describe sexual orientations, while "transgender" refers to gender identity, as discussed above. "Intersex" is the most widely self-adopted term for people who have a combination of male and female sex organs (Blumer, Gavriel Ansara, & Watson, 2013). "Queer" is generally used by homosexual or bisexual people, but has a wider usage being adopted by anyone who identifies as sexually and/or gender fluid, often coupled with a radical ethos that eschews societal norms (Lane, 2009). This terminology is vital to this study of the television show *Transparent*, which features several LGBTIQ characters.

1.3 A brief introduction to *Transparent*

The United States television series *Transparent* (2014 -) is the subject of this thesis. It was created for the streaming network Amazon Prime by executive producer Jill Soloway, who in 2017 announced that they identify as gender non-binary and use the pronouns they/them/their, which this thesis will respect (Freeman, 2017). Soloway made their name as a writer on the acclaimed show *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), along with writing and directing independent films. Their own parent came out as transgender at a late age, which prompted Soloway's idea for *Transparent*, although their previous work also displayed feminist and queer politics (Brodesser-Akner, 2014).

Transparent revolves around the character Maura Pfefferman (born Mort, and played by cisgender actor Jeffrey Tambor), a retired, Jewish, transsexual woman who begins her transition in retirement, and her grown-up children Sarah (Amy Landecker), Josh (Jay Duplass) and Ali (Gaby Hoffman). Also featured are Maura's ex-wife Shelley (Judith Light), who was historically aware of her ex-husband's cross-dressing practice but not that Mort/Maura was a trans woman, and Davina[2] (Alexandra Billings) and Shea (Trace Lysette), Maura's new transsexual friends who guide her through the transitioning process.

Throughout the series there are flashbacks to Maura's past, sneaking off to a cross-dressing camp, finding trans and cross-dressing magazines, and, in season three, flashbacks to her childhood, where she is already displaying her female gender identity. Maura's children are equally present in the narratives, with Ali experimenting with both her gender expression and her sexuality (she attempts a threesome with her attractive personal trainer and his flatmate, she dates a trans man who is into kinky sex, and she dates women, including her best friend Syd and a university professor who is thirty years her senior). Sarah has a husband and two children, and impulsively leaves her husband for Tammy, a lesbian whom she dated while at university several years earlier. Josh, an immature record producer who sleeps with his female musicians, had a long-term relationship as a teenager with his former babysitter, with whom (unbeknownst to him) he had a child who was put up for adoption. It is within this turbulent, narcissistic yet tight-knit family that the imperfect Maura begins her life as an openly transgender woman. This show is rich with analytical possibilities, particularly with regards to the trans characters' narratives, which prompted the interest in it as a media artefact for in-depth analysis.

When Soloway was criticised for casting cisgender Tambor in a trans role, they apologised and went on to hire increasing numbers of trans people in the cast and crew, including writers and directors (Brodesser-Akner, 2014). Both Soloway and Tambor have since called for television and film producers to hire more trans actors, with Tambor declaring that he hopes he is the last cisgender person hired for a trans role (Jamieson, 2016).

However, more controversy has met the show; in November 2017 it was reported that Tambor had been accused of sexual harassment by an assistant, Van Barnes, and by co-star Trace Lysette, both trans women. The latter's description of Tambor's alleged

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[2] Davina provided the title of this thesis, *Who do you think you are talking to*, a line taken from the scene analysed in Chapter six (Kuperberg & Frohna, 2015).

behaviour is alarming in its resemblance to the trans misogyny and hyper-sexualisation present in broader US culture, described by Serano (2016), and explored in Chapter six of this thesis. The alleged harassment is also starkly opposed to the ethos of Soloway's production practices, which have been described by members of the cast and crew as being nourishing, feminist, and emotionally aware (Berl, 2016; A. Levy, 2015; Villarejo, 2016). At the time of writing, Tambor has denied the charges, and resigned from the show within weeks of the allegations, citing a "politicized atmosphere" (Robinson, 2017, para. 1). Soloway has not commented specifically on the allegations but has made a general statement about safety in the workplace, calling for people to not touch each other without explicit consent (Robinson, 2017). It is unclear if a fifth season will be produced in 2018 now that Tambor has left the show *(Guardian staff, 2018).*

1.4 Positioning of the researcher

This section will first briefly describe my personal identity and politics as they apply to this research. It will then describe why this topic was selected for the thesis.

It is important to state first and foremost, given the focus on transgender realities this thesis has, that I am cisgender and am writing about transgender representation as an outsider, which can be problematic, and risks speaking for transgender communities without their input. As the research was proceeding, Lincoln and Denzin's (2000) question, "How do we create a social science that includes the other?" (p. 1050) was at the front of my mind. Both a limitation and a strength of the research is the fact that I am a white, queer woman in Aotearoa New Zealand. While the research is motivated by critical discourse analysis's aim of revealing power imbalance and championing the downtrodden, there is a tension in that as the researcher, I have considerable power and resources and figurative and physical distance from the experiences of the people I am seeking to know more about. To borrow from Levy's (2013) statement of her own research identity, my being cisgender and white means I am often privileged. For example, I do not experience the significant barriers trans people do when accessing health care, justice, employment or education. However, while I do not have first-hand experience of the types of oppression trans people often experience, this research is nonetheless motivated by my desire for equality and understanding for trans people. I have not taken the privilege of research lightly, and with this in mind I have attempted to consistently look to the perspectives and insights of trans people, in the form of

both scholarly and non-scholarly works (including Halberstam, 1998, 2000; Jacques, 2015; Madison, 2016; McKenna, 2016; Mock, 2013; Namaste, 2000; O'Donnell, 2014; Serano, 2016; Stryker, 2004; Stryker, Currah, & Moore, 2008) and research that was undertaken in collaboration with trans communities (including Bauer et al., 2009; Cobos et al., 2009; McLemore, 2015; Sanchez, Sanchez, & Danoff, 2009).

Being geographically apart from the physical location of the focus of the study (the USA) is also something of a limitation, again placing me as an outsider. Some cultural nuances may have been overlooked, or certain aspects taken out of context. However, this is also a strength, giving me a relatively objective perspective when reviewing this American television show and building up knowledge of trans realities in the United States. Most sources referred to in this thesis are from the USA with some from other developed countries. This reflects the locus of the text, *Transparent*. Where sources from other countries are used, they generally align with USA-based research and experiential accounts, therefore there is a reasonable assumption that these have significant transferability to the US context.

Given the above statements of my status as an outsider both to the dataset (the television show) and the people central to this study (trans people), the question arises of why I chose to research this topic. Critical analysis of media representation is of interest to me, particularly the representation of women on screen. As topics were being explored for a field of study for this thesis, representation consistently came through as a chief concern, and although transgender representation was a new area to me it was timely, given the rapid increase in visibility transgender people have experienced in recent years. Greater openness around discussions of transgender people has been apparent during the two years this research has been underway. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) has social justice at its core and is therefore a good fit with my personal ethics, allowing me to hone my critical voice within an established theoretical framework that questions systems of power and oppression (Fairclough, 2001b). It is my hope that this thesis plays some small part in furthering the discourse around transgender media representation, visibility and rights, and encouraging a deeper and more expansive regard for the various ways transgender people, and people in general, can be in our society (Hayward, 2008).

1.5 Previous research

The scholarship that this research builds upon falls into two categories. First, work that explores transgender realities, which has come from empirical studies within legal, psychiatric and medical fields and personal records of trans people, along with sociology, gender, feminist and queer studies. Second, media studies that have dealt with the importance of representation generally, and particularly of transgender people on film and television. Information and observations from these fields will be thoroughly described in the literature review in the following chapter, and will be summarised here.

1.5.1 Scholarship that deals with transgender themes

Past scholarship that has guided the present research has investigated historical and contemporary transgender realities in Western countries, including the discrimination trans people face in accessing employment, health care, education and justice (Herman, 2013; Snelgrove, Jasudavisius, Rowe, Head, & Bauer, 2012). Also relevant is conceptual theory that explores transgenderism and problematises the gender binary, which is the dominant mode of perceiving gender in contemporary Western societies (Butler, 2006; Halberstam, 1998; Hayward, 2008; Lane, 2009). In the past two decades the dominant rhetoric around trans people on English-language television (and also in the wider discourse around transgender) has been that trans people are "born in the wrong body" (Prosser, 1998), but many trans scholars and writers have argued that this conceptualisation is unhelpful as it erases other ways of experiencing diverse gender identities, while assuming there is a "right" bodies and "right" gender construction (Hayward, 2008; Jacques, 2015; Serano, 2016). Much scholarship, across disciplines from media studies to public health, has expressed a desire that research will help to create a world in which the various ways in which transgender people live are celebrated, not denigrated (Harper & Schneider, 2003; Hayward, 2008; Lane, 2009; Robertson, Light, Lipworth, & Walter, 2016).

1.5.2 Scholarship about representation and media

Television has the power to demystify different ways of being, but it can also stereotype or erase whole groups of people (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; Gerbner & Gross, 1976). It is important to continuously analyse and critique media representation, particularly of marginalised people-groups, on the one hand to call out

harmful depictions or lack of representation and on the other to applaud positive and thoughtful diversity that promotes equality (GLAAD, 2016a; Kelso, 2015; Luther, Lepre, & Clark, 2011). Because new television shows are always being produced, scholarship should stay up to date in its critique of current trends and styles of representation.

Previous research into transgender representation has found that, while there are some positive examples of transgender people on television, most depictions have perpetuated negative stereotypes (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; Sandercock, 2015). A dominant narrative of white transsexual women undergoing physical transition persists – trans people of colour, trans men and gender non-binary people are rarely featured. Trans characters are often stuck with a narrative solely driven by their trans status rather than by other aspects of their lives or personalities. Trans women are often hyper-feminised and sexualised on television, reducing their characters to objects for a male gaze (Serano, 2016). Furthermore, depictions of trans people often exploit trans bodies to amuse, shock or disgust audiences. Another dominant style is to depict trans characters as tragic and pathetic, or crazed and violent, serving to send the message that to be trans is untenable (Lester, 2015; Tharp, 1991). The perpetuation of these stereotypes provides a barrier to social equality by reproducing structures of cisgender power and the oppression of trans people in society (Dyer, 2009).

1.5.3 Scholarship about progressive representation

To measure how positive or useful a new trans representation is we must first define what progress looks like. The definition of progressive representation for the purposes of this thesis has been guided by queer media representation organisation GLAAD (2016a) and scholars Capuzza and Spencer (2017), Lester (2015), and Sandercock (2015). Progress is seeing a variety of transgender characters (varied in ethnicity, age, socio-economic status, physical ability and gender expression) on screen across a variety of shows and genres (GLAAD, 2016a). Trans characters ought to be fully fleshed-out rather than token, and their narratives should not rely solely on their trans status (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). Representations should not perpetuate negative stereotypes or exploit trans characters and their bodies to shock and disgust (Lester, 2015). When dealing with explicitly trans issues, these should be well researched with a commitment to depicting authentic trans experiences (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; Sandercock, 2015). A bold demand to summarise: transgender characters on television

ought to be at least as enormously varied as cisgender characters, and as thoroughly developed and explored as white cis male characters.

1.5.4 Existing research and criticism on *Transparent*

Transparent has been well-received by most audiences, television critics and scholars, and widely written about in multiple arenas. That the lead character is transgender was deemed to be a bold and progressive move, although the actor playing her is not (Brodesser-Akner, 2014), and the show's complex historical storytelling, innovative exploration of Jewish themes, and breadth of fully fleshed-out LGBTIQ characters have also been celebrated (Freedman, 2016; Moss, 2016; Villarejo, 2016). These aspects and more have led the show to be accepted by media scholars and critics as "quality television" (Moss, 2016; Villarejo, 2016). Villarejo (2016) argued that the show created a "trans gaze", an antidote to Mulvey's (1989) male gaze where women (both cisgender and trans) are objects rather than players with their own will and motives. Soloway (2016) has spoken about deliberately adopting a female or trans gaze that empathises with all characters rather than othering or objectifying.

Major criticisms of the show include a preoccupation with Maura's coming out, a lack of ethnic diversity, and the casting of the cisgender actor Tambor in the role of transsexual Maura. Funk and Funk (2016a, 2016b) have argued that focusing on a trans person's need to come out to their family reinforces the idea that trans people are being dishonest or inauthentic until they come out. The show's casting is overwhelmingly white, and the characters are mostly extremely wealthy, which is unrealistic in socio-economically and ethnically diverse Los Angeles where the show is set (Villarejo, 2016). Maura attends a diverse community support group for trans people, but the attendees are mostly extras rather than core characters offering real diversity to the show. Funk and Funk (2016a) observed that the lack of diversity was disappointing in the face of the need for greater visibility for trans people of colour across all media.

Some aspects of *Transparent* have been highlighted as particularly salient to the show's appeal and the important role it has played in the media landscape. Robertson, Light, Lipworth and Walter (2016) expressed gratitude that the show, through a focus on the Nazi persecution of sexual and gender minorities, shone a light on the disastrous effect

that historic practices of the psychiatric establishment continue to have on the status and welfare of trans people. Transgenderism has been pathologised by psychiatrists, leading to dehumanising treatment and the widely held belief that to be trans is to have a mental illness. Moss (2016), Freedman (2016) and Rosenberg (2017) each analysed and celebrated the Jewish elements woven into the show, with Freedman comparing the transitional journey of transsexual people with Jewish spiritual and geographic journeys.

The wide variety of scholarship that surrounds *Transparent* indicates the richness of its text and the appetite for this type of modern and complex television show.

1.6 Positioning of the present study

1.6.1 Building on previous research

Past scholarship about specific trans representations on television provides valuable groundwork for further study in the field but it is superseded as new media representations are created and disseminated. Broad surveys, such as the annual survey of LGBTIQ on television undertaken by rights organisation GLAAD (2016a), offered a vital snapshot of quantity and quality of transgender representations, as did Capuzza and Spencer's (2017) review of television trans representations from 2008 to 2014, but neither of these provide an in-depth analysis of the specific issues raised on one show.

As mentioned previously, studies of *Transparent* have looked at the show's innovative narrative structures (Freedman, 2016; Villarejo, 2016), and its Jewish and LGBTIQ (not just transgender) themes (Freedman, 2016; Moss, 2016; Rosenberg, 2017; Villarejo, 2016), with just one addressing a problematic aspect of the show's treatment of trans people (Funk & Funk, 2016a). None of these studies has analysed scenes from the show closely to ascertain the accuracy and progressiveness of its trans representations. There is, therefore, at the time of writing a need for serious critique of the way *Transparent* represents transgender realities.

This research aims to identify those aspects of the television show *Transparent* that are, or are not, progressive, using CDA as a theoretical framework from which to examine the language and content of specified scenes. It seeks to recognise in what ways the show promotes wider understanding of transgender people in society and in what ways it depicts transgender realities with nuance, variety, accuracy and compassion.

The research question that has guided this analysis is: "In what ways is the television show *Transparent* a progressive depiction of transgender realities?"

1.6.2 Scope of the research

A close viewing of the whole show, paired with reading around the show's critical, popular and scholarly reception, and reading and viewing of interviews with Soloway and members of the cast and crew, led to a good understanding of the issues the show raises around the trans experience. This knowledge guided the decision to adopt critical incident technique to select scenes from the first three seasons that represented important trans issues in powerful or inventive ways. While a fourth season was released at the end of 2017, this thesis deals solely with the first three seasons.

The research is focused on the way the show deals with trans themes, rather than on all LGBTIQ characters, or Jewish themes, or any other feature of the show. While these may naturally be drawn into analyses, the focus will remain on the show's trans representation. The findings from this research are derived from the issues interrogated in the four scene analyses which serve as exemplars of the show's treatment of trans themes and characterisations. Other scenes from the show are referred to at times as supplementary evidence where relevant, and not as the core dataset. Given this conservative scope, the study aims to glean insights that are moderate in strength, and only transferable within limits (Payne & Williams, 2005).

1.7 Summary of methodological approach

1.7.1 Theoretical framework: Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

As stated above, this research uses CDA as its theoretical perspective. CDA has the goal of analysing language and discourse to reveal structures of power and oppression, and causes for optimism. A field of research developed primarily by Fairclough (2001a, 2013), Wodak (2001), and Van Dijk (2001a, 2009), CDA posits that discourse routinely reproduces – or challenges – power and oppression. According to Fairclough (1992), any given text is both influenced by, and an influence on, society.

In this research, the text in question is the television show *Transparent*. The text has been created in a significant time for transgender people, during which the discourse around transgender people and their rights is evolving rapidly. The societal climate in which *Transparent* has been produced has influenced its production practice (including the hiring of cast and crew and its writers) and the text of the show itself. This research takes all of this into account while focusing on specific scenes as a focal point for analysis.

CDA lends itself to an interdisciplinary approach, where the research can include concepts and methods from various theoretical schools (Lê & Lê, 2009). Queer and trans theory and feminist concepts have informed the perspective of the research, particularly with regard to representational theory and to get a deeper understanding of the theory that has developed alongside the evolution of transgender visibility.

The data for analysis were selected using an adapted version of critical incident technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954) and the analysis was conducted with CDA methods as described by Fairclough (2001a) and Machin and Mayr (2012). These will be briefly reviewed here and expanded upon in Chapter three, which presents the methodology.

1.7.2 Method of data selection

Once the research question was established, it was decided that the research would take the form of four scene analyses. The scenes were selected using Flanagan's (1954) CIT (Hughes, Williamson and Lloyd, 2007; Borgen, Amundson, & Butterfield, 2008). While CIT is rarely used in media studies, it proved to be an efficient and flexible method with which to select scenes to analyse. The entire first three seasons were viewed closely with potential scenes identified for analysis. Chosen scenes had to include at least one trans character and had to feature a trans theme or themes that were raised during the literature review process. Around twenty scenes met these criteria and were examined more intensively. Of these, five scenes (with two scenes providing the data for one combined analysis) were selected as providing the richest possibilities for analysis, featuring issues that are central to the contemporary trans experience as evidenced in the literature. This process was structured and deliberate but inevitably subjective, given the scenes were selected by the researcher using the criteria above and drawing on knowledge gained during the literature review process.

The four scenes that were identified are varied in subject matter, from the everyday issue of being trans and trying to find a public bathroom to use, to Maura's grappling with her past actions as a privileged male. Each analysis has been given a title for the purposes of referring to them throughout this thesis. The first analysis, *The Bathroom Scene*, is presented in Chapter four. The scene takes place in a shopping mall bathroom, where Maura is confronted and asked to leave because she is perceived as male (Fitzerman-Blue, Harpster, & Ganatra, 2014). The second analysis, *Leslie versus Maura*, looks at a scene where the complexities of Maura's history of white male privilege come back to haunt her (F. Soloway & Heller, 2015). The third analysis, *Sal, Davina*

and Maura, focuses on two connected scenes where several important trans issues are raised. This analysis uses an intersectional lens to see the stark differences between the way Maura and Davina are allowed to live their lives as trans women (Kuperberg & Frohna, 2015). It also demonstrates the existence of a problematic type of trans-attracted cisgender man, sometimes called a "chaser". Chapter seven presents analysis four, *Elizah*, from an episode of the same name (Kuperberg & J. Soloway, 2016). Elizah provides the audience of *Transparent* with a counterpoint to Maura's privilege and seemingly straightforward transitional process, in the form of a young, poor black trans woman who calls the trans helpline Maura is volunteering at. Her struggles are on a more desperate level than Maura's but Elizah's resilience and street savvy raise questions around Maura's naiveté and narcissism. The analysed scenes are varied in their subject matter and provide broad analytical possibilities.

1.7.3 Methods of data analysis

Transcripts, with each speaker identified, were prepared for each scene, based on transcripts sourced online and amended for accuracy. Methods of analysis were adapted from Fairclough (2001a), Machin and Mayr (2012), and Huckin (1997). Scenes were analysed for linguistic features, for example, hedging, modality and sincerity, which can provide a variety of insights into the positioning of each character in the scene (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Use of language that was trans-specific or had its roots in gender studies or institutional discourse was noted for its educational function and its evidence of the ideologies of the show's writers.

Next, the content of the scenes was analysed for other features, from subject matter to characterisation and tone. Subject matter is important, as the writers of each scene chose to highlight some issues that affect trans people, and to overlook others. Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality was drawn on to examine the ways each character's attributes and experiences define their level of privilege and oppression. Choices around power – which characters have it and which do not – were observed and conclusions drawn about how this impacted the representations. An important aspect of the analytical process was testing if the scene leant on stereotypes of trans people. While at times stereotypical subject matter was used, generally it was treated in a nuanced way, not evoking a voyeuristic or mocking response from the audience.

Finally, the visual aspects of the scene were noted as a part of the total scene. These aspects included the hair and makeup of the actors, the location, and any unusual or notable camerawork.

Once all features had been examined, the most pertinent were identified. Supplementary research was done into new areas not already covered in the literature review but raised by the scenes. This research spanned trans theory, trans memoirs, feminist and queer theory, and magazine and news articles that discussed the issues raised. The observations were laid out and integrated with this supplementary research with a focus on how the issues raised in the scene reflect real trans experiences gleaned from trans blogs, memoirs and empirical studies of trans experiences in a range of settings. Where relevant, how the scenes either built upon, or diverged from, trans representations produced to date was also identified.

1.8 Limitations

This thesis is a constructive addition to the study of transgender representation in the media; however, because of its scope and other factors it has its limitations. With just five scenes analysed across three of the four published seasons, any generalisations made across the whole show must be lightly held, with the potential to be substantiated or refuted by future research (Payne & Williams, 2005). CIT, the method used to select the dataset, is a subjective process that relies on the judgement of the researcher. It is therefore not likely that another researcher would replicate exactly the dataset selection made here. The research is also limited by the personal biases of the researcher. As stated above, my position as a feminist, liberal, cisgender female in New Zealand necessarily impacted on the perspective of the study (D. L. Levy, 2013). These aspects of my identity also led to this research topic and the choice of CDA as a theoretical framework, with its goal of interrogating the way discourse can reproduce or resist social injustice and inequality. None of these limitations discount the strength of the research, rather they must simply be taken into consideration when reading the study's findings.

1.9 Contribution of this research

This research contributes a new voice to the critical discourse around transgender representation in the media. As stated earlier, while transgender people have become

more visible in society they continue to be disproportionately discriminated against. Media representations have the power to improve public understanding of transgender people or to perpetuate their pathologisation (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). Critical media research into trans representation emphasises the importance of ongoing pressure on media producers to create ethical representations of trans people with a view to achieving a safe society in which trans people can exist and thrive.

Considering the state of trans rights in the USA, where much progress has been made in the past decade, but equally there have been moves by those in power to erode rights, a study that raises the importance of positive trans representation is timely in the struggle for trans equality. While some scholarly work on *Transparent* has been published, none uses critical discourse analysis to focus solely on the way transgender issues are dealt with in the show. The present study aims to do precisely this, seeking to identify and applaud those transgender representations within the show that can be described as progressive, and conversely to highlight those depictions that are harmful or limiting in their treatment. This thesis uses each scene as a catalyst to investigate the challenges trans people face, from using public bathrooms to barriers accessing general and transition-related health care, drawing on both theoretical and empirical studies to derive conclusions about the authenticity of each scene.

This research not only contributes to much-needed scholarship regarding contemporary trans representation, but also utilises CDA in a novel way, laying the groundwork for future studies that wish to analyse television shows in ways that reveal ideology and semiotic meaning. A CDA perspective has historically been used to uncover abuse of power through the thorough analysis of discourse (often political), but Martin (2004) called for a positive discourse analysis that seeks out instances where the discourse analysed is promoting positive social change in some way. My study has been undertaken in this mode, identifying that the television show *Transparent* has markedly improved trans representation on television but that it likely includes some problematic features (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; Villarejo, 2016).

New media representations of trans people are being created every year and it is critical to furthering trans equality that these representations, including *Transparent*, are analysed and held to account with the goal of improving future depictions. Scholarly and popular critique can have a positive effect on the choices that television producers make regarding casting and representation, which makes it valuable to the advancement of marginalised groups (Van Zoonen, 1994; Woods, 2015). Given that transgender rights in the USA are currently under attack, it is crucial that a counter-

discourse grows, and that it include continuing scholarship on the way trans people are depicted in the media.

1.10 Chapter organisation

This thesis consists of eight chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter two reviews existing literature in the fields of transgender studies and media representation, along with scholarly, critical and popular reception of the television show *Transparent*. This review establishes that media discourse has the power to promote or obstruct equality in society. The chapter provides the direction for the research question that is addressed in this thesis.

The methodological approach adopted for the research comprises Chapter three, outlining the theoretical framework of CDA and describing and justifying the research methods used. These methods include the use of an adapted version of CIT to select the data, and CDA methods of analysis influenced by queer, trans and feminist thought.

Chapters four to seven are the analyses of the chosen scenes from *Transparent*. These each follow a similar format, featuring a scene introduction and transcript, with various key elements then analysed and discussed. Each analysis identifies key issues raised by the scene and discusses the ways in which the scene deals with these issues. Each analysis draws on empirical studies into trans experience, personal accounts and queer and trans theory.

Key findings from the scene analyses are presented in Chapter eight. In this chapter, findings are interpreted with conclusions drawn in response to the research question. Finally, this chapter iterates the impact of the study, describes its limitations, and highlights opportunities for future research.

Chapter two: Literature review

2.1 Introduction to the literature review

Transgender studies and transgender representation in the media are growing fields of scholarship. This review of the literature aims to highlight the research and commentary that is relevant to the research question and will guide the thesis in terms of issues of trans representation. Section one will define the terms that will be used throughout this thesis, and provide some background information regarding the etymology and common usage of certain terms that are used by or about trans and queer people. Section two will then describe the experiences of trans people historically with regard to the way both society and the medical establishment have characterised transgenderism, and the social and economic challenges that face transgender people. Dominant discourses about transgenderism will be highlighted and problematised. The importance of representation on television will be discussed in section three, raising issues that producers face when representing marginalised groups, and introducing the concept of homonormativity. A brief outline of the television media landscape over recent years and its effect on representation will follow. Section four reviews the themes that are found in current scholarship and popular media regarding transgender representation on film and television. Particular focus will be on the role of stereotypes and describing specific transgender stereotypes, locating these in the culture. A review of scholarship around *Transparent* will be presented, with emphasis on writing that highlights the ways in which the show represents transgenderism. Finally, these sections lead to the research question which has guided the present study.

2.2 Gender identity and sexuality: context and terminology

Terms that refer to personal gender and sexuality continue to evolve (Lane, 2009). Vitulli (2010) explained that many terms regarding gender and sexual identities are constructed and propagated by the medical-psychological establishment and academia, and can exclude certain marginalised people. LGBTIQ communities are also generators of terminologies. For example, the term "queer" is a derogatory term reclaimed by gays and lesbians as an act of empowerment and defiance (Jagose, 1996). Ryan (2016) noted that in "ballroom culture", a dance and performance community

made up of predominantly black and Latino queer people, a set of terminologies has been developed which draws similarities across the community rather than segmenting it. "Femme queen" refers to transgender women, while "butch queen" refers to cisgender gay males. For them, everyone in the community is a "queen", which is a play on "queer" (Ryan, 2016).

Gaard (1997) argued that terms defining gender and sexual identity can only be self-definitions adopted by the individual(s) concerned, rather than labels applied by external players. For example, an individual may appear to an outsider as transgender, but identify more closely with the term "genderqueer", which must be the individual's choice (Saltzburg & Davis, 2010). Similarly, gender non-conforming individuals may have a preferred gender pronoun that differs from the pronoun used for their sex at birth (Donatone & Rachlin, 2013). While self-determination is one factor in identifying oneself with specific terminologies, these terminologies are often born out of a political need to delineate a marginalised group (Serano, 2016). It is easier for a group with a title or a label to demand rights and highlight issues that affect individuals from the group (Morrison, 2010).

LGBTIQ

LGBTIQ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans- or transgender, intersex and queer. While "lesbian", "gay", and "bisexual" describe sexual orientations, "transgender" refers to gender identity, as discussed below (Renn, 2007). "Intersex" is a term for people who have some male and some female sex organs (Blumer, Gavriel Ansara, & Watson, 2013). "Queer" is more difficult to define, as it is used to describe both homosexual or bisexual people and those who feel their gender and/or sexuality is different from the norm. Its origins and usage will be expanded on below.

Transgender

This is an umbrella term that refers to people with a wide variety of gender identifications, and includes transsexual people, genderqueer and gender non-binary. They, to some degree, identify with a gender that does not align to their anatomical sex, or eschew both male and female gender identification entirely (Serano, 2016). People who identify as trans or transgender may or may not have used surgery, dress and grooming, and/or hormone treatment to aid their transition (Serano, 2016).

Serano (2016) has identifed that some transsexual people take issue with the proliferation of the use of "transgender", saying it erases transsexual realities, and focuses on those trans people who do not strictly identify as one gender. Nonetheless, the term has gained political recognition and has contributed to the greater visibility and legal rights of transsexual and nonbinary people (Serano, 2016). In his discussion of trans rights in the USA, Vitulli (2010) opts for the more inclusive "trans", an approach the present thesis will follow in most instances.

