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Queering Ethnic Rites of Passage: *Transparent* and *One Day at a Time*

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Introduction

In the summer of 2018, the Los Angeles group Defend Boyle Heights, an anti-gentrification coalition, boycotted a Kosher restaurant after the owner retweeted anti-Latinx and xenophobic statements from then-President Trump. Responses to the case highlighted the neighborhood's welcoming of Jewish immigrants in the 1930s and the expectation that the Jewish community extend the same hospitality towards other immigrant and minority groups. Similarly, in her 2015 documentary, *East LA Interchange*, director Betsy Kalin includes accounts from community members who assert that the Jewish community in Boyle Heights avowed strong support for Latinx civil rights in the 1960s as an expression of affinity and solidarity. Recently, Boyle Heights's Jewish community was depicted in the popular Amazon series *Transparent* (2014-2019) through flashbacks that tell the story of the main family's refuge in the neighborhood after fleeing Germany between the world wars. Set in Los Angeles's nearby Echo Park neighborhood (which came to be known as LA's "Little Havana" in the 1960s), *One Day at a Time* (2017-2020) depicts queer Cuban coming-of-age similarly to *Transparent*'s treatment of queer coming-of-age in a Jewish setting. Both series include gendered rites of passages, the Latinx *quinceañera* and the Jewish *bat mitzvah*, in a way that shows sexuality and ethnicity to sit uncomfortably with one another for queer adolescents whose grandparents immigrated to the United States.¹ The two storylines share a family as a site of compulsory heterosexuality, adolescent characters who negotiate their sexual identities as they grapple with a rite of passage, and the use of humor as a tactic to question, resist, and at times reify patriarchal norms.

Over the course of its five seasons, *Transparent* did not fully seize on the opportunity to make a truly intersectional intervention commensurate with Boyle Heights's rich history. Indeed, the Pfeffermans' story includes flashbacks to Boyle Heights as a place of refuge for Jewish immigrants in the 1940s (and as the site of protagonist Maura's burgeoning transgender identification) but makes no references to the neighborhood's importance in the intervening years as a hub of Latinx and Black community organizing and activism, let alone to the commingling of these groups with Jewish communities.² The Pfeffermans moved to the Palisades (likely in the 1970s or in the 1980s, since they are shown raising their children there in the early 1990s). There, as Maura remarks to her fellow trans friend Davina in 2014, "they don't let our kind in . . . They only recently started letting in the Jews." Their family story is a common one in which Jews vacated neighborhoods such as Boyle Heights for whiter neighborhoods—part of the family's "carefully constructed white world" (Villarejo 12).³ This whiteness is "carefully constructed" not only in Joey Soloway's representation of the Pfeffermans' world but also in the history of race relations in the twentieth-century United States that compelled Jews into avowing whiteness in order to be accepted in neighborhoods such as the Palisades after leaving Boyle Heights.⁴ In contrast, *One Day at a Time*—a much more aesthetically conventional, multicamera situation comedy—celebrates the Cuban presence in Echo Park, a neighborhood that is gentrifying. The series does take the opportunity to include Jewish characters who reflect on their difference and privilege vis-à-vis Latinx families. Likewise, the show's reflections on colorism and its intersections with queer identities tell a story that is more in line with the legacy of Boyle Heights's welcoming of refugees that *Transparent* seeks to celebrate.

The diachronic stories of urban spaces within Los Angeles are marked indelibly by the complexities of Jewish and Latinx convergence and divergence. Dean Franco notes, "Boyle

Heights . . . is a dynamically negotiated space, with shifting lines of belonging and exclusion” (28). While *Transparent* circumscribes its depiction of Boyle Heights to the time and space in which the Pfefferman family found refuge there in the 1940s, the intersections of immigrant and queer identities in Los Angeles neighborhoods are more dynamic than the show might suggest. Indeed, we note the contrasts between what Amy Villarejo describes as a “carefully constructed white world” of the Pfeffermans’ present as opposed to their family’s past in the “dynamically negotiated space” of Boyle Heights. Bearing this contrast in mind, my comparative discussion of how *Transparent* and *One Day at a Time* treat coming-out narratives seeks to move past delineations between disparate ethnic and racial categories. Specifically, both shows emphasize the particular challenges for coming out presented by both dominant majority culture and by the minority cultures to which these characters’ families belong.

Rites of passage are particularly salient for immigrant communities in the United States insofar as, in addition to marking a watershed moment in an individual’s coming-of-age, they also play an important part in maintaining cultural identities related to immigrant communities’ countries of origin. Jewish bar/bat mitzvahs and Latinx quinceañeras are two examples of such rites of passage that have been integral to celebrating and preserving ethnic identities among their respective cultures in the United States. Moreover, both are patently gendered. *Transparent* uses flashbacks to character Ari’s decision to forego their bat mitzvah in such a way that is inexorable from both their vexed relationship to their family’s immigrant history and their burgeoning queer (and later nonbinary) identification as a twenty-something in the series’ present.⁵ Indeed, as an adult, Ari reclaims the anti-assimilation of her ancestors through their sexual freedom in the cabarets of Weimar Germany before immigrating to Boyle Heights.⁶ Likewise, *One Day at a Time* presents character Elena’s process of coming to terms with

whether or not to celebrate her quinceañera, which she perceives as a misogynist, patriarchal tradition, as she duly grapples with coming out. Since Deborah Kaplan had her bat mitzvah in New York in 1922, the bat mitzvah has played an important role in fostering Jewish young women's identification with Judaism as a religion and with Jewish culture and ethnicity in the United States. To this day, as Mark Oppenheimer has noted, the celebration retains a particular feminist meaning for many Jewish families. For US Latinx families, the *quinceañera* has long held significance in fostering a connection to one's culture of origin, although this significance has shifted over the decades along with patterns of Latinx assimilation.⁷ In this way, in addition to their obvious (though not uncomplicated) importance for gender, both rites of passage have historically been significant for families' maintenance of cultural and ethnic heritage within US racial paradigms that otherwise eschew cultural difference and specificity.

