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Timely Representations: The Queer Elder Figure in Canadian and U.S. American Film and Television

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Gender, Sexuality & Women's Studies

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Abstract

Since the release of Mike Mills's *Beginners* (2010), a critically acclaimed film about the late life coming out story of a 75-year-old father, representations of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or trans (LGBT) characters in their sixties, seventies, eighties, and nineties have multiplied in U.S. American and Canadian film and television. Instances of what I call the 'queer elder figure,' these contemporary representations comment on the intersections of aging and queerness. Evident in popular award-winning series, such as *Grace and Frankie* (2015-2022) and *Transparent* (2014-2017; 2019), the queer elder figure has emerged as a rather trendy subject in the second decade of the twenty-first century. This dissertation probes the popularity of the figure, asking the following questions: How does the queer elder come to be seen in the 2010s? What representational logics make possible its visibility? Who do such representational logics serve? And what old or new LGBT and/or elder tropes accompany the emergence of the queer elder figure? In this dissertation, I employ an affective-discursive methodology to a collection of Canadian and U.S. American films and television series created and distributed between 2010-2020 to argue that depictions of the queer elder figure are about temporal logics. Drawing upon queer temporal theories and concepts from critical age studies, this work illustrates how the queer elder figure reinforces and/or complicates normative temporal conventions, including narratives of progress, a sub/cultural investment in youth, and dominant constructions of longevity, death, and futurity. Building on a small body of literature about media representations of gay and lesbian aging and old age, this work offers the first sustained analysis of twenty-first century portraits of LGBT older adults in film and television.

Keywords: LGBT older adults; representation; queer aging; temporality; queer theory; queer temporality theory; critical age studies; paranoid reading; reparative reading

Summary for Lay Audience

Broadly speaking, this dissertation explores current depictions of the queer elder figure in Canadian and U.S. American film and television, as well as the role time and age play in the figure's visibility. Evident in popular award-winning series, such as *Grace and Frankie* (2015-2022) and *Transparent* (2014-2017; 2019), the queer elder figure refers to representations of aging and older lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) characters created and distributed in the twenty-first century. Taking the 2010s as the benchmark of the queer elder's cultural visibility, I explore the rising status of LGBT older adults in U.S. American and Canadian visual texts by asking the following research questions: How does the queer elder come to be seen in the 2010s? What representational logics make possible its visibility? Who do such representational logics serve? And what old or new LGBT and/or elder tropes accompany the emergence of the queer elder figure? I use concepts from queer theory, especially queer temporality theory, and critical age studies to analyze the cultural work performed by representations of the queer elder figure. Specifically, I examine how the queer elder figure is made useful through its relationship to time-related themes, such as progress, youth, death, and the future. Focusing on the intersections of sexuality, gender, and age, this work offers the first sustained analysis of twenty-first century depictions of LGBT older adults in film and television.

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Chapter 1

1 The Queer Elder Figure: It's About Time

“a ‘it’s-about-time’ celebration” – officiant from *A Secret Love*

In spring 2020, as countries and people around the world were coping with the devastating and disproportionate effects of COVID-19 for older adults, especially those residing in long term care homes, Netflix released Chris Bolan’s documentary *A Secret Love* (2020), a tender narrative exploring Bolan’s 94-year-old great aunt Terry and her long kept ‘secret.’ Nestled securely at the narrative’s center is Terry’s 65-year-old ‘secret’ relationship to Pat, a woman who had previously only been regarded by Terry’s family, including Bolan, as Terry’s long-time friend. The documentary traces some of Pat and Terry’s decades-long relationship, including Terry’s position in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, the inspiration for the ‘90s feminist film *A League of Their Own* (1993), as well as the pair’s successful careers in interior decoration. However, the tension and drama of the narrative derives from Terry and Pat’s present-day struggle. Due to Terry’s steadily declining health, the couple is forced to make difficult decisions about relocating to elder care as an old lesbian couple that have kept their relationship hidden from many, including Terry’s beloved niece Diana, Chris Bolan’s mother. “I didn’t know they were gay ‘til three years ago,” a somewhat embittered Diana reveals. Another niece admits, “I feel a bit betrayed that she couldn’t have told us sooner,” and accuses her aunt of “living a lie” (*A Secret Love*). In these early statements and carried throughout the narrative, is the notion that Terry and Pat’s relationship is a

secret that the supposedly duplicitous, yet forgivable, couple can and do successfully overcome in the present moment of the early 2010s. In this way, the film treats Pat and Terry's life together as a great coming out story, one that feeds on the couple's nonagenarian identities, implied long-time monogamy, and their eventual marriage or, what their officiant playfully calls, "a 'it's-about-time' celebration" in 2015 (*A Secret Love*). The popular expression ("it's about time"), which conveys the notion that the thing that is about to happen (the official, legal, and public acknowledgement of same-gender love) should have happened earlier, is a loaded temporal reference. The celebratory depiction of Pat and Terry's enduring love for one another, symbolized by a wedding, is ultimately about *time*. Specifically, I contend that it is about temporal dynamics that explore notions of age, aging, and progress, especially regarding the rights and treatment of LGBT persons in the millennium. The politics of time, which include considerations of older people who are bound by (and running out of) time, are central to this depiction of a 60-year-old lesbian couple married in 2015 and celebrated widely in 2020.

The sentiment of Bolan's winsome film, which received positive critical reception and was an instant social media sensation, can be summed up by the following contemporary catchphrase: #lovewins. The trendy hashtag, which continues to circulate in the current moment as a slogan used to celebrate (particular) gay and lesbian people, relationships, and rights, cropped up in popular discourse around the year 2015 to mark the victory of the US Supreme Courts' landmark decision on June 25, 2015 (*Obergefell v. Hodges*), which ruled in favor of marriage equality for U.S. American gays and lesbians. Evoking assimilationist and post-gay politics that emphasize lesbians' and gays'

similarities to heterosexuals (Warner *The Trouble*; Duggan; Ghaziani; Ng; Richardson “Desiring Sameness”), *A Secret Love* resembles other documentary-style narratives that also center, but also arguably use or operationalize aging and ‘aged’ protagonists in examinations of marriage equality. For instance, Susan Muska and Gréta Ólafsdóttir’s *Edie & Thea: A Very Long Engagement* (2009), another narrative about a life-long relationship between two old lesbian women, explores the landmark civil rights case *United States v. Windsor* (2013), which saw the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) declared unconstitutional. This case marked an important step in the 2015 US Supreme Court’s ruling that marriage is a fundamental right.

It was also around this time that transgender rights were becoming more prominent through aging and older trans celebrities and activists. For instance, 2015 marked the year that retired Olympic athlete Caitlyn Jenner, who at the time was in her mid 60s, came out publicly as a trans woman, famously announcing her new name (“Call me Caitlyn”) and revealing her new scantily clad, gender-affirming body on the front page of *Vanity Fair*. Immediately following her public disclosure, the basic cable network E!, well known for producing content about celebrity and popular culture, released *I Am Cait* (2015-2016), an eight-episode reality series that ran for two seasons about Jenner’s life after her gender transition. The series explored changes to Jenner’s relationships with family and friends but also issues affecting the larger trans community (e.g., violence, sex work, and job discrimination). Although the series was cancelled in 2016 as a result of low ratings, *I Am Cait*, which initially benefited from the success and celebrity statuses of Jenner’s Kardashian stepdaughters, offered temporary visibility to, and a platform for, other aging and older trans women, including activists and scholars,

such as Kate Bornstein and Jennifer Boylan—no small feat. 2015 also saw the release of Annalise Ophelian's *Major!* (2015), a documentary film about the life and campaigns of Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, an 80-year-old Black trans activist who has dedicated over 40 years of her life to helping the most marginalized in her community, including homeless, incarcerated, and racialized trans people. In all four documentaries mentioned, older or old age seems to play an important ideological function within the text. After all, representations of aging and later life are, as critical age scholars remind, "potent site[s] for the production of cultural knowledge" (Chivers *The Silvering* xviii). These texts not only showcase LGBT older adults, they also arguably put to work perceptions of age in their excavations of both historical and ongoing discrimination toward LGBT communities.

Such recent documentaries focusing on the narratives of LGBT individuals in their sixties, seventies, eighties, and nineties, join a growing number of popular visual narratives that feature what I call the 'queer elder.' The 'queer elder,' the subject of my doctoral work, refers to the construction of fictionalized aging lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or trans (LGBT) characters in Canadian and U.S. American film and television. A temporal phenomenon that comments on the identities and life courses of LGBT older adults, as well as constructions of time and aging, the queer elder emerges rather suddenly in the second decade of the twenty-first century. A central claim of my doctoral work is that the queer elder is both a figure *of the times* and *about time*. Evident in popular series such as *Transparent* (2014-2017) and *Grace and Frankie* (2015-), the queer elder came to visibility in the 2010s when issues affecting LGBT older adults were increasingly becoming more visible through documentaries, such as those mentioned

previously, but also through journalistic and academic reporting that often claimed that LGBT older adults were facing the serious threat of being re-closeted in later life (Furlotte et al.; Ibbitson; Pang et al.; Purdon and Palleja; Hurd et al.). Such examples indicate that representations of LGBT older adults were experiencing a cultural reevaluation in the twenty-first century, one that saw a relatively invisible subject move from invisibility and the margins to visibility and the center in the 2010s.

Broadly, representations that feature the ‘queer elder’ figure are important because they challenge and disrupt a dominant construction of later life as the sole temporal territory of heterosexual and cisgender people. These types of representations about later life and aging developed steadily from around the beginning of 2010 when *Beginners* (2010), a film about an older man’s late life coming out and, specifically, Christopher Plummer’s portrait of the queer elder, started to receive wide positive critical reception. Scholars exploring representation and LGBT aging argue that *Beginners* played a pivotal role in moving representations of aging and old gay men away from traditional themes of misery, isolation, tragedy, and decline (Hess “Portrait”; Goltz “Overcoming”). An observable trend followed in the wake of *Beginner*’s success, and representations of the queer elder multiplied and became slightly more expansive of other sexual and gender minorities. Since 2010, the queer elder is evident in biopics and tributes that explore the aging of historical and non-fictional figures known or rumored to be LGBT, such as Liberace, J. Edgar Hoover, Lee Israel, and Eileen Myles, as well as in fictionalized portraits that seek to represent LGBT aging and older adult identities more generally. The rising popularity of this figure is also perceptible in casting decisions. For example, several well-known (straight and cis) older actors and actresses portrayed the

queer elder in the 2010s, including Michael Douglas, Marten Sheen, Susan Sarandon, Jane Fonda, and Olympia Dukakis. Such high-profile names indicate that the queer elder enjoyed a rather distinguished status in the last decade. Indeed, the queer elder became unprecedentedly visible and even fashionable in film and television in the 2010s.

Prior to the 2010s, however, representations of the queer elder did not regularly enjoy a celebrated status. In fact, very few narratives created before 2010 even included representations of LGBT older adults. Bill Condon's *Gods and Monsters*, a U.S. American film based on a fictionalized account of gay director James Whale's final days, and Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice* (1971), Richard Kwietniowski's *Love and Death on Long Island* (1998), Richard Eyre's *Notes on a Scandal* (2006), European films about an older character's ruinous infatuation with a much younger person of the same gender, offer four rare examples of articulations of the queer elder before the 2010s. Such depictions offered a narrow and stereotypical portrait of the aging gay man, primarily, as "a lecher of young men" and assigned "the older gay male to a destiny (if not already arrived) of being an 'old queer,' unable to cope with advancing years" (Brown et al. 8). Notably, these images also imply that the only type of non-heterosexual aging worth exploring in the twentieth century was gay male aging, since most feature older gay men and *Notes on Scandal* only vaguely recalls lesbianism. In fact, older lesbians and bisexual women have been virtually absent in the cultural imagination. Referencing *The Children's Hour* (1961), *The Killing of Sister George* (1968), and *Notes on a Scandal*, lesbian scholar Jane Traies argues, "there are no happy endings for middle-aged lesbians. When it comes to older lesbians, however, there are too few representations to generalise about. Old lesbians have no role models in popular culture" (*The Lives* 4). Similar

conclusions could be drawn about older bisexual and trans characters as well. In televisual adaptations of Armistead Maupin's nine-book series (1978-2014) that began with *Tales of the City* (1978), Mrs. Madrigal (Olympia Dukakis) offers the only example of an older trans character prior to 2010 (see chapter 4 for more detail). Aside from the characters and texts mentioned, representations of the queer elder have otherwise largely been absent in the cultural imagination.