Transsexual

"Transsexual" applies to someone for whom the gender they were assigned at birth does not unambiguously match the gender they identify with (Robertson, Light, Lipworth, & Walter, 2016). More specific than "transgender", the term refers to individuals who to some degree transition, or wish to transition, from one gender to another, and includes people who have used surgery and/or hormone treatment to aid their transition and those who have not (Robertson et al., 2016; Serano, 2016). Halberstam (2000) and Lane (2009) identified that transsexuality has been positioned by theorists and members of LGBTIQ communities as conservative in that they are adhering to the cisnormative gender binary of male/female in contrast to the progressive transgender whereby gender is viewed as existing on a spectrum rather than a dichotomy. Lane (2009) argued this line of thinking risks alienating and erasing the lived experiences of transsexual people who often have a deep-seated psychological need to change their bodies to match their gender identity.

Genderqueer, gender nonbinary, gender non-conforming, gender diversity

Saltzburg and Davis (2010) describe "genderqueer" as not conforming to the hegemonic gender binary but falling somewhere within the spectrum between male and female. A person who identifies as genderqueer or nonbinary may perform some physical or stylistic gender modifications but not wish to fully transition to a different gender (Donatone & Rachlin, 2013). Individuals who identify as genderqueer tend to see their gender as outside of the gender binary, and as with transgender may alter their appearance cosmetically, with clothing, or with medical intervention, or not at all (Donatone & Rachlin, 2013). Perhaps even more all-encompassing and non-specific are terms such as "gender diverse" or "gender expansive", both phrases touching on the

concept of gender as fluid rather than discrete (Morrison, 2010). "Gender non-conforming" refers to not conforming to society's normative gender binary (Morrison, 2010; Sandercock, 2015).

Cisgender

A "cisgender" person identifies as the gender they were assigned at birth (Donatone & Rachlin, 2013). This term was created in response to the othering nature of non-gender conforming terms like "trans", and first came into usage in transgender studies in the 1990s (Robertson et al., 2016; Stryker, Currah, & Moore, 2008). Users of the term "cisgender" acknowledge that all humans have a gender identity, not just gender diverse people (Ryan, 2016). The cisgender paradigm is the dominant one in terms of the cis/trans binary, much like the heterosexual dominance over its queer counterpart (Funk & Funk, 2016a). The term "cisnormative", similar to the more commonly used "heteronormative", denotes the cisgender paradigm dominant in western culture, and can be seen in various areas including organisations, government policy, and entertainment and news media (Lane, 2009).

Queer

Originally a pejorative word meaning "gay man", the term was reclaimed by lesbians, gays and bisexuals and is now often used as an umbrella term claimed by sexual and gender non-conforming people (Cregan, 2012; Jagose, 1996). Its meaning is more nuanced than simply describing gender identity or sexual orientation, however. Where "lesbian" and "gay" refer solely to sexual preference, "queer" often also includes those with non-conforming gender identity. Those who identify as queer often appreciate the term's accepted fluidity of meaning in contrast to the more concrete, limiting, specific categories regarding non-normative sexualities and gender identities (Jagose, 1996). Kemp (Kemp, 2009) argued that "queer" comes out of a worldview that sees homosexuality as fundamentally threatening to hegemonic societal structures. People who identify as queer may question labels regarding sexuality and the social structures that require such labels (Renn, 2007). Jagose (1996) argued that the term "queer" has developed meanings in different times and different contexts and has retained a certain "elasticity" (p. 1) despite its widespread adoption. Queer theory originated from these concepts of queer but has also moved beyond queer as a descriptor of personal identity

traits, rather becoming a field where any and all subjects can be "queered"; treated in alternative, radical and sometimes controversial ways (Kemp, 2009).

2.3 Transgender realities

2.3.1 Transgender across cultures, and throughout the natural world

While western societies have consistently condemned non-conforming gender identities as unnatural or abhorrent, Devor (1997) argued that "transsexuality exists because the natural world loves diversity" (p. 67). Indeed Lane (2009) highlighted that over 300 animal species display some form of gender fluidity or homosexuality. Gender expansiveness can also be seen throughout human history and across many different cultures. Lane (2009) argued for "multiple pathways to transsexuality" (p. 147), citing research that shows that human gender develops via a combination of complex biological influences and human interaction, refuting claims that transsexual people are unnatural. The gender performance and societal roles of the following groups differ between cultures, but they all display some type of non-conforming gender practice: fa'afafine in Samoa, the legally visible third gender waria in Indonesia, hijra in India, two-spirit in North American native populations (Davies, 2010; Lane, 2009; Schmidt, 2017; Vasey & Bartlett, 2007). This is not an exhaustive list, rather it is a set of examples that indicate the gender binary is not a naturally occurring structure. Both biology and sociology are now being used to explain and normalise non-traditional gender identities (Devor, 1997; Lane, 2009; Namaste, 2000; Vasey & Bartlett, 2007).

2.3.2 The conflation of trans and homosexual

A defining feature of dominant discourse around transgender is a lack of understanding within the medical establishment, government, and also popular culture (Rose, 2016). Vitulli (2010) identified that early understandings of homosexuality were conflated with transgenderism, with the gay man being seen as innately feminine, and vice versa for the lesbian. Conversely, gender expansive individuals are often confused by outsiders as being gay (Dawson, 2015; Sandercock, 2015). Trans individuals have been denied transitional medical treatment if they displayed any so-called transgressive sexual behaviours, their sexuality being incorrectly conflated with their gender identity (Abbott, 2013), and Namaste (2000) argued that many homophobic

"attacks are justified not in reaction to [being gay] but to one's gender expression" (p. 445). This conflation is also perpetuated in screen depictions of trans people, as will be described further in this chapter (Sandercock, 2015).

2.3.3 Trans and LGBTIQ discrimination and oppression

Trans people also suffer from widespread personal and systemic discrimination that makes accessing employment, education and health care particularly difficult (Vitulli, 2010). As trans and homosexuality have been consistently conflated, much of the victimisation of trans people has been applied to their LGBIQ peers also. While the type and intensity of oppression of LGBTIQ people has varied across time and location, some brief examples are provided here. In the USA in the 1950s and '60s, LGBTIQ bars were routinely raided by police, and patrons were subjected to vicious beatings (Armstrong & Crage, 2006). In Nazi Germany, homosexuals and transgender people were imprisoned and murdered in concentration camps along with Jews and those with mental disabilities, in line with laws established in the early 1930s, with some being subjected to inhumane experimental 'treatments' in an attempt to 'normalise' their gender or sexual identity (Robertson et al., 2016). Harper and Scheider (2003) summarise the all-encompassing persecution:

> Like other marginalized groups, LGBT people have historically experienced oppression in the form of harassment and violence; discrimination in areas such as employment, housing, access to education and human services; and laws that have either actively discriminated against them or failed to protect their basic human rights. (p. 246)

2.3.4 Trans as separate from sexual minorities

Trans and gender non-conforming people suffer discrimination that is unique and apart from that of cisgender gay, lesbian and bisexual people (despite their consistent conflation by outsiders), and are sometimes described as an out-group even within the LGBTIQ umbrella (Morrison, 2010; Vitulli, 2010). Halberstam (2000) argued that trans people of colour experience a double marginalisation, with transphobia and racism coming into play. Transgender individuals continue to be the victims of harrassment, violence and murder at disproportionate rates (C. Lee & Kwan, 2014). Rose (2016) pointed out that while acceptance of white, middle-class gays and lesbians

has greatly improved in recent years, murders of trans youth go largely unreported in the media, and trans individuals, especially trans people of colour, are at increased risk of violence. The American queer magazine and news website *The Advocate* (2017) reported that more trans people were killed in the USA in 2016 than in any year previously, and reiterated that most victims were trans people of colour and that the actual number of murders is likely to be much higher than the 27 reported.

2.3.5 Trans discrimination in health and education

Sandercock (2015) argued that trans youth are at risk of discrimination, violence and harassment by both their peers and adults including teachers and others in positions of power. Trans people often experience structural or personal discrimination when accessing health care (Bauer et al., 2009; Snelgrove, Jasudavisius, Rowe, Head, & Bauer, 2012). In the USA trans people are twice as likely as the average to be unemployed and trans youth are more at risk of self injury and suicidal ideation than any other group, perhaps due to ill treatment and/or rejection by family and the wider community (Donatone & Rachlin, 2013; Rose, 2016). Robertson et al. (2016) noted that in Australia trans people are four times as likely as the general population to have experienced depression.

Harper and Schneider (2003) argued that discrimination and violence is due to macro-societal ideologies, which inform one-to-one behaviours, hiring practices, medical processes and government policy. Lester (2015) said that transsexuality was initially a pathological term and Robertson et al. (2016) suggested that the fields of psychiatry and psychology are culpable for the widely accepted pathologisation of and resulting discrimination against LGBTIQ individuals, given the establishment's influence over public opinion and government policy. This psychiatric position caused medical professionals to ignore the psychological needs of trans people, rather treating them with disdain and disgust (Lester, 2015). Homosexuality, transsexualism and transgenderism have been characterised by the medical establishment as mental illnesses, resulting in unnecessary and often cruel 'treatments', along with social ostracism (Funk & Funk, 2016a; Robertson et al., 2016). Gender expansiveness has been unintelligible to cisnormative western societies, with trans people seen as 'freaks' or aberrant. This misperception has precipitated mistreatment; if a person is not perceived as fully human, then society need not treat them as such (Funk & Funk, 2016a; Morrison, 2010). Referring to Butler and Athanasiou's (2013) concept of

dispossession, Funk and Funk (2016a) declared "how ubiquitous cisgender privilege is in the way that it routinely dispossesses gender expansive individuals" (p. 72). Modern societies are set up within a cisnormative paradigm that does not allow for trans lives.

2.3.6 Gender performance and transgender passing

To understand transgenderism, it is helpful to review what scholars have said about gender itself. Butler (2006) argued that biological sex and gender identity are separate categories that are incorrectly conflated, and there is no such thing as sex until it is gendered by society. She asserted that all gender is performed (from the way one holds their body, to the clothes they wear and the roles they play in society) and gender performance differs across circumstances (Butler, 2006). Dawson (2015) agreed, adding that "gender does not operate in isolation, but rather intersects with class, ethnicity and other aspects of identity" (p. 209). Non-conforming gender identity and performance threatens the socially constructed gender binary, by exposing the gender performance of all people, including the cisgender hegemony (Butler, 2006). Butler (2006) wrote: "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (p. 187).

Similarly, trans people who "pass", that is, who perform their gender identity in such a way that outsiders cannot tell they are trans, "expose the workings of this gender system" (Abbott, 2013, p. 32). The term "passing" has also been used to describe people passing as a different ethnicity (often mixed race passing as white) or sexuality (gay passing as straight). This passing is threatening to society and individuals who have a desire to understand fully the world around them. Whether they pass or not, transgender people are often viewed as inauthentic or even wilfully deceitful when they dress and behave in their gender of choice (Abbott, 2013). This is sometimes taken a step further, where trans people are described or portrayed as though they have malicious intentions or are sexual deviants (Abbott, 2013; Dawson, 2015; Russo, 1987). For many trans people, to be true to themselves (that is, their authentic selves) they must perform a gender that is unexpected or upsetting to the cis majority. Funk and Funk (2016a) argued that society does not allow trans people to be both anonymous (by passing) *and* authentic (by being openly trans) – they must choose one or the other but are most often caught somewhere in the middle.

2.3.7 Conceptions of trans: born in the wrong body?

Discourse surrounding transsexuality is largely biological-determinist, in that it is seen as innate (Lane, 2009). Prosser (1998) and others have put forward the idea that transsexual people have been "born in the wrong body", meaning a male born in the body of a female, or vice versa. Funk and Funk (2016a) have argued this "wrong body" rhetoric does not help the cause of transsexual acceptance in wider society, arguing that it further pathologises trans individuals and their bodies. To have an illegitimate body is a social transgression, and the perpetuation of this type of rhetoric divests gender expansive individuals (who internalise it) from self-determination (Funk & Funk, 2016a; Lane, 2009). Furthermore, Hogan (2004) argued that it is dangerous to imply, using the "wrong body" explanation, that surgical bodily transition will result in a "right body" or a healed body, and a happy ending for trans people. Hayward (2008) also objected to the "wrong body" concept, arguing:

> Transsexuals do not transcend gender and sex. We create embodiment by not jumping *out* of our bodies, but by taking up a fold in our bodies, by folding (or cutting) ourselves, and creating a transformative scar of ourselves….I am always of my tissue even in its ongoing transformation. (p. 73, emphasis in original)

The "wrong body" rhetoric may help some trans individuals articulate their position to outsiders and has been the dominant concept used in media representations of trans people in documentary and reality television and in scripted shows (Serano, 2016). Nonetheless it denies the myriad ways of being transsexual, instead labelling all trans people with the same description, and also largely excludes non-binary people (Hogan, 2004).

The term transgenderism is useful in its inclusivity of a wide range of gender identifications and presentations, in contrast to the male-to-female or female-to-male transsexual (Lane, 2009). As opposed to being born assigned a sex opposite to their gender identity, transgender or gender non-binary people tend towards seeing their gender identity as a choice, with the freedom to experiment and change their gender identity and its expression over time (Donatone & Rachlin, 2013). Rose (2016) added that for many, "transition does not so much mean crossing from one side to the other as hovering in the space in between" (p. 5). Lane (2009) argued that the dichotomy of transsexual/transgender (largely constructed by theorists) does not help either camp

and argued that there is a need for a "critical social theory that helps build a social movement of gender-variant people" (pp. 139-140) rather than creating false divisions. Although she identifies as transsexual and writes with this perspective, Serano (2016) declared the term transgender a useful political term that can bring together different people who have the combined goal of ending discrimination to any and all gender variant individuals.

2.4 Representation on television

2.4.1 Inequality in television production and representation

This section will discuss the ways in which certain groups are excluded from television production processes and representation, later exploring transgender representation specifically. Gaard (1997) argued that social hierarchies and discriminatory structures of oppression are mutually affirmative (Gaard, 1997). For example, sexist and racist writing for television are interdependent and do not exist separate from one another. Sourbati (2004) argued that television should "reflect, and provide for, the information and communication needs of society" (2004, p. 585). Although in western societies ethnic minorities and people who identify as LGBTIQ are in many (not all) cases better represented than ever, the larger part of production power has remained with its traditional keepers: white, straight, cisgender males (GLAAD, 2016). Seventy percent of senior network staff and studio heads in the USA are male, and 90 percent are white (GLAAD, 2016a). Writing in *Time Magazine*, D'Addario (2016) reported that while non-whites account for 38% of the USA population, only 13% of television writers and 19% of directors are ethnic minorities. As the chief cultural producers, straight white males have cast everyone else as the 'other' (Dyer, 2008; hooks, 1992; Russo, 1987).

For many, media representations are the only (sustained) encounters some people have with groups different from themselves, and therefore form the basis of their attitudes towards certain groups (Lester, 2015). Although the average viewer is aware of the fictiveness of television shows, Gerbner and Gross (1976) asserted that there is nevertheless an assumption that what is depicted is anchored in some semblance of reality. The consistent exclusion and misrepresentation of marginalised identity groups is a question of power: Van Dijk (2001a) argued that those who hold the power control discourses and therefore have some degree of control over the minds of recipients. Research suggests that television affects viewers' genuine attitudes.

Garretson (2015), for example, conducted a 30-year study that compared the frequency of depiction of working women, sexual minorities and African-Americans with viewers' social tolerance. He found that tolerance was greater when sexual and ethnic minorities and working women appeared with higher frequency. Viewers' exposure to gay or trans characters, for example, on television (a group with whom they may have no contact in real life) resulted in more tolerant opinions of same-sex relationships (Garretson, 2015; GLAAD, 2016).

They may have been allowed to *exist* on television, but in the past a breadth of experiences has not been permitted for characters who are female, LGBTIQ and/or ethnic minorities (Garretson, 2015). The implications of inclusion versus exclusion in television were put neatly by Gerbner and Gross (1976): "representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation"(p. 186).

2.4.2 The burden of representation

Television writers and producers who aim to tell new stories with diverse casts and characters are held to a higher standard than the writers of mainstream shows that either adhere to a homogenous cast or ensure characters fulfill their ethnic, sexual or gender stereotype. A discussion of stereotypes, their origins and power, and specific stereotypical notions about trans people, will follow in the next section. Mercer (1990) coined the term "the burden of representation" refering to the work of African American artists, but it is applicable in this context also. She asked, if a member of an underrepresented group is "'given' the right-to-speak and a limited space in which to tell your story, is it not the case that there will be an overwhelming pressure to try and tell the whole story all at once?"(Mercer, 1990, p. 62). An overwhelming number of shows depicting underrepresented people (including *Transparent*), be they women, LGBTIQ people, people of colour, and so on, have come under major criticism for failing to adequately represent these groups.

Speaking of queer representation, Kessler (2011) explained "the historical and to some extent continuing dearth of GLBT characters makes each poorly developed character or well-developed exiting character that much more painful" (p. 162). This is a sentiment that is echoed regarding the representation of all marginalised groups. It is clear that those "positioned in the margins of the institutional spaces of cultural production are burdened with the impossible role of speaking as 'representatives' in the sense that they are expected to 'speak for' the ... communities from which they come"

(Mercer, 1990, p. 62). Fuller and Driscoll (2015) insisted, "This is not a standard to which all television shows are held" (p. 255).

2.4.3 Representations of LGBTIQ

The burden of representation stems from the fact that groups which have been excluded from the media or portrayed negatively are likely to suffer from societal inequality, which is both influenced by media representation and also influences representations. Stereotyping of various groups has been shown to be pervasive on screen. Russo (1987) identified a disturbing trend in cinema whereby the few gay, lesbian or trans characters that are included are presented as depressive, immoral, and mentally unstable, and rarely survive to the end credits. Kessler (2011) added that LGBTIQs have been "systematically omitted, vilified, marginalised and/or homogenized on mainstream television" (p. 139). Nonetheless, gay, lesbian and bisexual characters have become familiar over the past two decades, while trans representations have been all but non-existent until recently (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). Television, with its multitudinous channels and endless timeslots to fill, has been more willing to experiment with gay themes than Hollywood, with additional pressure somewhat successfully applied by gay rights activists to portray gays and lesbians more often and not in offensive ways (Kessler, 2011; Russo, 1987). In the 1990s, networks and advertisers recognised the increasingly visible queer customer, and included increasing numbers of LGBTIQ themed shows, and even some LGBTIQ-dedicated cable networks (Ahn, Himberg, & Young, 2014; Kessler, 2011). Baker Netzley (2010) attributes a wave of increased LGBTIQ visibility to Ellen DeGeneres, whose screen character Ellen Morgan became the first gay lead character on a primetime show when she came out on screen in *Ellen* in 1997, right after the actor herself did. However, *Ellen* was cancelled the following season.

2.4.4 Homonormativity and crossing over

When portraying 'diverse' characters, producers tend towards one 'difference' from the 'norm' (white, cis, straight and male), be it sexual, ethnic, or gender, erasing those people who are, for example, queer *and* female or Asian *and* trans (McCall, 2005). Within LGBTIQ communities, Vitulli (2010) argued that homonormativity has dominated activist groups, saying that the white gay male has become the holder of

power and is the most visible in these groups. Ng (2013) argued that the programming of network and streaming website Logo, ostensibly aimed at a LGBTIQ audience, in fact focuses on the tastes of white gay males, essentially further excluding queer communities and pushing a homonormative agenda that is based on consumerism and integration. Homonormativity is a construct that asserts the white, male, gender-conforming experience as the norm, casting LGB people of colour, trans and intersex people as the other (Vitulli, 2010). Joyrich (2014) argued that the 'ideal' gay characters in apparently progressive shows of the late 2000s were products of homonormativity. They acted just like straight people, had monogamous relationships, just like straight people, and were middle-class, white and male (Joyrich, 2014). GLAAD (2016) confirmed the trend is present across most television networks, finding that in 2015, of all LGBTIQ characters, white characters made up 69% on broadcast television, 71% on cable networks, and 73% on streaming providers. Gay men made up 43% of all LGBTIQ characters (GLAAD, 2016).

Orange is the New Black has enjoyed critical acclaim for its diverse cast and storylines, including several queer and one trans woman. However, Caputi (2015) argued that the show failed to truly further diversity in a helpful way in television because the story is told through the eyes of a middle-class white woman, Piper Chapman. Caputi (2015) also recognised that the themes and characterisation of the show fall into easily identifiable racist, transphobic and homophobic stereotypes. These echo the widespread white cultural imperialism that hooks (1992) had previously identified, with black lesbian characters being repeatedly presented as dirty and sex-crazed, in comparison with the white lead character, Piper, who, though bisexual, is white and portrayed as clean and (mostly) dignified. Kessler (2011) argued that people of colour are underrepresented, whether straight and cisgender or LGBTIQ.

In the biographical film *Boys Don't Cry*, about the American trans man Brandon Teena who was murdered, the producers did not include Brandon's friend in real life, Philip DeVine, who was black, disabled and was also killed by the people that murdered Brandon (Dawson, 2015). Dawson (2015) argued that this erasure of blackness and disability is common, but inexcusable. Though the show *Scandal* does depict a black female lead that arguably departs from typical depictions, Erigha (2015) accused the show's black showrunner Shonda Rhimes of being a "crossover success" (p. 13), a term that refers to (usually) African Americans succeeding in a predominantly white setting by downplaying their blackness. Erigha (2015) insisted that Rhimes set her show *Scandal* in a kind of post-race utopia rather than dealing with issues of race head-on,

effectively abandoning the plight of African Americans, many of whom continue to suffer under a racist state. Homonormativity erases LGBTIQ people of colour, and trans people, and diminishes or denies structural discrimination against LGBTIQ (Ng, 2013; Vitulli, 2010). Similarly, depicting a post-race world erases the real struggles of people of colour living in a country with real issues of racism and race-related violence and poverty (Erigha, 2015).

2.4.5 Television networks and the shift to online

Television has traditionally been seen as the most mainstream of media platforms (Joyrich, 2014). However, globalisation and the increased number of networks and platforms for those networks means niche shows can find an audience to sustain them (Ahn et al., 2014). In the 1990s, narrowcasting (shows pitched at niche demographics) meant that the LGBTIQ sector was identified as an untapped market, which is one of the reasons (another being that homosexuality was more widely accepted in American society) shows that featured LBG characters increased in number (Ahn et al., 2014).

The next major shift in television that would impact on LGBTIQ representation was the advent of streaming, web-only television networks like Amazon Prime, Hulu and Netflix (Lotz, 2014). Lotz explained that "the multiplicity of post-network technologies and distribution windows … has enabled an expanded diversity of content" (p. 164). Shows whose subjects or style were too unconventional for network television could now be hosted online where they could find worldwide niche audiences (Lotz, 2014; Robertson et al., 2016). Robertson et al. argued that *Transparent* was commissioned in the first place due to its network, Amazon Prime, being web-based, new on the production scene (originally an e-commerce site that sold books and other goods) and willing to take risks. The show's creator Jill Soloway said that the production process was unlike their previous experiences with traditional networks:

> We have this absolutely unprecedented amount of creative freedom.… [I]t was a really vital and vibrant distribution system that would be able to get the stuff to the people quickly. There was none of that [network] interference … This is nothing like TV! (Lynch, 2014, para. 5)

While Soloway was satisfied with their Amazon deal, Amazon also benefitted from commissioning the show. *Transparent* was a commercial success on the platform, won several high-profile awards, and "established Amazon Studios as a viable producer of

quality television" (Moss, 2016, p. 73). *Transparent* was not the only streaming show that featured LGBTIQ characters. For the first time in their twenty-year history of tracking representation, in 2016 the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation counted LGBTIQ characters on online networks as well as their usual broadcast and cable channels and found that these networks featured a much higher percentage of trans characters than cable or broadcast networks (GLAAD 2016). Capuzza and Spencer (2016) argued that the change in the network structures as online becomes a locus for vibrant and diverse viewing is a key reason for the increased representation of trans people.

2.4.6 Transgender representation

Harmful representations of trans people pervade the culture, not only in television and cinema but in all media. As mentioned in the introduction, the otherwise liberal writer, civil rights leader and political commentator James Baldwin (1956), included this transphobic description of someone who in today's terms would likely identify as a transsexual woman in his acclaimed novel *Giovanni's Room*[3]:

> Sometimes he [sic] actually wore a skirt and high heels. … People said that he [sic] was very nice but I confess that his [sic] utter grotesqueness made me uneasy; perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people's stomachs. They might not mind so much if monkeys did not – so grotesquely – resemble human beings. (p. 30)

This style of dehumanising depiction is also present in more recent television and cinematic depictions of trans people. While any trans depictions are rare, the majority of those that exist ridicule by using negative stereotypes and exploit trans identity for narrative gain (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; Lester, 2015; Saunders, 2014). Such depictions, Saunders (2014) argued, "use transgender identity for a purpose unrelated to transgender issues or commentary" (p. 183).

Kessler (2011) noted that gay, lesbian and bisexual characters in the past tended to be introduced into shows tentatively "via 'very special episodes'" (p. 144) but that they are now introduced earlier and kept on as integral characters rather than as guest stars. Trans characters, however, are for the most part still in this early phase of televisual

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[3] Note that in this quote, [sic] has been used to indicate that the protagonist is using male pronouns when describing the character, but it is not clear from the text whether the character would use female or neutral pronouns.

inclusion, treated as exotic anomalies who make swift exits (Kessler, 2011). Although there has been an increase in trans characters on screen, in 2015 in the USA there were none on broadcast television, three on cable networks and four on streaming (online) networks – these seven characters made up just 2.6 percent of the total LGBTIQ character count (GLAAD, 2016). So, while representation is increasing, progress is slow.

Increased representation also comes with its own risks. Booth (2011) warned that while television has the power to educate audiences about trans people it also has the potential to spread misinformation and sensationalise trans lives. Serano (2016) agreed, saying that when trans identities are used to prop up cisnormative agendas this is a form of erasure of trans lives. Saunders (2014) explained that this approach profits from trans identities, "without giving anything back to the marginalised community" (p. 184).

2.4.7 Casting

A key criticism of the majority of trans depictions is the use of cisgender actors in the roles. Canada's *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (2001– 2010), the United Kingdom's Hit and Miss (2012), and American shows *Glee* (2009 − 2015), *Orange is the New Black (OITNB)* (2013 − 2017), and *Transparent* (2014 −) have all included a trans character as a key player (Caputi, 2015; Lester, 2015; Sandercock, 2015; Villarejo, 2016). The films *TransAmerica* (2005), *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *The Danish Girl* (2015) and *The New Girlfriend* (2014) also feature trans characters (Abbott, 2013; Dawson, 2015; Lester, 2015; San Filippo, 2016). However, of these films and television shows, only one, *OITNB*, cast a trans actor in the role (Laverne Cox as Sophia Burset). The rest use cisgender actors who cross-dress, a point of major contention in trans communities, who have argued that using cisgender actors perpetuates the erasure of trans lives in society and further limits the opportunities of trans actors to get work (Brodesser-Akner, 2014; Caputi, 2015; Sandercock, 2015). The actor and model Hari Nef, who appears in *Transparent*, has argued for producers to hire more trans people to tell trans stories, but conceded that "some recognition is better than no recognition" (Katz, 2015, para. 1).

2.4.8 Conventions, tropes and stereotypes in trans representation

Stereotypes help people apprehend the world around them, providing a short cut to understanding, similar to generalisations and patterns (Dyer, 2009). Seiter (1986) explained that while some claim that stereotypes are based on some grain of truth, this perspective "fails to analyze social origins and ideological motivations" (p. 17). A useful example of how stereotypes function is a dated stereotype that posits that black people are innately unintelligent, not taking into account the history of black people in the USA that has resulted in structural discrimination and barriers to education (Seiter, 1986). Dyer (1999) argued that stereotypes propose and confirm 'our' definitions of 'them', where 'we' are the hegemony (in American society, white, straight, cisgender, middle class) and 'they' are anything that is not 'us' – whether different via ethnicity or nationality, sexuality or gender conformity. Stereotypes provide a barrier to social justice because they prop up the powerful and repress the weak (Dyer, 2009). Stereotypes erase the myriad ways individuals within any given group may exist and live, reducing them to one-note caricatures (Dyer, 2009). Lester (2015) argued that repeated exposure to visual stereotypes can create "misinformed perceptions [in the viewer] that have the weight of established facts" (pp. 143 -144). It is therefore important to identify stereotypes and their origins and challenge them (Dyer, 2009).

Seiter (1986) argued that while popular cultural products are more likely to be accused of using stereotypes, highbrow work (arthouse cinema, literary novels) uses them too, but that in these cases they often are described in different language, for instance, "tropes", "archetypes" or "types". Similarly, stereotypes of white people exist but again are described as "archetypes" (Seiter, 1986). Later in this chapter it will be argued that *Transparent* qualifies as "quality television", as a highbrow production. This positioning may protect the show from being described as stereotypical. While beyond the scope of this thesis to explore in any depth, it is acknowledged that the bias that Seiter (1986) describes may have infiltrated the popular and scholarly rhetoric that surrounds *Transparent* in unquantifiable ways. It is also acknowledged that sometimes common tropes or conventions are used in transgender representations to provide a narrative shorthand to offer context to the audience quickly. Such devices are sometimes problematic, and stereotypical, but Saunders (2014) argued that it is possible for such conventions to be used as "a springboard to explore more sensitive issues" (p. 191).