As these shows remind us, representations of racial and ethnic difference in television function within hegemonic understandings of normative culture in ways that dovetail with normative understandings of sexuality. Herman Gray posits: "television representations of blackness operate squarely within the boundaries of middle-class patriarchal discourses about 'whiteness' as well as the historic racialization of the social order" (9). That is, representations of racial difference are situated within structures of privilege and power that are based on white middle-class heterosexual normativity. Notably, Gray is focusing on network television in 1995, and enormous breakthroughs in representation have taken place since then in network television and on streaming platforms. Yet white, middle class, heteronormative, patriarchal codes continue to orient television's representations of categories of difference and are relevant to the representations I discuss of queer folx and immigrant families, particularly those who do not pass as white. Steven Funk and Jaydi Funk also take note of how whiteness and heterosexuality are

similarly codified in television depictions of coming-out stories.⁸ Coming out narratives can reify gender normativity, akin to Gray's model of representations of Blackness that serve to codify existing paradigms of racial hierarchies. Similarly, Kristin Moran has noted that the fact that media is produced for Latinx audiences "does not mean it is necessarily free from replicating many of the narrative tropes found in other programming" (84). Indeed, as I underscore in my analyses of these programs, much of the progressive sensibility that they may be able to foster is belied by their own affirmation of white, patriarchal, heteronormative cultural paradigms, which we may understand in relation to cultural hegemony.⁹ In these shows, despite having parents who do not conform to conventional heteronormativity, the adolescent characters in both series still grapple with their own sexual identifications and with coming out to their families.

The two characters on whose coming-out narratives I focus here—*Transparent*'s Ari and *One Day at a Time*'s Elena—recall Adrienne Rich's model of compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence. The assumption of identification with norms of conventional femininity is coded as part and parcel of these characters' families and their ethnic identifications. Ari's and Elena's coming-out stories shed light on the compulsory heterosexuality engrained in their individual families and within Jewish and Cuban-American culture, respectively. For Rich, "the assumption that 'most women are innately heterosexual' stands as a theoretical and political stumbling block for feminism" (26). These shows center on female-identified (and later nonbinary identified, in the case of *Transparent*'s Ari) characters whose life stories go against compulsory heterosexuality and who are being raised by a cross-dressing father (*Transparent*) or a strong single mother (*One Day at a Time*), yet their lives are still bound by heteronormativity. These shows—helmed by a nonbinary showrunner and a woman showrunner, respectively—work both within and against the limits of television as a medium to push the boundaries of

sexuality and ethnicity. Likewise, the shows themselves are bound by some of the constraints of heteronormativity within television. In *The Queer Politics of Television* (2009), Samuel Chambers draws from Rich's ideas to linger on the importance of norms themselves as a way of reifying heterosexual culture (65). Indeed, heteronormativity is insidious and bound up in hegemonic understandings of culture that duly pervade the coming-out process, as I underscore throughout my discussions of these two programs.¹⁰ My comparative discussion here of *Transparent* and *One Day at a Time* provides a modest attempt to think through the queer politics of television by acknowledging the necessary limits of each individual show.

A comparative discussion of these two shows raises necessary questions about whiteness and queer sexualities. Both Ari and Elena are light skinned, yet Jewish immigrants to the United States such as Ari's grandparents and Cuban-Americans have vexed (although very different) relationships to whiteness in ways that further problematize their sexuality and their relationships to their own cultures. For José Esteban Muñoz in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), "queer desires, perhaps desires that negate self, desire for a white beauty ideal, are reconstituted . . . we thus disidentify with the white ideal" (15).¹¹ Such disidentification with the white ideal necessarily includes a reckoning with white-supremacist racial paradigms.¹² Muñoz's model of disidentification that insists that identity is a fiction bears indelibly on my discussions of how these adolescent characters negotiate their own coming-out processes.¹³

With regards to their aesthetics, the two shows' treatments of coming-out processes drastically differ. *One Day at a Time* is faithful in its form to the original 1970s show from which it is adapted: the thirty-minute episodes include a laugh track and multiple cameras. In contrast, *Transparent* is much more aesthetically radical for a television show: the show has

always been difficult to categorize formally, incorporating aspects of camp and melodrama in an unmistakably cinematic television show. The last season (which also sees Ari now identify as nonbinary and no longer includes Jeffrey Tambor, a known sexual harasser, in the main role of Maura), takes the form of musical theater. In many ways, the formal aspects of the two series could not be more different. Yet, the aesthetic forms mirror the respective content of each of the shows, which is paradoxically similar. In their own ways, *Transparent* and *One Day at a Time* constitute feminist, gender-queer approaches to television, but with their own limitations. Not only does *Transparent* differ formally from a conventional family sitcom but also, as Joshua Louis Moss argues, sitcom conventions are tacitly invoked in *Transparent* to highlight the changes occurring within the family. Moss notes: “Maura struggles with her new identity, often falling back on her established patriarchal status when confronted or in trouble. These comedic sequences suggest the familiar sitcom parent comically out of touch with both her children’s needs and the contemporary pop culture landscape she clings to” (76-77).¹⁴ In this regard, *Transparent* engages with some of the codes of the family sitcom format that *One Day at a Time* is remaking. *One Day at a Time* furthers the feminist innovations made by the 1970s version by bringing immigration, racial difference, and queer identifications to bear on the show’s understanding of gender. With Norman Lear lending his expertise on some episodes, the show also continues the legacy that he established in shows such as *All in the Family* by addressing uncomfortable questions of race and racism in humorous, innovative ways. Within each of their aesthetic forms, both shows are, to an extent, limited to the gender norms of television and of society. At the same time, however, each manages to innovate and break new ground in television representation. In my discussion of the shows, I focus specifically on the shows’

emphases on previous generations' immigration stories and how these bear on queer adolescents' coming out processes.