As Traies implies, such cultural invisibility can be harmful for people growing up without role models—figures who can essentially model a future for us. And, as many media scholars acknowledge, to not see yourself represented in the cultural sphere can represent a form of invalidation of identity or erasure from public consciousness—a type of 'symbolic annihilation' (Tuchman). In contrast, an increase in representations of the queer elder can then arguably constitute a form of symbolic futurity; for representations of the queer elder bring into existence guides, maps, and blueprints for aging queers or younger queers who may struggle to envision a future for themselves and who may otherwise not know or have LGBT older adults in their lives to look up to. Illustrations of aging and older LGBT adults can arguably offer hope and horizons for those who have been systematically implied to be without a future and have historically been denied one.

Though the increasing visibility of LGBT older adults might for some understandably represent a cause for celebration, visibility should nonetheless be treated with both suspicion and caution for, as scholars studying representation have endlessly insisted, visibility does not necessarily produce altered social conditions for the recently visible, and visibility can just as easily be revoked. Many media scholars warn that increased visibility can actually generate more harm than protections for minority groups.

For instance, writing about the explosion of gay cultural visibility in the 1990s, Suzanna Walters reminds, “media saturation of a previously invisible group can perpetuate a new set of pernicious fictions, subduing dissent by touting visibility as the equivalence of knowledge” (12). In other words, visibility can engender new norms that congeal into facts about LGBT people. Vito Russo concludes in the afterword of his classic *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, “gay visibility has never really been an issue in the movies. Gays have always been visible. It’s *how* they have been visible that has remained offensive for almost a century” (325, original emphasis). For those who do not know (or think they do not know) any LGBT people, visibility can create new and not necessarily better assumptions and expectations that inform how LGBT people are treated. We should not, such scholars insist, assume that a spike in queer representation is “inherently progressive and unproblematic” (Beirne 7). In fact, for some minority groups, visibility has been accompanied by worsening social conditions. For example, trans and genderqueer cultural critics have described visibility as a toxic and lethal ‘trap’ that is offered to gender diverse groups as “the primary path through which trans people might have access to livable lives” (Gosset et al. xv). However, a recent spike in representations of trans and gender non-conforming peoples, commonly referred to as the ‘trans tipping point’ (see chapter 4), have also contributed to violent backlashes toward members of the trans community, especially those who are sex workers, racialized, and/or poor (Gosset et al.; Griffin-Gracy et al.). The price of LGBT visibility, these critics contend, can be steep.

Similarly, age studies scholars studying representations that feature aging and older characters prominently also express concern about the representational logics of visibility. Sally Chivers, for instance, writes, “because of the emerging prominence of age

on screen, cultural literacy about late life is likely to increase, but we must question the type of popular literacy that could develop” (*Silvering* xxii). Echoing Russo’s point, Chivers emphasizes that understanding *how* aging and older adults are portrayed in film is an important project for appreciating the ‘silvering’ or ‘greying’ of the big and small screens.

My doctoral work responds to and builds on these critical discussions about LGBT and elder visibility, exploring the representational logics that make visible and even popular the queer elder figure in the 2010s. Broadly, my analysis asks the following questions of representations of the queer elder: how does the queer elder figure come to be seen in the 2010s? What representational logics make possible its visibility? Who do such representational logics serve? What old or ‘new set of pernicious fictions’ regarding LGBT older adults pervade representations of the queer elder? Broadly, this dissertation explores the visibility of the queer elder figure and the temporal and age politics that inform its visibility in the 2010s.

1.1 Literature Review: Exploring Representations of Aging and Queerness

A rapidly expanding body of literature exploring the meanings assigned to filmic and televisual representations of aging and later life has been developing from the first decade of the millennium onward. To varying degrees, these works have helped shape my thinking about the representation of the queer elder. The following literature review outlines research that thoroughly offers what Anita Wohlmann calls an “age reading” of representations of aging and old age in U.S. American and Canadian film and television

(31). An “age reading” refers to “a close reading of fictional (age) narratives that has its main focus on the topic of age or aging and that consults studies from other disciplines or fields in order to better understand the functions and meanings of age in the corpus of fictional narratives” (31). Within this review of the literature about the “study of age imaging” (Shary and McVittie 8), I discern two relevant areas of focus: representations of old age in film and television and representations of queer aging. In what follows, I chart the contributions this body of research offers to cultural gerontology, age studies, gender and sexuality studies, film and media studies, and queer theory.

Offering perhaps the first sustained study of the “cinema of old age” (9), Cohen-Shalev’s monograph *Visions of Aging: Images of the Elderly in Film* (2009) approaches the neglected topic of aging in film with good intentions. Frustrated with the ways “popular films depict a midlife, censored, stereotypical vision of old age” (7), Cohen-Shalev rejects notable Hollywood representations of aging, such as *Harry and Tonto* (1974), *Harold and Maude* (1971), and *On Golden Pond* (1981), as “realistically satisfying pictures of old age” (8). Cohen-Shalev’s concise analysis focuses primarily on *Wild Strawberries* (1957), *She’s Been Away* (1989), *A Woman’s Tale* (1991), and the later films of Ingmar Bergman and Claude Sautet. Cohen-Shalev argues that these various auteurs, in particular, can be credited with illustrating more accurate and less stereotypical representations of old age because auteurs are generally “less dependent on the commercial machinery of filmmaking” (8), but also in part because these auteurs were themselves aging into later life during the production of these films. It is Cohen-Shalev’s belief that “access to the existential condition of an aging mind has to be gained through aging” (10), and thus ‘elderly’ film directors are better situated to construct

‘visions of aging’ that are less “mocked, moralized or otherwise stereotyped” (7).

Demonstrating a departure from clichéd representations of aging, the ‘old age style’ of the late films of Bergman, Kurosawa, and Sautet are, according to Cohen-Shalev, “disturbing rather than peaceful, open-ended rather than providing closure” (132).

Problematically, however, Cohen-Shalev’s assertion that some representations, especially those created by (white, male) older adult film directors, can dependably or at least more truthfully record the realities of later life assumes that old age has a stable and universal essence while overlooking additional axes of intersecting identities, such as gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. Nonetheless, given that many representations of later life are created about ‘the old’ by young to middle-aged directors, screenwriters, and producers, and for the amusement of a younger audience, analyses that center representations of aging created by, for, or with older adults are valuable.

In her monograph *The Silvering Screen and Disability in Cinema*, Sally Chivers brings together critical disability scholarship and cultural gerontology scholarship to consider the cultural signification of old age in contemporary film. Chivers’s close analysis of a handful of well-known and celebrated films concerning an aging protagonist, such as *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (1962), *The Straight Story* (1999), *Iris* (2001), *About Schmidt* (2002), *Away From Her* (2006), and *Gran Torino* (2008), demonstrates the various ways in which aging is conflated with, compared to, and understood as disability in filmic representations of old age. Taking her cue from David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder’s *Narrative Prosthesis*, which explores how disability is employed in both film and literature as an opportunistic shorthand for multiple social ills, Chivers contends that representations of later life *lean on* disability, “the narrative

prosthesis of ‘old age’” (8), to garner intelligibility. Put simply, the ‘silvering screen’, the phenomenal surge of late life visibility on the contemporary big screen, uses disability as a *crutch* for old age to be knowable and meaningful within an economy that values productive (both working and reproductive) bodies. Popularly understood as a sign of progress, the ‘silvering screen,’ Chivers maintains, embodies twenty-first century fears about the cost and “use value” (146) of a quickly aging population. Chivers’s conceptualization of ‘old age’ includes considerations of discursive constructions of disability as well as old age, for they are understood as necessarily connected within the public imaginary. Chivers’s use of a critical disability perspective offers interesting lines of investigation for considering the significance of non-normative embodiments.

Pamela H. Gravagne’s monograph *The Becoming of Age: Cinematic Visions of Mind, Body, and Identity in Later Life* (2013) traces the ways in which cinematic representations of aging can repeatedly articulate a pernicious “narrative of decline” but can also quite literally offer “visible alternate ways to view and live into old age” (5). The organization of Gravagne’s chapters, which culminates with her suggestion that aging should be understood as a process of “becoming” (158), is dependent on four philosophical views on aging: age as biological, socially constructed, a combination of these two, and as material-discursive, or what Karen Barad calls ‘agential realism.’ Following this philosophical structure, Gravagne narrows her analysis to a modest selection of post-1990s narrative and documentary style films to demonstrate how aging and old age have been variously conceptualized across multiple production contexts, including Canadian, U.S. American, British, and Japanese. Gravagne’s monograph illustrates that if film can injuriously influence our perception of old age, it can also just

as easily improve our conceptualization of later life. This promising claim is manifested most prominently in her final chapter “Age as Becoming,” where she argues that films such as *Strangers in Good Company* (1991) and *The World’s Fastest Indian* (2006) “allow the ambiguity, vulnerability, and creativity—the ongoing becoming—of the old to take center stage” (158). “Rather than present aging as a relentless march of accumulating losses that gradually erodes one’s right to personhood, dignity, and respect” (158), these films, she contends, challenge normative assumptions about aging and old age, and underscore elder characters as being in a “constant process of formation,” a state of becoming (9).

Most of the texts explored thus far provide key theoretical arguments in relation to the intersections of gender, sexuality, aging, and disability. Diverging from this trend, Timothy Shary and Nancy McVittie’s *Fade to Gray: Aging in American Cinema* follows in the tradition of film scholarship to archive the history of elder characters in U.S. American film by documenting the thematic development of representations of growing older. To this end, Shary and McVittie explore hundreds of examples of aging on screen from the early 1900s to 2010 to chronicle and categorize the tropes of and trends for depicting elders in U.S. American film. Each chapter explores a thematic element of the representation of older age through a selection of individual films. Themes explored in their study include intergenerational conflict, old age as comical and terrifying, romance and intimacy in later life, penultimate quests, and death. Proceeding from silent, prewar-era stereotypes of elders as “saintly mothers, out-of-touch millionaires, and admirable pillars of the community” (20) to twenty-first century constructions of elders as complex and manifold subjects worthy of a diversity of topics and narratives that consist of

personal romance and adventure, Shary and McVittie offer a sort of progress tale about filmic constructions of agedness. For them, this progress is in part marked by the more recent inclusion of the queer elder, which they explore briefly in their discussion about representations of elder sexuality and romance. They note that it was not until the 1990s that audiences saw gay-identified elder protagonists in film, such as in *An Empty Bed* (1990) and *Gods and Monsters* (1998), and that only near the second decade of the twenty-first century could this type of protagonist have (limited) romantic relationships onscreen, evident in *Hannah Free* (2009), *Beginners* (2010), *Cloudburst* (2011), and *Love is Strange* (2014). Though good indicators that representations of older adults are becoming more expansive, these films all conclude with elder death. More progressive representations of the queer elder, they argue, “will occur when both lovers are still alive at the end of the movie” (168). Indeed, representations of death are unfortunately typical of “age imaging” (8). Shary and McVittie found that portrayals of elder death, however, have remained “curiously limited” (174) and “anxious, even downright delusional” (176) throughout U.S. American cinema history, unlike those of elder sex and intimacy.