2.4.9 Dominant trans narratives

Dyer (2009) explained that stereotypes have in-built narratives that do not shift, in contrast with a novelistic character that grows and develops. Stereotypical trans characters come with an in-built narrative of transition that includes coming out, which provides the main source of tension and drama. GLAAD (2016) identified this overemphasis on the transitional process in trans narratives. Serano (2016) argued that the media hyper-feminises and hyper-sexualises trans women, the implication being that trans women exist for the male gaze. Intimate transformational shots of the trans character applying makeup, in the process of dressing in hyper-feminine clothing or surrounded by wigs are common and serve to undermine the character's authentic gender identity (Lester, 2015). This transformational dimension forms the basis of many trans plotlines, although Malatino (2016) argued that OITNB's trans character Sophia Burset is not stereotyped in this way. Burset is an out trans woman from the beginning and is post-operative, and while she is still a victim of transphobic slurs that question her authenticity, the camera's gaze does not.

Dawson (2015) observed a preoccupation with trans bodies on screen and in society, particularly with their sex organs and what medical and surgical transitional measures they have or have not taken. Abbott (2013) argued that directors who reveal the genitals of trans characters, a common practice, are in effect telling the audience they are revealing the 'truth' about the trans character, undermining that character's self-identity and efforts spent to enact that identity. Serano (2016) said that this practice further fetishises trans women.

Representations that lean on the narrative of transition also often perpetuate the "wrong body" rhetoric, and because this is the dominant message in the media it is now the way in which most cisgender people understand the trans experience (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). This is unhelpful as it does not allow for stories about those trans people who do not identify with this metaphor (Funk & Funk, 2016b; Hayward, 2008). It further upholds one particular experience of transgender as being the only experience, limiting "the range of transgender subjectivities available to viewing publics" (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017).

As the overwhelming number of trans characters on screen are hyper-sexualised trans woman, trans men and gender non-binary people are virtually non-existent on screen (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; GLAAD, 2016a; Saunders, 2014). Abbott (2013) attributed this lack to the patriarchal medical establishment's prioritising of trans women who

receive more (largely sexual) attention. This disproportionate representation has resulted in a skewed public perception that "transgender" refers to a trans woman who is attracted to men, ignoring the spectrum of trans identities and sexualities (Abbott, 2013). *Transparent* includes a trans man (played by a trans man actor) in two episodes and this portrayal was both celebrated as a first on television and also criticised for the hyper-sexual narrative he was a part of (Villarejo, 2016). Saunders (2014) celebrated two independent European films that depict young male-identified trans characters, and the television show *Degrassi* and the film *Boys Don't Cry* both feature characters who are trans men and but these four examples are exceptions to the rule (Dawson, 2015, Sandercock, 2015; Saunders, 2014).

Common patterns found when reviewing depictions of trans on screen include: trans characters as tormented victims, or as sex workers or porn stars; or as psychotic villains; and reluctance to depict trans people in romantic scenarios (Caputi, 2015; GLAAD, 2016; Sandercock, 2015). Dawson (2015) observed an extreme reluctance to depict trans people in romantic scenarios. The perpetuation of these tropes has been described as unhelpful at best and dangerous at worst (Malatino, 2016; Russo, 1987). GLAAD (2016) pointed out that for many people, trans characters on screen are their only insights into trans lives, and so the reiteration of negative stereotypes and limited storylines inevitably affects the attitudes of the general population, many of whom have never met a trans person. Sandercock (2015) argued that the perpetuation of "harmful tropes ... reinforces the legitimacy of heterosexual and cisgender people" (p. 437).

2.4.10 Disgust and shock

Lester (2015) identified that trans characters are often exploited in television and cinema to provoke feelings of disgust, which can be enjoyable in the safe form of entertainment. Serano (2016) agreed, writing that most trans representations sensationalise trans bodies to shock and titillate audiences. In *Trans: A Memoir*, Jacques (2015) described a scene in the 1994 Jim Carrey comedy, *Ace Ventura, Pet Detective*. The protagonist (played by Carrey) discovers that a woman he has kissed is in fact a transsexual woman, whose past male identity is implicated in the detective's investigation. He is so disgusted at this discovery he vomits and squeezes toothpaste into his mouth. He later goes to find her, attempts to prove she is a man by ripping her clothing off to reveal breasts and tucked male genitalia (Jacques, 2015). This narrative

used the trans woman to ridicule the detective while calling into question her authentic gender by revealing her genitals. Lester (2015) argued:

> When transpersons are part of storylines that purposely evoke disgust in viewers, whether for dramatic or comedic purposes, the use of disgust becomes another form of pornography while the visual stereotypes shown are difficult for many to erase from their minds. (p. 143)

2.4.11 Trans characters as pathetic, tormented victims

GLAAD (2016) identified the harmfulness of the stereotype of the tragic transsexual. While the types of tragedies these characters endure vary, the message is the same, that to be trans is untenable and will only result in the character's downfall (Abbott, 2013). Generally such characters are ridiculed by the camera's gaze, showing them as grotesque or humorously pathetic (Kaufmann, 2010). Russo (1987) identified the suicides of numerous transsexual characters in his necrology of all LGBTIQ deaths. Funk and Funk (2016a) say that trans people are often portrayed as lacking stability and being emotionally fragile. One example, the character Rayon in *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), combined several problems – played by a cisgender man, Jared Leto, she was a drug-addicted prostitute, both flamboyant and pathetic (Lester, 2015). This harmful, stereotypical character was bad enough, but Leto also won an Academy Award for the performance, which sends a message that the performance and the character were to be respected rather than reviled (Lester, 2015).

2.4.12 Trans people as deceitful and violent

A common trope in trans representation is depicting trans characters as adopting a "gender disguise as a tool for manipulation or deception" (Saunders, 2014, p. 183). Stereotypical portrayals of trans characters often revolve around authenticity and deceit. As mentioned above, the storyline that involved the trans woman in *Ace Venture: Pet Detective* revolved around her inauthenticity in passing as female (Jacques, 2015; Lester, 2015). Russo's (1987) survey of LGBTIQ on screen contains one pithy example of an early (possibly trans) villain: "the transvestite behaviour of Ray Walston's murderous cosmetician in *Caprice* (1967) is his ultimate downfall; he is pushed to his death from a balcony by the virtuous Doris Day" (p. 54). The 1991 thriller *The Silence of the Lambs* revolved around the grotesque plotline of a frustrated transsexual, unable

to get gender reassignment surgery, who murders women for their skin to wear herself (Tharp, 1991). As soon as "A", on the 2015 show *Pretty Little Liars*, is revealed to be transgender, she promptly attempts both murder and suicide (GLAAD, 2016b).

Indeed, the very nature of the mainstream discourse around transgenderism revolves around trickery and inauthenticity, if not murderousness, then at least untrustworthiness (Abbott, 2013). Funk and Funk (2016) agree that trans people are often seen as deceitful: they may appear to be one sex when they are, to outsiders without the knowledge required to understand transgenderism, 'truly' another. Many depictions lean heavily on the anxieties of cisgender, heterosexual males who fear being 'tricked' by trans women into sleeping with them (Abbott, 2013; Sandercock, 2015). Lester (2015) argued that trans people who successfully pass represent an unconscious attack on heterosexual cisgender male supremacy, and it is in defending against this attack that violence against trans people (on screen and in life) is justified. Funk and Funk (2016a) and Malatino (2016) argued that trans people are in a double-bind: if they disclose their status as trans they are seen as inauthentic pretenders, and if they do not disclose it they are at constant risk of discovery and its consequences.

2.4.13 Conflation of sexuality and gender expression

Dawson (2015) observed that in both the American biopic *Boys Don't Cry* and the German film *Unveiled*, straight cisgender men (incorrectly) use terms that refer to sexuality in regard to the trans characters, conflating gender identity with sexuality. In both films the trans characters are attacked (and one is killed) by cisgender men for the social transgression of being trans (Dawson, 2015). Sandercock (2015) identified similar interactions in *Degrassi* and *Glee*, with trans characters being told by others what they are ('really' a boy, or 'really' a girl), highlighting the fact that outsiders often view trans people as deceitful types who want to trick people. Indeed Unique, the male-to-female trans character in *Glee*, is even assumed to be gay by the show's prominent gay character Kurt, who is then educated by Unique (Sandercock, 2015).

While in *OITNB* Burset has limited opportunities to call out transphobia and educate her peers (along with television viewers), she is ultimately the victim of horrendous discriminatory treatment, from both her fellow prison inmates and the prison guards (Caputi, 2015; Malatino, 2016). Malatino (2016) argued that such plotlines serve to reaffirm cisgender hegemony as 'good' and transgender as a hopeless and unviable mode of existence. Sandercock (2015) asserted that *Degrassi* achieves a more helpful

framing of trans issues; when characters act out transphobia they are positioned as in the wrong and the viewer is invited to feel disgust at them and empathise with the trans character Adam. But ultimately, Adam is killed in a car accident, a method of making trans invisible once more without the use of transphobic violence (Sandercock, 2015).

2.4.14 Sex workers

Trans women are disproportionately characterised as sex workers. Abbott (2013) conceded that sex work and pornography *are* some of the limited employment opportunities on offer to many trans women, but complained that screen representations exaggerate the proportion of trans people who do sex work. Depictions of trans sex workers as fascinating and attractive but ultimately pathetic and disposable rarely explore the economic precarity that is very common among trans individuals due to social and structural discrimination that forces them into this type of work (Abbott, 2013; GLAAD, 2016; Lester, 2015). An exception is the film *Tangerine* (2015), which revolves around two sex workers in Los Angeles over one evening. The tone of the portrayal makes it a refreshing, positive portrayal. The characters drive the story, are funny and, while not in an ideal life situation, they are never depicted cruelly (Grobar, 2015).

2.4.15 The trans/romance dilemma

Abbott (2013) argued that the trans/romance dilemma derails most otherwise progressive filmic depictions of trans. She explained that filmmakers have such anxiety over audience perception of the trans character's gender and perceived transgression, that even where romance and intimacy would logically ensue they avoid it entirely (Abbott, 2013). Exceptions exist to this rule but these are the domain of arthouse cinema such as the experimental French film *The New Girlfriend* (San Filippo, 2016).

Sandercock (2015) explains that according to the dominant discourse, trans is seen and portrayed as inauthentic, so it follows that romance involving a trans person is automatically regarded as transgressive. San Filippo (2016) noted that in the Hollywood film *The Danish Girl*, based on the real lives of trans woman Lili Elbe and her partner Gerda Wegener, a voracious sex life was portrayed but only before Lili's transition. She also concluded that this sanitising for the benefit of audiences also

"unqueers" Gerda, who was in fact known for her sexual fluidity and remained with Lili after her transition. Abbott (2014) argued that both in real life and on screen, cisgender sexual attraction to a trans person is either a joke or deception that justifies violence.

Sandercock (2015) argued that in the television show *Glee* the trans character Unique is depicted as asexual. When she falls in love with a cisgender teenage boy, the potential for romance is not shown as a possibility, while every other character is offered love stories at different times. Malatino (2016) argued that trans woman Sophia Burset, in the midst of the "lesbian prison-porn" (p. 104) of *OITNB*, is portrayed as a prim handmaiden to her female prison co-inmates, her marriage to the mother of her son a companionable friendship with no romance or desire. Abbott (2013) identifies warm, romantic storylines involving trans characters in the films *TransAmerica* and *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, but in both instances these are cut haltingly short, with physical contact avoided even at the cost of plotline believability. Abbott (2013) argued that television and film depictions of trans are often ground-breaking for the very fact of telling a trans story, but they ultimately delegitimise the trans character's gender identity when they "avoid the taint of sexual deviancy" (p. 35).

2.4.16 The camera's gaze

The feminist Laura Mulvey (1989) argued that most mainstream media was constructed with a "male gaze", a concept that she particularly applied to the objectification and fetishisation of women's bodies on screen. This concept has been extended to describe the way the camera (in television as well as cinema) can either objectify or sympathise with characters (Jones, 2010). Sandercock argued that most shows that include trans themes have adopted a "cisgender gaze [which] 'fixes' transness, thus rendering trans people as knowable and legible curiosities, shoring up binaries of ... cis/trans" (p. 441). Lester (2015) argued that when trans people are used to shock and disgust, audience members are invited to feel superior to the object of disgust. This style of representation further others trans people in the material world.

However, it is possible to represent trans themes and characters in ways that are not cisnormative, and complete avoidance of trans issues is not necessary (Halberstam, 2000). Sandercock (2015) argued that when trans characters are depicted as victims this often echoes real trans experiences, so it is not the answer to simply avoid this angle completely. There are positive examples of trans representation. The first is *Boys*

Don't Cry, a true story about a trans man, Brandon Teena, who is murdered. Lester (2015) argued that the camera's gaze shows confidence in Brandon and tries to comprehend him. It does not avoid transition themes or the body, for example, Brandon is shown binding his breasts (Halberstam, 2000). The second example is Chloe Sevigny as a trans woman assassin in the Netflix show *Hit and Miss*. In one scene, she showers, and the camera shows her penis naturalistically, in a way that does not inspire shock. Finally, *Tangerine* (2015) depicts trans people as sex workers, but the trans gaze encourages the audience to care about the main characters rather than to ridicule or feel superior to them (Grobar, 2015). Lester (2015) argued that these portrayals tell us that producers need not avoid the trans body or trans themes altogether, but rather should depict trans people in ways that are not sensationalising or shocking.

2.4.17 The importance of trans representation

While this has been touched on earlier, it is important to reiterate just why trans representation on television is considered crucial for the equality of trans people. Television has the power to transform attitudes and resulting behaviours in both positive and negative ways (Garretson, 2015; Jensen & Oster, 2009). The mass media contributes more than, for example, interactions with other people, or books, to the stereotypes one holds regarding trans people (Lester, 2015). Trans people experience more barriers to health care and employment and are victims of violence and murder at higher rates than cisgender people (Bauer et al., 2009; Vitulli, 2010). In cases of violence against trans people, Lester (2015) described how defendants have justified their actions by arguing they were so disgusted upon realising the victim was trans that they panicked and lashed out. This defence has successfully convinced jurors that the defendant was 'tricked' and that the victim deserved the violence they received (Lester, 2015). This example demonstrates that, for some, trans people are not entitled to the same rights of safety and access as cisgender people.

As stated above, the transphobia present in American culture means that a trans person who passes is perceived as reasonably deserving of violence if found out (Abbott, 2013). If the cisgender majority are "challenged to examine the bases for their personal prejudices" (p. 144) they will develop better understanding of and respect for trans people as equals (Lester, 2015). It is then possible that trans people will experience an opening up of opportunities and reduced risk of attack, similar to the

social change lesbian, gay and bisexual people have experienced over the past three decades (Lester, 2015).

It is also important for the mental health and self-esteem of trans people that they see positive representation of similar people (Battis, 2008). Stereotypes and harmful depictions can cause negative psychological effects on trans people, who, due to a lack of resources in schools and support from health care providers and society generally, often rely on television depictions for information about their identities (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015; Lester, 2015). Better representation of trans people has the power to transform the self-esteem and mental health of viewers, which will have positive implications on such viewers' lives as they move through the world as trans (Craig et al., 2015).

2.4.18 Progressive trans representation

When discussing the need for progressive representation of trans people and underrepresented groups generally, academic discourse revolves around variety and fully fleshed characterisation and realism versus stereotypes and tropes. Progressive television depictions of transgender people should feature more people of colour, gender non-binary people as well as trans women and men, and trans people of "different ages, economic statuses, and sexual orientations" (GLAAD, 2016, p. 27). It must also depict characters in ways that are realistic, nuanced and varying, without relying on stereotypes or tropes (Battis, 2008; GLAAD, 2016; Kessler, 2011). It should avoid making a character's transition process their only source of narrative, and never exploit the trans character for shock value or to provoke disgust from the audience (Abbott, 2013; Lester, 2015). It should adopt a trans gaze, that seeks to know the character and empathise with them and place them on an equal footing with cisgender characters (Halberstam, 2000; Lester, 2015). In writing about the progress seen in trans representations in independent cinema, Halberstam (2005) observed that contemporary transgender depictions have:

> … moved from a tricky narrative device designed to catch an unsuspecting audience off guard to truly independent productions within which gender ambiguity is not a trap or a device but part of the production of new forms of heroism, vulnerability, visibility and embodiment. (p. 96)

Independent cinema has traditionally offered up a wider diversity of people and narratives than mainstream cinema and television. One might hope that such cinema is leading a trend towards more nuanced representations generally. His perspective is helpful to bear in mind when discussing what new representations ought to be like. Rather than simply asking that trans representations not be derrogatory, Halberstam (2005) argues that they can be transformative, creative and challenging, adding new depth and variety to media depictions and expanding the potential for creative gender expression in society.

2.5 *Transparent:* Popular and scholarly reception

2.5.1 A critically acclaimed masterpiece?

Transparent has been widely acclaimed by audiences, the press and some scholars. It was created by Jill Soloway, who also directed eight of the first season's ten episodes and is the show's executive producer. *Transparent* revolves around 70-year-old trans woman Maura (born Mort) Pfefferman and her three adult children, Ali, Josh and Sarah. As Maura transitions, each of the children grapples with this new information and experiments with their own gender and sexual identities. *The New Yorker* described the show as a "stealth masterpiece" (Nussbaum, 2016, para. 2), while in *Film Quarterly* Villarejo (2016) declared the show "completely revolutionary" (in article title). In the *New York Times Magazine*, Brodesser-Akner (2014) asserted that rather than introducing a trans person as a marginal character to ease audiences into trans awareness, as Kessler (2011) said is common practice, Soloway, the show's creator, attempted instead to "fast-forward past the incremental water-testing that network TV has historically applied to shifts like this…She [sic] wants to give her [sic] viewers a fully realized trans character" (para. 2).

2.5.2 *Transparent's* place in the television landscape: quality television

According to Moss (2016) and Villarejo (2016), *Transparent* fits the definition of quality television. Cardwell (2007) argued that quality television can be identified by any given show's possession of certain attributes, including "high production values, weighty themes and careful characterisations and performances" (p. 26), all of which *Transparent* has been assessed as possessing (Nussbaum, 2016; Villarejo, 2016). Cardwell (2007) noted that a tone of awkward discomfort is common among quality

television shows, and Johnson (2005) suggested a preoccupation with "contemporary anxieties" as a hallmark trait. Moss (2016) has described the show as a "transcomedy", funny but without the punchlines or tidy resolutions of a sitcom. He wrote, "The audience waits for a clear comedic catharsis that never comes" (Moss, 2016, p. 79).

Driscoll and Fuller (2015) noted that while themes of troubled masculinity have dominated quality television, HBO's *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), heralded a new age where female-centric shows could be described as quality television. The contemporary show *Girls* (to which *Transparent* is often compared) is also viewed as quality television: its selfish, insecure characters are difficult to watch, are often naked but not Hollywood-bodied, and the show's writing demonstrates modern feminist themes in difficult ways (Fuller & Driscoll, 2015). Another trait of quality television is the foregrounding of the show's creator, as we have seen with *The West Wing*'s creator and screenwriter Aaron Sorkin, with *Girls'* creator/director/producer Lena Dunham and with *Transparent's* Soloway (Cardwell, 2007; Fuller & Driscoll, 2015; Levy, 2015; Woods, 2015). This focus positions each show as the unique product of an individual creative vision rather than a generic, network-produced show (Woods, 2015).

2.5.3 The gaze

An aspect of *Transparent* that has been widely commented on is the camera's gaze. Kagan (2015) offered that the show's lesbian sex scenes featuring Amy (married to a man) and her lesbian once-ex, now current lover, are salacious but never "pandering to the dynamics of a male gaze" (p. 6). Villarejo (2016) pointed out that while arthouse cinema has often employed a female gaze, "it's never been done before in such a sustained way on the small screen"(p. 10). In a *New Yorker* profile, Levy (2015) reported that Soloway aims to direct with the female gaze, "creating conditions for inspiration to flourish" (para. 7). Villarejo (2016) also argued, however, that the camera's generosity to Maura and her transition is not extended to her brattish children, going one step further by concluding that the show reveals a "trans gaze". She said that "Soloway grants Maura a nurturing space of trans emergence" providing a protected world for Maura to emerge unhindered by transphobia (p. 10). Soloway gave a keynote masterclass at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2016 called The Female Gaze (Soloway, 2016) and at times claims they are representing a "queer gaze". They argued for a "subjective camera that attempts to get inside the protagonist, especially when the protagonist is not a [cisgender male]". Villarejo

(2016) said that while a sustained female gaze is present in many examples of arthouse independent films, it is rare to see it carried out so clearly in a television show as it is in *Transparent*.

2.5.4 Coming out and transitioning

Although Kagan (2015) described the scene where Maura comes out to her daughter as "astonishly moving" (p. 6), Funk and Funk (2016a, 2016b) have criticised the show for its focus on Maura's need to come out in the first place. Their position was that the practice of coming out presumes that trans people owe a warning or an admission (as though guilty of something) to cisgender friends and family for their gender identity. Funk and Funk (2016b) further argued that coming out "serves to make the world a better place for cisgender individuals, not the trans person" and indeed, Maura's transition serves as a catalyst for her children's own journeys of sexual and gender self-discovery (Freedman, 2016). If transgender is viewed by society as an inauthentic performance (Abbott, 2013; Dawson, 2015;) then, as Funk and Funk (2016b) would have it, it is unhelpful for the *Transparent* writers to emphasise the coming out process.

2.5.5 Psychology, psychiatry and remembrance

For shedding light on the grim role psychiatry has played in the pathologisation of trans people, Robertson et al. (2016) have applauded the show. *Transparent* has flashbacks to Maura's mother Rose and trans aunt Gittel (nee Gershon) in 1930s Berlin at the research institute of Dr Magnus Hischfeld, who was in reality a pioneer in the study of gender and sexuality. The institute is raided by Nazis and the family attempts to leave, but Gittel is tragically left behind. Robertson et al. (2016) outlined the particular abuse and murder of queer prisoners in concentration camps (including experimental 'treatment') and the fact that Germany's anti homosexual laws persisted for decades after the war. These laws were informed by the homo- and transphobic pathologisation of gay and trans traits (Funk & Funk, 2016a; Robertson et al., 2016).

2.5.6 Demography

Both Villarejo (2016) and Funk and Funk (2016a) identified that the show takes place in a fictional, unrealistically and overwhelmingly white and wealthy Los Angeles. The

focus is on Maura's individual, particular transition rather than on a typical trans community, which Funk and Funk (2016a) argued ignores, and therefore erases, the real struggle of trans people and particularly trans people of colour, who have been pathologised and discriminated against.

2.5.7 Casting and ownership

Transparent has also not escaped serious criticism from trans advocates. At an LGBTIQ media event Soloway was challenged by an activist who took issue with the casting of cisgender man Jeffrey Tambor in the lead role of the male-to-female trans Maura Pfefferman (Brodesser-Akner, 2014). This sentiment has been echoed in *The Advocate* and elsewhere with some calling the practice of cisgender actors playing trans characters "transface", comparing it to the now outmoded, racist white performances of black characters (Reynolds, 2015). As already noted, Hari Nef, an actor who plays a part in flashback scenes in the show, has said "trans people deserve the opportunity to tell our own stories" (Katz, 2015, para. 5). In a video interview with *The Guardian*, Soloway said, "I was ignorant about the economic crisis for trans people and how hard it is for trans people to get work" (Moylan, 2016, 0.32). In an article in *The Atlantic*, James (2014) described the dilemma that faces producers and those advocating for more casting of trans actors; cis actors are cast in trans roles because there are more cis actors with name recognition than trans, but trans actors will never become feasible options if they are never cast. She also noted that trans roles are "Oscar-bait" to actors, adding that Hilary Swank and Jared Leto won Academy Awards for their roles as trans people in *Boys Don't Cry* and *Dallas Buyers Club* respectively. Indeed Tambor himself has won two Emmy awards for his role as Maura, but unlike Leto, who neglected to acknowledge the trans community and whose role (as already discussed) perpetuated several negative stereotypes, Tambor has used his platform to implore producers to cast more trans actors, saying as he received one award "Please give transgender talent a chance" (Kornhaber, 2016, para. 1). Beyond casting, before Soloway came out as identifying as gender non-binary, they also expressed awareness that some may feel that as a cisgender woman they too were not entitled to tell trans stories (Brodesser-Akner, 2014).

The employment and production practices of the show have developed as Soloway and their team became more educated about trans issues. Soloway enacted a "transfirmative action" hiring programme, effectively considering trans candidates for

production crew jobs over cisgender people (Brodesser-Akner, 2014; Nussbaum, 2016). However it wasn't until the second season was in production that Soloway hired the show's first trans writer, the musician Our Lady J (Ennis, 2014; Holpuch, 2014).

2.5.8 Conclusion and research question

This review aimed to synthesise the scholarship around transgender realities, including the way the cisgender majority views and treats trans people. The social, economic and health care barriers that face trans people were identified along with dominant trans discourse, particularly the "wrong body" rhetoric. Next it was argued that good quality representation can be a pathway for greater visibility and an expansion of rights and opportunities for marginalised groups, and specifically trans people. The ways in which the shift of network television to online has affected representation was then explained. Transgender stereotypes and tropes were identified and problematised, balanced by the identification of the trans or female gaze, which can be the catalyst for positive depictions. This culminated in a discussion of what progressive transgender representation should look like. Finally, themes that emerged from scholarly and popular reception of *Transparent* were presented with particular focus on its portrayal of transgender people. This initial research has culminated in the following research question which will guide the thesis: "In what ways is the television show *Transparent* a progressive depiction of transgender realities?"

Chapter three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework used in carrying out the research, namely critical discourse analysis (CDA). The key tenets of CDA will be discussed, along with how they apply to the present research. Insights from transgender, queer and feminist studies that have influenced the research will then be related. While queer and trans theories have built on the work done in feminist studies, these fields disagree on many points, sometimes necessarily rejecting aspects that are exclusionary. Each field has provided useful touchpoints throughout the study, particularly because they appear to have influenced the writers of the show. Once the theoretical framework has been described and justified, the data collection method of critical incident technique (CIT) and methods of analysis will be laid out. Finally limitations of the study will be identified.

3.1.1 Qualitative paradigm and interpretivist model

This is a qualitative research project using an interpretivist approach. While this approach necessarily lacks the precision of quantitative, positivist research, it allows for depth of insight and flexibility of trajectory (Silverman, 2013). An interpretivist approach accepts that the researcher is an active participant rather than a neutral observer, bringing their own perspectives and biases to the research (Walliman, 2011). Interpretivism is most often used to study society and human behaviour. Rather than looking for discrete, countable data from a purely objective standpoint, interpretivist research allows for the myriad viewpoints of people in the world, disavowing the idea that there is one universal truth (Walliman, 2011). The goal of this study is to "uncover [the] underlying meanings" embedded within the "value-laden data" found in the three seasons of the television show *Transparent* (Walliman, 2011, p. 75). This research will use inductive reasoning, meaning observations around particular parts of the show will be used to make moderatum generalisations to answer the research question (Payne & Williams, 2005). Moderatum generalisations are claims that are moderate both in scope and intensity, avoiding inferring more than is reasonable from observed features (Payne & Williams, 2005).

3.1.2 Methodological approach: Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

CDA is a research perspective concerned with power, ideology and discourse. Where discourse analysis is concerned with closely analysing grammar, semantics and other linguistic elements, CDA takes a critical perspective, in that it seeks to reveal underlying struggles for power that can be found within discourse (Lê & Lê, 2009; Wodak, 2001). Central to CDA is a critical focus on social problems and providing solutions to these problems (Fairclough, 2001a) – specifically, on where and how social out-groups are dominated and/or empowered by those in power through discourse. The goal of CDA is to systematically investigate and decipher the ways in which language is used to maintain and reproduce or challenge power structures (Tenorio, 2011; Wodak, 2001). Along these lines, Fairclough (2001a) argued that CDA aims to not only uncover unjust treatment and domination but also to free socially excluded groups, including, for example, ethnic minorities, women and sexual minorities.

3.1.3 Why CDA?

CDA, with its goal of analysing discourse to reveal ideologies and power, is the appropriate theoretical framework to analyse how transgender people are depicted on the television show *Transparent*. Transgender people can be described as a gender minority who are often socially excluded and discriminated against (Funk & Funk, 2016b; Grant et al., 2011; Halberstam, 2000). Television is a powerful channel for social discourses, and, to date, transgender people have experienced limited, stereotypical and negative television representation (Morrison, 2010; Russo, 1987; Sandercock, 2015). With growing representation, the way transgender people are portrayed is increasingly of concern to trans communities. These representations have the power to educate audiences, perpetuate or break down stereotypes, and improve social acceptance for trans people. Other connected aspects of CDA are relevant to this reading of *Transparent*. These will be briefly identified below.

3.1.4 Interdisciplinary nature of CDA

Wodak (2001) held that CDA is necessarily interdisciplinary, and Fairclough (2001) suggested further that CDA is in "dialogical relationship with other social theories and methods" (p. 121). While CD analysts share an interest in critically engaging with texts, Wodak (2001) carefully noted that researchers within CDA draw on multiple

theories and use multiple methods aimed at multiple datasets. Lê and Lê (2009) agreed that although early CD analyses were Euro-centric, CDA is able to be used successfully across cultures and disciplines. Wodak (2001) supported this notion, arguing that CDA is an open theoretical framework rather than a closed or dogmatic theory. Rather than using CDA and another theory separately, these should each inform and advance the other (Fairclough, 2001). This study will draw on key concepts from queer and trans theory to clarify the perspective of the analysis.