***Transparent*: “Torture in a Dress”**

Since its debut in 2014, *Transparent* has generated myriad discussions on the points of contact between Jewishness and gender and sexuality. Indeed, the series repeatedly depicts the two as inexorable from one another. As the 2003 edited volume *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* argues, categories of gender normativity and Jewish difference have shared histories. As the editors posit in “Strange Bedfellows: An Introduction,” “If gender provided a ready interpretive grid through which nineteenth-century science could detect and interpret the racial difference of the Jew, the masculine/feminine axis was also being fit to another emerging taxonomy of difference: the modern discourse of sexuality with its ‘specification’ and ‘solidification’ of individuals . . . into distinct sexual personages” (3). *Transparent* makes clear throughout its run that Jewishness necessarily takes into account the negotiation of gender and sexuality. One of the strengths of the show is that it treats the points of contact between sexuality and Jewishness in ways that are deferential to the fact that the two are, at times, analogous and, at others, co-constitutive. The episodes of the show that I discuss here focus on the gendered elements of becoming a Jewish woman in such a way as to grapple with the patently gendered (and limiting) aspects of Jewish identifications. This element of the series recalls Janet Jakobsen’s essay in the aforementioned volume, “Queers Are Like Jews, Aren’t They? Analogy and Alliance Politics,” specifically, Jakobsen’s conclusion that, “Analogizing queers to Jews violates the categories that might otherwise separate them. This category is potentially a space of constraint or of possibility . . . To raise the Jewish question in relation to queer theory, then, is also to ask whether we can

queer? queers” (86). Similarly, Soloway’s series not only depicts characters who largely exceed the limits of the identities with which they are associated by others but also call into question these categories themselves.

While *Transparent*’s main characters do not “come out” as Jewish within the show, they do take on new relationships to Judaism and Jewishness as they grapple with their sexual identities. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s foundational *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) discusses Queen Esther’s coming-out as Jewish to her husband in relation to coming out as queer. Sedgwick concludes that “male and female gay identity have crossed and recrossed the definitional lines of gender identity with such disruptive frequency that the concepts ‘minority’ and ‘gender’ themselves have lost a great deal of their categorizing (though certainly not of their performative) force” (82). In keeping with Sedgwick’s characterization, both Jewishness and sexuality are vexed but nonetheless essential to Ari’s (and Maura’s) coming out story—specifically in the outward showing, performative aspects of identification.

However, while the series breaks meaningful ground in transgender representation (the casting of a cisgender actor in the main role, an oversight the show corrected in its fifth and final season after Tambor was ousted from the show), it falls short of attaining the very intersectionality that it acknowledges and at which it pokes fun. The show’s emphasis on Maura’s womanhood—in a still patriarchal role of provider and authority figure within her family unit—often overshadows the subjectivities of other woman-identified characters: in particular, her two daughters and her ex-wife. Soloway commented in a speech at the Toronto International Film Festival that they wanted to be associated with the female gaze: “You know what’s crazy is that it’s been FORTY YEARS since Mulvey named the Male Gaze and no one has claimed being the namer of the Female Gaze yet! I really want that. I want it to be like

MULVEY: MALE GAZE, SOLOWAY: FEMALE GAZE!” (“The Female Gaze”). To be sure, *Transparent* breaks meaningful new ground in terms of destabilizing the male gaze. Yet, as Villarejo asks, “if Soloway carefully and deliberately constructs a way of looking at Maura that is expressive of Soloway’s own feminist queerpolitics (for now, call it trans-affirmative and genderqueer), why does that gaze not extend to the three other women in the Pfefferman clan?” (11). While this shortcoming that Villarejo acknowledges improves over the course of the series, episodes showing Ari’s cancelled bat mitzvah depict Maura in the role of a patriarchal authority figure who, despite her closeness with her youngest child, did not provide the guidance that Ari sought in their formative years.

Transparent Season 1, Episodes 6-10—two of which include flashbacks to 1994, the year of Ari’s would-be bat mitzvah (six, “The Wilderness,” and eight, “Best New Girl”)—all reference the unresolved conflicts sparked by the cancelled bat mitzvah. At this point in the series’ progression, main character Mort has begun transitioning to Maura and we see her children launched into an exploration of their respective gender and sexual identifications. Throughout the series, sexuality is presented as part and parcel of the family’s Jewish identity and its backstory of emigration from Germany after the sexual freedom of Weimar Germany came to a screeching halt with the Nazi takeover. Within these five episodes in particular (6-10), then-Mort’s struggles with his gender identity and his desire to cross-dress in 1994 are coupled with Ari’s discomfort with the gendered bat mitzvah. In the scenes set in the present day, Ari decides that they want to enroll in gender studies courses and subsequently begins to date a transgender man (whom they introduce to their siblings and boast, “that man has a vagina”). The show’s diachronic story of Ari’s bat mitzvah and their present are interlaid so as to couple the cancelled bat mitzvah with their burgeoning sexual and gender fluidity. In this five-episode arc,

we see Maura repeatedly attempt to bond with her child on the basis of their shared gender fluidity. Yet gender fluidity is both a point of identification and a source of tension between the two in a dynamic in which Maura often reverts to an authoritative, patriarchal figure despite her transition.

These attempts to bond with her child are shown to be rooted in both characters' decades-long questioning of their Judaism and their gender identifications. The scenes set in the present depict Ari asking Maura for financial support to enroll in gender-studies courses, saying that they are inspired by her. Maura asks if it is because she is a renowned scholar (a retired professor of political science), which Ari dismisses to say that they are inspired by Maura's transition. This moment speaks to a generational divide in which, while Maura is transgender, she does not connect this personal experience to her academic persona. The exchange recalls Moss's interpretation of the show's tacit invocation of family sitcom's humor based on the out-of-touch patriarch.¹⁵ In the first flashback to 1994, we see Ari on the verge of tears as they hold a frilly dress that they are devastated at the thought of wearing. Presenting as a tomboyish adolescent, Ari is wearing sport shorts with their hair pulled back in a ponytail and bemoans, "This is torture. It's torture in a dress." Maura responds that she thinks that it is a beautiful dress; from the perspective of what we know about Maura in the present, we understand that Maura (Mort in this scene) is envious of the dress that her child is supposed to wear for the ceremony. After proclaiming that they do not want to wear the dress and participate in the bat mitzvah, Ari asks Maura, "Do you actually believe in God?" to which Maura responds, "That has nothing to do with your bat mitzvah!" Maura goes on to assert—in a somewhat effeminate posture with her fingertips daintily brushing her clavicle—that she struggles with the pain and suffering. Ari responds by listlessly sinking down the wall as they lament, "So if there is no god, I mean

honestly, like, everything we do, no one sees it.” The parent and child’s shared conflicts with categories of gender and sexuality thus give way to their shared doubts about spirituality. Ari complains about the dress and insists that they have not memorized the Torah verses, yet they recite them perfectly for the caterer who turns up at the house unaware that the event was no longer happening. As we will see in the later scenes set in the present, Ari begrudges Maura for having fostered doubts rather than inculcating a stronger sense of belief and serving as a spiritual role model.