Returning to how old age intersects with gender and sexuality among other social locations in narrative cinema, Josephine Dolan’s monograph *Contemporary Cinema and Old Age: Gender and the Silvering of Stardom* (2017) builds on previous scholarship that contends that cinematic representation is experiencing a ‘greying’ (Jermyn) or ‘silvering’ (Chivers) to include a more complete consideration of Hollywood’s ‘silvering’ of audience, stardom, and narrative, or what Dolan calls the “conglomerate’s cinematic triad” (1). For Dolan ‘silvering’ does not simply refer to bodily signs of aging, such as greying hair (i.e., silvering), but to money (i.e., silver), capital, and profit as well. Rather

than narrowing her focus on representation alone, Dolan considers how U.S. American and British “broader circuits of consumption” (41), such as spin-offs and celebrity endorsements, intersect with femininity, masculinity, and old age to constitute the silvering of contemporary cinema. Unlike sensationalistic reporting that marks the silvering of the screen as progressive and enlightened, Dolan’s analysis complicates this notion by including analyses of gender, race, and sexuality. Combining age studies’ concepts, such as ‘third age’ and ‘successful aging’, with critical analyses of hegemonic masculinity, whiteness, heteronormativity, and neoliberal rationalities, her study reveals that silvered on-screen representations and off-screen marketing and consumption dynamics are gendered, racialized, hetero(sexualized), and productive and thus not necessarily cause for celebration after all. For instance, Dolan’s chapter “The Silvering of Genre: Deferred Retirement and Hard-bodied Dissonance,” offers a particularly cogent observation of the ways in which aging actors and actresses who star as post-retirement characters, are operationalized to “naturalise the freedom to choose deferred retirement” (177). Dolan argues that films such as *RED* (2010) and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011), and the third-age stars who populate them, depict extended working as a matter of choice and leisure rather than as “a matter of economic exigency” (180). Effectively, these texts bolster successful aging agendas that responsabilize the individual for their physical, mental, and economic well-being, and normalize productivity, activity, and consumption into later life. Dolan’s analysis of *RED* not only exposes how aging stars and characters corroborate the commonsensical logic of successful aging agendas, but also makes clear how ‘silvered’ narratives rearticulate “white masculine potency” (193) and “hetero-happiness” (182) in old age.

It is in Dolan's extensive conceptualization of, and approach to, 'contemporary cinema' that she contributes something new to an emerging body of scholarship on the representation of later life. Importantly, Dolan offers a much-needed analysis of race, particularly whiteness, in relation to the representation of aging. Moreover, Dolan's consideration of "old age and the broader consumer culture" (171), especially the silvering of stardom, offers an entry point for identifying the ideological work performed on- and off-screen by aging actors. Dolan's work along with a couple of anthologies that address the interstices of aging, gender, popular culture, stardom, and celebrity (Swinnen and Stotesbury; Jermyn, Holmes, and Jones; Whelehan and Gwynne) establish an in-depth precedent for approaching representation and stardom in relation to old age and cinema and pave the way for considerations of the ways in which the star statuses of aging celebrities are made meaningful and/or productive through capitalism and heteronormativity.

Finally, Niall Richardson's monograph *Ageing Femininity on Screen: The Older Woman in Contemporary Cinema* investigates the role aging femininity plays in what he calls "age affirmative cinema" (24), visual narratives that deploy discourses of successful aging and the third age to challenge negative or stereotypical depictions of aging. In the first half of the monograph Richardson explores the importance of genre, specifically British heritage cinema as well as U.S. American musicals and action films, to the development of age affirmative depictions of older adult women, including characters played by Helen Mirren and Judi Dench. As well, Richardson conceptualizes age camp and age drag, typified by the "guaranteed and reassuring atemporality" (106) of actress Dame Maggie Smith's "Lady Bracknell type" (107) or her performance of "old-lady-

ness” (205), as having the potential to challenge and deconstruct gender, class, and age identifications assumed to be stable, such as “vicious harridans, ageing dragons and snobby battle-axes” (114). From this perspective, “the identification of age could be as much cultural as it is biological” (204). In other words, age (not unlike gender) can be “a matter of aesthetics and performance” (205) rather than simply a biological process. In the second half of the monograph, Richardson’s analysis expands the category of aging femininity to include considerations of aging female and feminine characters commonly excluded from traditional analyses of gender and age in film and television, including aging lesbians, trans women, and effeminate gay men who are “usually coded as old ‘queens’” (25). Focusing on a handful of contemporary films and television series that center representations of aging LGBT characters, including *Cloudburst* (2011), *Transamerica* (2005), *Transparent* (2014-2017; 2019), *Beginners* (2010), *Gerontophilia* (2013), and *Love is Strange* (2014), Richardson’s analysis is primarily focused on how these representations challenge “negative stereotypes of queer aging: the vicious, embittered old ‘dyke,’ the pathetic non-‘passing,’ older trans woman and the predatory yet highly effeminate old ‘queen’” (115). To a lesser extent, Richardson also explores in these chapters how representations of LGBT older adult characters are unevenly inflected by successful aging and third age discourses. For instance, Richardson argues that *Love is Strange*, a film about an older gay couple who are displaced from their home and forced to live separately after one of the men is discriminately dismissed from his job, offers critical commentary about “the older, gay man who does not conform to the capitalist narrative of successful ageing” (197).

Of central importance to Richardson's analysis throughout the monograph is the concept of 'greywashing,' a mechanism of representation that mobilizes or co-opts the image of older adult or greying characters for the purpose of making contentious politics more palatable, including neo-imperialist politics in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011) and *The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2015), marriage equality politics in *Cloudburst*, and trans-affirmative politics in the Amazon Prime series *Transparent*. Richardson argues that cultural expectations about aging femininity, including pervasive assumptions that older adult women are sweet, devoted, monogamous, frail, and/or asexual, are operationalized in such texts "to make issues of lesbian and gay activism and trans rights appear more sympathetic to the non-queer identified spectator" (206). Given that older adult characters, including LGBT aging characters, are reduced "to little more than political ciphers" (107), Richardson speculates if these types of 'positive' representations of aging can truly claim "sincere grey affirmation" (107). Richardson's monograph therefore conveniently spans representations of aging *and* representations of LGBT older adults, providing a convenient segue into the next body of literature, which is centered specifically on the representation of LGBT older adults and the concept of queer aging.

In what follows, I outline and elucidate the scholarly literature that explores queer representations of aging. In this use, 'queer' refers to the identities of LGBT characters, *as well as* to the action or intention to complicate notions of time, the life course, and/or old age. This body of literature, smaller than the last area, can largely be narrowed down to a single anthology and monograph, and a handful of articles and chapters written primarily by Dustin Goltz, Eva Krainitzki, and Linda M. Hess. These

scholars almost exclusively focus on the representation of lesbian and gay aging, with the exception of a recent article on an aging trans protagonist in the television show *Transparent* (2014-2017). To my knowledge, there is no literature that explores representations of aging bisexuals.

Dustin Goltz's monograph *Queer Temporalities in Gay Male Representation: Tragedy, Normativity, and Futurity*, the first sustained analysis of aging, representation, and queerness, establishes a foundation for understanding the cultural meanings attached to the concepts of "gay future, gay aging, and gay longevity" (10). Concerned with the limited "cultural myth of the single, miserable, and bitter old queen" (9) and the governing messages gay men receive about their futures, "where one is not only taught to expect a shortened life, but is also told that the actual attainment of a longer life is hardly worth aspiring to" (9), Goltz focuses on popular film and television representations of aging gay men produced between 2000-2007 to draw his analysis. Goltz's findings indicate that popular representations of gay men reify long-standing attitudes toward gay male aging as tragic.

Notably, Goltz's analysis of representations of gay aging centers largely on television characters in their 30s and 40s, such as Will Truman (Eric McCormack) from *Will & Grace* (1998-2006; 2017-2020), David Fisher (Michael C. Hall) from *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), and Brian Kinney (Gale Harold) from *Queer as Folk* (2000-2007). In the reboot of *Will & Grace* (2017-2020), which resumed its run on NBC in September 2017 (seven years after the publication of Goltz's book), Will is about 51 years of age and Eric McCormack (the actor who plays Will) is only 54 years of age. These gay male characters, though aging, are certainly not 'aged' according to popular definitions.

Goltz's focus on characters aged 30 years and older can be partly attributed to the fact that lesbian and gay elders have been nearly absent from mainstream film and television. The few images that did exist when Goltz was writing were limited to representations of older gay men as isolated, lonely, perverted, and predatory, evident in characters such as Gustav von Aschenbach (Dirk Bogarde) from *Death in Venice* (1971), Giles De'Ath (John Hurt) from *Love and Death on Long Island* (1997), and James Whale (Ian McKellen) from *Gods and Monsters* (1998). Notably, Goltz's landmark study of representations of gay male aging was published in 2010, the year that saw the release of *Beginners*, a film that is largely perceived as a departure from previous portraits of the queer elder.

In the absence of representations of chronologically old gay men, the futures of gay men, Goltz argues, are often constructed through how younger gay men imagine the aging process. Even still, a study that focuses on constructions of aging into middle age is useful for the ways in which it demonstrates that those who forge a life outside of heteronormative dictates have, as Lee Edelman argues, 'no future.' Indeed, the queer subject, shaped by the realities of the AIDS/HIV epidemic, as well as several decades of homophobia and transphobia, has traditionally lived a chronologically short life. In consideration of the ways in which aging was interrupted and denied to gay men, Goltz's study on the constructions of gay aging affirm some queer theorizations about the non-normative subject's relation to time as fleeting, short-lived, and rapid.

In Maricel Oró-Piqueras and Anita Wohlmann's anthology *Serializing Age: Aging and Old Age in TV Series*, the contributors make clear how contemporary television is the ideal format for exploring the aging process. Due to its long durational format, a

television series, unlike film, can represent a character that ages *and* “temporally document the aging process” of actors and actresses without or with limited prosthetics and special effects (Goltz 188). Moreover, television series, through flashbacks and flashforwards, can influence how viewers experience time. And, with the increasing popularity of online streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu, which often release entire seasons of a television series in a day, television is quite literally changing how rapidly we experience a program. With its ability to break up, slow down, and speed up time, television also has the potential to queer, or trouble, chronological time—commonly conceptualized as the straightforward progression of existence. Thus, temporal devices, such as flashbacks, can disrupt the assumed linearity or progression of a narrative. According to the contributors, these key devices and advancements in television formatting and distribution make television an exciting and perhaps ideal site for teasing out representations of age and aging, the politics of temporality, and “concepts of time and time passing” (Oró-Piqueras and Wohlmann 13).

Relatedly, in addition to offering a collection of temporal possibilities realized through the medium of television, the anthology includes a section that examines how (homo)sexuality, desire, and (old) age are handled on television. This section includes the following three essays: “Still Looking: Temporality and Gay Aging in US Television” (Goltz), “‘You’ve Got Time’: Aging and Queer temporality in *Orange is the New Black*” (Krainitzki), and “I’m Too Old to Pretend Anymore: Desire, Ageing and *Last Tango in Halifax*” (Gorton). Of these three essays, one essay (Goltz) specifically focuses on the representation of an aging gay character, while the other two essays (Gorton; Krainitzki) focus on non-normative or ‘queer’ female aging on television. Goltz, returning to and

updating some of his previous claims about gay male aging, contends that the HBO television series *Looking* (2013-2014) and the British sitcom *Vicious* (2013-2016), both of which center the narratives of aging gay men, disrupt heteronormative timelines and forge “alternative temporal workings” (“Still Looking” 198) that challenge the classical portrait of the desperate, “sad and horny” gay elder (200). Focusing on queer time rather than queer characters, Krainitzki employs queer conceptualizations of time to analyze representations of non-normative female aging in the Netflix series *Orange is the New Black* (*OITNB*). In particular, Krainitzki’s analysis focuses on the ‘golden girls,’ a homogenous gang of violent, “not-young” (217) inmates, and the story arch of Miss Rosa Cinsneros, an old and cancer-riddled inmate. For Krainitzki, the ‘golden girls’ and Rosa embody queer temporal arrangements because they defy age-appropriate behavior and thus, transgress chrono(normative) depictions that traditionally construct old women as sweet rather than dangerous, and old age as a time of slow decline rather than as a rapid burst.