3.1.5 Television as discourse

This section will justify the inclusion of a television show within the various forms "discourse" might take. CDA provides a framework with which to analyse discourse in its broadest sense; rather than linguistic analysis, which might focus on words or sentence structures, CDA is concerned with communicative events (Wodak, 2001). Key scholars each have their own definitions and types of discourse, which have contributed to the position of critics such as Widdowson (1995), who argued that discourse analysis and CDA in particular were fashionable but without a solid base. In fact, across the main CDA scholars there appears to be more consensus than disagreement. Gee (2014) uses the term Discourse (which he capitalises) to incorporate the ways people combine language, interactions and beliefs to "enact a particular … socially recognizable identity" (p. 46). He asserts that knowledge is produced by the use of "sign systems", which include not only language but also other communicative methods like equations, imagery and music. This supports Wodak (2001), who stated that discourse encompasses non-verbal communication as well as verbal and written language, for example, body language and visual language such as art or fashion. The processes of production, reception and understanding can also be seen as forms of discourse, as can a social dimension; discourse is controlled and purposeful, and is a social action happening in a context, which dictates the style and content of what is spoken (Van Dijk, 2001a). This study approaches the television show as an entire communicative event, considering the process by which it has been produced and its critical and popular reception.

3.1.6 Semiotics of discourse

Fairclough (2001) offered that all communication practices have a meaning-making or semiotic component; texts can be read as symbols or signs for other information or

meanings, including ideologies. The basis of Fairclough's particular brand of CDA revolves around the semiotic aspect of discourse, genres and style. Genre denotes types of social activity, for example, giving a speech, interviews, or talk between friends. Style is the *way* a social actor performs their position. Identities are partly defined by one's practice, but people "who differ in social class, in gender, in nationality, in ethnic or cultural membership produce different 'performances' of a particular position" (Fairclough, 2001a, p. 123). So Fairclough (2001) is interested in what, exactly, is expressed, the context in which it is expressed, and the way it is performed. This provides a solid foundation to address *Transparent*: *what* is the show telling its audience, what is the *context* for its production, and *how* does it tell what it is telling?

3.1.7 Hegemonic discourse

The dominant modes of behaviour, assumptions, beliefs and their resulting social actions are the discourse of any given realm, for example, the discourse of politics, the discourse of classical music, or the discourse of videogames (Fairclough, 2001a; Wodak, 2001). Fairclough (2001) describes this as an order of discourse; there is a social structuring of the different ways of meaning-making, and the way which is most popular or common becomes the dominant order of discourse in opposition to marginal or alternative styles. A particular style of making meaning within an order of discourse may be the hegemonic way, but hegemony will always be contested in hegemonic struggle – the order of discourse is always at risk of evolving and a new style becoming the hegemony (Fairclough, 2001a). This is a relevant concept in that the television show *Transparent* could be challenging, shaping and contributing to the discourse of sexual and gender minorities.

3.1.8 Language as social practice, language as power

Similarly, Fairclough (2001a) argued that language as social practice both reproduces and maintains dominant structures and "has the potential to transform them" (p. 122). Wodak (2001) agreed, saying that language can subvert or challenge power and alter distributions of power. Every social practice includes, according to Fairclough (2001), productive activity, means of production, social relations, social identities, cultural values, consciousness, and semiosis. These components are "dialectically related" (p. 123) in that they are each a part of the other, not disparate, separable elements

(Fairclough, 2001a). Rather than *Transparent* being simply an entertainment product, interviews with creator Soloway and others involved in the production of the show indicate that the intention of *Transparent* is to transform social structures through discourse (Brodesser-Akner, 2014; Moylan, 2016). The production also contributes to actively improving the lot of trans communities, and hiring record numbers of trans people for the show's cast, crew and writing team (Villarejo, 2016). While not the primary focus of the analysis, knowledge of the show's production enables a more accurate reading of the show's content.

3.1.9 CDA as a method

Fairclough (2001a) held that CDA can be used both as a theoretical framework and a method, however Van Dijk (2001b) argued that CDA is a critical research perspective rather than a method. He prefers the term "Critical Discourse Studies" (CDS) when speaking about the practical application of CDA. Wodak (2001) agreed that CDA is a perspective, not a specific method of analysis. There is a general consensus that research undertaken under the banner of CDA utilises various methods (Lê & Lê, 2009; Wodak, 2001). The methods used for this study will be outlined later in this section, and include a grounding in certain methods described by CD analysts Machin and Mayr (2012), synthesised with other scholarly methods as appropriate.

3.1.10 Limitations of CDA

CDA is not without its critics, and even its proponents have voiced concerns about its efficacy as a research framework, with its bold goals of encouraging positive social change (Tenorio, 2011; Wodak, 2001). Van Dijk recognised that CDA's audacious social justice goals meant it was even more important for CDA scholars to produce rigorous work. Martin (2004) argued that CD analysts should not just study material that shows an abuse of language and power, but also texts that are constructive. This perspective has prompted, in part, the present study, given that *Transparent* appears to have the goal of promoting positive representation of trans people on television.

Tenorio (2011) said that a potential weakness of CDA is its myriad theoretical roots and the various disciplines it employs. Widdowson (1995), too, considered CDA to be biased and unprincipled, arguing that CDA produces loose interpretations and simplistic results. Van Dijk (2001b) responded to this concern by saying that such

weakness is entirely avoidable if scholars are explicit about their positioning and their methods. According to Tenorio (2011), CD analysts ought to take a critical attitude towards their own methods, be explicit about their methodology, which must be replicable, and apply consistent principles and systematic linguistic theory. Furthermore, Wodak (2001) urged scholars to recognise that they too are situated within social structures, and are, as researchers, in privileged positions. Researchers need to be aware of their own motives and identity-position and name them to avoid criticism and in the interests of transparency. In sum, pitfalls are easily avoided if researchers take the appropriate care with their methodology and reporting.

3.1.11 Insights from transgender, queer and feminist studies

Elements from feminist, queer and transgender studies provide an important framework for this analysis. These schools disagree on several issues, therefore only the specific influences and themes pertinent to the study will be outlined here. Representation has been a key issue for feminist scholars, with concepts introduced thirty years ago concerning women's representation, developed further by anti-racist scholars and others to apply to other marginalised groups. Queer and transgender studies have both built on feminist work and rebelled against it, particularly against the vitriolic work by Raymond (1979) advancing the idea that trans women are pretenders who ought to be rejected and scorned by feminists. Work by Butler (2006) and Halberstam (1998) provides a solid foundation for concepts around gender and gender non-conforming and upon which modern queer studies have been developed.

Also pertinent, the show itself explicitly features gender studies rhetoric and queer theory (Levy, 2015; Villarejo, 2016). This is most often done through Ali's storyline. Ali is the youngest daughter of Maura (the main character of the show). She begins attending university gender studies classes with curiosity and enthusiasm, and mixes with a variety of queer and politically progressive women and men. The show also appears to colonise the discourse of scholarly feminism and queer studies, particularly in storylines with Maura's trans peers, and one episode (*Man on the Land*) even highlights the tension between Raymond's (1980) sentiment, lived out by older radical feminists, and modern, trans-supportive feminism (Liebegott and J. Soloway, 2015). Therefore, it is appropriate to engage with the text from a place of understanding the ideological framework the show itself was built on.

3.1.12 Representation

Salient to this study is the issue of representation. CDA theorists Machin and Mayr (2012) address the importance of representation within any given discourse. Social actors communicate part of their message and ideology simply by *who* is represented, even if the ideology is never overtly articulated. Machin and Mayr said, "There is no neutral way to represent a person" (2012, p. 77). Similarly, there are always reasons for why those who are not represented, are not. This research will look at how *Transparent* represents transgender people, including how well the storylines reflect trans lives, and what actors are cast in the show.

Early feminist theories provided the groundwork for how to critically analyse the representation of women and other marginalised groups. Mulvey (1989) coined the phrase the "male gaze", arguing that the dominant viewpoint in Western written and visual media is that of a man, utilising women as decoration or titillation. Halberstam (2000) argued that a trans gaze was constructed in the film *Boys Don't Cry*, describing it as being achieved when the audience is looking with the trans character, not at them. *Transparent* showrunner Soloway (2016) gave a keynote at the Toronto International Film Festival entitled The Female Gaze, in which they argued that the female gaze is not the opposite of the male gaze, but a new, empathetic, nuanced gaze, particularly when depicting women and LGBTIQ people.

Other work has focused on proportionate representation and harmful stereotyping in television and cinema (Van Zoonen, 1994). Although some early feminists focused on the status of white women predominantly, many of the concepts that were developed are applicable today in a broader, more inclusive style of feminism (Steeves, 1987). Anti-racist and feminist scholar Crenshaw (1989) introduced the term intersectionality, identifying the double jeopardy that comes with being both a woman *and* black. This concept has been developed further to interrogate the way all aspects of identity (including ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, ability/disability, amongst others) can interact to result in multiple oppressions or sources of societal privilege (Bailey, 2004; McIntosh, 1988). Intersectionality has been a lens employed in modern television studies by Erigha (2015), Caputi (2015) and Silva and Mendes (2015).

3.1.13 Gender and transgender

Concepts relating to gender and transgender have informed modern scholarly understanding including within communication studies, but these ideas are being

constantly challenged and reframed. Butler (2006) argued that the gender binary of female/male is a social construct. She observed that gender identity is "performatively produced" through one's dress, hairstyle, and manner of moving and speaking (p. 34). Family, friends, schools and the media police this performance from when one is very young, stamping out irregular behaviour where the gender performance is incongruous with one's birth sex. The performance produces the illusion of gender-as-innate, in other words that the gendered traits appear to come from the inner core of the self rather than from learned behaviours.

Sellberg (2009) proposes that Butler's (2006) position that gender is a social construct limits the perceived authenticity of transgender experience of gender. According to Sellberg, the fear of being perceived as inauthentic is at the root of transgender studies' anxiety around gender-as-fiction. Furthermore, Lane (2009) identified the tension between the idea that trans people are breaking down the gender binary (in that their identity and expression opposes their birth sex), and the idea that trans people (especially those who identify as male or female rather than non-conforming) in effect reinforce the binary. Lee (2016) developed this idea further, developing theory with concrete examples that show that trans people are often expected by peers to rebel against the gender binary, while living in a transphobic society means that adhering to the binary results in greater prospects and safety. While no resolution or consensus has been arrived, all of these notions inform the critical viewing of the television show.

3.2 Data collection

This section will outline the data collection procedure used. It will describe the initial foray into thematic analysis and its eventual exchange for critical incident technique (CIT). CIT will be introduced, and the ways it was applied to the dataset will be laid out.

3.2.1 Critical Incident Technique

Figuring out the best way to collect and analyse the data proved to be a case of trial and error. Initially a test was made using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) but coding scenes and key moments by theme did not serve to help answer the research question, it merely stated the obvious. This was nonetheless a useful process to go

through as I familiarised myself thoroughly with the text, further identified key themes, and ruled the method out only after doing thorough coding of the first season.

It became clear to me that not every scene was relevant to my finding a response to the research question, and that some scenes were more relevant than others. Key scenes were therefore identified using Flanagan's (1954) CIT. Initially developed to examine critical events in the workplace, CIT often relies on interviews with practitioners, in Flanagan's case, pilots in World War II (Flanagan, 1954). It has since been used widely in the analysis of incidents in nursing practice, marketing, social work and other fields (Borgen, Amundson, & Butterfield, 2008). Hughes, Williamson and Lloyd (2007) use CIT for its flexibility, straightforward approach and its well proven, clearly defined guidelines for data collection and analysis. Flanagan (1954) stated that CIT was a "flexible set of principles which must be modified and adapted to meet the specific situation at hand" (p. 335). While CIT is not commonly used in communication studies, it proved to be a useful method to select the appropriate data to be analysed, with some adaptations to meet the present research requirements.

Flanagan (1954) offered that "an incident is critical if it makes a significant contribution, either positively or negatively, to the general aim of the activity" (p. 338). Adjusted to the present research, an incident or scene is critical if it significantly highlights a key theme or themes that can help to answer the research question.

The five steps outlined by Borgen, Amundson and Butterfield (2008) were adapted for this research. The key difference in this adaptation was that the fourth and fifth steps were combined.

Step 1: Ascertain the general aims of the study

The research question must be clearly stated. In this case, the question is: In what ways is the television show *Transparent* a progressive depiction of transgender realities?

This question asks *how* transgender realities are depicted in the show, and then asks if this depiction is progressive, or, in other words, represents transgender characters in more varied and nuanced ways, thus helping a general audience to better understand transgender. A progressive depiction also avoids depicting trans people in offensive or stereotypical ways (as outlined in the literature review).

Step 2: Make plans and set specifications

Using the key themes identified in the literature review, critical incidents (in this case, scenes) were identified that allowed for in-depth analysis. In particular, scenes that highlighted the show's politics in a specific way, exemplified universal transgender experiences, and/or reflected the greater conversation about transgender rights in the USA and worldwide were preferred.

Using CIT helped to further clarify the focus of this research, namely the depiction of transgender people and how this talks to the wider developments in trans visibility and rights in the USA. Therefore, while the show includes innovative storylines and narrative devices (such as its dreamlike historical sequences and flashbacks) and an unusually varied depiction of lesbians and bisexuals, it was decided that each scene chosen must include a transgender character, and the content should in some way relate to the themes and issues already identified in the literature review. In addition, new themes emerged from the scenes and presented themselves as important aspects of contemporary trans experience, even if these had not been identified during the literature review.

Themes gleaned from the literature review:

- Gendered spaces
- Trans stereotypes: trans as pervert, victim, villain, mentally unstable person
- Transgender as one aspect of a person's identity but not the only aspect
- Intersectionality and diversity in trans representations
- Medical and surgical transition
- Health and access
- Trans rights
- The "trans/romance" dilemma (Abbott, 2013)

Themes that emerged during close reviewing of the show:

- Trans misogyny, objectification and "tranny chasers"
- Pre- and post- transition identity
- Misgendering[4] of trans people
- Privilege and oppression

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[4] To misgender someone is to use gendered pronouns or other gendered language (e.g., sir, ma'am) that do not match the person's gender identity.

Step 3: Collect the data

After viewing the full three seasons twice and taking notes throughout, I identified key scenes. Some additional research was done into themes other than those that had emerged from the literature review. From the large group of potential scenes, five were selected that best reflected the themes and issues that arose from the literature review. Two of the selected scenes are analysed together in Chapter six.

It should be noted that the initial goal was to analyse six scenes, but after the completion of three lengthy draft scene analyses it became apparent that six would be too many to include within the scope of the thesis. Therefore, it was decided to complete four detailed analyses from the five scenes, drawing on other scenes from throughout the three seasons as supporting evidence.

Several scenes would have proved to be excellent candidates for analysis but, due to the above limitations, were omitted. One episode that was considered was *Man on the Land*, season two, episode nine (Liebegott & J. Soloway, 2015). Maura's daughters Sarah and Ali are going to a women-only feminist music festival, Idyllwild Wimmin's Music Festival, loosely based on the annual Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. Both festivals are for "women-born-women"; transgender women are not permitted to attend, but Sarah and Ali did not know this when they invited Maura along. The episode introduces to unaware viewers the fact that there is a subset of feminists, sometimes described as trans exclusionary radical feminists, who believe that transgender women are still in fact men, potentially pose a danger to women, and do not deserve to come under the umbrella of "women" or receive any of the social improvements feminism fights for. This viewpoint was most famously put forth in Raymond's (1979) book *The Transsexual Empire*, in which the author compared transsexual women to rapists, among other offensive claims (Stryker, 2004). While this episode highlighted this divide, it was not selected for analysis because it did not appear to present a universal transgender struggle – the rejection and erasure faced by trans people daily tends to be less overt than this specific situation.

1. **Season one, episode four: *The bathroom scene***

This scene is taken from the episode *Moppa* (Fitzerman-Blue, Harpster and Ganatra, 2014). Maura, Ali and Sarah are trying cosmetics at an upmarket department store.

Maura goes to the women's bathroom with her daughters, where two teenaged girls tell their mother that they think Maura is a man, and the mother confronts Maura, demanding that she leave the bathroom.

This scene clearly illustrates the daily conflict that trans people are faced with when trying to do the most mundane things, like using a public bathroom. It shows that her very presence makes some people uncomfortable and highlights the problem with gendered spaces.

2. Season two, episode three: *Leslie versus Maura*

Maura takes her daughter Ali to meet a professor friend at UCLA, where Ali is considering applying to graduate school. Carl in turn introduces Ali to the academic and poet Leslie Mackinaw, who remembers Maura from working at Berkeley at the same time, and accuses Maura of sexism in her past, pre-transition life. Maura was a member of the editorial board for a literary journal that never accepted women on its board. The scene raises interesting questions about one's pre- and post- transitional identity and actions. It presents Maura as an ultimately flawed person who, although she is now experiencing life as a member of a minority, has lived most of her life with white male privilege which she enjoyed and did not question.

3. Season two, episode seven: *Sal, Davina and Maura* (two scenes)

Two connected scenes will be analysed in tandem. Maura has been staying with her friend Davina for a few weeks, and Davina's boyfriend Sal questions her about her surgery plans and makes inappropriate comments about her body. In a later scene, Maura complains to Davina about Sal, encouraging her to leave him. Davina meets this with anger, explaining that she has limited options given her identity as an HIV-positive trans woman, and suggesting Maura mind her own business.

These scenes address two interesting aspects of trans lives. The first is that some people, particularly certain cisgender men who are attracted to trans women, frequently objectify trans women and discuss their bodies in a derogatory way. Second, Davina's strong rebuff to Maura's seemingly fair enough complaints allows the audience to experience two very different trans women. It shows that their different identities affect the choices they make, without casting either as a victim.

4. **Season three, episode one: *Elizah***

Maura has begun volunteering at the LGBT Center, and the first call she takes is from the very upset Elizah. When Elizah abruptly ends the call, Maura is worried, and drives to South Los Angeles to find her, embarking on an adventure in an ethnically diverse, low socio-economic shopping mall. Elizah is one of the few black trans characters to appear in any meaningful way in the show and her presence demonstrates the show's willingness to accept criticism (which they received about the first season for its lack of ethnic diversity in casting), and make amends. Elizah's characterisation, along with the social interactions Maura has while looking for her, give audiences a much wider view of the trans experience, and the Los Angeles experience for those without the resources that Maura and her family enjoy.

Sourcing episodes and transcripts

To encourage transparency and to allow for other researchers to replicate the analysis or verify one's results, Borgen, Amundson and Butterfield (2008) stressed the importance of recording the respondent interviews which comprised their dataset. In the case of the present research, the first three seasons of the television show *Transparent* are available to purchase or stream from www.amazon.com. The transcript for each episode was sourced from transcript database www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk, and each was checked for spelling and grammar, with dialogue being attributed to each character. In each analysis, the scene is identified by season and episode number, episode title, and the timestamp indicating when each scene commences.

Step 4: Analyse and interpret the data

The greatest deviation from the Borgen, Amundson and Butterfield's (2008) five steps was that the scene analyses and interpretations were created simultaneously, whereas the authors prescribe analysis and interpretation as separate stages. These were combined for this study because, when analysing the initial scene, interpretation naturally developed out of the analysis rather than as a discrete and separate piece of work.

3.2.2 Analysis procedures

Although it was not the purpose of this study to do an exclusively linguistic analysis of each chosen scene, language and delivery were analysed where that would shed light on the characters' and the show's writers' points of view. Much transphobia is expressed through language, but also, more specifically, a close reading of the dialogue revealed which characters were being open and honest and which were hiding or avoiding something (as an example). The dialogue is the delivery system of the narrative and the show's message, along with the actors who move and utter the words, the way they are dressed, the sets that are carefully planned, and the locations that are selected.

Using a combination of methods from Fairclough (2001a), Machin and Mayr (2012), and Huckin (1997), a set of analytical criteria was developed and applied to the four scenes identified.

1. **Linguistic analysis**

First, the language used in the dialogue was analysed. Using Machin and Mayr (2012) and Fairclough (2003) as a guide, along with other discourse analysis theory, particular care was paid to style, tone, contrast between characters, hedging, modality and sincerity. For example, a linguistic analysis of Maura's apology to Leslie for sexist practices many years prior revealed that Maura avoided a sincere apology while technically saying sorry.

Use of jargon was noted, and language specific to certain discourses that appeared to be appropriated by the characters (and therefore the writers of the show) was also identified and explored (Fairclough, 2001b). For example, it became clear that Elizah was appropriating the language of institutional health care when complaining that she was unable to access the care she was seeking. This type of appropriation might be evidence that Elizah is aware on some level of the power of the institutional discourse, which was used to control her and/or stop her from achieving her goals of physical transition and health. In appropriating its language, she perhaps believes the institution will accept her and support her.

2. **Content analysis**

Each chosen scene touched on more than one theme or key aspect of the trans experience. Each feature was identified and explored with regards to:

Subject matter

The issue or theme being highlighted in the scene was identified and interrogated. When each theme had been identified, research was conducted into how the scene related to the real lived experiences of trans people in the USA and worldwide. This research included scholarly work, mainstream news articles, niche websites and magazine articles (trans, LGBTIQ or feminist online blogs and magazines). A comparison was drawn between the content and style of the depiction in the show and typical experiences of the same issue in real life.

Identity frameworks

The way each character is presented in the scene and how their identity informs the depiction were analysed. This aspect of the analysis draws heavily on concepts of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). The first season of the show is trained on Maura and her family – all of whom are white and privileged. However, in the second season characters like Davina and Shea become more prominent. Both trans women are played by trans actors, and both characters have been living as trans for much longer than Maura and have experienced much more adversity due to their status as trans.

Power dynamics and agency

Who is granted a powerful voice, and who is not? What is the identity framework of those given power through language in the scene? In the episode *Elizah* the show avoids depicting Elizah as a victim, even though her circumstances are indeed challenging. In fact, her character is strong and independent, and she expresses herself with confidence and defiance.

Stereotypes and tropes

Is the scene perpetuating a stereotype or offering a new way to depict trans people? Common criticism when it comes to representation is casting trans people as a victim, a villain, or as a one-dimensional quirky character. Therefore, it was important to check the content of each storyline and the tone of the trans characters' portrayals for these tropes. In the episode *The Book of Life*, for example, Davina is set up initially to

appear as something of a victim, in a relationship with an unsavoury man. However, her confident pronouncement to Maura that she is in control of her life and her decisions shows that the writers wanted to portray her as a strong and complex woman, not a two-dimensional cliché.

Visuals

Visual aspects of the scenes were considered, including makeup, hair and clothing, set design and location, and body language of the actors. This part of the process was particularly helpful during the analysis of the *Elizah* scenes, where the personal styling of each character revealed the social group to which the character belonged, and provided an interesting contrast to the way Maura presented herself.

Review of initial analysis

Systematically applying the above to each scene built up a full picture that identified what the scene was trying to do and how it fitted within the wider contemporary discourse around transgender people. In each scene analysis, it was clear that some of the above criteria were more pertinent than others, and after an initial analysis these aspects were identified and explored further, often necessitating deeper research. An overarching argument was developed throughout, identifying macro themes that emerge in the show, and highlighting where they contribute to the development of a progressive discourse around transgender.

The process outlined above was appropriate to both analyse the key scenes and to allow these analyses to reveal more clearly the current state of transgender rights, particularly in the USA where the show is produced and where much of the supporting material that was consulted (news, academic studies, blogs and magazines) originated.

3.3 Limitations and considerations

The limitations of the study will be identified here. In particular there are limitations with regards to the data collection method and the method of analysis. There are also limitations inherent in a qualitative, interdisciplinary study which will be described below.

CIT relies on the researcher's informed opinion as to which scenes ought to be analysed. In this case scenes that highlighted particular trans issues were numerous, and therefore an insightful analysis could have been done on many of the scenes that were not selected during the CIT process. Furthermore, given that four key scenes were identified and analysed, rather than the entire series of three seasons to date, extrapolation or generalisation must be made moderately and with this in mind (Payne & Williams, 2005).

There is a key point that needs to be addressed around the actual screen time granted trans characters. In this study, only scenes that featured trans characters were chosen, and no scenes without trans characters were analysed, even where these may have dealt with issues relating to transgender people. Therefore, the study does not take into account the actual amount of screen time trans characters enjoy in the show. Capuzza and Spencer (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017) found that even those shows that were celebrated for featuring trans characters often gave those characters less dialogue and screen time than their cisgender counterparts. While the quantity of representation that trans characters receive is important, it is not the focus of this study.

Given the interdisciplinary nature of the criteria used, it is possible that another researcher using it would focus to a greater or lesser extent on any one of the criteria or aspects of the theoretical framework that was employed, producing a different analysis. The analysis relied on researching themes and ideas that came up along the way, so again, an individual replicating it perhaps would not access the same material as was found for this study.

Chapter four: Analysis one, *The Bathroom Scene*

Chapters four to seven present the scene analyses. Each scene is introduced, followed by a transcript of the scene(s) in question, then the analysis. The analysis will identify the key themes raised in the scene and note particular aspects of the scene's treatment of the subject matter. The present chapter presents an analysis of a scene taken from the episode entitled *Moppa*, which is the fourth episode of season one of *Transparent*. It was written by Micah Fitzerman-Blue and Noah Harpster and directed by Nisha Ganatra.

4.1 Scene introduction

Maura, Ali and Sarah are trying cosmetics at an upmarket department store. Maura goes to the women's bathroom with her daughters, where two teenaged girls tell their mother that they think Maura is a man, and the mother confronts Maura, demanding that she leave the bathroom. The teenagers and their mother are white, fashionably dressed and appear to be well off and confident in the department store environment.

Maura has only been out as trans for a short time and is unused to scrutiny from other people who are unsure of her identity. Sarah is her champion, and, of Maura's three children, she has had the most time to get used to the idea of her father being a woman. She is bisexual and her female lover with whom she is having an affair has been teaching her about trans politics and how to support and accept Maura as she transitions. Maura's new identity still bewilders Ali, who appears to be sulking and embarrassed by the bathroom confrontation.

4.2. Scene transcript

Scene begins at 17:50

Maura – Is it down here?

Sarah – Yeah, this is the ladies'.

Maura – Okay, I think I'm –

[Maura gestures that she will not go into the bathroom]

Sarah – No, no, no, come on, it's okay. Come on. Come with me.

[takes Maura by the hand and pulls her into the bathroom]

Sarah – I don't really have to go that bad, so –

Ali - I do.

Sarah - All right, Dad, if you have to go in front of me, that's fine, 'cause I don't have to go.

Maura - No, Ali has to go.

Teen #1 - Did she just say "Dad"?

Teen #2 Is that a man?

Teen #1- Hey, Mother.

Mother - What?

Teen #1- Do you see that person over there with the grey hair?

Mother - Hmm?

Teen #1 - I think it's a guy. She just called him "Dad".

Mother - Excuse me, are you a man? 'Cause this is the ladies' restroom.

Sarah - Yeah, we're aware what it is. Thank you.

Mother - Sir-

Sarah - Thank you. We're good.

Mother - Sir, can you hear me? Because this is the ladies' restroom, and clearly that is a man.

Sarah - This is my father, and he's a woman. And he has every right to be in this bathroom.

Mother - No, he does not. And you know what? I'm calling security because there are young women in here - that you are traumatizing.

Sarah - Oh, really? You mean the little snickering bitches over there? They look really traumatized.

Mother - You don't talk to my children that way.

Sarah - Oh, and you don't need to talk to my father like that.

Mother - Your father is a pervert.

Sarah - You are a fucking cunt!

Maura - All right, let's go. Ali!

Mother - Yes, you all need to go.

Ali - Dad, don't you need to go pee?

Maura - No, I don't. I'm fine.

Mother - You need to go.

Maura - Let's just go.

Sarah – [to the mother] Have a nice day.

Sarah – [to Maura] Are you okay?

Maura - I will be.

Maura drives away, Ali and Sarah are left in the carpark together.

Ali - God, why is he doing this now?
Sarah - [scoffs] Why? Why did he wait so long?

4.3 Transgender rights and public bathrooms

To examine this scene is to focus on what Halberstam (1998) refers to as the "bathroom problem" (p. 20). The hostility many trans people experience when attempting to satisfy their natural need to use a bathroom is one of the most overt examples of cultural cisgenderism's negative impact on trans people (Saunders, 2014). The bathroom is therefore an archetypal battleground for transgender rights. This section will use the present scene as a lens through which to view the types of personal and legal struggles trans people have with regard to public bathroom use. First, legal activities regarding this issue will be highlighted, along with some conceptual exploration into why some cisgender people have a fear of sharing a bathroom with trans people. Then after a brief outline of trans experiences using public bathrooms, the way the bathroom problem has been depicted on screen will be described. The scene analysis will continue by highlighting the significance of the misgendering Maura experiences and the way language is used in the scene as a form of violence against her. Comparing what happens in the scene with what trans people have been shown to experience, the analysis will then look at the power dynamics of the scene. Finally, a conclusion will be drawn assessing *Transparent*'s treatment of the subject matter.