Mort and Ari’s emphasis on the dress that Ari would (not) wear for the bat mitzvah anticipates the tenth episode’s visual emphasis on Maura’s dress and the Star of David that she wears for the first shiva she attends as a woman. Over the course of these five episodes, we see Maura become gendered as a Jewish woman for the first time. In the episode prior to the one that depicts Ari’s cancelled bat mitzvah, Maura prays over a *Seder* as the mother of the family. She fumbles to light the candles and then through the blessing, which she realizes is the Hanukkah prayer and not the Shabbat Seder prayer. In a later episode, she attends ex-wife Shelly’s husband Ed’s funeral, a coming-out event of sorts for her as she appears (fashionably late and in a limousine) in women’s clothing for the first time in front of many of Shelly’s relatives and friends. Ari comments here that Maura is wearing a “sparkly Star of David” necklace and adds somewhat derisively, “Since when are you into Judaism?” Like their earlier exchange in 1994, Maura and Ari’s gender identifications are again couched in terms of their fraught relationships to Judaism and, like the dress in the 1994 scene, prompted by frilly adornment. The question stems from her rancor over her parents allowing her to cancel her bat mitzvah, over which she confronts them both during her stepfather’s shiva. That she should bring up the subject during a shiva again equates Jewish practices—here, the mourning ritual—with gender identification

through focusing on both Ari's own gender fluidity and Maura's cross-dressing during Ari's adolescent years.

As we come to see over the course of these episodes, Ari's cancelled bat mitzvah is bound up in issues of both her own sexual orientation and Maura's gender identification. We learn that Maura wanted to cancel the bat mitzvah in part so that she could go to a cross-dressing camp with her friend. Shelly, however, is incensed over the prospect of canceling the bat mitzvah and reproaches Maura, "I want you to be a man! And save the goddamn day." We see Maura's face grow long as Shelly storms out of the room. Shelly's anger and frustration in this scene are echoed decades later when Ari finally asks at their stepfather's shiva why they allowed them to cancel the bat mitzvah.¹⁶ Shelly, already annoyed that her ex-spouse is using her husband's funeral as an opportunity to come out as trans (in an outfit completed by the sparkly star of David), erupts in anger and yells at Ari, "so that your father could go to cross-dressing camp!"

The flashback scenes of young Ari at home alone—at times with their siblings—evoke their parents' neglect as Maura and Shelly were both focused on Maura's sexual identifications in ways that distracted from their parenting. On the day of the would-be bat mitzvah, Ari is alone at home and ends up on the beach with a stranger. The final scene of the episode juxtaposes shots of Ari in a cave on the beach and shots of Maura in dress at camp while an upbeat tango-inspired track plays. Gaby Hoffman—rather than Emily Robinson, the young actress portraying the twelve-year-old Ari in the rest of the flashback scenes—steps in to act as Ari as the tango reaches its crescendo. Ari (Robinson) crawls toward adult Ari (Hoffman) as the stranger kisses the adult Ari to pull him away from Ari. The young Ari steps in to save the adult Ari, visually emphasizing the need for Ari as a child to fend for themselves. This performance tacitly couples Ari's sexuality and bat mitzvah with her family history, since the other role that Gaby Hoffman

will play in the series is that of Ari's own grandmother (Maura's mother) in Boyle Heights after immigrating from Germany.

The back story of Ali's cancelled bat mitzvah, interspersed with Maura's first seder as a woman and her attending her ex-wife's funeral wearing a Star of David necklace, creates a storyline in which both Ari and Maura look to gendered religious rites to understand better their sexuality. For Moss, "The canceled bat mitzvah by a transgender woman is also ironic. The female version of the bar mitzvah was a recent development towards gender equality in Reform and Conservative Jewish culture. Mort's cancellation of the event suggests a paradox, a severing of assimilated Jewish cultural life at the moment each of the Pfeffermans begin to explore their individual sexual identities" (87). Yet, for both, either these rites are overly rigid in their gender roles or the individuals' understandings of them are somehow impressionistic and removed from the original meanings of the rites themselves. In fact, much of the show's depiction of Judaism—despite being focused on religious rites—might more properly be thought of as Jewishness, rather than Judaism. Similarly, as Roberta Rosenberg notes, "*Transparent* offers a window into a world where secular Jews (and even their rabbi) struggle, sometimes succeeding and sometimes failing to create a spiritual world of Jewish ritual living that will provide them with the ability to do '*lech lecha*,' a going forth as courageous adults into a challenging world" (78). In these episodes, Ari laments their own aimlessness in life and begrudges their parents for not having inculcated more aspects of Jewish life in them as a child.

The climax of the conflict surrounding Ari's bat mitzvah culminates in their confronting Maura and asking why Maura gives them money (something she does not do for her other adult children), to which Maura responds, "because you cannot *do* anything." Maura steps into the role of an authoritative patriarch in this moment to admonish her child and becomes the center of

attention at Shelly's second husband's shiva. Ari leaves angry, although they come back later and reconcile with their parents.

As the show will later make clear during its second season through the flashbacks to Weimar Germany, the Pfeffermans' Jewish identifications, even when patently religious, have more to do with cultural identifications as children and grandchildren of immigrants and as part of a diasporic community than with spirituality. While later episodes of the show will depict the family's time in Boyle Heights after fleeing Germany, the show does not depict that neighborhood's Latinx populations, which were already present at that time and grew in importance over the decades. Nor does the show engage with present-day issues of immigration and asylum. Like the show's storylines in the present, the backstories in both 1994 and the 1930s and 1940s emphasize genderqueer identifications, yet despite the importance of immigration for this family's back story, the topic is not taken up in the show's present.