Gorton considers how the “‘othered’ sexuality” (234) of older adults, in general, and the desire of older women, in particular, is constructed in the British television series *Last Tango in Halifax* (2012-2016). The series, which focuses on the elderly couple Celia and Alan (who are reunited in their seventies after fifty plus years of being apart), primarily follows the romantic relationship of Celia and Alan and the relationships of Gillian (Alan’s daughter) and Caroline (Celia’s daughter). While Gorton acknowledges all three aging female protagonists for their subversive portrait of female sexuality, it is the ‘othered’ sexualities of the ‘elderly’ straight couple (Celia and Alan) and the middle-aged lesbian couple (Caroline and Sarah) that are of primary interest for Gorton. Gorton’s

comparison between the relatively invisible desires of both the lesbian and elder character on screen demonstrates the ways in which both elder heterosexuality and young-ish homosexuality are similarly constructed as not representable—unwatchable. Goltz, Krainitzki, and Gorton’s essays build on previous discussions of aging and queerness and contribute analyses that largely understand the aging protagonist to be queered through their relationships to strange temporal arrangements and through their ties to lesbian and gay subjectivities.

While the previous research on representation, later life, and queerness largely focuses on the futures of aging gay men and the deviance of aging heterosexual women, who are queered through their relationship to alternative temporal arrangements and their cultural proximity to non-normative or ‘othered’ sexuality, research on filmic and televisual representations of older queer women does exist. Indeed, parallel to Goltz’s studies on the representation of gay aging, Eva Krainitzki’s articles “Ghosted Images: Lesbians on Screen” and “‘Older-Wiser-Lesbians’ and ‘Baby-Dykes’: Mediating Age and Generation in New Queer Cinema” offer needed analyses of contemporary representations of lesbian women in mainstream, independent, and queer cinema. Krainitzki’s first article “Ghosted Images”, investigates how Terry Castle’s conceptualization of the “apparitional lesbian” (Castle qtd. in Krainitzki “Ghosted” 13), a cultural figure who is rendered invisible or ‘ghosted’ in the social imaginary, intersects with gendered and ageist discourses of decline in relation to the figure of the older lesbian. Not unlike Goltz’s aging gay man without a future, the “‘ghosted old’ lesbian” (14) is associated with death; however, the ghosted lesbian “is made ghostly as a result of the spectral themes of illness and death, and the experience of mourning and widowhood”

(14), which, according to Krainitzki, are enabled in contemporary representations of lesbians through their discursive association with old age rather than queerness. Put simply, the ‘spectral themes’, which previously defined the lonely and sad lesbian in film and television from the pre-Stonewall era to the queer cinema era, were relaxed in the twenty-first century, only to be recuperated once the lesbian became aged on screen. Krainitzki’s analysis is significant for the ways in which it makes clear how ageist and biomedical discourses recuperate a ghostly essence for the on-screen (old) lesbian. Krainitzki discerns hope and anticipates a turn in the construction of the older lesbian in the films *Hannah Free* (2009) and *Cloudburst* (2011), which “expand the mode of lesbian visibility and challenge the taboo of the aging lesbian body” (21). Perhaps unsurprisingly, these films share a proximate relationship to the year 2010, the year, I suggest, the queer elder becomes visible as a protagonist of interest—of cultural acceptability.

Analyzing many of the same texts, Krainitzki’s second article, “‘Older-Wiser-Lesbians’ and ‘Baby-Dykes’” interrogates the extent to which new queer cinema, especially lesbian-feminist new queer cinema, challenges normative constructions of aging. Focusing on the films *If These Walls Could Talk 2* (2000), *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* (2007) and *The Owls* (2010), Krainitzki explores how these particular lesbian-themed texts are effective in their disruption of heteronormative discourses, yet are unsuccessful at challenging, and are even complicit in maintaining, normative constructions of aging that paint later life as a site of decline, pit generations against one another, and reify the essentialist young/old binary. Implicit in its name, *new* queer cinema constructs the lesbian, bisexual, and queer woman as progressive post-feminist

subjects, who now have “acceptability, visibility, and certain rights” (637). These subjects are understood as ‘positive’ representations of queerness—victories for LBQ representation; however, these films maintain a troubling ageist and post-feminist idealization of youthfulness. Again, Krainitzki highlights *Hannah Free* and *Cloudburst* as instances of representational transgression from heteronormative *as well as* ageist discourse.

Cloudburst in general has been the subject of much scholarly critical attention, particularly for its depiction of nursing homes (Kribernegg; Chivers, “Blind People”). *Cloudburst* is also, however, one of two films analyzed in Linda M. Hess’s monograph *Queer Aging in North American Fiction*, which thoroughly explores considerations of age, gender, and sexuality. Focusing on U.S. American and Canadian fiction, primarily literature from the mid-twentieth century onward, Hess’s analysis continues in the tradition of Goltz and Krainitzki’s use of queer temporality theory to explore depictions of ‘queer aging.’ For Hess, queer aging refers to “aging at odds with and in resistance to the norms that shape aging with chrononormative culture” (11); however, Hess limits the scope of her analysis of queer aging in fiction to texts that center an aging, though not necessarily ‘old,’ lesbian or gay protagonist, such as Pauline from Dorothy Baker’s *Trio* (1943), a middle-aged lesbian character whose growth outside of the normative life course (i.e., adulthood, marriage, and procreation) “is portrayed as a dead end: a view that renders a queer life course unintelligible” (42). In other words, Pauline’s suicide, a consequence of the “confines of straight time” (31), forecloses the possibility of a future as an old lesbian. A main contention of Hess’s monograph is that queer aging fictions have the potential to challenge and disrupt normative conceptualizations of aging and the

life course while offering “alternate visions of aging” (20). This argument is most evident in Hess’s separate analyses of the novels *Sister Gin* (1975) and *The Widows* (1998). In such narratives, queer aging complicates and “opposes the exclusive focus on illness and death that often permeates narratives of aging” (152). Later life is conceptualized, instead, “as a potential new beginning” (152) rather than simply as a period of decline. Though primarily focused on queer aging narratives in *literature*, Hess does offer individual analyses of the films *Beginners* and *Cloudburst*, both of which she argues mark a departure from traditional narratives of queer aging since they “present unprecedentedly positive portrayals of their aging protagonists” (23) and historicize their gay and lesbian protagonists. Building on previous arguments about *Beginners* (Hess “Portrait”), Hess maintains that the film tells “a new story about gay aging” (181), one that “breaks with the persistent stereotype of the predatory, miserable, and lonely aging gay man” (182). Speculating about the directions queer aging fictions will take in the second decade of the twenty-first century, Hess argues that narratives of queer aging “could lead to more radical deconstructions of heteronormative scripts than previous depictions of aging LGBTQ protagonists have achieved, but that could also pave the way toward new normativities that absorb queer lives into heteronormative timelines” (23).

Finally, in her article, “‘My Whole Life I’ve Been Dressing Up Like a Man’: Negotiations of Queer Aging and Queer Temporality in the TV Series *Transparent*,” Hess argues that the television show *Transparent* queers—that is, challenges, makes strange, criticizes—dominant constructions and conceptualizations of aging and temporality in three ways. The show, she argues, illustrates a particularly unique representation of aging, challenges linear (read as straight) trajectories, and troubles a

simplistic past/present binary. Hess argues that the “mere visibility of older LGBTQ persons” (4) has the potential to ‘queer’ (heteronormative) “imaginaries of aging” (4). Additionally, she argues that the recent representation of aging and old LGBTQ individuals challenges the notion that queers are without a future. Instead, the presence of Maura, the trans protagonist of the show, makes clear that at least some LGBTQ persons do live into old age. Moreover, Hess illustrates the ways in which the embodiment(s) of Mort/Maura contest the reductive “binary of queer vs. straight time” (5), which is endemic to most investigations of time in queer studies. Hess challenges common understandings of ‘queer aging’ that figure ‘aging’ as a process that is solely assumed by those “chronologically considered old” (2). In opening up the aging process to everyone, Hess offers a life course perspective that can appropriately take into consideration the complexity of a life informed by the logics of both normative and queer temporal arrangements, a concept that challenges binary notions of time. Moreover, given that Hess’s article offers a rare exploration of an aging trans character, her investigation importantly sets a precedent for research exploring aging and trans representation.

1.2 Methods and Methodology

My doctoral study focuses on representations of the queer elder in film and television series that were created and distributed between 2010 and 2020. This decade is relevant for a number of reasons. The year 2010 saw the release of Mike Mills’s *Beginners*, a film about an adult son who reflects on the life and death of his father who comes out as a gay man at 75 years of age. Described as “a new kind of story about gay aging” (Hess “Portrait of the Father” 164) and “the beginnings of heroic gay male aging”

(Goltz “Overcoming” 77), *Beginners* is often viewed as a departure from conventional representations of queer aging, especially gay male aging, which has traditionally been marked as a period of misery, isolation, and predation (Goltz *Queer*; Brown et al.). Around the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, LGBT older adults, especially white gay and lesbian older adults, were experiencing a significant shift in cultural visibility. As Linda Hess writes, “in 2010, seemingly out of nowhere, aging LGBTQ persons gained a presence as a group of people with a distinct cultural history” (Hess *Queer* 175). The 2010s marked the emergence of representations that started to reflect the concerns and issues of a relatively invisible population in mainstream and LGBT organizing. For example, the documentaries *Gen Silent* (2010) and *Before You Know It* (2013) explored LGBT issues, such as marriage inequality and end of life care, from the perspectives of LGBT older adults. 2010, thus marks the beginning of my analysis of representations of the queer elder figure.

Between 2019 and 2020, I developed a corpus of films and television series containing LGBT older adult characters or representations of what I call the ‘queer elder’ figure. To achieve such a corpus, I began by searching relevant keywords in the Internet Movie Database (IMDB). In my initial search for films and television series containing representations of the queer elder, I used a combination of the following keywords: LGBT, old, later life, elder, aging, old age, queer, elderly protagonist, queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans/gender. From this long list of titles, I pulled texts that were produced in Canada and the United States, spoken in English, and created during the 2010s. This process yielded an initial set of texts that made up the foundation of my corpus. Following feminist media scholars Rachel Silverman and Emily Ryalls’s method of

“marathon viewing,” I viewed each text from this winnowed list of films and television series in a concentrated period of time. Described as “an informed and active method of criticism” and “a productive and timely method of analysis” (521), marathon viewing refers to “the process of consuming mass amounts of television [and film] for the purpose of research and/or critical analysis” (522). For each film and television series watched, I engaged in the process of copying transcript-like passages of dialogue that pertained to queer elder and writing analytic and reflexive memos (Birks et al.). My memo writing considered discursive patterns present both within and across the texts viewed for analysis and included reflexive discussions about some of the assumptions that undergirded my perceptions of LGBT aging and older adults. Relevant scholarship concerning representations of LGBT individuals and “age imaging” (Shary and McVittie 8) helped to shape and continually refine my practice of viewing and memoing.