4.4 Bathroom use and the law

Trans individuals using the gendered bathroom that matches their gender identity rather than their sex at birth has caused concern among certain groups. In recent years, laws and policy around transgender rights have centred on bathroom access. In a landmark decision by the US's Equal Employment Opportunity Commission it was ruled that a transgender woman was being discriminated against when she was prevented from using the female bathrooms at her workplace, and was insulted and persistently misgendered by some colleagues (Z. Ford, 2015). The decision stated, "employees may object—some vigorously—to allowing a transgender individual to

use the restroom consistent with his or her gender identity …. [C]onfusion or anxiety cannot justify discriminatory terms and conditions of employment" (as cited in Z. Ford, 2015, para. 5).

4.5 Cisgender fear and the myth of trans as sexual threat

Anti-trans groups in the USA have claimed that new laws protecting trans individuals' rights to use their bathroom of choice regularly put cisgender bathroom users as risk of sexual assault (e.g., Blankley, 2016; Brady, 2016; Schilt & Westbrook, 2015). Schilt and Westbrook (2015) found that concerns centre on transgender women (incorrectly perceived as men) in women's bathrooms and almost never transgender men in men's bathrooms. They further argued that it is a preoccupation with the penis that drives transphobic outrage, when "people react to a challenge to the gender binary by frantically asserting its naturalness" (Schilt & Westbrook, 2015, p. 27). This links back to the widely disseminated misperception that transgender people are sexually aggressive and/or morally corrupt (Brady, 2016; Funk & Funk, 2016b; Kelso, 2015).

Rather than trans people attacking cisgendered bathroom users, it is trans people who are more often attacked in bathrooms, both physically and verbally (Halberstam, 1998; Herman, 2013; Rose, 2016). In a survey of 93 transgender individuals in Washington, D.C., Herman (2013) found that 70 percent of respondents experienced verbal and physical attacks and/or were denied bathroom access to gendered bathrooms. The results were similar for trans men, trans women and gender non-binary respondents, but a greater proportion of those with lower incomes and people of colour experienced verbal and physical assault (Herman, 2013). Several reported health problems caused by not using a bathroom when they needed to, due to fear of attack (Herman, 2013). Halberstam (1998) described security being called to remove them whilst using public airport bathrooms, and Herman's (2013) respondents describe being socially shunned by colleagues in work bathrooms.

4.6 Gender panic

Screen depictions, psychiatry, and general societal attitudes have consistently conflated transgenderism with sexual perversion (Russo, 1987; Schilt & Westbrook, 2015). Schilt and Westbrook (2015) hypothesised that it is a preoccupation with the idea of male genitalia (including those of a trans woman) juxtaposed into women's

spaces that causes cis people an irrational fear of sexual assault by trans women in bathrooms. This scene shows the cisgender mother jumping to the conclusion that Maura is a "pervert", claiming her presence in the bathroom is "traumatising" her daughters. Sarah correctly ascertains that the teens are not traumatised so much as entertained by their mother's attack on Maura, whom they perceive as a novelty, and calls the mother out on this assertion. The mother's confrontation is an example of what Schilt and Westbook (2015) called "gender panic" (p. 27). Maura's bodily presence, with her male sex organs (assumed, but not actually confirmed) in a female-only space threatened the mother's paradigm of gender to the point that her fear compelled her to launch an attack based on Maura's (incorrectly assumed) sexual predation of women. Furthermore, Sarah uses the term "cunt" as an attack on the mother, drawing attention to the female genitalia (and by extension, female sexuality) that allows them both free access to the bathroom, and Maura's lack thereof. She explicitly references the "safe", female sexual organ, calling to mind the unsaid "dangerous" male sexual organ that Maura has potentially brought into the bathroom, to some minds, illegitimately.

4.7 The bathroom experience for trans and gender variant people

Sandercock (2015) identified that the public gendered bathroom is exemplary of society's continual reinforcement of the gender binary of male and female. Herman (2013) offered that gender-segregated spaces can be found throughout the built environment in societies, from changing rooms and public bathrooms to homeless shelters and prisons, but the underlying concept of gender that supports these segregations ignores those who do not fit squarely into the categories of 'male' and 'female'. The "bathroom problem" applies to those whose gender expression may not adhere unambiguously to their gender identity (Halberstam, 1998). Anxiety around the use of public bathrooms is common amongst trans people, in part due to the frequency of these types of experiences (Herman, 2013; Saunders, 2014; Weinberg, 2009). In this scene Maura clearly feels uncomfortable before they even enter the bathroom and only goes in after some cajoling from Sarah.

Trans people, masculine women, feminine men and those who appear androgynous experience frequent and overt gender policing by others in public bathrooms in the form of verbal abuse, body language that intends to make the "gender-vague" person feel unwelcome, notifying of security, and physical removal or attack (Halberstam,

1998, 2000; Lane, 2009). Herman's (2013) survey of transgender people regarding their experiences of hostility from other bathroom users lists the following experiences, reported by respondents with varying frequency: being told they are in the wrong bathroom, being told to leave the bathroom, security or police being called, having their gender questioned, being stared at strangely, being verbally threatened, physically assaulted, and being ridiculed. Most of these things happen to Maura in this scene, which tells us that the writers of the episode had likely researched typical trans experiences of bathroom altercations.

4.8 Transgender characters and bathrooms on screen

The depiction of bathrooms and urinary segregation generally as contexts of anxiety for, and violence against, trans people is a common motif in films and television shows that portray gender variant and cross-dressing characters (Saunders, 2014). In the films *Unveiled* (2005) and *Romeos* (2011) the bathroom is a space of anxiety for the protagonists of each film. *Unveiled's* cross-dressing character Fariba/Siamak is shown using the bathroom with fear and anxiety of being discovered, while *Romeos'* Lukas in fact is discovered, and taunted, by a party-goer who hides in the shower of the bathroom Lukas is using in what he thought was safety (Dawson, 2015; Saunders, 2014). The film *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), which was based on a true story, depicts trans male Brandon Teena in a bathroom, stressed while dealing with his unexpected period, washing his jeans in the sink (Dawson, 2015). Sandercock (2015) described the experiences of the trans female character, Unique, on television's *Glee*, who is verbally attacked by a teacher in a transphobic tirade. The French film *Tomboy* (2011) features 10-year-old Laure/Mikaël experimenting with their gender one summer holiday. They are shown running to the bushes to squat and pee away from their friends, anxiously hoping that this evidence of their female body is not observed (Saunders, 2014).

On the television show *Degrassi* the bathroom is a space of physical violence for trans male teen Adam, who is forcibly removed by a male classmate (Sandercock, 2015). The school's solution to prevent further attacks was for Adam to have access to a single room special-needs bathroom, which Sandercock (2015) argued was ostracisation and a form of erasure of his true gender identity (he should have had free and safe access to the male bathrooms). Writing on the liberal news website *Think Progress*, Ford (2015) says that the separation solution, which is common in real high schools and workplaces grappling with the needs of trans students and employees, isolates trans

individuals from their cisgendered peers and serves to reinforce cisgender students as 'normal' and superior.

Although some screen examples of the bathroom as a safe space for a trans character exist, as in life, the bathroom is more often shown as a space of gender policing, potential violence and psychological pain (Halberstam, 1998). While Saunders (2014) acknowledged that urinary segregation is a trope of classic trans representations, she argued that the use of such conventions had the potential to develop into narratives with more depth and insight into the trans experience. For example, Sandercock (2015) saw in Unique's bathroom scene a lost opportunity for *Glee* to educate its audience by ensuring the teacher who verbally abuses Unique was reprimanded and Unique defended. Although the scene is framed to set the viewer's sympathy to lie with Unique, the teacher is never punished, formally or informally, implying that her abuse is acceptable and to be expected (Sandercock, 2015). Saunders (2014) argued that both *Romeos* and *Tomboy* utilise the urinary segregation trope as just one element in complex and humane stories that go on to "openly depict the complexity of transgender narratives and aspects of real-life experiences and transitions" (p. 184).

4.9 Assault by misgendering

Maura's expression and body language tell us that she is deeply uncomfortable and wishes to leave. The verbal attack she experiences combines several types of transphobic language and behaviour typical of the everyday experiences of trans and gender variant people when using public facilities, and elsewhere (Cavanagh, 2010; Halberstam, 2000). Misgendering is one key form of violence against trans people. In this scene, Maura is repeatedly misgendered, meaning she is referred to as a man, when she identifies and, in clothing, makeup and hairstyle, presents as female. With no intended malice, her daughter Sarah, unused to the news that her parent is now a trans woman, uses male pronouns and refers to her as "dad" and her "father", even while defending her and declaring that "he is a woman". The mother, apparently *with* malicious intent, calls Maura "sir", and asks if she is a man.

Misgendering works to reproduce through language the dominant ideology that everybody is cisgender, while further stigmatising trans individuals. The United Kingdom's Trans Media Watch (2011) stated that misgendering of trans people operates to "dismiss the veracity of the subject's identity. This approach … serves to invalidate the individual's experience [and] makes of the transgender person a liar

– and liars are ripe for parody and ridicule" (p. 11). As stated in the literature review, transgender people are frequently portrayed as deceitful, and misgendering is just one tactic used to reproduce this message. Many trans people choose new pronouns during and after transition, the most common at present being the new gendered pronoun that fits their gender identity, or the neutral singular pronouns "they" and "them", although invented pronouns are sometimes used (Wayne, 2005). Wayne (2005) argued that the current state of the English language continuously reproduces a cisgenderist culture. Pronouns for trans people are not included in the lexicon, resulting in their linguistic annihilation. Wayne (2005) imagined a time where gender-neutral pronouns are used universally for all cisgender and transgender people regardless of gender identity or sex as assigned at birth. This linguistic revolution would decrease discrimination against women as well as creating space in the English language for trans people.

Misgendering has palpable effects on the physical and mental health of trans people. Gupta (2018) analysed media reports on a trans woman teacher in the United Kingdom, Lucy Meadows, who transitioned during summer break from male to female, and whose story of transition was covered widely in the press. Gupta (2018) found that local and national reporters, who sometimes used correct pronouns when writing about Meadows themselves, chose to repeatedly utilise quotes from people who misgendered Meadows, reinforcing her past identity and presenting a confused version of her, both "he" and "she". Some of the quotes were positive about Meadows as a person, their misgendering demonstrating their naïve innocence, much like Sarah, who is yet to be properly educated in how to refer to her parent. Some of the quotes were aggressively transphobic, as with the mother in this scene. Irrespective of the spirit of the misgendering, this language actively misunderstands and erases Meadow's, and Maura's, trans identity.

Gupta (2018) also argued that using such quotes represented a calculated tactic on the part of the reporters to undermine Meadow's chosen identity (Gupta, 2018). This leads us back to *Transparent* – is the show's inclusion of misgendering language simply reinforcing or condoning bad behaviour, or is it helpful to the cause of healthy and positive transgender representation? I argue that the scene cannily demonstrates that allies ought to support their trans loved ones with both good actions, as Sarah has done, but also good language, which she largely fails to do. The camera's gaze achieves this through focusing on Maura from time to time and showing her absolute anguish and humiliation at the verbal attack (and misgendering defence) her presence has

triggered. Sarah comes off as having her heart in the right place but a careless and hurtful mouth.

In this scene we see how often and how naturally the language-based micro-aggression of being misgendered happens to Maura. We also see the harm it causes, whether enacted with malicious intent or thoughtlessly. This harm can be simple feelings of discomfort and feeling misunderstood, but it can also manifest in more serious psychological ways: Swann, Johnson and Bosson (2009) argued that daily social interactions inform individuals' self-knowledge, and building on this concept McLemore (2015) argued that the experience of having one's gender identity misinterpreted by others is psychologically disturbing, and arouses feelings of inauthenticity, along with anxiety and depression. His studies into the psychological effects of misgendering on trans individuals found that most survey respondents were at times misgendered, and this led them to feel stigmatised, and to experience a loss of self-esteem and felt authenticity (McLemore, 2015). Lucy Meadows, the subject of Gupta's (2018) study, committed suicide in 2013, but not before hundreds of newspaper articles were published about her transition, often misgendering her directly or via quotes.

4.10 Power and agency

Fairclough (2001a) argued that social practice both reproduces and maintains dominant structures and "has the potential to transform them" (p. 122). Wodak (2001) agreed, saying that language can subvert or challenge power and alter distributions of power. In this scene we see the vulnerable, transgender woman in a public bathroom, which, as discussed above, is a common touchpoint for trans stories on screen. Although Maura is the reason for the altercation, Sarah emerges as something of a hero, using her white, cisgender power to defend her parent. While some might argue her choice of language was overly aggressive ("You are a cunt!", she yells at the mother, along with her frequent misgendering of Maura), she succeeds in being an effective ally to her parent (Ji, 2007). In calling out the mother's attack and declaring, "This is my father, and he's a woman" she is, however problematically, publicly standing by Maura and not asking Maura to bear the attack alone (Ji, 2007). Ali is noticeably silent during the attack. Although the scene is painful and the mother's language is ignorant and offensive, Sarah uses her privilege to meet the attack head-on

(Bailey, 1998). This provides an educational moment to the audience, demonstrating both good, caring behaviour and transphobic behaviour.

This power dynamic could be perceived as celebrating Sarah's plucky strength and solidarity at the cost of Maura's own agency to respond. The writers made a choice to include Ali and Sarah in the scene, and the fact that Maura hesitated to enter the bathroom initially tells us the confrontation may not have happened at all if Maura had not gone in with her daughters. But had she been confronted while in the bathroom queue, alone, how would she handle it? The bind Maura and many male-to-female transgender people find themselves in is that to defend themselves in such a scenario can very easily be perceived, or retold, as an attack, and an attack by someone who may be perceived as a man (Schilt & Westbrook, 2015). Nevertheless, the depiction of a trans person being defended by a cisgender person models good behaviour to the cisgender majority, and places Maura within the social context of her family rather than a 'freakish' outlier, which has been a feature of some problematic depictions in the past. These features of the scene demonstrate thoughtfulness on the part of the writers.

4.11 Conclusion

Given the role the "bathroom problem" plays in trans lives, government policy, and depictions of trans lives on film and television, this is conventional subject matter for a show about a transgender woman. However, I argue that its inclusion provides a realistic depiction of Maura's new experience of a cisnormative societal structure (which we see in gendered bathrooms, and the limits of the English language when talking about trans people) and transphobic language, which we see in the mother's abusive tirade and her and Sarah's frequent misgendering of Maura. Its gaze empathises strongly with Maura as she bears the brunt of the attack, while Sarah demonstrates a fairly good use of her cisgender privilege in standing up for Maura (while also demonstrating what not to say, frequently misgendering her parent). For those viewers who do not know any transgender people, this scene explains well the daily fear and anxiety some gender diverse people experience when needing to use a public bathroom. It achieves this without casting Maura as helpless or pathetic (as past depictions have tended to do), rather adding it to the myriad other experiences (many positive) Maura has as a newly out trans woman.

Chapter five: Analysis two, *Leslie versus Maura*

This scene is taken from *New World Coming*, the third episode of season two of *Transparent*. It was written by Faith Soloway and was directed by Marielle Heller.

5.1 Scene introduction

Maura is bringing her daughter Ali to meet a professor friend and ex-colleague Carl at UCLA, where Ali is considering applying to graduate school. Carl in turn introduces Ali to the academic and poet Leslie Mackinaw, and Ali recalls reading her work as an undergrad student. Leslie remembers Maura and accuses her of sexism in her past, pre-transition life. Maura had been a member of the editorial board for a literary journal that never accepted any women.

5.2 Scene transcript

Scene starts at 8:25

Leslie - And I know you.

Maura - That's right, we know each other right? Were we at Berkeley together?

Leslie - Mm-hm.

Maura - What? What is it?

Leslie - You edited "Perspective on Politics."

Maura - I did.

Leslie - Uh-huh.

Maura - I did, for several years.

Leslie - Yeah.

Maura - Yes. Did we publish you?

Leslie - I applied for the editorial board. And you blocked me.

Maura - I block I didn't block. I've never blocked anybody. But I — I mean, you — You were one of the applicants, or?

Leslie – Uh, yeah, and I applied every year for ten years. Me and my sisters-in-arms and I applied, and applied, applied, and applied. And you took only men. Oh, and one chick who had these huge, huge tits that you couldn't keep your eyes off of, if – if I remember correctly.

Maura – Oh, my God, you were part of that group?

Leslie – Well, it's very nice of you to remember.

Leslie [to Ali, she explains] - The Berkeley Seven. We were the scourge of the administration. We drove out a provost.

Ali – What is a provost?

Leslie – Exactly.

Maura – Leslie, I just want to say this, I don't stand behind what I what I did back then. All right? Uh, and I profoundly apologize if that does if that does you any good. I actually don't I don't remember much of it.

Leslie – Well, why would you remember it?

5.3 Introduction

From an analysis of this scene we can see the fullness of the *Transparent* world, where people are complex and neither fully good, nor fully bad. The scene stands out because it clearly foregrounds the white male privilege that Maura has enjoyed her whole life until very recently, and the fact that despite her own inner turmoil and fear of persecution, she did nothing to stop the persecution of or discrimination against other people. She was a part of a powerful group of men in the university who resisted granting equal opportunities to women. This section will discuss the language used and what it suggests about each character's perspective, before going into the gender politics and intersectional themes of the scene, which include Maura's male privilege and Leslie's own combination of privilege and oppression. It will then highlight the tension many trans people have with regards to their past identities and actions, using Maura as an exemplar.

5.4 Apologies and language

An analysis of the language utilised by the two main players in this scene clearly shows one woman comfortable and confident, and one woman unhappily struggling to communicate. Leslie is straightforward and seems to enjoy making Maura squirm but delivers clear statements free from hedging. Maura on the other hand stumbles over her words, and couches several of her statements with hedging. Also telling is the contrast between Maura and Leslie's language and manner. Perhaps Leslie feels she must be hard-nosed in order to be taken seriously, while Maura has always had the luxury of being respected and not questioned. Maura begins speaking with Leslie with a casual joviality just as she had been with Carl, smiling and at ease, while Leslie sternly holds Maura's gaze, and uses military terms to describe her experience: "me and my sisters-in-arms", "We were the *scourge* [emphasis added] of the administration. We drove out a provost" (F. Soloway & Heller, 2015). It is Maura's faux apology, however, that offers the best insight into the workings of Maura's mind.

The sincerity of an apology and the degree to which the apologiser claims culpability can be measured in various ways. Aspects of Maura's apology to Leslie reveal that it is not a complete and sincere apology which recognises real guilt. Kampf (2009) points to the various ways people and organisations manipulate the act of apologising to minimise their responsibility. In this scene, Maura employs three such tactics. The first is to cast doubt on the notion that there was ever a crime committed – apologising while denying a misdeed ever took place (Kampf, 2009). Maura claims not to remember the incident, which is akin to not doing it in the first place. Her second tactic can be seen in the line "I don't stand behind what I what I did back then". She is highlighting the fact that she is a different person now, effectively shifting the blame to Mort, a different person (she seems to argue) from Maura, who she is now. Finally, Leslie gets an apology: "Uh, and I profoundly apologize if that does, if that does you any good". Maura claims to "profoundly" apologise but her statement is couched within hesitation ("uh") and uses hedging: the conditional clause "if it does you any good" weakens the apology (Machin & Mayr, 2012). What this apology lacks, and what would add to its sincerity, is any admission of a specific action, a pledge to make amends somehow, or a request for forgiveness (Lakoff, 2001). Maura avoids committing to her apology while still offering one (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Her attitude is typical of many in positions of power, eager to be heard to be doing the right thing but ultimately unwilling to risk a loss of power (Fairclough, 2001b).

5.5 Privilege and oppression

In this scene, we have a clear examination of male power and privilege as it plays out in academia. Moss (2016) suggested that Maura's "residual male privilege … becomes … the central character flaw mined for comedy" (p. 77). However, this scene is uncomfortable and without a punchline. Wildman (1996) argued that in order to examine systems of oppression we must also look to those who enjoy the spoils of such systems: we must examine the privileged, not only the oppressed. As Bailey (1998) declared, privilege allows "some people the freedom to be thoughtless at best, and murderous at worst" (pp. 110–111). Maura appears to have never accepted that she is privileged, having lived the larger part of her life as a white, wealthy, cisgender man with a good education and a powerful job at a prestigious university. She has enjoyed the freedom to be thoughtless, which we can see both in the statement, "I actually don't, I don't remember much of [that time]," and in the fact that it took some persistent coaxing from Leslie to get her to recall the period at all (Bailey, 1998).

Although throughout the series the camera's gaze is never cruel or exploitative towards Maura, nor is it overly kind (Villarejo, 2016). This scene uses an uncomfortable juxtaposition of characters to further interrogate identity politics. We see Maura, an older trans woman grappling with her new gender expression, being called out by the forthright but once-marginalised Leslie, while Carl, the epitome of white male privilege looks on, bemused. Leslie will not allow Maura to get away with continuing to think of herself as a nice but careless person. While Maura concedes her thoughtlessness, she is unrelentingly naïve – she seems to believe not having remembered doing this is equal to never having done it. Her apology as afterthought may be evidence that she would like to think of herself as a good person, and she wants those around her to think well of her. Feigenbaum (2007) describes the common, misguided action of scholars and activists to frame the privileged as 'good people' at heart, who have simply not interrogated their own privilege. She argued that this tactic is an attempt to get the reader/audience on side rather than provoke them to become defensive, but that this ultimately absolves the privileged of any culpability and makes a call to action inappropriate and irrelevant. In this sense, we can see that the forthright Leslie does not intend to coddle Maura and her glowing self-image. She has no qualms about alienating and blaming Maura for exercising her privilege at the expense of her female peers.

5.6 Male privilege in academia

That Leslie is given a strong voice in this scene despite years of her and her "sisters-in-arms" being rejected demonstrates that the show attempts to amplify the voices of women and highlight inequality (F. Soloway & Heller, 2015). Leslie's experience was an overt example of misogyny and white male privilege playing out in the university, but structures of privilege and oppression are often revealed in subtler ways, including micro-aggressions, non-verbal gestures, lack of bodily safety and employment biases (Hulko, 2009; McIntosh, 1988; Rothenberg, 2002; Wang, 2012). Several aspects of the scene support the theory that the roles and related power that Carl and Maura held were linked to their maleness. At the start of this scene Maura engages in the easy familiarity of the old boys club when she greets Carl; they joke about another colleague, whom they refer to as "Hobbsy", and who, according to Carl, is "gonna be here forever" (F. Soloway & Heller 2016). Their banter is contrasted with a shot of Ali's unimpressed face, clearly excluded from the chummy catch up. This meeting takes place in an opulent university dining hall, providing visual cues for the type of environment Maura was once a powerful part of. Although Ali agrees to meet with Carl, she expresses fears that she is unfairly capitalising on her parent's connections.

As Feigenbaum (2007) observed, "Privilege is a terrain of largely unexamined invisible perks and protections" (p. 5). The writers of this episode may have included this storyline to iterate as clearly as possible the privileged position Maura held before she transitioned and to some extent continues to hold. She has kept up the network of (mostly white straight male) academics that she built up when she was one of them, and is now attempting to put her daughter in contact with influential academics, continuing to capitalise on her past status as a white man by bestowing some of her power on her daughter (Bailey, 1998; Moss, 2016).

5.7 Leslie as a symbol of second wave feminism

The gaze of this scene frames Leslie as a staunch and righteously indignant butch woman and Maura as the former man who wielded his power thoughtlessly. The writers are revealing their feminist ideology in this narrative much more than educating the viewer about trans lives. Like Maura, Leslie's character contains a specific combination of oppression and privilege. Moss identified that Leslie "scrambled the boundaries of power and resistance" (2016, p. 88). She is at once marginalised (a woman, a lesbian, a radical feminist) but also has her share of privilege

and its related confidence: she is white, and despite the setback related in this scene, is now a respected academic. In subsequent episodes she will host Ali at her large, expensive house, and then become Ali's lover, arguably an abuse of her position as a professor (Moss, 2016). That she protested the injustice of her exclusion from the editorial board tells us that, even then, she had some measure of social clout. Just as the suffragette movement in the USA for the most part excluded black women, so did second wave feminism, which fostered activist groups just like the fictional one Leslie was a part of (Crenshaw, 1989; S. Ford, 2017). Consistent with this reading, we see in later scenes too that Leslie surrounds herself with white, queer women of all ages, very few people of colour, and even some radical feminists who have a problem including trans women in the category of "women". In using her power and resources to get what she wants and not pushing for equality for all, Leslie is complicit with androcentric white supremacist structures of power she might claim to be against.

5.8 Maura, her wealth and realistic portrayals

Progressive representation of transgender people should, often if not always, reflect the authentic experiences of trans people in the world (Battis, 2008). Maura's wealth, perhaps due to her long successful career, makes her an outlier with regard to the typical trans socio-economic status (Rose, 2016). Trans people in the USA experience higher rates of unemployment and lower income and amassed wealth than the general population (Rose, 2016). Maura's wealth might be described as unrealistic, though for two reasons it makes sense. First, it fits within the narrative of her life, which is illustrated by this scene where her privilege comes to the fore. She came out after retirement so never experienced the employment barriers that openly trans people face in the job market (Women and Equalities Committee, 2016). Being white and perceived as a man for her entire working life granted her access to career opportunities that women (and likely trans women) were denied (Dyer, 2008; McIntosh, 1988). Second (and part of a larger issue in the entertainment industry), her wealth is congruous with television shows presenting characters who are on average wealthier than the general population. In 1978, Fox and Philliber (1978) argued that television regularly portrayed American people as exceedingly wealthy and more recently, *The Economist* (2011) argued this was still the case. Steenland (1989) found that 90% of ethnic minority characters on American television at the time of her study were middle class or wealthy, much higher than the average socio-economic status of these groups in reality. While Maura's prestige and wealth make her atypical of the

average trans woman, these aspects of her character both make narrative sense and fit within the wider tendencies of the television industry to create richer-than-average characters.

5.9 Pre-transition/post-transition identities

This scene also reveals the difficulties Maura faces in the early days of her transition to reconcile her past self with her present. It highlights the tension many trans people feel regarding their pre-transition identities. However, Maura's behaviour seems somewhat at odds with some other trans people's accounts of their pre- and post-transition identities: the trans scholar Hayward (2008) writes, "There is no absolute division, but continuity between the physiological and affective responses of my different historical bodies" (p. 73). A psychoanalyst, Hansbury (2005), argued for the importance of encouraging transgender patients to mourn the loss of their past selves rather than moving forward and attempting to deny their past altogether. Maura, on the other hand, is eager to disassociate from her past self. She does not "stand behind what [she] did back then" (F. Soloway & Heller, 2015).

In another episode, Davina has a batch of re-gendered childhood photos delivered. She provided her personal childhood photos, in which she presents as male, and the photo retouching company altered them to feminise her in terms of clothing and hairstyle (Bedard & Arnold, 2016). Maura is moved, and daydreams about the prospect of having her own history effectively rewritten in the same way. This is further evidence that she appears to have no love or nostalgia for who she was pre-transition. As the series unfolds, we find that Maura has done several things (when living as Mort) that she would prefer not to admit responsibility to. These range from allowing her 13-year-old daughter Ali to cancel her own bat mitzvah (the term for a Jewish female's coming of age ceremony, like the Jewish male's bar mitzvah) so she could secretly attend a cross-dressing camp, to paying off her teen son Josh's older girlfriend to adopt out their child without Josh ever knowing she was pregnant. When confronted by the now adult Ali and Josh, Maura tries to talk her way out of any wrongdoing, much as she does here with Leslie.

However, later in the episode we are offered a rare moment of growth and self-awareness. After the confrontation with Leslie, Maura attends her trans support group. There, after some coaxing by her peers, she reveals that she is upset about something:

I met somebody today, uh I knew back in the day. Uh, we were at Berkeley, and, um - she was part of this radical feminist group, they were called the Berkeley Seven. They burned effigies of us. They thought that we were holding them back. And we did. We held them back. That's the truth. I mean I hurt people. (F. Soloway & Heller, 2015)

This is the somewhat gratifying conclusion to the open-ended question around Maura's "goodness", satisfying for the viewer and allowing them to continue on Maura's journey with her. It further addresses the issue many trans people have with grappling with past relationships and actions. Hansbury (2005) argued that those who transition must not only mourn their past lives but also their fantasy of the ideal woman or man they have always wanted to be. We see in Maura's confession that she is coming to terms with the fact that her transition has not made her a different or better person as she might have hoped. It appears that she has ever more opportunities to question herself and her actions. Potentially too quickly to be believable, she goes from barely acknowledging her past wrongs in the first scene to publicly owning them in the second, remorseful and disgusted with herself. However, true remorse would entail a sincere apology or confession not just in the safety of her trans support group, but to the person (or indeed, people) wronged by these past actions she claims to regret (Kampf, 2009).

5.10 Conclusion: the complexity of identity and representation

The real success of this scene, and by extension *Transparent* as a show, is that it depicts Maura as a fully fleshed individual who is both a hero and a victim, a member of a family, capable of kindness and cruelty. She has a past rich with experience and some regret. While Maura does not have a particularly healthy attitude towards her past self, the scene nonetheless highlights the fraught nature of late-in-life transition and its implications on the way one views one's past actions. Added to this we have a grounding in intersectionality. In displaying Maura's past misogyny, we are also asked to compare Maura's privilege with Leslie's purported marginalisation, which is more complicated than it seems at first glance. The writing of the scene acknowledges the impossibility of casting people as heroes and villains, rather exploring the more realistic murkiness of human nature with all its contradictions. Though the narrative highlights the tension between Maura's present trans identity and how she regards

her past, the scene is one of many storylines in the show in which Maura's trans identity does not drive the narrative of the scene. Scholars and activists have called for more representations like this, where trans characters just happen to be trans, rather than defined by their trans status (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). This scene is an indication of progress in transgender representation as displayed in *Transparent*.