“I’m Coming Out:” *One Day at a Time*

One Day at a Time is very conscious of the importance of Latinx representation in television. Touted as the frontrunner of Latinx television programs in recent years, the show explicitly tackles stereotypes and perceptions of Latinx communities in nearly every episode. As a queer Latinx adolescent, Elena finds herself in tension with the gender codes both of mainstream, hegemonic culture and of her own Cuban-American family. For purposes of my discussion of Elena's *quinceañera*, I focus on the show's first season, the finale of which centers on the event itself. This season premiered on Netflix in January 2017 and was immediately met with popular and critical acclaim, leading the streaming platform to renew the show for two seasons before deciding not to do so for a fourth season. *One Day at a Time* was then taken up by the cable Pop

Network, which aired the fourth season before CBS decided to do so beginning in October 2020. *One Day at a Time* has garnered headlines such as “Norman Lear’s New *One Day at a Time* Has a Latin Flavor” (Keveney). Yet, these exoticizing glosses are misleading because the Netflix series goes far beyond just being a “Latinx version” of the acclaimed, groundbreaking 1970s series. Gloria Calderón Kellet’s series offers meaningful insights into intersectional understandings of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. Indeed, in the very piece on the series under this headline, the reviewer quotes Calderón Kellet as stating, “1975 sexism is different than 2016 sexism.” The reboot tackles loaded issues of mental health, immigration, single mother Penelope’s PTSD from her service in Afghanistan, and queer identifications, continuing the legacy of the original series’ innovative consideration of single motherhood. In addition to *One Day at a Time*’s focus on Cuban-American experiences, Calderón Kellett’s version maintains the original show’s family structure of a single mother with son and daughter but adds the single mother’s mother, Lydia, portrayed by the iconic Rita Moreno. This character adds the movement and dynamism of the EGOT-winning actress.

Because of Lydia’s presence, the children on the show—Elena and her younger brother, Alex—are in effect being raised by two women. The generation gap between Lydia and Penelope and their differing perspectives often cause them to butt heads over what is best for Penelope’s children in ways that sometimes recall conflicts between heterosexual parents. Lydia’s role in the family evokes a characteristic of many Latinx families in which grandparents often live with the nuclear family, so the show’s inclusion of this character is also an important element of Cuban-American and Latinx family structures. Rather than having an authoritative father figure propel much of the conflict and humor, the family is patently matriarchal. This family structure thus debunks monomaterialism, understood as the idea—rooted in heterosexist

belief systems—that every child should have only one mother. As Shelley Park notes, this idea works “by giving us a personal stake in claiming to be a child’s ‘real’ mother and thus the only mother who counts” (14). The structure of the family thus works against heterosexist, patriarchal assumptions. Elena’s father only appears in two episodes and is not accepting of her sexual orientation.

At the same time, however, Lydia espouses conventional and patriarchal viewpoints on gender roles, such that this two-mother parenting structure is also heteronormative in some ways. Yet, when Elena comes out to her, Lydia is effusively supportive and works through any issues she has with her granddaughter’s homosexuality on religious bases by quoting Pope Francis’s famous “who am I to judge” line. Her conservatism, however paradoxically, allows her to accept Elena’s homosexuality more readily than Penelope. Lydia’s character also couples Latinidad with Catholicism. Similar to *Transparent*’s treatment of Judaism in relation to Jewish ethnicity and memories of immigration, *One Day at a Time* emphasizes Catholicism’s role in Latinx identities. Yet, the show does not underscore the religious elements of the *quinceañera*. Characters describe that “Cubans go to church,” in contrast to Protestants, suggesting that Catholicism is such a part of Cuban-American life as to conflate the two by setting up a binary between “Protestant” and “Cuban.” Like in *Transparent* (in which Ari’s sister, Sarah, feels during her wedding reception that she has made a huge mistake in marrying her college lover and proclaims, “I hate her fucking family, these fucking WASPS”), religious identity is important because it is tied to a marginalized identity and to a family past of immigration.

The show couples Latinidad—and issues of Latinx immigration to the United States—with sexuality. As Esteban del Río and Kristin Moran highlight, “Latinas featured in scripted programming are often narrowly defined by a limited binary that pits the hypersexual young

Latina against the asexual grandmotherly figure or the untouchable immigrant. . . . *One Day at a Time* challenges these characterizations through its three female lead characters by working within and against this narrative device” (14). Del Río and Moran make note of other television characters—including *The Office*’s Oscar Martinez and *Grey’s Anatomy*’s Callie Torres—whose intersecting queer and Latinx identification serve to reify heteronormativity. In contrast, *One Day at a Time*, while at times bound up in the compulsory heterosexuality of television, nonetheless defies the patriarchal, heterosexual norms of television by allowing Elena to embrace elements of Cuban-American culture that she identifies as misogynistic.

In the show’s first episode, Elena asserts to her mother and grandmother, in a characteristically indignant rejection of what she perceives to be a patriarchal practice, “I don’t want to be paraded around in front of the men of the village like a piece of property to be traded for two cows and a goat.” *One Day at a Time* takes a common sitcom trope—a “rebellious” teenager and the generation gaps with parents and grandparents—to make Elena a fleshed-out, sympathetic character who grapples with her identity in a supportive family, albeit not without struggles. Crispin Long notes that “[Elena’s] battle with her family, especially her grandmother, over whether to have a *quinceañera* . . . leads to subtle conversations about gender roles and heritage, and to Elena’s eventual realization that she is a lesbian. Ideas that would normally be relegated to an ‘issues episode’ . . . are part of the emotional fabric of the show, and handled with a light but sensitive touch.” In this way, *One Day at a Time* deviates from the norms of the sitcom to foreground serious family and political issues and to maintain its focus on these conflicts over the course of multiple episodes (and even seasons) rather than resolve them neatly. Similarly, Jacinta Yanders notes, “Very real concerns of the Latinx diaspora are foregrounded in a way that’s far removed from the ‘Very Special Episode’ of years past. Viewers don’t get the

sense that the Alvarez family will necessarily overcome every roadblock. Instead, these problems are ongoing struggles” (145). *One Day at a Time* works within the sitcom format to push the genre’s boundaries so that “issues” episodes—in my focus here, coming out and immigration—are not relegated to a half-hour storyline and neatly resolved at the end. Rather, these issues take center stage throughout the show’s first season and affect the everyday dealings of the family.