It would be disingenuous to present the process of collecting and analyzing data as a tidy and singular event. The availability of multiple media platforms played a crucial role in my critical viewing process and helped me to locate texts that fell outside of my initial keyword search. Specifically, by following “the flow of content” (Silverman and Ryalls 523), I generated a list of other representations of the queer elder to include in my corpus. For Silverman and Ryalls, this process resembles what Henry Jenkins refers to as ‘convergence,’ understood as the “the flow of content across multiple media platforms” and the labor that spectators perform to draw connections among these diverse media platforms (Jenkins 2). For example, while viewing the initial set of texts, I often accessed multiple web-based media platforms, such as IMDB and Google Scholar, through various technologies (e.g., laptops and smartphones) to learn more about the previous roles of

actors and actresses who portrayed the queer elder. Almost inevitably, this generated other relevant texts that were not found through my initial keyword searches. For instance, during my critical viewing of *Cloudburst*, a 2011 film about an older lesbian couple that are forced to flee to Canada to get married to avoid being separated, I searched the names of the two lead actresses who portray Stella (Olympia Dukakis) and Dot (Brenda Fricker), two instances of the queer elder figure. Through this search, I learned that Olympia Dukakis had quite famously already performed the queer elder figure. More specifically, following the ‘flow of content,’ I learned that Olympia Dukakis had previously portrayed Mrs. Anna Madrigal, the aging ‘transsexual’ landlady of 28 Barbary Lane in *Tales of the City* (1993), *More Tales of the City* (1998), and *Further Tales of the City* (2001), nearly 20 years prior. Though the dated miniseries fell outside of my range of analysis, knowledge of this character led to further searches in an attempt to garner both popular and academic information about Dukakis’s portrait of an aging trans woman. It was within this flow of web-based content searches that I learned that Netflix had picked up the original miniseries for a reboot, and that Olympia Dukakis, now also 20 years older, was to reprise her role as Mrs. Madrigal in the Netflix adaptation. In summer 2019, I included and analyzed the *Tales of the City* reboot, a series that eventually became a key text for exploring representations of the queer elder figure (see Chapters 2 and 4). This example serves as one among many to demonstrate the complex, critical viewing process of following the flow of content to seek information, locate other texts, and make new connections across DVDs, web-based content, and streaming services (e.g., Netflix and Prime).

Spanning over two years, this process yielded 23 texts, 16 feature length films and 7 television series: *3 Generations* (2015), *A Perfect Ending* (2012), *AJ and the Queen* (2020); *Beginners* (2010), *Behind the Candelabra* (2013), *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* (2018), *Cloudburst* (2011), *Gerontophilia* (2013), *Grace and Frankie* (2015-), *Grandma* (2015), *J. Edgar* (2011), *Looking* (2014-2015), *Looking: The Movie* (2016), *Love is Strange* (2014), *Remember* (2015), *Tales of the City* (2019), *The Cool Kids* (2018-2019); *The Normal Heart* (2014), *This is Us* (2016-), *This is Where I Leave You* (2014), *Transparent* (2014-2017), *Transparent Musicale Finale* (2019), and *Tru Love* (2013). For this doctoral project, I analyzed 23 texts and watched over 200 hours' worth of film and television. This breakdown does not include a comprehensive account of all of the other narrative texts that I consumed for this project, such as memoirs (e.g. Scott Thorson's *Behind the Candelabra: My Life with Liberace*), fictional books (e.g. Armistead Maupin's nine-book series *Tales of City*), and older film representations (e.g., *Gods and Monsters*), which helped shape my thinking about the articulation of the queer elder in film and television in the 2010s.

Ranging from comedy to thrillers, independent film to blockbusters, and sitcoms to feature films, these texts are dissimilar in genre, production, and medium. This study is not designed, nor interested, in exploring what effect say the comedic genre or Wolfe Video (the largest producer and distributor of LGBT films in North America) has on the articulation of the queer elder. Though that work may be valuable (and could be a suitable avenue for future directions of studies about representations of the queer elder), it is not the purpose of this study. Building from the work of scholars interested in the politicized meanings of age and queerness in film and television, I am interested in the

ways we depict and describe the aging experiences of LGBT older adults and thus how we come to 'know' or 'see' them.

The selection and analysis of texts was informed by an affective-discursive approach. I understand an 'affective-discursive' approach to be a method of analysis that does not simply trace discourse alone but endeavours to reveal "potentials for realizing a world that subsists within and exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm" (Seigworth and Gregg 7). For I intend for this project to move beyond mere critical description of the discourses that pertain to the queer elder to include queer knowledges that imagine new, possibly better, and more equitable ways to age in this world. Originating in literary studies and cultural studies, this method is informed by the 'paranoid' and 'reparative' reading practices of Eve Sedgwick, outlined in her provocative essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You." According to Sedgwick, the paranoid position has singlehandedly become the only method of analysis for critical theory, rather than "one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds" (124). Sedgwick understands paranoid readings as a method that all-knowingly "has access to true knowledge" (130). This method can identify systems of oppression, "the act of critical unmasking" (Wetherell 352), but does little conceptually to change them. Paranoid readings risk reifying, rather than altering the oppressions they name. To remedy critical theory's narrow obsession with criticism and strong theory, Sedgwick proposes a reparative reading practice that enables scholars to explore experimentation, revel in the unexpected, and even find pleasure in their objects of study. Unlike the paranoid position, reparative readings rebuke academic coherence, mastery, and the

apparent necessity to maintain critical distance from our objects or subjects of study. Ellis Hanson sums up Sedgwick's distinction between the two methods nicely when he writes, "a reparative reading focuses not on the exposure of the political outrages that we already know about but rather on the process of reconstructing a sustainable life in their wake. In other words, we rebuild our immediate surroundings, one might even say our belief in a future" (105). To this end, the reparative position can be understood as a future-building project. After all, reparative reading practices promise to collect "the fragments to construct a sustainable life" (Hanson 102).

Affective-discursive methods such as Sedgwick's reparative position respond to a need for methods that move past articulating discursive formulations alone. Indeed, Wetherell describes Sedgwick's reparative practice as appealing precisely because it "emphasizes processes *beyond, below, and past* discourse" (350). Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to assume that Sedgwick, in later work on affective methods, is altogether rejecting the importance of the paranoid position. Contemporary queer scholars concerned with the reductive nature of affective practices (Love "Truth;" Weigman; Allan), argue that "Sedgwick's call to reparation" (Love 239) has been narrowly understood as the renunciation of the paranoid position, "nearly synonymous with criticism itself" (Weigman). For instance, Heather Love argues "that we do Sedgwick a disservice when we read her solely through a reparative mode" ("Truth" 239). Similarly, Jonathan A. Allan writes, "paranoid becomes 'bad'; reparative becomes 'good.' But when critics rely on this idea, they miss her point. The paranoid and the reparative must 'interdigitate,' like lovers' fingers braided together...we must spend time thinking about both modes of reading" (13). Following these scholars, I propose a method that calls for

both discursive (paranoid) as well as affective (reparative) readings of the queer elder figure: readings that trace discursive constructions, but also read perversely against privileged discursive constructions to imagine new discourses for the queer elder figure.

In analyzing a handful of texts produced in a single decade, the stylistic arrangement of my discussion of the queer elder figure is more closely aligned with film scholarship that prioritizes an in-depth analysis of a select few texts, such as Dustin Bradley Holtz's *Queer Temporalities in Gay Male Representation: Tragedy, Normativity, and Futurity* (2010), Sally Chivers's *The Silvering Screen: Old Age and Disability in Cinema* (2011), and Pamela H. Gravagne's *The Becoming of Age: Cinematic Visions of Mind, Body and Identity in Later Life* (2014). These texts attempt to theorize rather than chronicle representations of aging and later life.

For Timothy Shary and Nancy McVittie, a method such as this, what they call “a ‘greatest hits’ approach” (13), risks dignifying only *particular* and *popular* films, and “indicate[s] personal bias, as well as reflect[s] the bias of audiences” (13). While this criticism is significant for consideration, it is also relevant to take seriously the cultural investment in texts that center on elders and queer folks. Firstly, films that explore themes of old age and queerness largely lie on the periphery of the cultural imagination and therefore rarely garner funding for production, let alone popular attention. And secondly, when films focusing on a queer aging protagonist do capture the attention of the larger public, critical media scholars and film scholars would do well to pay attention. After all, these are the films that are discursively constructing ‘old age’ and ‘queerness’ for the general public. Certainly, the popular constructions we see and consume influence and, perhaps, determine the ways in which we conceptualize and value, or rather devalue,

the experience of aging and those interpellated as aging and/or old. The implications of images that value or devalue older adult characters should not be minimized or underestimated, for, according to aging studies scholar Margaret Morganroth Gullette, they contribute to “the quality of our lives, starting with our willingness or reluctance, at any age, to grow older” (11). Given the importance of representation to the quality of lives of queers and older persons, I have been committed to exploring texts that trace dominant discourses of the queer elder figure, as well as those that reinvent the queer elder figure.

1.3 Theoretical Framework: Queer Temporalities and Critical Age Studies

Concepts of time in the study of age and aging are inescapable. For instance, time-inflected topics, such as chronological age, life course perspectives, third age, fourth age, retirement (i.e., ‘free’ time), the past, ‘ticking time-bomb’ demographics, and *later* life, are all central areas of investigation for social gerontologists and critical age scholars. A life course perspective, a common analytical lens in critical age studies, acknowledges that old adults are marked by time and are products of particular time periods (Bengston et al.). Like age studies, queer theory shares a focus on the temporal with a distinct interest in sexual and gendered ways of being in historically distant periods, unsatisfactory present moments, and almost perceptible future horizons, as well as in progress narratives, life stages, schedules, and clocks that bind, discipline, assemble, and orient bodies in particular ways. For example, the normalization of particular tempos (e.g., ‘women’s time’, ‘biological clocks’, ‘repro-time’, ‘family time’, and ‘work/life

balance’) inform expectations for how bodies and identities, including old bodies and identities, move throughout time and space in any given socio-cultural context. For example, near the end of the twentieth century, late or later life (that period of life before death, the final marker of life in Western conceptualizations of the life course) was a time of decline (Gullette) and a return to childhood (Hockey and James). In contrast, in the twenty-first century, that expansive period of time between adulthood and death is increasingly shaped by successful and positive aging agendas as a time of productivity and activity (Laliberte Rudman “Embodying;” “Shaping”; Katz and Laliberte Rudman; Katz; Katz and Marshall). Critical age studies and queer temporality theory thus share a theoretical commitment to exploring the significance of time for aging and gendered sexual bodies.

My analysis of representations of the queer elder in film and television is informed by the theoretical insights of queer theory, especially queer temporality theories. Indeed, a central claim of my doctoral work is that representations of the queer elder are about time. Increasingly, critical age studies scholars have argued for the usefulness of adopting queer theoretical lines of inquiry for exploring dominant constructions of later life and the aging body (Gallop; Hess *Queer*; Hughes “Queer;” Marshall and Sandberg; Port; Sandberg “Dementia,” “I Was,” “The Old”). For instance, Mark Hughes argues that “there remains considerable potential in applying queer ideas to the social sciences including social gerontology” (“Queer” 58). A queer perspective, he maintains, “can be used not to just critique, but also help transform the expression of older people’s citizenship, challenging restrictive definitions of old age” (“Queer” 58).

As scholars like Hughes maintain, queer theory naturally lends itself to theorizing

age and aging relations in part because of its analytical commitment to denaturalizing identity and troubling categorization, for queerness, as some contend, “can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one” (Edelman 17). Indeed, queer theory has proven to be an effective tool for exposing as socially constructed that which is conventionally considered to be natural (or unnatural) and normal (or abnormal). By challenging essentialist and essentializing expectations about age classifications (e.g., adolescence, adulthood, and old age), including the dominant assumption that the experience of aging is solely a biologically informed reality, queer theory can trouble age as a stable, commonly uncontested identity. Such an exercise is appealing for critical age studies scholars who contend that “we must ‘learn’ how to be old” (Cruikshank 2) and that we are undoubtedly ‘aged by culture’ (Gullette). Aging, such scholars maintain, “is not just a natural process like breathing but something we are initiated into, and we learn to be old partly in response to the ways we are treated...aging is a creation of this time and place, more cultural than biological, determined by social institutions” (Cruikshank 2). Like gender, age requires performance (Butler *Gender*; Laz). Age is something we enact, perform, or ‘do;’ it is not “natural [n]or fixed” (Laz 86), but rather learned, ‘situated, contingent, and negotiated’ (Laz 110). For Cheryl Laz, the common expression ‘act your age’ is instructive. Challenging the naturalness of age and aging, the disciplinary linguistic device points to the constructedness of age: ‘act your age.’ Indeed, aging and old age, as Thomas R. Cole argues, “are certainly real, but they do not exist in some natural realm, independently of the ideas, images, and social practices that conceptualize and represent them” (Cole xxiii).