Chapter six: Analysis three, *Sal, Davina and Maura*

This analysis considers two connected scenes (which will be referred to as scene one and scene two) from the episode entitled *The Book of Life*, which is the seventh episode of season two of *Transparent*. It was written by Ethan Kuperberg and directed by Jim Frohna.

6.1 Scene one introduction

Maura has been staying with her friend Davina for a few weeks. They have a fond relationship; Maura's trans friends affectionately use the term "baby-trans" for her because she has been out as transgender for a short time. Davina's boyfriend Sal owns the house she lives in and has just been released from prison that week. He comes up to the attic where Maura is staying, with a swamp cooler (air conditioning device) to make the room more comfortable in the heat. After some small talk, Sal begins asking Maura about any plans she might have to get surgery in support of her transition.

6.2 Scene one transcript

Scene one begins at 5.10

Sal – Yeah. For a start. What are you thinking about facial feminization wise?

Maura – I'm not thinking –

Sal – No? Well, I'm thinking lower that hairline, maybe some cheek implants and some fat transfer, you know? Maybe a forehead reconstruction. Maybe a little, maybe a facelift. If I might?

Maura – Yeah.

Sal – 500 ccs in the titty area. Nothing too big, 'cause that's not you, you know?

Maura – No, it's not who I am.

Sal – No. Did you know I helped Shea out back in the day?

Maura – Nope.

Sal – Shea's a beautiful girl. Gorgeous.

Maura – She is.

Sal – Work of art. When she was done, I felt like fucking Michelangelo.

Maura – Wow.

Sal – Yeah. I wanted to sign my name on her ass.

Maura – Okay.

Sal – Yeah. When the time comes, I'll be happy to help, whatever you need.

Maura – Thanks, Sal.

Sal – I mean, Maura, you still got some good years left.

Maura – All right.

6.3 Scene two introduction

Davina is doing some gardening in the front yard of her large grand house. Maura comes out with a couple of drinks. At first, Davina is very warm towards Maura until Maura confronts her about Sal's comments.

6.4 Scene two transcript

Scene two begins at 11.00

Maura – Is Sal about?

Davina – No. What's up?

Maura – Oh, do you think it's odd that … you haven't met his family yet?

Davina – I don't really – That's a choice that we both made. Name me one time when meeting somebody's family actually made a relationship better.

Maura – Does he talk to you about your body? Because he talks to me about my body.

Davina – What do you –

Maura – Your Sal came in the turret today, and, oh, he talked to me about how many ccs should be in my titty area. And I'm gonna tell you one thing from the bottom of my heart. You can do better than that.

Davina – My God, who do you think you're talking to? I'm gonna tell you one thing. Mind your own goddamn business. You have no right. We don't all have your family.

We don't all have your money. I'm a 53-year-old ex-prostitute HIV-positive woman with a dick. And I know what I want, and I know what I need. And if Sal is bothering you this much you should probably sleep somewhere else.

6.5 Introduction to analysis

These scenes are important because they highlight the myriad experiences and backgrounds trans people have, as opposed to presenting them as a homogenous group. A study of the language and themes in scene one exposes an ongoing issue in both trans communities and media representations of transgender – the cisgender male's gaze on the trans woman, particularly regarding their attractiveness and anatomy. The most extreme example of this type of objectifying gaze is the phenomenon of the fetishistic "tranny chaser". The inclusion of this theme here and in other scenes throughout the show is a sign of *Transparent's* knowledge of contemporary trans issues. Scene two places Maura's lifetime of privilege in contrast to Davina's ongoing barriers to health and happiness but honours the latter's resilience, pragmatism and self-determination. The identities of the two women provide excellent studies in intersectionality, united by being transgender but different in numerous important ways that influence their outlook and access to resources and opportunities. If the first season of *Transparent* was about one woman's late-life transition and her family, the second season opens a wider look at the countless trans lived experiences.

6.6 Attitudes revealed with language

Sal's worldview is shown in what he says to Maura and how he says it - talk reveals speakers' ideology (Fairclough, 2003). We can also glean some information about Sal by observing his appearance and manner. The character is styled with greasy hair and sleazy, seventies clothing, he is comfortable speaking casually to Maura, with swear words and crude slang (e.g., "the titty area") peppering his speech, all of which contribute to a general impression of a working class man without pretentions (Kuperberg & Frohna, 2015). His specific line of questioning identifies his fixation on Maura's looks and body and his thorough knowledge of feminisation surgeries. The dynamic between Sal and Maura is one of confident host versus polite but clearly affronted guest. We see Maura's discomfort in her short responses, never quite consenting to Sal's line of questioning.

Sal's unsolicited advice is consistent with Serano's (2016) and Madison's (2016) accounts of trans misogyny. His dialogue offers several examples that reveal Sal's sense of ownership over trans women's bodies. That he felt it was appropriate to speak to Maura about her breasts and facial flaws that could be 'fixed' suggests that he does not respect Maura or think of her as an equal. He speaks about Shea as though she is an object: "Work of art. When she was done, I felt like fucking Michelangelo. I wanted to sign my name on her ass" (Kuperberg & Frohna, 2015). While Sal is an extreme example, he represents mainstream hegemonic male attitudes of domination over both cisgender and transgender women, particularly with regard to how they look (Serano, 2016).

The complexity of transition is also visible here; when someone transitions, they change themselves (in their gender expression) but they are also subject to western society's patriarchal system whether they are transitioning male-to-female or female-to-male (Serano, 2016). Maura's transition exposes her to the types of sexism that she likely did not notice when living as a man, and to the types of people (trans women) she had nothing to do with when living as male. Sal not only represents a misogynistic point of view, but a lower class, uneducated one, especially when contrasted with Maura. Maura is a wealthy, retired professor, has lived in liberal Los Angeles her whole life and is surrounded by emancipated women (her ex-wife and two daughters) who make their own choices and reject, in varying degrees, traditional gender roles and heterosexuality. Maura, having lived as a white cis man until very recently, is unused to people (especially people she considers beneath her, like Sal) commenting freely on her body and her choices. Therefore, it makes sense that she is shocked and offended by Sal's unsought and graphic advice. It is an early lesson that her transition has ramifications beyond her own gender identity and expression; the way she is now perceived by others invites new, often undesired, behaviours.

6.7 The trans body, the cisgender body

There is an exoticisation of the trans body which is perhaps due to its other-ness (Serano, 2016). Homosexuals and bisexuals are hyper-sexualised, in part because their name refers to their sexuality (by this logic straight people are sex-free, in label, and indeed are generally not labelled with their sexuality in social life), but more importantly because their sexuality is different to the heterosexual norm (GLAAD, 2016a). Similarly, the trans body, being potentially different to a cisgender body, and

therefore different to the mainstream concepts of the male and female body, is often obsessed over by certain cisgender people, as is trans physical attractiveness (Capuzza & Spencer, 2016). The media, as a vocal part of the dominant cisnormative culture, objectifies and sensationalises trans bodies (Serano, 2016). Capuzza and Spencer (2016) found in their review of transgender representation across a selection of television shows that cisgender characters discussed trans bodies and attractiveness at a much higher rate than trans characters. This trend continues with this scene, as the cisgender character Sal brings up the topic of Maura's body and objectifies that of Shea.

Male objectification of trans women is well documented. Madison (2016) reported that trans pornography is the fastest growing porn genre, which, she argued, can feed male "chaser" practices of fetishising the bodies of trans women. RedTube, a porn website, has published a report that shows that "men are 455% more likely to search for transgender related content compared to women" (Madison, 2016, para. 2). Traditionally televisual and cinematic representations of trans women most often depicted them as hyper-feminine and hyper-sexual, and catered to the male gaze (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; Serano, 2016). Objectification has been shown to have negative effects on the target of the objectification. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argued that objectification of women and girls leads to extreme body-monitoring which can result in negative mental health effects, and Saguy, Quinn, Dovidio, and Pratto (2010) found that women who are perceptibly physically assessed by men and other women take less part in social interactions. Although these studies had cisgender girls and women as their subjects, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) and Serano (2016) suggest the aforementioned effects of objectification are the same for trans people. Scene one's framing of Maura as sympathetic and Sal as lewd and inappropriate indicates an empathetic awareness of the ways in which trans women are objectified in life and on screen.

6.8 Medical transition

Many have called for more varied media representations of the transgender experience, including a de-emphasis on medical transition, a term which includes the use of hormones, gender reassignment and cosmetic surgery (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; GLAAD, 2016a). This scene might have re-inscribed television's preoccupation with the medical transition process, but something else is at play. Sal's attitude, shown in the line, "When the time comes," assumes that Maura will certainly get surgery,

whether it is gender reassignment or cosmetic (Kuperberg & Frohna, 2015). In the USA only around 33% of trans people have had gender reassignment surgery, and the reasons for not opting for surgery are complex (Grant et al., 2011). Some trans people simply do not want to transition surgically, while others are unable to access reassignment surgery due to prohibitively high costs and health insurance limitations, cisnormative bureaucracy in health care, the small number of trans-literate medical professionals, and health issues that make surgical transition unsafe for some (J. A. Lee, 2016). In the third season Maura discovers that in fact she is not in good enough health for surgical transition, a devastating blow for her, as her transition to this point had been relatively smooth, experiencing few of the other barriers listed above. For now, the gaze of the scene tells us that it is not Sal's place to dictate what Maura should do with her body, and she has every right to wish to protect herself from his unwanted advice.

While not avoiding the topic of surgery altogether, these scenes seek to reframe the discourse around trans bodies. They cleverly raise the topic of surgery and transgender physicality while critiquing Sal's fixation on it, as opposed to perpetuating the mainstream obsession. The use of the repellent Sal as the vehicle for this medical transition discourse may make the viewer wonder why he is so obsessed by the topic and then understand that her physicality is not the most important thing about Maura's identity as a trans woman.

6.9 Using language to control

Scene one provides a study in how Sal uses language to assert his power by objectifying Maura and Shea (Madison, 2016; Milloy, 2014; Serano, 2016). In scene one, Sal assesses Maura's physical attractiveness and shortcomings, and offers a detailed description of all the surgery she ought to consider. We see in the modality of his speech that Sal is not just advising, but ordering Maura what to do, for example, the word "lower" in his first list of instructions: "I'm thinking, lower that hairline…" (Kuperberg & Frohna, 2015, Machin & Mayr, 2012; Swanson, 2008). He finishes his speech with a backhanded compliment: "I mean, Maura, you still got some good years left" (Kuperberg & Frohna, 2015). A backhanded compliment is commonly used by men who believe damaging a woman's self-esteem will make them more likely to sleep with them, but is also used generally as a linguistic means to wield emotional power over others (Archer, 2015). Here it is used by Sal, ensuring Maura is aware of her limited power as an older trans woman and his considerable power as a cis man with

some money and a history of using it to gain soft power over other trans women. He also seems aware that what he is saying might not be well received, as demonstrated by his frequent hedging, for example, "I mean," "I'm thinking," and "Maybe a little, maybe a facelift", and in seeking Maura's engagement, with "If I might?" and "you know?" (Kuperberg & Frohna, 2015, Machin & Mayr, 2012). Marcus (2009) explained that the use of "well", as heard in "No? Well, I'm thinking …" is known to be a face-threat mitigation, which supports the theory that Sal knows to some extent that he is being offensive (Kuperberg & Frohna, 2015).

6.10 "Chasers"

We are introduced, through the character of Sal, to a type of character little seen on television, the trans-attracted man. People who are attracted to transgender or genderqueer people are sometimes labelled with the derogatory term "tranny chaser". In an earlier scene, Sal tells Maura about his journey of "coming out" as trans-amorous, adopting the discourse of coming out as gay or trans: "When I was younger, I realized that I was trans-amorous[5]. I kind of explored it in secrecy, you know spank rags and- and picking up girls on Santa Monica. Then one day I realized I didn't have to separate love and sex. I'm glad that I can be honest now about who I am." (Kuperberg & Frohna, 2015). This poignant self-description is at odds with the Sal we see later, in scene one, where he is revealed to be obsessed with trans bodies rather than attracted to trans people's whole selves. Nevertheless, it does highlight the fact that there are men who are exclusively attracted to trans women, something that is seldom brought up in the media.

Writing on the website *Bustle*, AJ McKenna (2016) argued that this episode simplified the complex issue of trans-amorous men, "who some of us in the trans community prefer to call chasers" (para. 3). Madison (2016) explained that many trans people feel uncomfortable about chasers as they tend to be "interested in the one thing that many trans people hate most about themselves … usually pre-operative genitalia" (para. 4). Season two, episode three also includes a scene that touches on this issue. A woman at Maura's trans support group recounts being approached by a man for sex at a photocopy shop:

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[5] The term trans-amorous is not commonly used in trans- or trans-allied communities. "Trans-attracted" is used far more often (Milloy, 2014; Mock, 2013; Tompkins, 2014).

"I was at the Sprint store with my niece, my four-year-old niece, and he walks up to me and he asks me, 'So, do you date?' And so I'm, like, 'well well, yeah, I date'.

And then he asked me, 'So, uh, how much do you charge?' How much do you charge? I mean, as a trans woman, I appreciate that you want me because I'm trans, I'm good with that. It's the inappropriate, asking me things like, are you fully functional? Fucking rude." (F. Soloway & Heller, 2016)

This account mirrors several reports from trans women who have experienced this kind of objectification first hand (Milloy, 2014; Serano, 2016; Tompkins, 2014). It shows that the man in question was attracted to the trans woman, felt it was appropriate to ask her for sex in front of her niece, and assumed that she was a sex worker. It is not clear if this man asked her if she was "functional" but it is implied that she has been asked that question about her genitalia before (F. Soloway & Heller, 2016). The attitude that produced this line of questioning illustrates a wilful abuse of cis male privilege on the part of the "chaser", and his dehumanising attitude towards the trans woman in question. The woman does point out that there is space in her worldview for trans-attracted men: "I appreciate that you want me because I'm trans, I'm good with that", but not for this type of disrespectful propositioning. The implication of this report and scene one with Sal is that chasers would not get away with treating a cisgender woman in this way.

Milloy (2014) clarified that the term "tranny chaser" does not apply to "all trans-attracted people" but to "individuals whose primary motivator in dating is that they really … want to 'be with' a trans person, one with anatomy intact … to the extent that other interpersonal concerns are neglected" (para. 5). While cis women and trans people *can* display behaviour that earns them the chaser label, the largest group that can be defined as chasers are cis men pursuing sex with trans women (Milloy, 2014; Tompkins, 2014). Milloy (2014) explained that for most chasers their education around trans issues comes from pornography, and therefore a tell-tale sign that someone is a chaser will be use of derogatory terminology like "tranny" and "she-male" and confusion of terms like "transvestite", "cross dresser" and "hermaphrodite" (paras. 13-14).

"Tranny chasers" are yet another challenge for transgender communities. As Shea says in a later episode, "Dating while trans is a shit show" (F. Soloway & J. Soloway, 2016). Abbott (2013) noted, "In our transphobic culture … romantic or sexual attraction to a

trans person is, at its most benign, a comic misunderstanding, or, at its worst, an abhorrent deception that can justify murder" (p. 34). If we add to this the likelihood of trans people being pursued by "tranny chasers" who fetishise their bodies and sometimes harm them, along with the anxiety trans-attracted people who wish to avoid the "tranny chaser" label may have, the pool of eligible mates for trans women attracted to men is small (Madison, 2016). Tompkins (2014) observed that there is such fear of the "tranny chaser" label that most cis partners of trans people deny any sexual attraction whatsoever, claiming they are only attracted to their partner's personality, not their body. This attitude, while understandable, denies the possibility for trans bodies to be sexually desirable at all. Tompkins (2014) argued that a sex-positive environment for trans and trans-attracted people will not be possible if the rhetoric of the "tranny chaser" is allowed to inform so completely the discourse around trans sexuality. Nonetheless, it is a real part of the trans woman experience and it is therefore appropriate and innovative that *Transparent* included this storyline.

6.11 Transition as loss

While Davina is accustomed to the tribulations of living and dating as a trans woman, Maura is still new to this life, and is struggling to reconcile her past identity and privileges with her new identity and all the problems that come with it. As transgender, Maura gains a new gender, but she loses many parts of her previous identity. Maura, until very recently Mort, has moved through the world with all the advantages that come with being wealthy, respected in his/her field, male and white (McIntosh, 1988). She has lost her male privilege and her cisgender privilege and is now moving in a new transgender social circle, one with less financial and social power. Maura is unused to being marginalised and still holds an expectation of a high level of treatment and respect, which extends to the expectations she has of, and for, her friend. She is appalled by Sal's comments, and assumes Davina will be too. She appears bewildered that her friend, whom she deems an equal, is 'settling' for someone as gauche and insensitive as Sal. Davina recognises this lack of understanding and explains it to Maura clearly, saying, "Who do you think you're talking to?" (Kuperberg & Frohna, 2015). In this moment, Maura is forced to reckon with her loss of cisgender and male privilege, her own ignorance, and confronted with the prospect that she too may need to adopt Davina's pragmatic attitude towards her own relationships.

6.12 Davina's intersectional identity

The differences between Maura and Davina are best viewed through a lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). In Maura and Davina we are presented with two very different trans experiences: the discrimination that Davina has faced and internalised over her lifetime compared with Maura/Mort's relative comfort and privilege, living with (only) the internal suffering of being closeted. In her monologue, Davina declares all the identity markers she carries which interrelate to make her a victim of complex and specific oppressions (Hulko, 2009). Intersectionality requires us to not classify just by one identity category such as gender or ethnicity, but to accept that each part of identity influences experiences of privilege and oppression (Hulko, 2009; McCall, 2005). Davina is not only transgender, or only HIV positive, and she is not just an ex-prostitute – though all of these aspects would certainly result in hardship and/or discrimination. These parts of her identity combine and influence each other to result in specific limits to her access to social status, employment, health care and, as she demonstrates here, her pool of suitable and attainable partners (C. T. Lee, 2016). While Maura is now experiencing transphobic objectification, she has never had to seek education or employment living as a trans person and carries the privilege of assuming everyone else has had the same opportunities that she has had (Herman, 2013; Wildman, 1996). This unambiguous engagement with intersectionality as it applies to trans women could be read as an effort on the part of the producers to atone for the fact that the show up to this point has depicted a predominantly white (albeit Jewish), wealthy and connected cast of characters. Davina's iteration of her challenges comes as something of a refreshing shock to the audience, who have been witnessing Maura and her narcissistic family members fumble through life with few real worries.

6.13 Trans and HIV/AIDS

One of the many revelations in this scene is the discovery that Davina is HIV-positive. This adds to the authenticity of her character, given the enormous impact HIV/AIDS has had on trans individuals, and the tendency of television producers to not include characters with disabilities or health problems (Bauer et al., 2009). Past screen depictions of the AIDS crisis have centred on gay men, erasing the huge number of trans people affected by the disease (Kohnen, 2016). GLAAD (2016a) reported that

while an estimated 12 percent of Americans live with a disability[6], only one percent of television characters have one. In the US-based National Transgender Discrimination Survey, "respondents reported over four times the national average of HIV infection, with rates higher among transgender people of color" (Grant et al., 2011, p. 6). While it is disappointing that this aspect of Davina's life is not explored in any depth in the first three seasons, its inclusion is a step forward in terms of visibility for trans people living with HIV/AIDS and representation of disability and ill health in general.

6.14 Framing and reframing

This plotline demonstrates the show's agility, able to alter the viewer's sympathies in a moment. Sal's pronouncements about Maura's body and the plastic surgery he thinks she should get appear to be abhorrent, and it is likely the producers wanted to highlight the scrutiny trans people face with regards to their looks and bodies (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). The initial scene casts Sal as an anti-feminist, offensive and lecherous villain, and Maura as the innocent and uncomfortable victim (McKenna, 2016). So when Maura decides to tell Davina, the viewer is on her side. Maura seems to be acting in Davina's best interests by telling her about it: "You can do better than that" (Kuperberg & Frohna, 2015). But Davina's retort tells us something new about her circumstances and perspective, provoking the viewer to rethink everything they thought they had known about the previous scene. Was Maura speaking out of turn? Is Davina's pragmatism to be pitied or admired? This willingness to show both sides of a story and leave the narrative unresolved is typical of *Transparent* and a feature that sets it apart from many other shows (Moss, 2016). It also deftly represents the reality of trans lives which are, like cisgender lives, diverse in experiences, circumstances and perspectives.

6.15 Direct language versus manipulative language

The dialogue between Davina and Maura shows us Davina's direct sincerity contrasted with Maura's careful linguistic manipulation. Maura is indirect in her lead-up to the eventual confrontation, apparently relishing the chance to reveal Sal's inappropriate comments to Davina. This line reveals Maura's tactics clearly: "Your Sal came in the turret today, and, oh, he talked to me about how many ccs should be in my titty area" (Kuperberg & Frohna, 2015). Using the second person possessive "*Your*

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[6] HIV/AIDS is covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Sal", she makes Davina responsible for Sal's actions (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Maura uses a filled pause, "oh", to hold Davina's attention and indicate that she has more to say, and adopts Sal's crass language to further highlight its offensiveness (O'Connell & Kowal, 2004). Davina, on the other hand, is open and does not play games, stating her position and not masking her feelings about Maura's experience with politeness or passive aggression. At first it seems as though they are on an equal footing in the scene, but in pointing out Maura's privilege, coupled with a suggestion that Maura leave her house, Davina asserts her own power, leaving Maura floundering.

6.16 Ingenious citizenship

There is more than one type of transgender life, nicely exemplified in the contrast we see between Davina and Maura. McKenna (2016) argued that this scene continued the portrayal of Maura as implausibly naïve about the issues facing transgender women. She added that although Davina's retort was a welcome moment of authenticity, the fierceness of Davina's response erased Maura's legitimate claim to be insulted by Sal's comments (McKenna, 2016). However, I would argue that Davina is enacting what C. T. Lee (2016) describes as "ingenious citizenship", an important lesson for both Maura and the audience to learn. Examining the ways in which various transgender subjects simultaneously subvert and reify the gender binary, C. T. Lee (2016) argues that "everyday practices of transgendering can be understood as disrupting and appropriating (without being able to transcend) the gender script of liberal citizenship" (p. 154). One of his subjects is a group of Mexican transgender sex workers who have moved to San Francisco for work opportunities. They have undergone some medical transitioning, and style themselves in a feminine manner, but retain their penises due to the market demand for femme-appearing sex workers with male genitalia. He argues that these women are not tragic victims but are simply making "strategic and creative" choices (p. 154) to make the best of the limited opportunities available to them (C. T. Lee, 2016). Davina's choice to be in a heteronormative relationship with a flawed man who loves her and who provides for her is an apt example of strategic and creative decision-making which both rails against societal norms and reinforces them (C. T. Lee, 2016). Hayward (2008) echoed these themes, writing:

> Changeability is intrinsic to the transsexual body, at once its subject, its substance and its limit…. That is all to say, the transsexual body, my body, is a body created out of necessity, ingenuity, and survival – to carry the heft of my various social identities. (p. 74)

Davina has found her way through life adapting and seizing any opportunities to get stability and security while still being true to herself. She says, "I know what I want, and I know what I need" (Kuperberg & Frohna, 2015). What she wants is some semblance of a 'normal' life, which by necessity fits the capitalist heteronormative and cisnormative society in which she lives. In Sal, she finds financial and emotional security and a 'normal' relationship. Perhaps in seeking, and finding, the lifestyle markers of the "liberal citizenship script", Davina is creating more liveable spaces *within* her community for herself and other trans people (C. T. Lee, 2016, p. 151). The trans actor and activist Hari Nef (2016), who also has a role in *Transparent's* flashback scenes, has spoken publicly about the aesthetics of survival. She argued that trans women are often criticised for assuming high-femme styling, reifying society's restrictive and misogynistic gender binary, but it is this aesthetic, which enables them to "pass", which means they are able to make friends and gain employment and move through the world with reduced risk of transphobic attack. Davina might admit to reinforcing traditional gender roles but she has prioritised her own safety and happiness over making a potentially dangerous political statement with her romantic and aesthetic choices.

Nef's position and C. T. Lee's notion of ingenious citizenship appear to be at odds with radical queer thought, which seeks to deconstruct the gender binary altogether, seeing it as a tool of the patriarchy and oppression (Butler, 2006; C. T. Lee, 2016). However, Lane (2009) identified that an artificial divide had been created by academia that separated gender non-binary (radical, transgressive) people from trans men and women who strongly identify and live as the gender opposite to the one assigned to them at birth (traditional, safe). She called for a diversity of transgender and for the discourse to move away from this dichotomy and towards an openness allowing individual freedom of identity and choices in whatever form they might take. C.T. Lee (2016) further argued that for many transgender people it is necessary to be at once complicit with these systems of liberal citizenship, while simultaneously subverting or pushing against them (C. T. Lee, 2016). In complying with the liberal citizenship script of the gender binary (by modifying their bodies and their lives to fit society's concept of male or female), trans men and women are moving towards a place they can comfortably inhabit, free of the widespread discrimination and suffering trans people experience (C. T. Lee, 2016).

6.17 Conclusion

This episode takes the opportunity to depict a wider range of transgender experiences than has previously been seen on television. Capuzza and Spencer (2017) call for for more, and more varied images of trans people, who might be "struggling, behaving poorly, acting heroic, and doing nothing extraordinary" (p. 13). In depicting the flawed Maura with her very different trans friend Davina, rather than simply placing her within an entirely cisgendered set of characters, this episode supports the goal of showing that there are more ways than one to be transgender, and that none of the ways are 'right' or 'wrong'. Through Davina's life story, the episode highlights the challenges facing trans people with regard to romance and sex, but also employability and health issues. The problematic idea of a "chaser" is brought up, along with the pragmatism that is necessary to flourish as a trans woman in a transphobic society. It introduces an explicitly intersectional viewpoint and calls attention to the ways in which oppressed people often address their difficulties with creativity and resilience. These scenes are exemplary of *Transparent's* second season's trend of including more issues that are central to trans lives, rather than just Maura's unique experience.

Chapter seven: Analysis four, *Elizah*

Elizah is the first episode of the third season of *Transparent* and is also the title of this final scene analysis. The episode was written by Ethan Kuperberg and directed by Jill Soloway.

7.1 Scene introduction

Maura has begun volunteering at the LGBTIQ community centre she is involved with, taking calls on a help line. The very first call she takes is from the upset Elizah.

7.2 Scene transcript

Scene starts at 5.10

[phone ringing]

Maura - LA Call Line, I'm here to help you. How can I help?

Elizah - [indistinct]

Maura - I'm sorry, can you speak up? I can I can hardly hear you.

Elizah - I said today was really fuckin' hard. And I know there's gonna be, like, hard days and stuff, but today was really fuckin' hard. I got up at 5am, and I took the bus all the way across town to go to the stupid fuckin' clinic, and I waited for five hours all for the doctor to say I'm not old enough, and I'm not in the system, and I need my fuckin' foster parents who won't do shit but take the check they get every single month.

Maura - Mm-hm.

Elizah - I just feel like I'm drowning, like, I just don't want to do this anymore. So, you know, you're asking me how you're gonna help me, like, why don't you just tell me why I shouldn't just kill myself.

Maura – Um.

Elizah - No, you said you were gonna help me, so what am I supposed to do now?

Maura - Um sounds very difficult.

Elizah - Difficult. That's a good fuckin' word for it.

Maura – Have you been drinking?

Elizah – What?

Maura – Just scratch that. Uh, I'm sorry. Um, have you felt this way before?

Elizah – Where the fuck are you getting these questions from, man, seriously?

Maura – Well, I'm not a man, actually, I'm I'm I'm trans.

Elizah – Oh. Well, shit. I'm trans, too.

Maura – Hey, uh, what's your name?

Elizah – Elizah.

Maura – My name is Maura.

The conversation continues with Maura gaining some trust and asking Elizah to breathe with her. Elizah breaks down sobbing, and hangs up the phone. When Elizah abruptly ends the call, Maura is worried, and drives to South Los Angeles to find her. She goes to the clinic Elizah was at in South Los Angeles (invading Elizah's privacy and likely breaking the rules of the help line), and someone tells her she is at Slauson's Swap Meet, a nearby mall, and describes her bright green hair as a distinguishing feature. She goes to the mall and rushes around trying to find her.

7.3 A new perspective for *Transparent*

While *Transparent* has been extolled for its fresh perspective and its warm treatment of complex, imperfect trans and gay/bi characters, it has received some criticism for its lack of inclusion of people of colour and focus on the atypically wealthy trans woman Maura (Villarejo, 2016). This episode turns narcissistic protagonist Maura's attention towards those less fortunate than her, her own privilege held in sharp relief against the everyday hardships that trans women of colour face. First, the context in which the episode was written will be introduced, and it will be argued that public opinion and critical response influenced the decision to include this subject matter. A discussion will follow around how the writers avoided depicting Elizah as a poor, black victim with Maura as her white saviour, favouring a more complex treatment of both characters. The analysis will then draw on aspects of Elizah's life that reflect real experiences of trans people of colour, including the barriers they face in accessing

adequate medical and mental health care. It will go on to discuss the contrast between the intersectional identities of Maura and Elizah, and also between Maura and the diverse group of people she comes across during the course of the episode.