By the end of the first episode, however, Elena agrees to the *quinceañera* because her mother tells her the event is important to her because she wants people to see her as a strong single mother who is pulling everything together. This matriarchal family thus resignifies the *quinceañera* to make it a celebration of a single mother’s triumph over hardships. At the season’s end, Elena attends her *quinceañera* in a white pantsuit that her grandmother tailors for her out of the *quinceañera* dress that she had previously made for her, and the party becomes a coming-out party for Elena as queer (she walks out onto the dance floor to the song “I’m Coming Out”). While her father had promised to dance with her at the party even though he has been grappling with her sexual orientation, he leaves the party after seeing Elena’s pantsuit, and Penelope dances with her daughter in another gender-bending element of the celebration.

Earlier in the season, Lydia suspects that Elena is queer because of her close relationship to a friend from school, Carmen, in the first season’s fifth episode, “Strays.” While Lydia’s suspicions that Elena is queer turn out to be true, the family soon comes to learn that Carmen has been sleeping at their house because her own family has been detained and is going to be deported. When Penelope insists that Carmen has spent enough time in their home and needs to go home, the girls seem panicked and dramatically say goodbye to one another, leading audiences to suspect that they are teenage lovers who cannot bear to be separated. Once Carmen is caught trying to sneak back into their apartment, Elena becomes irate with her mother. In this

way, through a relationship that is very different from Lydia's own, the show underscores an intergenerational identification between Cuban immigrants of Lydia's generation and their grandchildren's generation, among which Latinx immigrants tend to be from Central America and Mexico and who often face discrimination or even deportation, such as Carmen's family. The episode begins with Penelope entering the family's apartment to find Elena and Carmen asleep under the same blanket on the living room couch. Lydia comments to Penelope that she suspects that there is something "queer" between the two girls as Carmen begins spending more and more time at their home, virtually always depicted walking around the apartment wrapped together in the same large blanket. Certainly, two teenage girls depicted right next to each other is conventional in family sitcoms, but the image of these two wrapped in a blanket together and embraced establishes a visual coding of Elena in intimate relationships with other females, in contrast to her later foray into heterosexuality. After first describing herself to her younger brother as bisexual, she briefly flirts with and kisses a boy with whom she establishes a friendship and who agrees to be her *quinceañera* escort. Aside from the time that she kisses him, the two are shown spending time together but are much more distanced.

Present for Carmen's return to the Álvarez home and the discovery of her parents' deportation is Penelope's boss, Leslie Berkowitz, whom she has invited to their house because it is his birthday and no one else has offered to celebrate with him. Her hospitality here is another reason for the episode's title, "Strays." Berkowitz identifies as Jewish; in another episode, after he reveals that he often dreamed of writing parodies of beloved songs, Lydia sings a song to him to the tune of "Hava Nagila." Throughout the series, he is lovingly touted as a straight white man who benefits from certain privileges (as the two characters discuss explicitly, he was able to attend medical school whereas Penelope was not) but who is extraordinarily empathetic and

aware of his own privilege. Here, *Transparent*'s lack of engagement with Latinx characters comes into greater relief: while *One Day at a Time* incorporates a Jewish character into its depiction of Cuban-American rites of passage, *Transparent* does not include Latinx characters in its consideration of Jewish sexualities.

Queering Ethnic Rites of Passage

Despite this difference, both *One Day at a Time* and *Transparent* depict gendered rites of passage with a strong emphasis on intergenerational relationships and family histories of immigration. This similarity is important to my reading of *Transparent*'s depiction of Boyle Heights because the show also depicts the history of this neighborhood so as to highlight intergenerational relationships. Gaby Hoffman, the actor who portrays Ari in the show's present, also plays the role of Maura's mother in 1940s Boyle Heights after she and her family escape Germany and find refuge in Los Angeles. Thus, the show tacitly couples intergenerational relationships with the storied spaces once inhabited by Jews in Los Angeles. While *One Day at a Time*'s Lydia chides Elena's balking at a *quinceañera*, *Transparent*'s Shelly rebukes her then-husband Mort's insistence that it is not her bat mitzvah with "Oh yes, it is my bat mitzvah." Mothers and grandmothers are bonded together in both works through these rites of passage. Previous generations' accounts of immigrating to the United States loom large in these stories.

The narrative pivot in *One Day at a Time*'s "Strays" episode between a possible lesbian relationship and the experience of deportation patently couples immigration with queer identification, as in *Transparent*'s flashbacks to earlier generations in the Pfefferman family that emigrated from Germany. In this regard, queer immigrant experiences are shown to be similar in Cuban-American and Jewish-American cases. For Anna Dempsey, "Soloway and [their] team

weave together a Weimar Jewish transgender historical narrative with a Cold War US history of immigration and twentieth-century archival film and television to create a fictional account of the twenty-first century late-in-life ‘coming out’ of Mort Pfefferman as Maura” (803-04). This “weaving” of which Dempsey speaks is intimately connected to past generations’ experience of immigrating to the United States and forming part of minority groups.

As a way of addressing the enormous trauma placed on their families by fleeing Germany or, in Lydia’s case, coming to the United States alone as a minor through the Pedro Pan Operation, both shows use humor to make their characters’ stories palatable and engaging. Both shows derive much of their humor from other characters mocking Ari’s and Elena’s “wokeness.” For example, when Ari tells their brother and sister that their date is trans, her sister scoffs and says, “Fucking Ali, Jesus Christ,” balking at Ari’s embrace of gender fluidity as typical of their personality, and their brother responds, “so, four out of five Pfeffermans now prefer pussy.” As Jack Halberstam states, “[This] is a great line and like much of the humor in the show, perfectly delivered. Eschewing the sit-com laugh-line humor for a more self-deprecating style that mixes defeat and disappointment in healthy doses with wry self-awareness, *Transparent* actually hits a few new notes for comedy.”¹⁷ Similarly, *One Day at a Time* pokes fun at Elena through her banter with Lydia. When she says that she does not want to be paraded around the village for two cows and a goat, Lydia responds that Elena certainly thinks that she is worth a lot. The humor here is particularly telling: both shows, while they break significant ground in representation, also grapple with the challenges and complexities of intersectionality insofar as their characters often find their sexual identifications and ethnicities at odds with one another. Through their use of humor at the expense of such topics as intersectionality and gender-inclusive language, these series suggest a latent conservatism in their explorations of sexuality and ethnicity. In this way,

both series continue the problem that Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch noted nearly forty years ago in their analysis of “the obvious ways in which [television] maintains dominant viewpoints” (571).