Scholars exploring the cultural contours of age, aging, and later life have embraced queer temporality theory specifically. Queer temporality, Linn Sandberg suggests, can “challenge what is considered normal and good ageing but also reveal the taken for grantedness of normative time” (“The Old”). Other scholars, especially those studying fictions about age and aging, contend that older adults, like queers, are similarly constructed as being inherently antithetical to ideas of futurity. Cynthia Port, for example, argues that “the old,” commonly framed as past their reproductive and productive years, “are often, like queers, figured by the cultural imagination as being outside of mainstream temporalities and standing in the way of, rather than contributing to, the promise of the future” (3). This is most evident in popular discourse, where older people and population aging are constructed as ‘ticking time bombs’ that challenge the prosperity, indeed the future, of generations to come, especially for Millennials and Generation Z (Gullette; Robertson; Gee and Gutman). My doctoral work joins an emergent body of literature that utilizes queer temporality theory for the purpose of exploring and troubling dominant ideas about age and aging, including those relating to normative sexual ways of being in this time and space.

My project’s focus on the temporal dynamics of representations of the queer elder is thus primarily informed by an established body of work on queer temporality, exemplified by Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), Jack Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007), José Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010), Juana

María Rodríguez's *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (2014), and Kara Keeling's *Queer Times, Black Futures* (2019). Such texts critique and intervene in normative and governing constructions of time and offer a radical rethinking about the timing of the sexual dissident, sexual politics, age, stages of development, and tales of progress, as well as notions of the past, present, and future.

A foundational text in queer temporality theory, Lee Edelman's infamous *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* builds on the anti-social turn in queer theory, formulated in texts such as Leo Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave" and *Homos*. Responding in part to the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian identities at the turn of the century, as well as to "the structuring optimism of politics" (3), Edelman proposes that queers give up on or say 'no' to the future because the future is always governed by the imagined needs of an innocent figural Child, a disciplinary temporal logic Edelman calls 'reproductive futurism.' For Edelman, the figural Child represents "the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity" (21) and "serves to regulate political discourse" (11). Edelman writes, "we are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child" (11). Edelman maintains that because political hope is always structured by reproductive futurism, the future will never be for queers who represent the antithesis to the figural Child—indeed, that which threatens to destroy the Child, signification, and thus the future. Edelman implores queers to "choose, instead, *not* to choose the Child, as the disciplinary image of the Imaginary past or as site of a projective identification with an always improbable future" (31). Queers should instead, he argues, abandon politics and the hope for a better future and identify with "the meaninglessness associated with the sinthome" (47), a

Lacanian concept that refers to “the singularity of the subject’s existence, to the particular way each subject manages to knot together the orders of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real” (35). Borrowing from the concept’s refusal to signify the logic of the Symbolic, as well as the *jouissance* that is produced in this negation, Edelman offers the ‘*sinthomosexual*’ to describe the death drive’s capacity to disrupt reproductive futurism. Evoking the typical conflation between gay men and the HIV virus, as well as forms of non-reproductive sex, Edelman associates the figure of *sinthomosexual* with the figure of the queer and urges queers to take up “a ‘culture of death’” (48) that they are historically perceived to signify in the social imagination. Rather than fighting a dominant characterization of ‘queers’ (i.e., gay men) as non-reproductive, death-driven, and pedophilic, Edelman proposes that queers embrace the negativity that is socially imposed on them. Drawing on literary characters that embody a threat to the lives of children, such as Ebenezer Scrooge, Lord Voldemort, and Captain Hook, Edelman writes, “why not acknowledge our kinship at last with Scrooge who, unregenerate, refuses the social imperative to grasp futurity in the form of the Child” (49). For Edelman, the figures of Scrooge, the queer, and the *sinthome* all share a destructive potential that threatens to unravel or undo social signification. Arguably, however, by urging queers to identify with and inhabit the negative, a political position afforded to few (Muñoz; Halberstam *The Queer*; Keeling), Edelman does offer a (non)politics for contemporary queers that is, as some have noted, nonetheless somewhat optimistic (Ahmed “Happy Future;” Snediker). Edelman’s *No Future*, thus makes a strong case for an anti-relational queer ethic that offers a defiant, circular, and ironically generative (non)politic, which would become the basis for nearly two decades of theoretical stances on the temporal

orientations of both the queer subject and politics, many of which would continue to invest in futurity contra Edelman.

Jack Halberstam also responds to the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian culture in their book *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. However, in contrast to Edelman's nihilistic, anti-futural construction of queerness, Halberstam describes queerness as possessing the tools to imagine different futures, alternative temporalities. Queerness, Halberstam argues, is "an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric practices" (1). According to Halberstam, queerness is a temporal logic that is "developed, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (2). Acknowledging some of the temporal effects of the AIDS epidemic, namely the many foreshortened lives and futures for gay men, Halberstam argues that queer time is not simply or only "about compression and annihilation" (2). For Halberstam, queer time is also about the possibility of scripting a life outside of the normative tempos of "repro-time" and "family time," both of which are "governed by an imagined set of children's needs" (5). Halberstam maintains that queer time generates possibilities for its participants to envision different futures, ones that "can be imagined according to the logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death" (2).

Halberstam contends that alternative temporalities, embodied by transgender subjectivities and those involved in queer subcultures, scramble or queer dominant assumptions about adulthood, (im)maturity, the life course, and the reductive "adult/youth binary" (2). For example, involvement in queer subcultures, including dyke punk and drag king bands, model for Halberstam a form of "stretched-out adolescence"

that challenges binary and thus limited and limiting conceptions of adolescence and adulthood, immaturity and maturity (153). For Halberstam, participation in queer subcultures frustrates not only the hegemony of dominant culture, but also the increasingly palpable social imperative for lesbians and gays to couple, marry, have children, and make family units. Halberstam maintains that subcultural involvement challenges “our notion of adulthood as reproductive maturity” (162), allowing some to reject adulthood or map out different or deviant forms of adulthood. In other words, queer subcultural involvement can “offer alternative life narratives” (175) outside of repro-time and family-time. Moreover, the concept of an extended adolescence defies stable age categorization, as well as an increasing overemphasis on ‘queer youth’, which can focus on the present and the future and unintentionally elide or ignore queer history, the past, and LGBT older adults who came of age in the mid-twentieth century. Finally, queer subcultural activities that support non-reproductive forms of adulthood can also challenge conventional accounts of generational warring at the heart of countercultural production. Halberstam argues that the lesbian punk band *The Butchies* “refuse[s] the model of generational conflict,” instead drawing together lesbian generations (and thus different ages of lesbians) from the quieter 70s and raucous 90s and exemplifying cross identification and continuity, rather than opposition and division, among generations (172). In these ways, Halberstam offers a different temporal orientation of the queer subject to the future, while also not privileging reproduction, children, or youth.

Glancing backwards to the past, Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* encourages queers to feel the ‘backward feelings’ of queer ‘history,’ including feelings of self-hatred, disconnection, isolation, and loss. Although

Love shares with Edelman a deep skepticism of gay and lesbian ‘progress’, as well as “political appeals to the future” (22), Love does not flatly dismiss the importance of the future. Instead, Love claims to be more interested in the queer negativity of the past, especially ‘backward feelings’, such as “shame, secrecy, and self-hatred” (22), that mark pre-stonewall subjectivities—indeed, those who came of age before gay liberation in the late ‘60s. Recognizing that current “advances” for some gays and lesbians (e.g., gay marriage and increased media visibility), often come at the expense of others (e.g., non-white, fat, disabled, ‘diseased,’ and gender deviant bodies), Love writes, “social negativity clings not only to these figures but also to those who lived before the common era of gay liberation—the abject multitude against whose experience we define our own liberation” (10). Although Love is interested in the backward feelings of difficult or irredeemable ‘queer’ characters of late 19th and early 20th century authors and texts, such as the depressing Stephen Gordon from Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, it seems pertinent to highlight that the now ‘old’ of the twenty-first century (e.g., members from the Silent Generation and the oldest Baby Boomers) might also very well carry traces of ‘backward feelings.’

Refusing to see “the past as past” (19), Love dwells on such ‘backward feelings,’ or what Judith Butler calls queer’s “history of injury” (“Critically” 288), to explore the “continuities between past and present” (29). For Love, the experiences and feelings of the queer ‘past’ are “not at a safe distance from contemporary experience” (32). Love contends that backward feelings, popularly thought to be renounced in the contemporary moment of gay liberation and pride, can produce feelings of shame among those who harbour them in the present, precisely because such feelings are assumed to be historical

rather than contemporary. She writes, “paying attention to what was difficult in the past may tell us how far we have come, but that is not all it will tell us; it also makes visible the damage that we live with in the present” (29). In other words, Love claims that “a politics of the past” (21) is necessary to understand the present which continues to be structured by homophobia. Love argues that a politics of the ‘past’, which includes accounting for non-productive (*à la* Foucault) ‘bad’ feelings such as “self-pity, despair, depression, loneliness, [and] remorse” (161), might be pleasurable in part because contemporary sexual subjects continue to experience shame and stigma. Love thus contends that looking to the past and feeling backward promise to both frustrate and expand “the recognized or allowed styles of political subjectivity” (162) in the present.

Similarly interested in queer subjects and socio-temporal possibilities “declared useless” (xiii), Elizabeth Freeman focuses on the queer potential of a “historical ‘post-ness’” (xiv) in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Similar to Love, Freeman argues compellingly that queers must look to the recent past to challenge the constraints of the present. Centering her analysis on texts and artists from the 1970s, that ‘revolting’ decade that at once represents both rebellion and embarrassment in the contemporary moment, Freeman engages “the temporal politics of deconstruction...to arrive at a different modality for living historically, or putting the past into meaningful and transformative relation with the present” (xvi). Freeman rejects a stubborn temporal fixation that privileges either the past or the future as the sole territory of queer theorizing, “instead...mining the present for signs of undetonated energy from past revolutions” (xvi).

Of central importance for Freeman are forms of interruption (e.g., anachronism, delay, belatedness, flashback, and reversal) that disrupt “time as seamless, unified, and forward moving” and in turn offer “other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others: that is, of living historically” (xxii). For Freeman, instances of queer temporalities, such as hiccups, pauses, or ruptures, hold the potential to not only derail normative time, but also to reveal the socially constructed contours of time, which are generally conceived of as disinterested and apolitical. According to Freeman, time governs or binds “individual human bodies toward maximum productivity,” and thus is far from a natural or impartial phenomenon (3). Freeman calls this form of temporal regulation “chrononormativity” (3). Borrowing from sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel, Freeman refers to life events “that seem like somatic facts,” (4) such as marriage, (re)production (i.e., work and childrearing), and death, as “‘hidden rhythms,’ forms of temporal experience that seem natural to those whom they privilege” (Zerubavel qtd. in Freeman 3). To have any life at all, Freeman argues, is to follow “this sequence of socioeconomically ‘productive’ moments” (5). Freeman thus conceives of queerness as those temporal disruptions that expose chrononormativity, those “powerful reorientations of supposedly natural, physiological impulses” (171), such as embodiments considered useless, unproductive, and/or non-productive. According to Freeman, queer theorizing must foster a relationship with the non-normative past in order to challenge the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian identities in the present and imagine alternative forms of belonging beyond coupledness, marriage, and family for the future.