7.4 Growth and development within *Transparent*

Transparent, like all contemporary television shows, does not exist apart from its audience, its production context, or society, but within an inter-discursive framework. The social context in which the show was produced has materially influenced its trajectory. Fairclough (1995) argued that any given text is a product of social activity, and that activity is a part of greater society. He elaborated that these three elements do not exist separately but interact and influence each other. The three seasons of *Transparent* have been created by Soloway and their team of writers, actors and crew within a social context. This includes the broader discourse around transgender people, which has become more public and complex in recent years, along with online and offline criticism specific to the show (from both reviewers and bloggers). This social context has directly informed narrative and casting decisions made by the producers.

Soloway has come under fire for both the way they have told the story of trans people, and for presuming this was their story to tell at all (Brodesser-Akner, 2014; James, 2014). There have been calls from trans rights advocates for the film and television industries to hire more, or exclusively, transgender actors for transgender roles, with Soloway taking criticism for the casting of cisgender actor Tambor as Maura (James, 2014; Katz, 2015). Funk and Funk (2016a) accused Solway of creating the show as a mode of self-therapy – an opportunity to come to terms with their own parent coming out as trans. Soloway has been quoted by a friend as saying, when their own parent came out late in life as transgender, "as a child, oh my god! But as a writer, oh my god!" (Maron, 2017, 1:18:07). Critic Taffy Brodesser-Akner (2014) insisted that the show is as much an exploration of Soloway's own gender exploration as it is an homage to their trans parent, although their parent was clearly the catalyst for the Pfefferman family journey.

Regardless of these problems, Soloway's subsequent actions and the trajectory of the show have evolved in a way that implies growth and a deeper understanding of the issues that face trans people. Soloway has admitted that they made a mistake casting Tambor as the lead trans character (Moylan, 2016). They established gender-neutral

bathrooms on set, and practised trans-affirmative hiring (favouring trans candidates over cisgender ones), admitting that they had discovered during the process of producing *Transparent* the difficulties trans people face in finding employment (Moylan, 2016). The cast features several recurring trans characters played by trans actors, and there are trans people working in most parts of the production, including an episode director and members of the writing staff (Ennis, 2014; Locker, 2015). When Soloway won three Emmy Awards in 2016 they acknowledged and thanked the trans community "for their lived lives" (Jamieson, 2016, para. 14), and Tambor, upon winning a Best Actor award for his role, declared "I would be happy if I were the last cisgender male to play a transgender female,"(Jamieson, 2016, para. 4). People connected to *Transparent* have also been involved in other projects that have featured gender diverse characters. Soloway's 2016 show *I Love Dick* features a gender-fluid character, and Jay Duplass, who plays Maura's son Josh on *Transparent*, executive produced the film *Tangerine*, about two trans women friends who are also sex workers (Grobar, 2015). In 2017 a new show, *Pose*, featured the most trans actors ever in a television show. It has cast two trans actors who had minor roles in *Transparent*, and is co-written by trans writer Our Lady J who joined the *Transparent's* writers' room in its second season (Andreeva, 2017).

Transparent has been criticised, though to a lesser degree, for its whiteness, specifically its focus on the extremely well-off, white Pfefferman family, who seldom mix with people of colour. It has been argued that this exclusion of non-white people is strange, given the show is set in ethnically diverse Los Angeles (Berman, 2016; Villarejo, 2016). This episode, which focuses on a black trans woman, launched the show's third season, and was a step towards addressing this criticism. Soloway admitted to being scared that they would not treat the subject matter properly, exposing themselves to further criticism, but said "if I'm not going to do work about race, [or] class, and I'm only doing work about my own world, then I'm not pushing the conversation forward,"(Dry, 2016, para. 12). In the episode, we see Maura pulled out of her moneyed, white world and into nearby South Los Angeles, the natural habitat of the episode's titular character Elizah (played by trans actor Alexandra Grey), who is young, poor, black and transgender (Berman, 2016). Maura's adventure into this new world forces her to confront her own identities and how they are perceived by others – from the potential of trans kinship to the (negative) affect her whiteness has in a place where that is rare.

The cinematography is notable in this episode and tells the story of Maura's discomfort in her new surroundings. There is a transition from Maura's world, where the shots are clear, wide and familiar, to Elizah's world. When we first meet Elizah on the other end of the phone, the camera stays on Maura and her headset, now and then offering short cuts to Elizah, tight on half of her face, and going in and out of focus. She is unfamiliar and distant. As the call progresses she comes into focus and a wider shot captures her: a cool young woman with bright green hair, dressed in tight jeans and a shirt with a choker and boots. Later, when Maura loses control more and more in the foreign environment of the Slauson's Swap Meet, the editing becomes more erratic and the camera less stable. Frequent cuts and low, skewed camera angles force the viewer to feel as disoriented there as Maura does. Through this experimental style of shooting, the viewer is immersed in the emotions of Elizah and Maura, encouraging greater empathy with them.

7.5 Maura as the white saviour? Privilege and context

Maura, recognising her privilege as a wealthy white person, is seeking to help the tragic, black Elizah. What seems to be another white saviour on screen becomes something quite different. A well-documented phenomenon, the "white saviour complex" is where the role of a white advocate or ally is invented or exaggerated in the telling of a true story of people of colour, often triumphing over adversity (Hughey, 2010). This is usually done to better appeal to a white audience, or is the product of a white-centric production team, and it has the effect of diminishing the autonomy and strength of people of colour, adding to other media issues like stereotyping and underrepresentation (Hughey, 2010). White saviours can be found in life, too, not just in art: Bell (2013) argued that white celebrities merge their on-screen personas with philanthropic jaunts to poor African nations. They "harness spectacle", using philanthropic modes (Bell, 2013, p. 2). Similarly, Cole (2012) accused Jason Russell, the white, idealistic American who launched the Kony 2012 campaign (with the lofty goal to bring down the Ugandan brutal guerrilla leader Joseph Kony), of figuring himself as the antidote to this African problem. Davina has accused Maura of narcissism and privilege: "We don't all have your family. We don't all have your money" (Kuperberg & Frohna, 2015). Maura's volunteer work on the LGBTIQ helpline smacks of a similar longing to do helpful work that will also make her look good to those around her, especially those friends like Davina who are wryly mocking of her self-absorption.

What few characters of colour have been featured in *Transparent* have, most often, been depicted problematically. Notable examples are the handsome black personal trainer and his (also black) housemate whom Ali hyper-sexualises, proposing a threesome while high, and the attractive Asian real estate agent Josh seduces and readily dismisses. Villarejo (2016) argued that "When African American characters do appear, that is, they receive little of the tenderness and respect Soloway devotes to Maura's transformation" (p. 14). While these non-white characters seem to be stereotyped more by Ali and Josh, respectively, than by the show's writers, who seem to be mocking the Pfeffermann siblings and their bad behaviour, they are nonetheless limited, one-dimensional roles. It therefore at first seems likely that Elizah will be treated with similar dismissiveness, with Maura cast as her white saviour.

However, the unfolding of events allows us to view Elizah as a young woman with her own strength and power, rather than purely as a victim of her circumstances. We see it first in their conversation. Even as Elizah is confessing she is contemplating suicide, she still has the intellect, strength and quick instincts to call Maura out on her unhelpful line of stock questions and statements – identifying what Fairclough (2001) calls synthetic personalisation where companies attempt to design their communication style to appear more friendly. Maura says, "Sounds very difficult" and asks, "Have you been drinking?", "Um, have you felt this way before?", which she is indeed reading from the crisis checklist at the LGBTIQ centre. This is met with incredulity from Elizah, who can perceive the inauthenticity of Maura's words even through her own suffering: "Difficult. That's a good fuckin' word for it", and "Where the fuck are you getting these questions from, man, seriously?" (Kuperberg & J. Soloway, 2016). From the beginning of the exchange Maura is not positioned as a balm for Elizah's problems, and Elizah is not helpless, rather she is simply a smart, strong young woman in a tough situation. Later, as Maura unravels, unfit for the unfamiliar environment of the South Los Angeles mall, it is Elizah who ends up assisting Maura, not the other way around. Elizah defends Maura and holds her hand as she passes out on the ground.

7.6 Maura Pfeffermann: Typical trans woman?

Maura's experience is not a typical trans experience. As elaborated on later, she has had no problem accessing quality health care to support her transition, she has her own house (the result of a career at an Ivy League university) and she has not been the

victim of violence. In reality, trans people frequently face challenges in accessing health care, rental housing and homeless shelters, and addictions and sexual assault services, and experience higher unemployment rates than the general population (Bauer et al., 2009; Rose, 2016). Few countries have laws in place specifically protecting the human rights of trans people, and fewer still enforce such rules (Bauer et al., 2009). Trans women and especially trans women of colour are attacked and killed at a higher rate than the average population, but Maura is never shown as the victim of physical violence (Advocate.com editors, 2017; Rose, 2016). While this episode is a standalone narrative (Elizah does not appear again in the season), it addresses to some degree the criticism that Maura's experience as trans is an unrealistic one and highlights the most common systemic problems facing trans people.

7.7 Maura's experience with health access

Until this episode, the barriers trans people face in accessing health care had not been addressed on *Transparent*. Funk and Funk (2016) argued that the first season takes a neoliberal, individualistic viewpoint that ignores the historical and current "systemic prejudice and ideological violence perpetrated, especially by influential mental and medical health professionals, against gender expansive people in the United States and globally" (p. 71). Indeed, Maura is shown easily accessing community support and specialist doctors who guide her through the process with expertise and sensitivity. This is particularly clear in the episode *Cherry Blossoms* (season two, episode four) where the doctor not only offers a great deal of clear, well-researched information and advice, but also encourages Maura to "do yourself a favour and get to know your body" (Anderson & J. Soloway, 2016). Any discomfort or negative feelings come from Maura's personal grappling with her transition, not from any issues with her health care providers. So, along with a welcome change in focus from the narcissistic, white and wealthy Pfeffermans to the young, black, poor, trans woman Elizah, this episode also specifically highlights the situation facing many trans people when seeking health care.

7.8 Barriers to health care

The barriers facing trans people in need of health care are numerous and intertwined. Most issues stem from cultural or institutional cisgenderism which results in structures and laws which assume a cisgender population and make no allowances for transgender members of society (Saunders, 2014). Bauer et al. (2009) and Saunders (2015) all argued that the barriers of institutional cisgenderism constitute the erasure of trans lives. Informational erasure includes a dearth of research into trans health care, and limited dissemination of what knowledge has been produced (Bauer et al., 2009). Unlike Maura's experience noted above of being encouraged to educate herself about her own body, in reality this lack of information can result in the trans patient being forced to educate their health care provider (Snelgrove et al., 2012). Studies in both Canada and the United Kingdom have reported that there is little mandatory education about trans health at medical school, which has resulted in a severe shortage of professionals with the knowledge, skills and willingness to see trans patients (House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, 2016; Snelgrove et al., 2012). We see in Elizah's frustrated dialogue that getting to see a health care professional (it is implied she is seeking gender reassignment surgery or hormone treatment) was both hard for her to get to, geographically, and included a long wait. "I got up at 5am, and I took the bus all the way across town to go to the stupid fuckin' clinic, and I waited for five hours" (Kuperberg & J. Soloway, 2016). Elizah's experience appears to be consistent with that of the general trans population. Where transphobic behaviour is malicious, personal and targeted, institutional cisgenderism is passive and structural (Saunders, 2014).

Elizah's language betrays the bureaucratic and social barriers that are stopping her from accessing the care she needs. She even appropriates the clinic's bureaucratic language: "I'm not in the system" (Kuperberg & J. Soloway, 2016). Fairclough (2001a) describes this common process of the colonisation of discourse by outside groups as a means to harness some of its power. Elizah is demonstrating her understanding of the processes and discourse around accessing transitional medicine, potentially in the hope that the people bound by such processes and discourse will take her seriously and provide the care she seeks. Along with not being "in the system", there is an age limit ("I'm not old enough"), and the regulations do not allow her to independently pursue gender reassignment without her foster parents' support, which she does not have – they "won't do shit but take the check they get every single month" (Kuperberg & J. Soloway, 2016). It appears that Elizah went out of her way to get to a clinic that has

the specific expertise needed to see trans patients who want gender reassignment hormones and/or surgeries. However rare these types of clinics are, rarer still is the general practice or emergency room that is set up to meet the needs of trans patients with non-transition related medical requirements.

Bauer et al. (2009) argued that health care systems are set up within a cisnormative society which results in the erasure of trans people – they allow for cisgender women and men but nothing outside of that binary. There can be bureaucratic issues with gender and name changes in clinic databases, and a lack of policy that allows for the differences of trans patients. Some procedures are exclusively funded for a certain sex (for example, a prostate exam for men or a mammogram for women) which can make it difficult or impossible for a trans person to access (Snelgrove et al., 2012). *The New York Times* has reported that trans people are often placed in wards that correspond to their birth sex rather than their felt gender, causing awkwardness for both the trans patient and their ward-mates, and that doctors are often ill-equipped to treat trans patients even with non-transition-related health issues (Ellin, 2016). There is little published research for doctors to refer to regarding trans-related hormone use when getting treatment for other ailments, and trans people often avoid health care altogether, especially when the issue is related to those parts of their body that correspond to their sex at birth (Grady, 2016). Trans people have reported being verbally harassed by medical staff and turned away by doctors who were unprepared to treat them (Bauer et al., 2009; Grady, 2016; HCWEC, 2016). This lack of acknowledgement of trans people can be uncomfortable, humiliating or dangerous for the trans patient. Most often, ad hoc solutions are found rather than an overhaul of cisnormative policy and systems.

7.9 Mental health(care) and transgender people

The mental health establishment has an historic role in pathologising transgenderism (Robertson et al., 2016). The way gender non-conformity has been characterised in psychiatry in particular has had long-standing effects on how trans people continue to be seen and treated by health care providers and the public (Funk & Funk, 2016a; Robertson et al., 2016). Funk and Funk (2016a) described how trans people in the 1960s were routinely lobotomised and subjected to electro-shock therapy, and that cross-dressing was likened by the psychiatry establishment to rape and paedophilia. In a practice typical of most Western countries, Canada demands a psychiatric

assessment with a diagnosis of "gender identity disorder" (GID) in order for a trans person to get hormone treatment and/or gender reassignment surgery (Snelgrove et al., 2012). Doctors with experience treating trans patients often disagree with this forced diagnosis which they argue further pathologises their patients, but until a new process is established they are resigned to submitting to this archaic and discriminatory regulation in order to get the right treatment for their patients (Snelgrove et al., 2012).

It is in this context of institutional cisgenderism that we find Elizah. She is perhaps attempting to access hormone treatment – we are not told the purpose of her visit but it is implied. When she is turned away, she is so desperate that she expresses to Maura her suicidal thoughts. Trans people are at a higher risk than the general population of suicidal ideation (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007). There appears to be a causative relationship between Elizah's lack of access to health care and her suicidal thoughts; after being told she was not eligible for treatment she says, "I just feel like I'm drowning, like, I just don't want to do this anymore [...] why don't you just tell me why I shouldn't just kill myself" (Kuperberg & J. Soloway, 2016). This is consistent with the experience of many young trans people, especially those of colour. Indeed, 65 percent of trans people in a 2007 US study reported they had experienced suicidal ideation (Xavier, Honnold, & Bradford, 2007). Another US study of trans youth found that one quarter of participants had attempted suicide and around half had experienced suicidal thoughts (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007). A report prepared for the House of Commons stated that in the United Kingdom around half of young trans people and one third of trans adults had attempted suicide (HCWEC, 2016).

Marginalisation can cause mental health issues like depression and anxiety and can increase the risk of suicidal ideation (HCWEC, 2016). Bauer et al. (2009) argued that a lack of access to hormone treatment was a key cause of depression and suicidal ideation in trans people. Robertson et al. (2016) also drew a connection between the discrimination trans people face and that population's high rates of depression and anxiety (four times and one and a half times the rates for the general population, respectively). The medical establishment is one of the sources of trans marginalisation and, therefore, the high rate of suicidal ideation among trans people (Bauer et al., 2009).

Bauer et al. (2009) found that multiple barriers prevent transgender people from accessing mental health care, from an assumption some clinicians make that every trans patient has unrelated mental health issues to not treating actual mental health

problems as real and separate from a patient's gender identity. Similarly, Shipherd, Green, and Abramovitz (2010) found that "cost of treatment, fear of certain aspects of treatment (for example, the side effects of medications), and concerns about stigma or social consequence are salient factors that prevent transgender individuals in distress from seeking services" (p. 104). In Elizah's case, it appears that her difficult circumstances and barriers to transitional health care are directly causing her suicidal ideation, and a phone call to the helpline indicates that more practical or targeted assistance is not an option or readily available for her. This humane depiction of institutional cisgenderism and the obstructions faced by trans people in need of adequate physical and mental health care is a good example of *Transparent's* progressive and helpful representation of trans realities.

7.10 Intersected identity frames and social visibility

Race, gender, class and sexuality combine in specific ways to inform the dominant narratives people draw on to assign meaning to other people (de Vries, 2012). An example seen in the episode is when Maura hesitatingly announces she is trans to Elizah on the phone. It dissolves their other differences (the most obvious being class, ethnicity and age), instantly relaxes Elizah and establishes an affinity: "Oh. Well, shit. I'm trans, too" (Kuperberg & J. Soloway, 2016). Elizah feels she can trust Maura through their specific shared identity. However, this is not always enough to enable her to relate to others, Maura discovers. Her first stop at the mall is to ask three trans Latina women if they have seen Elizah. They are warm, and she bonds with them quickly, saying "*Yo estoy, uh, familia trans, tambien*" (I am … trans family, too") (Kuperberg & J. Soloway, 2016). They are dressed differently from her: Maura wears chunky jewellery with a pale blue cardigan and long skirt, is older and looks grandmotherly; they range in age from around twenty to forty years, each wearing form-fitting clothing, strong makeup and large hoop earrings. Maura brings to this exchange a stereotype that tells her who these women are and asks if they have seen Elizah "on the streets", implying they are sex workers (Kuperberg & J. Soloway, 2016). Though she insists that is not what she meant, they are offended, asserting their 'legitimate' roles as nurses and students. Maura, although ostensibly part of the "*familia trans*" nonetheless has allowed society's dominant narrative that all trans Latinas are sex workers to guide her, resulting in her rejection from the group.

7.11 Maura's intersectional identity

Maura is on the receiving end of the same style of prejudice later in the episode. Flustered and thirsty, with a broken shoe, she goes to buy a drink from a fast food restaurant but drinks it before paying, before realising she has left her purse at the clinic. She says she will return later to pay, but the woman working at the restaurant becomes angry. Maura sees Elizah out of the corner of her eye and, still holding the drink, she runs out of the restaurant and chases after Elizah. A mall security guard and the restaurant worker seize her.

> *Scene starts at 18.54*
>
> Maura - I told you very clearly, ma'am, that I told you that I lost my purse and I was - okay, so I'm gonna get you your money, I told you that.
>
> Restaurant worker - I don't care about the money, it's about the principle. You walk up in my store and you take shit because you think it's yours.
>
> …
>
> Maura - Wait a minute, hold on, I'm not a criminal. You don't have to -
>
> Restaurant worker - You are a criminal because you stole that Gatorade.
>
> (Kuperberg & J. Soloway, 2016).

The worker's assertion ("you take shit because you think it's yours") implies that she feels Maura has a white, privileged attitude of ease and ownership over everything in this predominantly black and Latino environment (Kuperberg & J. Soloway, 2016). Although she misses the fact that Maura is trans and therefore not without her own source of discrimination, she is not entirely wrong about Maura's attitude, which is that of one unused to being called out on bad behaviour, especially not by law enforcement. The worker asks the security guard to call the police, and Maura asks Elizah for $2 to pay for the drink. Bewildered by the scene, Elizah is offered help by the restaurant worker, who misgenders Maura: "Do you need me to call the police on this man? … Is he bothering you?". She nonetheless jumps to Maura's defence, displaying trans solidarity, saying "Hey, it's not he. Does she look like a he to you?" (Kuperberg & J. Soloway, 2016). This is a tidy bookend to the episode that links back to Elizah's first realisation that they are both trans, when they first talk on the phone. Nonetheless, all the other misunderstandings and conflicts of the episode are left

unresolved, in keeping with the show's style of storytelling (Moss, 2016). Maura is removed from Slauson's Swap Meet on a stretcher, with bemused mall workers and shoppers, including Elizah, looking on.

7.12 Conclusion

In one episode, the producers of *Transparent* display greater knowledge of the systemic barriers facing trans people in the USA than in the previous two seasons, likely responding to criticism of its focus on an atypically wealthy and privileged trans woman. Avoiding the trap of their first black trans woman being cast as the victim with Maura her white saviour, the episode highlights Elizah's struggles without diminishing her strength or agency. This episode is *Transparent's* first foray into telling the stories of trans people of colour. It highlights institutional cisgenderism as it plays out in the health sector and depicts the barriers trans people face when trying to access physical and mental health care. It further iterates how these barriers have a compounding negative impact on trans people excluded by the system. The depiction is far more in line with real, reported experiences than Maura's health care experiences shown on the show, and accurately presents the way that cisnormative structures "do not acknowledge the needs of transgender individuals" (Saunders, 2014, p. 190).

As Maura meets a range of people in the mall, some trans, her exchanges reveal the ways sameness and difference interact. We also see how others perceive Maura and the way she perceives them in turn, allowing dominant narratives to inform her exchanges, resulting in misunderstanding and mistrust. The episode shows a commitment to broadening the show's representation of trans lives and continuing to be a part of the greater conversation around trans rights and cisnormative cultural structures.

Chapter eight: Discussion and conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a discussion of the key findings from this research, and then concluding arguments based on these findings. It commences with a précis of the theoretical framework and methodological approach this research has utilised, before moving on to the key findings, separated into themed sections, and drawing elements from the relevant scene analyses to support each finding. A discussion of the contribution this research has made to the fields of transgender studies and media studies will follow. Limitations of the study and opportunities for future research will then be identified before a concluding summary of all these sections.

8.2 Overview of the aims of the research

The purpose of this study was to respond to the question, "In what ways is the television show *Transparent* a progressive depiction of transgender realities?" Depending on its content, television can educate audiences, perpetuate or break down stereotypes, and improve or worsen mainstream attitudes around, in this case, trans people (Garretson, 2015; Jensen & Oster, 2009). In the past, transgender people have been underrepresented on television and most of the few instances that do exist lean on negative tropes and stereotypes (Sandercock, 2015). Therefore, a television show like *Transparent*, which revolves around a trans character, promises a step in the right direction. *Transparent* has come at a time where transgender people are experiencing increased representation in all forms of media, yet many trans people continue to be the victims of violence and structural discrimination (Bolles, 2012; Rose, 2016). This study has sought to assess the ways in which trans people are represented on the show. In the literature review, progressive representation was defined as television that depicts (in this case) diverse transgender characters and presents them in ways that are realistic, nuanced, varied and do not rely on stereotypes (Battis, 2008; Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; Kessler, 2011).

8.3 Summary of the theoretical framework: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

CDA was chosen as the appropriate theoretical framework, with its aims of analysing language and discourse to reveal structures of power and oppression. Fairclough (2001b) argues for the importance of the semiotic aspects of discourse, genres and style. These aspects can be analysed to show the specific ways in which dominant ideologies are reproduced or challenged. Historically CDA has focused on the way the powerful retain their positions through the manipulation of language but some have urged for a positive discourse analysis whose focus could be examples of discourse being used to promote equality (Martin, 2004). It is in this spirit that the present research has sought to analyse *Transparent,* a television show that appears to be a positive step for transgender representation.

This study approached the show as an entire communicative event, considering the process by which it has been produced and its critical and popular reception, but with an analytical focus on the chosen scenes as exemplars. An advantage of CDA is that it lends itself to an interdisciplinary approach, where the research can include concepts and methods from various theoretical schools as appropriate (Lê & Lê, 2009). Given the subject matter – transgender representation – CDA was combined with queer and trans theory and feminist concepts, particularly those fields' contributions to gender and representational theory. The methods for analysis were drawn from a combination of CIT (Flanagan, 1954) and CDA methods as described by Fairclough (2001a) and Machin and Mayr (2012). These will be briefly reviewed below.

8.4 Summary of methodological approach

To address the research question in a way that was appropriate to the potential dataset, an innovative methodology was used. The television show had aired three seasons of ten episodes each at the time the research commenced, therefore a method was required to select a manageable number of key scenes to analyse in depth. CIT (Flanagan, 1954) was adapted to purpose. The entire three seasons were viewed closely and, based on criteria established in the literature review, four scenes were identified for analysis. These scenes each included at least one trans character and touched on issues that have been shown to affect trans people. A list of features, which included content, tone and linguistic elements, was established for analysis. Attention was paid to whether or not the issues featured in each scene resonated with the trans

experience in some way. Findings from each scene analysis were presented in separate chapters.

8.5 Findings

The strength of qualitative research of this type is that it considers the data from many different angles. The study has identified those ways in which the show has contributed to a progressive discourse about transgender realities, and those aspects that fell short. It has found, using the scene analyses as exemplars, that the show *Transparent* is in several ways helpful, innovative, and progressive in its depiction of transgender issues and realities. I argue, utilising scene analyses findings, that the television show, while not without flaws, has made a valuable contribution to the advancement of transgender visibility and rights, and cisgender understanding. In the literature review, parameters were established for what "progressive" might mean when talking about transgender representation on television. These criteria included: a variety of storylines, diversity of characterisation (including deviating from the norm of the white middle class male), and nuanced characterisation that avoids perpetuating established stereotypes and tropes that exist around trans people (Battis, 2008; Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; Kessler, 2011; Sandercock, 2015).

This section will present a discussion of the key findings of the research. Given the prior knowledge that I had of *Transparent*, along with literature reviewed that supported this perspective, there was an expectation that the show would be, upon analysis, progressive in several ways. The show was selected for its innovative approach to narrative and subject matter, therefore it was anticipated that some findings would support the supposition that the show would be progressive. While this expectation was largely satisfied, some findings indicate that the show is not as representative of the typical trans experience as it could be, in some ways perpetuating the erasure of trans lives.

It was found that negative stereotypes were largely avoided, and the show presented storylines that were often accurate depictions of real trans experiences and issues. The show is, however, disappointingly homogenous with regards to ethnicity and class: in the first season, all the main characters are white, and most are visibly wealthy. It was found that as the surrounding discourses around trans issues in society, and diversity on television, developed, so did the show itself. In its second season there was a widening of focus from Maura and her individual trans journey to include more trans

characters with varying life experiences and class status, and giving them (and therefore, a wider variety of trans issues) more screen time. The show utilises an innovative trans gaze, meaning that the tone and style of depiction generally allowed the show to explore trans issues in a way that did not sensationalise them. Finally, the show displayed a sophisticated understanding of intersectionality, successfully demonstrating the interplay of ethnicity, gender identity, social status and other identity markers. All of these findings will now be discussed in detail.

8.5.1 The dominant narrative of transition

The majority of screen depictions of transgender people in the past have displayed a preoccupation on the part of the producers with transsexual bodies (especially genitalia) and the transition process, prioritising storylines about surgical and medical transitioning (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; Serano, 2016). There also exists an assumption that all trans people both desire and have access to hormones and surgery (Serano, 2016; Xavier et al., 2007). *Transparent* does not avoid these themes: the viewer accompanies Maura to her doctor's appointments and eavesdrops on her conversations with her trans friends who explain to her the effects of hormones and describe what surgery they have or have not had. What is fresh about the way *Transparent* deals with these themes is its use of the trans gaze (Halberstam, 2000), which compels the viewer to see things from Maura's perspective. As discussed in Chapter six, regarding the scene where Sal flippantly interrogates Maura about her body and her plans for surgery, the message is that this line of questioning is irrelevant and rude (Kuperberg & Frohna, 2015). The inclusion of the scene does not serve to perpetuate cisgender obsession with trans bodies, rather it shifts their/our focus to how this obsession is dehumanising and disrespectful to trans people. When Elizah is suicidal over her inability to access the health services she needs to transition, the affecting portrayal of a desperate teen shines in the episode; no detail about Elizah's body or what transitional health care she seeks is provided, much less dwelled upon.

Abbott (2013) identified several cinematic and television examples where trans characters' genitalia or chests were exposed to the camera, apparently to satisfy a presumed audience desire to see what trans bodies look like, and to confirm what surgery they may or may not have had. In the four scenes analysed the camera's gaze does not focus on trans characters' body parts, although it does not shy away from showing them, some being conventionally feminine and beautiful (for example, Shea and Elizah). Maura is shown as something other than the stereotype of a young, sexy

trans woman. In her seventies, her corporeal history as a man is still apparent in the way she moves and her large size. Overall, while *Transparent* has not avoided depicting the trans body, it has done so without sensationalising it, and with sensitivity and respect.

8.5.2 Stereotypes and tropes

Stereotypes are problematic in that they erase the multiple ways of existing available to individuals within any given group, reducing them to caricatures. Dyer wrote that "Stereotypes express particular definitions of reality … which in turn relate to the disposition of power within society" (Dyer, 2009, p. 14). Presented as generalisations drawn from reality, stereotypes are in fact developed and enforced by those with a powerful voice in society as a means to retain their position, often at the expense of those with less power. This section will argue, using the scene analyses as examples, that *Transparent* has mostly avoided depicting trans people in stereotypical ways. However, the show did begin with a problematic reliance on Maura's "coming out" journey. As Funk and Funk (2016a, 2016b) argued, *Transparent's* emphasis on Maura's need to come out to her family dispossessed Maura of her authenticity and legitimacy. A by-product of this way of viewing trans identity is that, because trans people are forced to disclose their trans status, they are denied the option of anonymity or assumed authenticity that cisgender people take for granted (Funk & Funk, 2016b).