Yet, these points of humor can also be interpreted as serving to disarm viewers who may be ignorant towards or biased against LGBTQ characters. Soloway has stated that they sought to put into praxis an aesthetic of the “funcomfortable,” that is, to entertain at the same time that they make viewers uncomfortable by prompting them to question their assumptions. Soloway’s avowed endeavor to amuse while making viewers somewhat uncomfortable recalls Mikhail Bakhtin’s model of the seriocomic. For Bakhtin, “reduced laughter in carnival literature by no means excludes the possibilities of somber colors within a work . . . it is not their final word” (166). The points of dry humor in *Transparent* and *One Day at a Time* seek not to give final authority to the figures who utter them—older siblings, parents, and grandparents—but to push the boundaries of how their LGBTQ characters might be perceived in hegemonic codes. As in Bakhtin’s model of dialogism, laughter functions to contest monolithic or authoritative figures (including authors and directors themselves). In *Transparent* and *One Day at a Time*, humor works to question heteronormative, racist, and anti-Semitic paradigms of representation within the conventional modes of televised serial comedy. In these instants in which jokes are at the expense of doubly marginalized subjects, the humor of the situation is codified within norms of acceptance. Lydia pokes fun at Elena’s feminist and genderqueer expressions of self but fiercely protects and accepts who she is when she comes out to her, while Ari’s sister who scoffs at their pronouncement that her date has a vagina is, at that moment, also in a relationship with a woman. Thus, as in Bakhtin’s discussion of reduced laughter, the shows’ ludic treatment of serious subjects is not their final word. Rather, such uses of humor may serve to disarm viewers, both

because the comic relief conforms to common expectations of sitcoms and because it makes light of subjects that might be difficult to broach for some viewers.

Both shows' stories about queer rites of passage culminate in a breakdown in father-daughter relationships. When Ari attempts to confront Maura about the cancelled bat mitzvah, their encounter devolves into a screaming match in the middle of Shelly's husband's shiva. After seeing Elena's suit for her *quinceañera*, her father leaves the party, abandoning her for the father-daughter dance. Penelope, Lydia, and Alex, join her on the dance floor, visually emphasizing Lydia's role as a replacement for a father in the nuclear family. While Elena's relationship with her father is left in shambles, Ari returns to reconcile with both of her parents after storming out of the shiva. While Ali's family unit, in the present, has reconciled, the story of Elena's *quinceañera* ends with her absent father. Yet, both families are, at the end of the shows' respective first seasons, helmed by two women.

Despite these dramatic moments, these shows make use of humor both to conform with and to push the boundaries of situation comedy. Perhaps surprisingly, it is the more aesthetically normative of the two shows—*One Day at a Time*—that ends its first season with an unresolved family conflict: Victor leaves Elena's *quinceañera* and does not return, whereas Ari comes back to their childhood home (where they had spent the weekend of their would-be bat mitzvah alone) after their stepfather's shiva to find both their two parents and their siblings all joined around the table. While the next seasons will bring further familial disruption to the Pfeffermans, it is perhaps paradoxical that the show that seeks to destabilize the male gaze nonetheless returns to the nuclear family—now helmed by a trans woman but still relying on her as the authoritative figure. Indeed, it would not be until Jeffrey Tambor (who proclaimed in accepting his Emmy for his role as Maura that he hoped to be the last cisgender actor) was ousted from the show that it

completely eschewed the norms of sitcom television to produce its final “season” as an extended musical theater episode.

If the aesthetics of these two shows hold substantial potential to break new ground in inclusion and representation, I conclude that such potential is to be found in their opening credits. Both include montages of photos and film reels and are unmistakably flamboyant in their own ways: *Transparent* incorporates footage of gendered rites of passage, family celebrations, and beauty pageants paired with a slightly melancholic instrumental. To set the tone of the flashback episode, “Best New Girl” uses the first verse of Bob Dylan’s “Oh Sister” and evokes a strong sense of longing through the lines, “Oh Sister, when I come to lie in your arms / you should not treat me like a stranger.” *One Day at a Time* includes images of Cuba and of Cubans in Echo Park and updates its original theme song from the 1970s version to add a salsa beat, and Gloria Estefan lends her iconic voice to the lyrics. As Manuel Avilés-Santiago has noted, the opening credits evoke nostalgia: “The visuals of the credits include a montage of images of the cast and the production team. The use of real photos of the cast and production team (e.g., weddings, graduations, social events, etc.) induces a false nostalgia of shared moments, intended to make the audience see the characters as part of a shared past” (68-69). The importance of nostalgia for both shows further emphasizes the importance of intergenerational exchanges that are essential for fostering gender and ethnic identifications among these characters as they come of age or remember their coming of age. The nostalgic, exuberant tones that the shows’ credits establish also create a framework for disidentification. These sequences show families, ethnicities, and gender identifications that, as the episodes themselves emphasize, orient the young characters’ identities but also problematize them.

Throughout these story arcs, Elena and Ari are forced to grapple with the ways in which their families' minority cultures and mainstream hegemony define gender norms. Moreover, the seemingly feminist structures of their families—having a transgender parent or having a single mother—provide a framework in which to come to terms with their own individual identities but are also normative and hierarchical in their own ways. Even when these families' pasts are bound up in resistance and defiance of hegemonic norms, they still present generation gaps and obstacles for their young protagonists. What is potentially radical and liberating about these stories is that they not only suggest a more optimistic future but also rewrite history in such a way that centers genderqueer and immigrant experiences. Yet, perhaps *Transparent* would have been even more radically inclusive had its depiction of the Pfefferman family's story not moved so hastily from Boyle Heights to the Palisades—skipping over Echo Park—but instead lingered in a space such as the Álvarez household. After all, as Franco and Kalin have reminded us, this is the legacy of Boyle Heights.

Notes

¹ Whereas *Transparent* (2014-19) has already ended its run—replete with a fifth season in the form of a musical in which Ari has come out as nonbinary—*One Day at a Time* (2017-20) is still producing new episodes. (At the time of this writing, the show is in between its fourth and fifth seasons). The show has changed platforms from Netflix to Pop Network to CBS. The episodes on which I focus were aired on Netflix and were streaming with each season released as a whole, akin to *Transparent*'s streaming on Amazon. According to Esteban del Río and Kristin Moran, the streaming format allows the show to dedicate more careful detail to individual characters breaking ground in representation of Latinx characters. They submit: “*One Day at a Time* offers a potential change of course for the general market representation of Latinidad, one that is

specific in its cultural logic, working against the flattening of difference, and both critically acclaimed and renewed by Netflix” (6-7). While still maintaining many of the norms of sitcom television and of hegemonic US culture, these shows certainly push past many of the boundaries of television formats.