Queer scholars of colour remind that a queer politics organized around sexuality is not enough (Ferguson; Cohen “Punks;” Smith). Scholars of colour who draw on queer

of colour critique, as well as theories from Black and women of colour feminisms, to reconsider theories of time, temporality, and sociality, such as José Muñoz, Juana Rodríguez, and Kara Keeling, assert that the ideal sexual citizen is not just heterosexual and/or cisgender but also white. Critical of the ways in which dominant debates about queer sociality and futurity fail to account for the ways in which Black people and people of colour, including Black queers and queers of colour, are systematically denied a future, and/or advocate for “a color-blind, gender-blind, difference-blind future” (Rodríguez 10), scholars of colour have thought about temporality alongside serious considerations of race, reimagining the future (the not-yet) as a hopeful or promising site for racialized queer subjectivities.

Writing and publishing at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, that period when assimilationist agendas of mainstream gay and lesbian organizing were reaching a peak and when the inescapable negativity of the anti-social turn in queer theory was becoming quite stale, José Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* insists that the here and now (i.e., the present) is “a prison house” (1) and “simply not enough” (96). Veering away from Edelman’s conceptualization of anti-futural queerness, exemplified by the jouissance-seeking and thus death-driven figure of the sinthomosexual, Muñoz argues contrarily that “the future *is* queerness’s domain” (1, emphasis added). A temporal mode yet to be achieved, queerness is “always in the horizon” (11). He argues that queerness is a temporal arrangement that “exists for us an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future” (1). “We are not yet queer,” Muñoz asserts, “but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (1). Put simply, Muñoz advocates for a conceptualization of

queerness that implies a doing for the future: “we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in this world, and ultimately new worlds” (1). In this way, Muñoz is unable to part with the optimistic politics of futurity that Edelman rejects.

Importantly, though sympathetic to much of Edelman’s polemic, Muñoz highlights that Edelman’s critique of reproductive futurity “never considers the topic of race” (94). Critical of the “crypto-universal white gay subject” (94) at the heart of anti-social queer theorizing, as well as Edelman’s convenient elision of the importance of race, especially Blackness, in the examples he uses to explore the prevalence of pro-children agendas, Muñoz reminds, “in the same way all queers are not the stealth-universal-white-gay-man invoked in queer antirelational formulations, all children are not the privileged white babies to whom contemporary society caters” (94). Muñoz acknowledges that not all children are valued equally: “racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity” (95). Muñoz reveals that the figural Child at the heart of Edelman’s polemic, the one we are meant to fight for and who structures our politics, is in effect a white subject. According to Muñoz, serious considerations of race demand that queer temporal theories do not give up on hope and the future. Instead of saying ‘no’ to the future, Muñoz implores queers to “call on a utopian political imagination that will enable us to glimpse another time and place: a ‘not yet’ where queer youths of colour actually get to grow up” (96).

Drawing on queer, anti-social theorizations such as Leo Bersani’s *Homos*, as well as those that reject such anti-relational approaches and deploy the negativity that queers embody as a generative force instead, such as Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* and Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure*, Latina queer scholar Juana Rodríguez reframes

the discussion of queer politics, sociality, sex, and futurity through a focus on feminist and queer of colour scholarship and “the feminine, the female, and the femme” (23) in her book *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*. Critiquing queer theory’s undeniable focus on the sexual cultures, logics, and politics of “cosmopolitan gay white male urban culture” (14), such as gay sex at bathhouses, sex clubs, or in parks, Rodríguez “conjures radical sexual futures” (22) for the queer racialized feminine subject for whom such gendered and raced sexual cultures or logics may be inaccessible or dangerous. Following feminist of colour scholars, such as Chicana scholar Norma Alarcón and Muñoz, Rodríguez’s formulation of thinking through what is not possible in the present moment longs, yearns, conjures, and creates possibilities for the future. Rodríguez contends that “through an insistence on critique that nevertheless points to a ‘not yet’ of possibilities, refusal remains an operative mode of analysis that demands rather than forecloses futurity” (11). In other words, Rodríguez’s critique of the conditions of the present, including the present state of queer theory’s androcentrism and whiteness, serve as a form of world-making or future-building wherein sexual possibilities are imagined for the racialized feminine subject, “a subject position that seems to be vacated of erotic possibilities” (13). For Rodríguez, Latina gestures, especially those of submission, imagination, and sexual fantasy, long for and point toward a more livable future for femmes of colour, while also offering a critique of the present.

Finally, Kara Keeling’s *Queer Times, Black Futures* similarly uses imagination and present longings for a more just future to explore how the temporal structures of queerness and blackness work in conjunction with one another. Engaging queer theories

of time, as well as the temporal products of Afrofuturism, such as imagination, technology, future, and liberation, Keeling examines the “‘freedom dreams’ that issue from Afrofuturist imaginations...so that those of us living today who are...organizing things in support of that other world we believe is (im)possible can consider what...might survive us and our limited perceptions, taking flight beyond what is presently imaginable” (xiv). Keeling’s theoretical formulation of queer temporality insists that “*today* one can perceive desires and attempts for ‘liberation’ from those human structures and phenomena that define, fix, mold, alienate, confine, and limit the living beings and other things they order” (xv, added emphasis). In this way, her work thus affirms that both “*another world is possible*” and “such a world already is here and now” (ix, original emphasis). These undergirding temporal logics negotiate and complicate queer theories of time and temporality that insist that queerness is on the horizon rather than presently perceptible. Keeling shares with Freeman and Muñoz an interest in imagining alternatives to queer theory’s anti-relational approach but retains some of queer theory’s focus on negativity à la Edelman. Repurposing Edelman’s anti-futural queer figure, Keeling draws a comparison between Edelman’s queer subject (the sinthomosexual) and post-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon’s figure of the Black “native in the colony” (Keeling 89), who is conceived by Fanon as possessing “the corrosive element” (Fanon qtd. in Keeling 89). Given that both figures represent a “radical alterity, and therefore potent danger to the existing structures of signification” (89), Keeling contends that both projects “share a utopian vision that the world as we know it can be absolutely destroyed through the mobilization of an agent [the sinthomosexual or the Black native] produced within it” (89). For Keeling, “these two theories mark the shared historical interest of both queer

and Black liberation projects in thinking a radical rupture from within the extant theoretical structures informing the temporalities of Black existence and homosexuality and queerness” (89).

This body of scholarship about queerness, temporality, sexual dissidence, and time’s sexual politics heavily informed my thinking in this dissertation. This literature provides an ideal backdrop for exploring representations of the queer elder figure who, as I have signalled from the beginning of this chapter, is intimately connected to concepts of time. For example, the queer elder figure is a temporal phenomenon popping up quite visibly in the 2010s, but also embodies time as an aged figure who has amassed time and is running out of time. A figure in and of time and thus a breathing reminder of the *past* and what has supposedly *passed* (e.g., politics, ways of being, etc.), representations of the queer elder are convenient places to comment on the past, present, and future. My dissertation, therefore, engages, intervenes, complicates, and extends these theoretical discussions (outlined above) about queerness, time, aging, the past, and futurity through an analysis of filmic and televisual representations of the queer elder figure. As well, these foundational arguments about queer considerations of time and development offer promising theoretical frameworks for challenging normative life stages, including normative expectations for ‘old age.’

1.4 Overview of Chapters

Exploring how representations of the queer elder have become visible through notions of time, my dissertation is divided into three analytical chapters and a coda. In chapter 2 “The Queer Elder: Timely Figures,” I explore the queer elder figure’s

relationship to time, specifically the present and its popular articulation as a progressive, post-closet temporality. Although documentaries and news reporting in the 2010s generally depicted LGBT older adults as fearful and dissatisfied with the conditions of the present moment, representations of the queer elder figure, I argue, reify and sustain a temporal binary in which the past is always backwards, including those who represent it (i.e., ‘the old’), and the present is forward, future-oriented, and progressive. Exploring a handful of texts, including *J. Edgar* (2011), *3 Generations* (2015), *Tales of the City* (2019), *Transparent* (2014-2017), *The Cool Kids* (2018-2019), and *This is Us* (2016-), I claim that this temporal hierarchy is achieved through three different but interlocking articulations of the queer elder figure: the *closeted* elder, the *backward* elder, and the *belated* elder. Together, these three temporal framings of the queer construct a rosy narrative about LGBT progress, one in which time only improves life conditions for LGBT people.

In chapter 3 “The May-December Romance Queered: From Man-Boy Love to *Gerontophilia*,” I explore the May-December romance, a genre of film in which a person in the springtime of life (i.e., a youth) finds love with an older person nearing the end of their life. An instance of cross-generational attraction, the May-December dynamic has historically been a conventional trope for depicting elder romance between men and women in film. In the last decade, representations of LGBT cross-generational relationships, including depictions of May-December couples, have steadily been growing in number. This increasingly popular representational logic is surprising given that relations built around a significant age differential, especially among young and old gay and bisexual men, have been constructed as outmoded, backward, and distinctly

historical since the late twentieth century. In this chapter, I trace this supposedly ‘dated’ dynamic through several gay-themed texts, including *Looking* (2014-2016) and *Tales of the City* (2019), paying close attention to the films *Behind the Candelabra* (2013) and *Gerontophilia* (2013). I argue that the queered May-December romance not only draws the queer elder figure into contemporary focus, but it also indicates a longing for ‘backward-looking’ relations between gay and bi men of different generations. I contend that, while these representations can and do reproduce reductive dominant discourses of aging gay men as predatory and pathetic, and cross-generational relations as pathological and insufficient in relation to age-similar relations, they also offer productive framings of cross-generational kinship structures and erotics that *feel* and *look* backward (i.e., historical, less progressive, retrograde).

In chapter 4 “The Tragic Trans Elder: Reimagining Trans Aging and Futurity,” I explore trans feminine articulations of the queer elder figure in the two streaming series *Transparent* (2014-2017; 2019) and *Tales of the City* (2019). In sub/cultural discourse, older people and trans persons, especially those who are racialized and feminine, are fated to die both on- and off-screen. *Transparent* and *Tales of the City*, I argue, work within and against the conventions of representing trans and elder death onscreen. Specifically, although both representations participate in a clichéd depiction of old age as a time of death, the deaths of their trans elders complicate stereotypical portraits of elder and trans death in ways that are potentially significant for trans spectators. Relatedly, continuing to investigate the representational logics of cross-generational pairings involving the queer elder figure, I also explore the dialectic relationship between the *white transfeminine elder* and the *transfeminine of colour younger* in each series to

consider how race relations, in addition to gender and age dynamics, inflect depictions of trans aging, futurity, and death. Both series, I argue, use and sublimate race relations in ways that at once imagine futures for trans of colour characters, while understating how trans lives and deaths are organized by race, racism, and white supremacy. *Transparent* and *Tales of the City*, therefore, reproduce post-race representations of transness that are more contemporary and less forward-looking.

In the final chapter “Coda: The Future of the Queer Elder Figure,” I investigate the articulation of the queer elder figure at the beginning of the 2020s. In the emerging texts of the 2020s, including the final season of *Grace and Frankie* (2021-), *Supernova* (2020), and *Swan Song* (2021), I found that representations of the queer elder seem to be more explicitly preoccupied with themes about illness, disability, and mortality. Age-related diseases, such as dementia and prostate cancer, are increasingly shaping expressions of the queer elder figure. I explore ideas of productivity, futurity, and generativity in relation to the film *Swan Song*. I discern hope in *Swan Song*’s queer elder figure, who is imagined as contributing to, rather than standing in the way of, the future. Although emergent texts like *Swan Song* still overwhelmingly (and unfortunately) focus on a narrow image of the queer elder figure as a white, middle-class gay man, the emergent theme of aging into disability and impairment as an old gay man offers interesting lines of investigation for future scholarship exploring representations of LGBT older adults in film and television. Based on these new texts, I conclude by suggesting that future scholarship on the queer elder figure investigate the intersection of age, disability, and queerness.