Despite this misstep, the present research found that the show went on to both avoid harmful stereotypes and expose and dispel some existing harmful stereotypes in ways that educate the audience and respect trans diversity. It was useful to hold Dyer's (2009) differentiation between a stereotype and a "novelistic character" in mind when reviewing the scenes (p. 13). He said that novelistic characters are defined by a great number of traits, not all of which are immediately apparent, but are revealed to the audience over "the course of the narrative, a narrative which is hinged on the growth or development of the character" (p. 13). A stereotype has a full narrative in-built and is not allowed a narrative that diverges from this innate one. So, while Funk and Funk's (2016b) observation holds that her coming out story was stereotypical in nature, by Dyer's (1999) definition, that Maura's character continued to evolve and was not limited narratively by her status as trans indicates she can be described as a novelistic character rather than a stereotype. This is true of the other trans characters also. Three of the four scenes analysed in this study centred on trans issues that had

the potential to be treated in stereotypical ways, but they were generally successful in showing these issues in fresh ways that avoided cliché.

8.5.3 Trans people depicted as perverts

Trans people have been mistaken for and characterised as sexually perverted in television and cinematic representations (Abbott, 2013; Russo, 1987; Serano, 2016). *Transparent* includes the exploration of Maura's sexuality, but never depicts her and the other trans characters as depraved or hyper-sexual. Davina's relationship with her partner Sal is sexual and it is never implied that it is anything but a standard, healthy relationship. In the *Bathroom Scene*, season one, episode four (Fitzerman-Blue, Harpster, & Ganatra, 2014), the subject of Chapter four, the unnamed mother accuses Maura of being perverted, but again, the trans gaze means that the mother comes off as ignorant and callous. This treatment shows audiences that the mother's belief in the stereotype that all trans people are perverted is ignorant and antiquated. In this way, *Transparent* deftly expresses its awareness of the harmful stereotype and then immediately denounces it.

8.5.4 Trans people depicted as deceptive

Trans people have been perceived and portrayed as deceitful and inauthentic, the justification for this trope being that their birth sex is concealed by their identified gender and/or gender expression (Halberstam, 2000; Russo, 1987). But with characters like Davina, who are strong, stable, assertive and living their lives without fanfare, *Transparent* works towards reflecting the ordinary daily existence of most trans people. In fact, Maura, Davina and Elizah are generally open and honest about their thoughts and feelings. Maura is slightly less so, manipulating conversations (like the one with Davina about Sal) to "win" them, but she had this trait before she transitioned and it is distinct from her trans identity. Her cisgender family members each behave, to some degree, in this way also.

8.5.5 Trans people depicted as victims

Trans people have often been depicted as fragile and lacking stability, and are not allowed to be anonymous, or to live 'normal' lives; they present as tragic victims of their gender dysphoria (Funk & Funk, 2016a; Halberstam, 2000; Russo, 1987). This

study found that *Transparent* avoided this trope almost entirely. Davina is not depicted as a victim of her circumstances, rather as a strong woman who makes smart choices to live the way she wants to live. Maura, in her scene with Leslie, is exposed as an aggressor and wielder of power, not a victim (granted she was living as a man at the time of the 'aggression'). While she suffered as a closeted trans woman for most of her life, Maura also benefitted greatly from a patriarchal society where she (as he) was granted a great deal of influence in a prestigious university that she would not have received as a woman, much less a trans woman. She goes on to retain and benefit from the connections and resources she gained from this position, even now as a trans woman. Even in the bathroom scene where she is victimised by a transphobic attack from the nameless woman, she bears the incident with stoicism; when asked if she is okay, she replies, "I will be." We are asked to empathise with her rather than pity her. From the scenes analysed, the closest the show gets to depicting a classic trans victim is Elizah. She is victimised by her extremely difficult circumstances, but nonetheless operates with strength and intelligence, her victimhood does not dictate her entire narrative, rather is just one aspect of it.

8.5.6 Nuanced characterisation

That *Transparent* has largely avoided reliance on stereotypes is an indication of the progressive nature of its depiction of trans realities. Another key indicator is depth and tone of characterisation. Sandercock (2015) called for more "nuanced representations" of LGBTIQ people (p. 441). In *Transparent*, each character, trans or cisgender, is complex and capable of both good and bad behaviour and is informed by a rich history that helps the viewer understand their behaviour. These characteristics and histories are revealed over time, and the characters are specific and not tokens or symbolic stereotypes (Dyer, 2009). Maura's back-story is filled in with detail, for example, in the scene which was the subject of Chapter five. When Leslie confronts Maura for her past wrongs, we learn more about Maura's career as a highly regarded professor, and that she was not a particularly progressive man and played a strong role in the academic boys' club (F. Soloway & Heller, 2016). Maura is shown as a conflicted, complicated woman who has lived most of her life as a powerful white man. She shows remorse for her past actions yet is not capable of a true apology or making amends with the woman whose career she limited. When she later comes up against the trans misogynist Sal, her reaction is one of righteous indignation – she has never been spoken to with such disrespect – rather than beaten-down resignation (Kuperberg & Frohna, 2015). This

reaction is in keeping with her previous life as a white wealthy man with high expectations of others. This brings us to another striking aspect of Maura as a character – her age. If trans people are seldom depicted on television, older trans people are depicted even less, and so in Maura a gap is filled in trans media representations (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; Shankle, Maxwell, Katzman, & Landers, 2003).

In Davina we have another richly drawn trans character. Though she has some elements of the "fabulous" trans woman trope, as the series progresses we see more facets to Davina. She is a supporting character, yet her steady presence in Maura's life as she navigates life as a newly out trans woman is consistent and appealing. It is therefore satisfying that in *The Book of Life*, (the subject of Chapter six) we are shown more sides to Davina than just Maura's benevolent trans guide, which is how she has been presented up to this point (Kuperberg & Frohna, 2015). In one forthright response, we learn that she is HIV-positive, that she has not had gender reassignment surgery, but most importantly, that she is fully aware of the social status that results from her intersected identity (her specific attributes and circumstances) and has thought carefully about what she wants for herself, given her limited options. Generous and open, yet staunchly single-minded, she provides a refreshing alternative to Maura's narcissism and naiveté.

While only appearing for one episode, Elizah provides another trans character drawn with specificity. She is effectively Maura's opposite; she is young, black, and poor, confident in her gender identity, streetwise, and knowledgeable about the health care she seeks and the system she must navigate to receive it. She is also comfortable in her environment. For example, we see her at ease at the South Los Angeles mall, while in that same mall we see Maura flustered and out of place. The producers of *Transparent* waited until the third season to address the programme's lack of ethnic diversity and some might argue that Elizah's character was tokenistic, given that she does not appear in the show again. However, the characterisation of Elizah, for all the brevity of her appearance, raised important issues of trans access to physical and mental health care, and more generally ethnic and socio-economic inequality. Her inclusion added further depth to *Transparent's* already broad exploration of trans lived experiences, though it is disappointing her appearance was so brief.

8.5.7 Representative of trans realities

One of the measures of healthy representation is realism (Battis, 2008). Therefore *Transparent*, even as it employs a stylistic "transcomedy" with its specific awkwardly comic tone (Moss, 2016), includes contemporary trans issues facing real people in a way that is respectful, and educational for audiences new to trans themes. In this section I will first examine the aspects of the show that could be described as unrealistic or unrepresentative, assessing how problematic these aspects are. I will then go on to discuss the findings from each scene analysis that support the claim that *Transparent* has put forward a generally realistic depiction of transgender lives.

Elizah's one-episode appearance highlighted the finding that *Transparent* upheld the mainstream tendency of presenting upper class, white reality as the norm, casting non-whites as the other (Downing & Husband, 2005; Dyer, 2008; Steeves, 1987). Even though, as will be described further on, analysis revealed a true progressive development within the show, the starting point of *Transparent* – a wealthy white privileged family, with a focus on Maura's individual journey rather than trans as a community – made it difficult for the producers to diversify the cast of characters and storylines in a natural way. Kessler (2011) noted that previously underrepresented character types (for example, gay or trans people) are often introduced into shows tentatively "via 'very special episodes'" (p. 144) to test audience approval ratings without committing to a potentially controversial direction. She argued that when these character types are introduced earlier in shows and kept on as integral characters rather than guest stars, it is a sign of progress. Though *Transparent* at its launch was already at this progressive stage, with its inclusion of trans characters as fundamental to the show, when it comes to including trans people of colour they are still in this tentative, limited mode of depiction. As worthwhile as Elizah's episode is in depicting trans realities, ultimately she appears only in this one episode, to teach Maura a lesson about herself, and the audience a lesson about 'real' trans struggles. That a person of colour is only included as a one-off token rather than woven into the series as a whole is both incongruent with the rest of the show's progressive nature, and discounts the audience's capacity for (and indeed demand for) greater diversity on screen (D'Addario, 2016; Lotz, 2014).

Maura's story is not typical of trans people in the USA. She came out as trans late in life, and is wealthy. She is also played by a cisgender man. The decision to cast Tambor in the role of Maura was calculated for success; he is an award-winning actor with excellent name recognition from the target audience (O'Donnell, 2014; Villarejo,

2016). Similarly, the show's focus on the traditionally typical television family (white, upper-middle class) gave mainstream audiences a recognisable baseline they could relate to immediately (Villarejo, 2016). It is likely that these choices resulted in larger viewership than if the casting was more diverse, and this larger viewership likely resulted in increased discussion around trans issues, which is a desired outcome. However, some aspects of Maura's characterisation do not further trans awareness in a helpful way.

One example that indicates that her transitioning journey is atypical is Maura's easy access to trans-knowledgeable health practitioners, something that has been shown to be the opposite of the usual trans experience, where patients often need to educate their doctors and request specific treatment based on their own research (Shankle et al., 2003; Snelgrove et al., 2012). Davina, Shea and Elizah are far more representative in several ways. They are all played by trans actors, and have experienced the types of discrimination, barriers and abuse that are in keeping with reports from trans people (Snelgrove et al., 2012). However, while they represent diverse trans experiences and identities and Shea's and Davina's plotlines develop as the show progresses, they are secondary characters to Maura and her family. They operate as Maura's guides in the world of trans, existing primarily to make Maura's transition smoother and at times challenge her self-centredness. They are simpler in their characterisations than Maura and her family members, but they are also more likeable, with none of the Pfeffermann family's entitled attitude. It was disappointing that these dynamic characters, who have the potential to grow the mainstream audience's ideas around what it means to be trans, were not allocated more time on screen, but it is in keeping with television's tendency to avoid committing too deeply to potentially controversial or opaque characters (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017).

Although key aspects of Maura's life differ greatly from the typical trans experience, namely her wealth and successful and prestigious career, as argued in Chapter five, these details are in keeping with her specific character and storyline. She came out as trans post-retirement, so it follows that she faced none of the employment barriers trans people generally face (Vitulli, 2010). One must also read these details within the wider televisual tendency to portray people who are wealthier than the general population (*The Economist*, 2011). Maura is also often unbelievably naïve about trans issues, which has been pointed out by trans bloggers and critics (e.g., McKenna, 2016), but this is to some extent tempered by the diverse trans characters around her (Davina, Shea and later Elizah) who are more realistically savvy and knowledgeable.

Maura's journey represents something of a trans primer – her guides patiently explain things to her, and the audience can follow along learning about trans life at Maura's slow pace. This is a positive outcome when we consider the largely cisgender audience who may have limited knowledge of the subject matter (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). Nonetheless, for those trans viewers who have very few trans television characters in whom they can see themselves reflected, Maura's privilege and naiveté may be frustrating and inadequate (Funk & Funk, 2016a; McKenna, 2016; O'Donnell, 2014). Furthermore, as much as Davina, Shea and Elizah provide greater breadth of trans characterisation, their presence carries the limited weight of secondary characters; Maura's cisgender ex-wife and children are featured far more in terms of storylines and screen time.

However, it was found that several important aspects of the contemporary trans experience are highlighted in *Transparent* in sensitive ways that suggest solid research and thoughtfulness on the part of the writers and producers. These issues include barriers to accessing gendered spaces, the harmful power of misgendering and other transphobic language, trans misogyny and objectification, and barriers to adequate health care (both transition-related and general) for trans people. These findings are a positive step for trans representation.

Halberstam (1998) identified that for gender non-conforming people accessing something as ubiquitous and necessary to living as a public bathroom can be fraught with danger. In Chapter four it was found that Maura's experience of verbal harassment while using a public shopping mall bathroom matched the daily experiences of many trans people (Schilt & Westbrook, 2015; Weinberg, 2009). Furthermore, the aggressive woman in the scene verbally misgenders Maura and accuses her of sexual perversion, another commonly reported experience for transgender people (McLemore, 2015). In recent years, there have been numerous state and national-level legal battles in the USA over bathroom access for trans people, the most high profile being President Trump's successful repeal of laws that protect trans high school students' right to use their gendered bathroom of choice (Brady, 2016; Schilt & Westbrook, 2015; Trotta, 2017). Therefore, the producer's decision to include this scene revealed their knowledge of trans issues, both historically and with regard to contemporary issues.

Another challenge that faces many trans people is what Abbott (2013) described as the trans/romance dilemma. Davina's scene with Maura, explored in Chapter six, highlights this issue, using Davina's relationship as a way to bring up the challenges

trans people face in the context of participating in healthy romantic and/or sexual relationships (Abbott, 2013). Transmisogyny, bigotry and "chasers" (would-be lovers who have fetishistic ideas about trans bodies) are par for the course for trans women looking for relationships (Madison, 2016; Tompkins, 2014). Davina's pragmatism in selecting the problematic Sal as a partner is shown to be a necessary approach in order for her to flourish as a trans woman in a transphobic society (Serano, 2016). The scene also brought up employability and health issues and was pivotal in stretching the audience's idea of what trans is, and what are acceptable ways to live as transgender.

Building on the revelation that Davina is HIV-positive, *Elizah*, episode one in the show's third season and the subject of Chapter seven (Kuperberg & J. Soloway, 2016), goes even further in exploring the barriers to adequate health care (both transition-related and general) that exist for trans people. It was found that the problems Elizah had in negotiating the bureaucratic health system in the face of structural discrimination as a young poor black trans woman, and her resulting despair, were accurate depictions of real trans struggles. It has been widely reported that trans people face multiple barriers to accessing health services from cisnormative systems (Shipherd et al., 2010; Snelgrove et al., 2012). Although Elizah only appears in one episode, her story provides a refreshing balance to Maura's relatively unrepresentative transition story, and, as will be described further below, reveals the producers' commitment to growth and to telling a variety of trans stories.

8.5.8 Influence of the surrounding discourse, progress

The methodology for this research, while focusing on scene analysis, also included research into the production context of *Transparent* and the contemporary status and rights of trans people. Choosing scenes from across the first three seasons of *Transparent*, and reviewing them thoroughly during the CIT selection process, resulted in an unexpected observation that the content of the episodes became increasingly progressive (by the definition established in the literature review) as the show went into its second and third seasons. We can see, when using Fairclough's (1995) model where the text (the show *Transparent*) sits within the discourse practice (production of the show) which sits within society, that the text evolved as the discourse practice and society evolved, and that the three each influenced the other. I argue that the show's writers and producers responded to the evolving contemporary discourse surrounding transgender people, even as the show contributed to this discourse (Fairclough, 1995).

The supporting trans characters (played by trans actors) are afforded more dialogue and narratives in seasons two and three, and Maura's storyline moves away from the trope-ish transitioning narrative to more specific and nuanced storylines that place her within a matrix of family members, trans community friends, lovers and colleagues. Perhaps to address the criticism that the version of Los Angeles in which the show is situated is unrealistically and overwhelmingly white and wealthy, the producers made a clear gesture in dedicating the entire first episode of the third season to the poor, black, trans Elizah (Kuperberg & J. Soloway, 2016). While somewhat tokenistic, the episode successfully dealt with authentic trans struggles, as much if not more than any episode before it (Kessler, 2011). As trans discourse gains momentum in (particularly American) society, *Transparent* is affected by this discourse, contributing to it and growing with it. All of this can be seen in its steady development of ever more authentic narratives.

8.5.9 Contribution to the transgender discourse

The show and its key players have also contributed positively to the discourse around transgender outside of the show itself. Through interviews, awards acceptance speeches, and keynote lectures, Soloway, Tambor (who admittedly has since been accused of inappropriate sexual behaviour on set) and others involved in the production have used their platforms to speak out about trans rights and visibility on screen, and have actively supported more trans representation in Hollywood (Jamieson, 2016; Soloway, 2016). Advocacy happened in the discourse around transgender rights, with Soloway speaking out publicly about the mistake they made in casting a cisgender actor (Tambor) in the role of Maura (Moylan, 2016). Soloway, the show's creator, and the production team, realising the employment challenges trans people face, hired increasing numbers of trans cast and crew (Berl, 2016; Liebegott, 2014). The show has had a ripple effect, also: in 2015, Jay Duplass, the actor who plays Maura's son Josh, executive produced the acclaimed independent comedy *Tangerine*, which stars trans actors Kitana Kiki Rodriguez and Mya Taylor and revolves around one day and night in the life of trans sex workers in Los Angeles (Grobar, 2015). Soloway introduced a non-binary character in her 2016 show, *I Love Dick.*

The producers and cast of *Transparent* have shown a commitment to learning more about trans communities and working with them rather than simply plumbing their lives for good storylines (Dry, 2016; Moylan, 2016). The storylines in the text were

shaped by the trans performer and writer Our Lady J, hired for the show's second season (Levy, 2015). Beyond the writers' room, the production's involvement in trans communities and the greater participation of trans people in the cast and crew appear to have resulted in storylines and characterisation that display a more sophisticated knowledge of trans issues than in the first season of the show. The text was influenced by the discourses that surrounded it, and also by American society, which has experienced a marked increase in trans visibility in the years in which *Transparent* has been in production. In a climate of Hollywood superficiality, where entertainment and ratings are paramount, this finding is noteworthy, setting *Transparent* and its production crew apart from mainstream television shows.

8.5.10 The trans gaze

Crucial to the success of *Transparent's* incorporation of these everyday experiences for trans people is that it tends to not other the trans characters, or cast them as victims of their gender dysphoria, as objects to be pitied. In past problematic trans narratives on television (as described by Caputi, 2015 and Sandercock, 2015), the camera's gaze switched intermittently between sympathy for the trans character and othering them. This analysis of *Transparent* has revealed a consistent, deliberate trans or female gaze, that is, a gaze which is sympathetic to its trans characters, not exoticising or mocking (Halberstam, 2000; Soloway, 2016). As already noted in the stereotypes section above, from Elizah's health care crisis to Davina's pragmatic take on romance as a trans woman, *Transparent's* considerate treatment of trans characters may contribute to greater empathy and openness among the dominant cisgender population towards gender minorities (Battis, 2008; Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). Cisnormativity and mainstream fear and rejection of trans people could be mitigated by consistent, thoughtful and widespread exposure of trans lives to the general population – representation that is humanising and promotes social acceptance (Schilt & Westbrook, 2015). Soloway's consistent trans gaze plays a key role in the success of *Transparent's* progressive representation.

8.5.11 Intersectionality

Using CDA and its focus on revealing underlying power and ideology, these scene analyses have revealed *Transparent* to be interested not only in transgender themes but also in higher-level themes of inequality, power and oppression. Often using the

language of gender studies, the show has repeatedly displayed a sophisticated understanding of and willingness to explore Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, which states that the intersection of attributes (gender, ethnicity, sexuality and so forth) results in a unique experience of privilege and/or oppression, depending on the context (Hulko, 2009). This focus is seen explicitly in scenes featuring Maura, Sal, and Davina discussed in Chapter six, where Davina's intersectional identity is not only demonstrated but also declared from her own mouth. In this scene and in Maura's encounter with Leslie in season two, episode three, the subject of Chapter five, Maura's own complex combination of privilege and newly encountered oppression and adversity as a trans woman is explored (F. Soloway & Heller, 2016). Later, Elizah's character also articulates her position as a young black trans woman living with foster parents who do not support her adequately (Kuperberg & J. Soloway, 2016). Her circumstances are shown in stark comparison to Maura's whiteness, wealth, and her close and supportive (if dysfunctional) family unit. While this research primarily sought to understand the ways in which the show represented trans people, identifying its deft understanding of intersectionality is a useful finding. This depiction of intersectional politics is progressive as it demonstrates the myriad experiences trans people can have. Furthermore, representation on American television has to date tended towards over-representing white people and males, and largely excluding LGBTIQ people and those with disabilities (Baker Netzley, 2010; Kohnen, 2016). *Transparent* reflexively addresses these shortcomings both in the characters it includes and also in their rhetoric. Its deliberate inclusion of intersectional themes contributes to its successful representation – specifically of trans people but also of a wider range of identities.

8.6 Contribution of this thesis to existing research

This research provides a meaningful contribution to the fields of both transgender and media studies. The area of trans studies is developing, yet, while excellent scholarship exists on trans representation in the media, there is little about trans characters on scripted series and less still on the television show *Transparent*. Other scholarly analyses of the show offer a review of the show as a whole, pulling out notable themes across gender, identity, and innovative structure (for example, Villarejo, 2016), or focus on its Jewish themes (Freedman, 2016; Moss, 2016; Rosenberg, 2017). Robertson et al. (2016) investigated the show's flashbacks that depict Maura's ancestors experiencing the Nazi persecution of gays and transgender people, noting the

implication of the psychiatry establishment in such persecution. The only scholarship discovered that has a sole focus on the way the show depicts trans people is Funk and Funk's work (2016a, 2016b). Using Butler and Athanasiou's (2013) concept of dispossession as a framework through which to analyse the show, Funk and Funk (2016a, 2016b) focused on Maura's coming out narrative, which is presented in the first episodes of season one of the show. Therefore, as the present research seeks to engage with the way in which the show depicts transgender realities, it is unique in its offering. It is contributing in a novel way to the discourses of transgender in society and its representations in the media. It also adds a trans example to the growing discourse of intersectionality in televisual representation (for example, in the work of Caputi, 2015; Erigha, 2015; Malatino, 2016).

8.7 Innovative use of critical discourse analysis and critical incident technique

This research adds a critical voice to the evolving discussion around trans representation and rights. Its CDA approach meant that the position in society that trans communities currently occupy was a primary focus, accepting that producers of television generally and *Transparent* specifically hold power as storytellers; a power that can either solidify and uphold the hegemonic discourse around transgender, or challenge it. Martin (2004) called for more CDA research that sought to analyse positive developments in discourse (rather than focusing discourse analysis on revealing negative power abuses). Selecting a television show that appeared to be a positive part of a movement for better representation of trans people responds to this call, demonstrating how CDA is a useful theoretical framework for research into media representations of marginalised groups.

This research also successfully developed and utilised an adaptation of CIT (Flanagan, 1954), not previously used, to my knowledge, in television analysis. CIT is generally used in behavioural studies in health, education and psychology, but is seldom used as a means to sort data in media studies, although it functioned very well in this capacity for the present research (Borgen et al., 2008; Hughes et al., 2007). The way in which data were selected using a modified CIT was a novel and effective way of sorting the media dataset and may provide guidance to scholars in the future wanting to analyse television shows or other media products.

8.8 Conclusion

Television shows have the power to de-stigmatise, grow audiences' ideas of what (or who) is normal, humanise the "other" and educate (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). In the USA, where trans people, particularly young trans people of colour, are systematically excluded from society and are victims of transphobic violence and murder at very high rates, good quality television that promotes trans stories and increases their visibility in a positive way has the potential to be lifesaving. Being able to see themselves reflected in the characters on television also has the potential to increase the self-esteem and resilience of trans youth (Craig et al., 2015; Jensen & Oster, 2009). This research has been conducted as an attempt to further the discourse around the importance of positive transgender representation and has highlighted potential new opportunities for future studies.

When reviewing the scene analyses and the above findings, I conclude *Transparent* largely met the criteria for what "progressive depictions" means. It mostly avoided negative stereotypes, and featured several trans characters whose narratives were nuanced and diverse. It included well-researched themes and issues that affect trans people's lives and did so with sensitivity. The writers and production team allowed the evolving discourse around transgender struggles to shape the text itself, and the production's work environment. Cast and crew became active advocates for trans rights and visibility (Jamieson, 2016). The show adopted an innovative trans gaze which meant the trans characters were seldom othered (Halberstam, 2000). It furthered the contemporary discourse of intersectionality and diversity. The show faltered in its otherwise diverse and progressive depiction of trans realities with its exclusion of trans people of colour until the third season and a continuing focus on Maura's non-representative transitioning journey. It tentatively made amends with the one-episode-only black character Elizah. Nonetheless, the show has established itself at the forefront of innovative, progressive transgender representation and set a precedent that we can hope other producers will extend further. The television show *Transparent* is progressive in many ways in its depiction of transgender realities, and this is likely to have a profound effect on the visibility and cisgender acceptance and inclusion of trans people in society.

8.9 Limitations

This study is a useful contribution to the in-depth analysis of contemporary transgender representation on scripted television. There are several limitations of the study, which were inevitable due to the scope of the research. First, four scenes were selected for analysis. Naturally, if all scenes were analysed, a much broader picture of the nature and style of representation would have been garnered, but the depth of analysis would be compromised. Second, the scenes were chosen deliberately using CIT, which involves the personal judgment of the researcher; another person using a similar methodology might have selected four different scenes to analyse. Several scenes and characters would have provided excellent bases for detailed analysis. One example is Shea's storyline in season three, episode three, where she articulates the trans/romance dilemma (Abbott, 2013) eloquently to Josh, who is enamoured of her but fearful of the implications of a relationship with a trans woman (F. Soloway & J. Soloway, 2016). Another aspect I would like to have explored more is Maura's sexuality: it seems that an older, recently out trans woman has rarely been shown to have so much naturalistically portrayed and varied, sexual activity in television or cinema (Villarejo, 2016).

A third limitation of this research is that it was necessarily conducted from a specific point of view. My feminist, liberal, cisgender, queer female and New Zealand-located perspective led the tone and goals of the study, working on the assumption that better transgender representation is a necessary step for transgender rights and a positive thing for society in general. When the study commenced, my background knowledge of transgender lives and issues was very limited. Which is to say, a researcher with a different perspective might not have viewed the show and the issues it raises in the same way. A researcher who is transgender would have brought their first-hand experience to the research rather than relying on secondary sources to assess the accuracy of transgender realities. They might have come to conclusions that are more critical of the show's representation, or more specific to their own experiences in their observations. Any researcher brings their identity framework into the research and this necessarily alters its course.

My perspective was also the impetus for choosing to analyse *Transparent* specifically. The show was chosen due to an instinct that it was a potentially powerful storytelling platform for positive representation of transgender people. Therefore, there was a natural bias in the analysis from the outset whereby it was seeking to find the ways in which the show *is* progressive, rather than seeking out its errors. This approach is in

keeping with a particular CDA approach of seeking to highlight communicative events that reveal positive change, rather than selecting instances of obvious power abuse and discrimination (Fairclough, 2013; Martin, 2004). These limitations do not discount the strength of the research, rather they must be considered when reading the study's findings.

8.10 Opportunities for future research

Transgender representation is a growing area of study both in gender/transgender and communication and media studies. Therefore, there is huge scope for further studies in the field. As representation grows, so must scholarly analysis of it. Further studies on *Transparent* could include the ways in which the lesbian and bisexual characters are represented. Specific issues raised in the show could be explored further, for example, transgender people who come out late in life, trans sexuality late in life, and depictions of gender non-binary people compared with MTF or FTM transsexual people. Several contemporary shows that include trans characters exist that have not yet, to my knowledge, had scholarly appraisal, including Netflix's *The OA*, Showtime's *Billions* and BBC America's *Orphan Black* (Artavia, 2017; Avery, 2016). GLAAD (2016a) found that of the few shows with recurrent trans characters the majority were produced by online-only streaming networks as opposed to broadcast television networks. This detail provides an interesting jumping-off point for future research into why online networks seem to be more progressive with regards to diversity of representation.

A study into the audience reception of the show would be valuable and provide a counterbalance to the present research. Such a study could take into account the general audience or potentially a specifically transgender audience, whose take on the show is of particular importance when discussing whether or not the show is helping to progress transgender visibility and rights (Baker Netzley, 2010). *Transparent's* unique production framework would also provide an interesting case study. Research questions might ask how the show's purposeful trans-affirmative hiring practices impacted on the show's narratives and/or the local trans community with regards to employment and financial stability.

Finally, an annual update of Capuzza and Spencer's (2016) appraisal of transgender representation across all prominent television shows that include trans characters is imperative for measuring progress. GLAAD performs an excellent annual evaluation

of all LGBTIQ representation, and much research exists that provides analysis of specific shows (GLAAD, 2016a). However, studies like that of Capuzza and Spencer (2016) offer a useful overview of the breadth and styles of transgender representation specifically and see each trans character or trans-friendly show as a part of a representational eco-system. Studies into representation of transgender people in the media is a growing field with myriad research possibilities that have positive implications in furthering trans rights.

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