² Latinx communities in Boyle Heights have been depicted in the recent series *Gentefied* (2020-) as well as in *Vida* (2018-20). *Vida* emphasizes the points of contact between sexuality and Latinidad. Similar to my consideration of the bar/bat mitzvah and *quinceañera* in queer contexts, the show’s third season includes an episode in which character Marcos has a “double quinceañera” for his thirtieth birthday—dubbed a “queerceañera” by the show’s characters. The film *Quinceañera* is set in Echo Park and studies the Latinx rite of passage in that neighborhood. Bernard Beck has offered a comparative reading of the exuberant bar/bat mitzvah culture in the film *Keeping Up with the Steins* (2006) in contrast with the more solemn depictions of the *quinceañera* in *Quinceañera* (2006).

³ One exception is in the premiere episode of season 3. While working in a call center, Maura receives a call of distress from a Black caller, and goes in search of them in South Los Angeles, where she attempts to speak in Spanish to the Latinx store workers in a mall to help find the caller. Yet, as Anamarija Horvat notes, this moment “portrays the character as almost hyperbolically incapable of navigating any terrain except the one in which the show normally takes place” (469).

⁴ Robert Wuthnow et al. note that, in the post-war years, “American Jews consciously narrowed their collective boundaries, redefining what it meant to be Jewish” (19). Insofar as this narrowing included racial boundaries, the post-war United States to which the Pfeffermans immigrated consisted of Jewish communities that were increasingly avowing whiteness as a way of shedding

otherness to be accepted as part of middle-class society. For her part, In *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (1998), anthropologist Karen Brodtkin examines her own Jewish family—specifically, her immigrant grandmother’s embrace of racist language and attitudes to refer to Black people—and concludes, drawing from Toni Morrison, that her grandmother’s racism shows that “one could become an American by asserting one’s own white superiority over African Americans” (19).

⁵ For the first four seasons, this character’s name is “Ali,” and they are female-identified, yet at the end of the fourth season their mother informs their siblings that they are “not trans, but not comfortable being a woman,” and in the fifth season their name is “Ari.” I use the name Ari and the gender-neutral pronouns they/them/theirs to refer to this character.

⁶ In season 3, episode 2, Ari is teaching a course on gender and sexuality in which they focus on their own family’s past in the sexual freedom of Weimar Germany and proclaims that “Berlin between the two World Wars was a much freer place than America is today.” They ask their students, “How many of you have had the ominous feeling that your very essence is taboo to those around you?” and add, “so the Jewish people have this escape legacy.” They thus reclaim the condition of marginalization that compelled Jewish diaspora.

⁷ According to Azucena Verdín and Jeniffer Camacho, “Since the need to differentiate from Whites or Blacks has not been as great in the 21st century, the meaning ascribed to the quinceañera tradition evolved to reflect the Hispanic family’s changing minority position and subsequent expectations” (190).

⁸ According to Steven Funk and Jaydi Funk, “Ultimately, the ‘coming out’ narrative rendered in American television since the 1990s has been used to tell cisgender people that trans* people are essentially the same as they. This sameness rhetoric renders gender performance and gender

differences invisible. This ‘gender blind’ ideology, however, can be just as damaging as the ‘color blind’ ideology that allows aversive racism to flourish” (897).

⁹Understood as: “the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production” (Gramsci 12).

¹⁰ Similarly, in “The Epistemology of the Console,” Lynne Joyrich asks, “Is there a way to ‘think TV’ without thinking just like it, a way to understand how we literally ‘think through’ its epistemological forms without only reproducing the forms of this mass-reproduced medium?” (17).

¹¹ Similarly, José Quiroga notes: “Not content to remain within a world defined by categories, many Latino American works are not so interested in the violence of identity but in its negotiations” (159).

¹² In the first episode of the second season of *One Day at a Time*, Elena realizes that she has never been the object of discrimination, unlike her brother who is disparaged for being Latinx. (On a field trip, another child yells at him, “go back to your country.”) She asks, “Wait, am I passing?” when Penelope and Lydia point out that she and her brother are, in Penelope’s words, “different shades.”

¹³ Also, Funk and Funk discuss Maura’s coming out in *Transparent* in terms of Judith Butler’s notion of dispossession.

¹⁴ This element of subtle yet often present patriarchal authority with which Maura as a character continues to be vested in order for the show to work as television comedy finds a parallel in the fact that a cisgender actor portrayed Maura for the first four seasons. Damien Riggs notes,

referring to Tambor's portrayal of Maura, that "it is important to keep in mind that the positive reception of the series perhaps tells us more about the terms on which transgender people are offered space within the media, rather than necessarily reflecting a wholesale shift in public attitudes." For his part, Jack Halberstam notes that "the show seems to orient too much to a straight audience."

¹⁵ This exchange anticipates a moment in the second season of the show in which Ari's professor/love interest, Leslie (portrayed by actor Cherry Jones), admonishes Maura for her sexist dismissal of women's and gender studies as a field of academic inquiry before her transition.

¹⁶ Roberta Rosenberg interprets this moment of the episode: "And here we have the conflation of the sexual and spiritual, as Mort is forced to do two things he's incapable of doing: be a believing Jew who affirms the importance of this spiritual rite of passage and become the 'heroic man' who can overcome the will of a capricious adolescent daughter and 'save the day'" (82).

¹⁶ The siblings' reactions here anticipate the comments they will later make to one another at the end of season 4 when they suspect Ari is transitioning to become nonbinary. While floating in the Dead Sea on a family trip to Israel, Maura tells the rest of the family that Ari "is not trans. She's just not comfortable being a woman," to which her sister responds proclaiming "she's a they!" Her brother responds to speculate that Ari is not there with the rest of the family because they are taking some time alone to explore their gender, "which would be very they," and her sister adds, "It's so them!"

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