Chapter 2

2 The Queer Elder: Timely Figures

“It Gets Better” – Dan Savage and Terry Miller

“Surely to tell tall tales and others like them would be to spread the myth, the wicked lie that the past is always tense and the future, perfect” – Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*

Growing up in a hetero-normative society is not easy, writer Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller, founders of the *It Gets Better* project, acknowledge (“It Gets Better Project”). Created in 2010 in response to high rates of LGBT suicide, the project invites LGBT people (those who have survived adolescence) to create video submissions that offer hope to queer youth. The project’s promise is simple (if not false): life circumstances will improve for you in the future—hold on. Age and time, the logic goes, will yield a queer(er) future. In the last decade, the well-intentioned campaign has received harsh criticism for its neoliberal rhetoric, passive and future-oriented politics, and general lack of consideration for those queer subjects for whom adulthood does not bring respite, including for queers of colour and trans and non-binary individuals (Grzanka and Mann; Puar “In the Wake”, “The Cost”; Mason; Nyong’o). In addition to these concerns, Tavia Nyong’o playfully adds, “there is that little issue of aging. Who’ll spare a thought for the old queen?” Indeed, considerations of age and aging tend to trouble the mainstream gay proverb ‘it gets better.’ Around the same time that Dan Savage was promising LGBT teenagers that life gets better, Canadian and U.S. American LGBT individuals at the other end of the life course, those who lived through the pre- and post-liberation eras and those who witnessed legal recognitions gradually improve for

LGBT individuals, were reporting a fear of being necessarily “forced back into the closet” to circumvent heterosexism and cissexism, as well as overt anti-LGBT stigma, harassment, and discrimination, from service providers and fellow residents of long-term care homes (Wilson et al. 28).

Indeed, existing research about the lives of LGBT older adults indicates that this diverse group is already engaging in identity concealing practices to strategically navigate later life. For example, Charles Furlotte and colleagues found that LGBT older adults expend a significant amount of energy trying to protect their identities from visiting care workers. An older gay man in their study, for instance, said he tries to “de-gay the household” by removing revealing pictures to pass as straight to protect himself from subpar care (439). Corroborating this research, recent news coverage (Ibbitson; Purdon and Palleja) and documentaries about the oldest members of LGBT communities, such as *Gen Silent* (2010), *Before You Know It* (2013), *Gaycation* (2016-2017), and *A Secret Love* (2020), articulate a different reality to the optimistic, future-oriented politics of *It Gets Better*. For example, In Stu Maddox’s *Gen Silent*, Lawrence Johnson (a gay, Black man in his sixties, who describes the difficulties he and his same-gender partner of 38 years encountered when looking for a tolerant nursing home) counters the narrative of progress at the heart of the project when he says, “a lot people believe that you just live happily ever after and that’s just a myth” (*Gen Silent*). Similarly, in a recent roundtable discussion between Sarah Schulman and colleagues, 71-year-old Gay Liberation Front activist Ted Brown argues that present-day LGBT older adults, often an afterthought for many LGBT movements, are essentially “back in 1870. All the progress that we’ve had no longer applies to them because they’re in a straight environment that’s often very

hostile. They have no way out” (Schulman et al. “LGBTQ”). Such statements indicate that progress previously achieved for LGBT people can be halted or reversed in later life. In one recent study with Canadian LGBT older adults, a participant similarly indicated that life was not getting better in part because progressive social policies and rights experienced previously were increasingly unstable: “We don’t have a long time left to live. *Our lives are not getting any better*, we are losing income, we are losing housing, our healthcare is diminishing [. . .] The people who are supposed to be helping are not educated [. . .] policies have to be changed!” (Boule et al. 245, emphasis added). Statements such as these challenge the notion that ‘it’ (i.e., life circumstances and social conditions for LGBT individuals) necessarily improves with time, gets better with age, or progresses linearly from one stage to another indefinitely.

Interestingly, as LGBT older adults in Canada and the United States (among other places) feared a return to the closet, queer elder characters steadily came out of the closet in film and television between 2010 and 2020, becoming more visible than ever before. Mike Mills’s *Beginners* (2010), a film about a son whose 75-year-old father comes out as gay and dies shortly thereafter, established the trend of late life disclosures that would continue for at least a decade. For instance, in the 2011 film *Cloudburst*, a 70-year-old grandmother of declining health is forced to come out to her naïve, adult granddaughter to ensure that she and her lesbian partner of 30 years, who is perceived by the granddaughter simply as “Nonna’s best friend,” can remain together in old age (*Cloudburst*). In the 2014 film *This is Where I Leave You*, a surviving widow, who has gathered her dysfunctional children under the same roof to grieve the death of their father together, publicly and defiantly demonstrates her love for a neighbouring woman whose

husband has also passed away. In 2014, a 70-year-old (grand)parent discloses her gender identity as a trans woman to her family in the Amazon series *Transparent* (2014-2017; 2019). In 2015, two 70-year-old men come out to their wives and adult children as a gay couple in the Netflix original series *Grace and Frankie* (2015-). In 2016, a 60-year-old Black man with terminal cancer reveals to his family that he is not-straight when he brings home his same-gender partner in the NBC television show *This is Us* (2016-). And in 2018, a gay resident at a retirement community centre comes out to his son in the Fox television show *The Cool Kids* (2018). It would appear that narratives of late life sexual and gender disclosures are having a moment. In fact, portraits of the queer elder figure as closeted, ‘already out,’ or coming out grew in number over the last decade in Canadian and U.S. American film and television in such texts as *Behind the Candelabra* (2013), *Gerontophilia* (2013), *Tru Love* (2013), *Looking* (2014-2016), *Love is Strange* (2014), *3 Generations* (2015), *Grandma* (2015), *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* (2018), *Tales of the City* (2019), and *Supernova* (2020). The depiction of the queer elder figure has enjoyed increasing international success as well, including in *Albert Nobbs* (2011, UK), *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011, UK), *Vicious* (2013-2016, UK), *Las herederas* “The Heiresses” (2018, Paraguay) *The Coming Back Out Ball Movie* (2018, Australia), *Suk Suk* “Twilight’s Kiss” (2019, Hong Kong), and *Deux* “Two of Us” (2019, France). Therefore, during the same decade that scholarship, news media, and LGBT-themed documentaries were giving voice to some of the material conditions and hardships experienced by LGBT older adults, especially the fear of being closeted again, the figure of the queer elder continuously came out and gained prominence on big and little, national and international, screens. These two conflicting and competing discourses about LGBT older

adults produce a contradictory message about LGBT older adults' relationship to the conditions of the last decade.

In this chapter, I explore the queer elder's relationship to time. Specifically, I investigate the relationship between representations of the queer elder and ideas of progress and generation. Indeed, the concept of time is essential to the expression of the queer elder figure in Canadian and U.S. American film and television. A character of time (old) and of the times (the 2010s), the queer elder is a suitable vehicle for making progressive statements about the present. In this chapter, I identify and explore three temporal framings of the queer elder: *closeted*, *backward*, and *belated*. Popular representations of the queer elder either relegate '*closet cases*' to the distant past, depict already out queer elders as stubbornly *backwards* in relation to young queers, or render late life disclosures as embarrassingly *belated*. Taken together, these frames serve to implicate the queer elder as anachronistic, while telling a story about progress. For Mary Russo, anachronism refers variously to "an historical misplacement" and "retrogression, drawing up the past inappropriately into the present" (21). Anachronism, she concludes, is "a mistake in a normative systemization of time" (21). In these depictions, the queer elder, imagined as close to death, is literally out of time, as well as against and from another time. Portrayed as mistakes and victims of time, these timely figures establish a progress narrative about the constantly improving social conditions for LGBT people in the United States, the setting of the texts analyzed in this chapter. In this construction of time, the lives of LGBT individuals move linearly from an oppressive past to a liberated present moment. Importantly, this progress story conveniently elides some of the present-day realities and concerns of LGBT older adults outlined above. Taken together, these

figures sustain a dominant narrative that LGBT struggles have ended; that is, that liberation has been achieved and homophobia and to a lesser extent transphobia and biphobia are dead or, at least, almost dead because these attitudes *only* stubbornly remain among older generations. Together, the three temporal figures suggest that it does indeed get better for LGBT people: the steady march of time unfolds naturally from oppressive pasts toward queer(er) presents and futures.

2.1 The Closeted Queer Elder

The *closeted queer elder* is the first example of how representations of the queer elder reproduce LGBT older adults as ‘out of time’ and contemporary LGBT life as ‘progressed’ and ‘better.’ The defining characteristic of the closeted queer elder is his past-ness. Evident in films such as Clint Eastwood’s *J. Edgar* (2011), as well as Steven Soderbergh’s *Behind the Candelabra* (discussed in detail in Chapter 3), the closeted queer elder is associated with a period of time that is securely situated in the past; he is not *now*, but *before*. Concerning past events (e.g., the Lavender Scare, the AIDS epidemic, and homophobic violence), he is decidedly historical, and thus reinforces concepts of chronology, progress, and linearity. Queer historians and LGBT scholars have noted a need to critically investigate dominant and collective constructions of the LGBT past because memories “are answerable to the needs of the present...shaped in relation to changed and changing social conditions” (Castiglia and Reed 11-12). Memories are not simply “retrievals of an archived past but something more imaginative and driven by present needs” (11). In the current LGBT collective imagination, the historical past is often marked solely by experiences of isolation, discrimination,

violence, misery, and tragedy for LGBT individuals. Tamara de Szegheo Lang argues that in the collective LGBT memory positive aspects of the past are continually elided, obstructed from view, to ultimately buttress a sanitized “vision of the present in which sexual rights and freedoms have been achieved” (230). She contends that memories of tragedy, isolation, and white gay male suffering captured in twenty-first century films like *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *Milk* (2008), *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), *The Normal Heart* (2014), and *Stonewall* (2015) are repeated, while positive or happy aspects of the past are conveniently forgotten “to maintain the image of the present as both satisfactory for and accepting of LGBTQ people” (231). A closeted queer elder living in an oppressive, homophobic society is a valuable narrative to tell because it participates in constructing the past as unenlightened/backwards and the present as enlightened/progressive.

To further illuminate the temporal politics of representations of the closeted queer elder figure, I borrow from Ron Becker’s discussion of ‘post-closet’ representation and its relationship to depictions of ‘closet cases.’ Post-closet politics refers to the liberal mainstream notion that “homophobia has seriously decreased and with it, gay men’s need to be in the closet” (“Guy Love” 127). Becker argues that post-closet beliefs, which conflate “cultural visibility with political progress,” emerged in the 90s when representations of gays and lesbians multiplied on television (126-127). The sheer amount of ‘out’ characters in film and television simultaneously produced and confirmed the notion that America had entered into a post-closet era. The ubiquity of ‘out’ characters contrasts sharply with representations of ‘closet cases.’ According to Becker, ‘closet cases’ refer to popular representations of “gay men who are *not* out—who fail to

identify with the label waiting for them, who refuse to accept the straight world's tolerance, who expose the gaping hole in this post-civil-rights logic" (127). Becker contends that representations of 'closet cases,' exemplified by characters like Jack and Ennis from Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), reproduce post-closet discourses as well. Through an analysis of handful of examples of 'closet cases', he argues that representations of closet cases relocate the closet to other places, peoples, and times, and thus effectively evacuate traces of homophobia that necessitate a need for the closet from America, white people, and the twenty-first century. For instance, set in the 60s and 70s in Wyoming, *Brokeback Mountain*'s closeted 'gay' cowboys, Jack and Ennis, can be and often are read simply "as history—as a peek into an unenlightened, closeted, pre-1990s world" (129). In the post-closet imaginary, representations of closet cases ultimately function alongside the many representations of "openly gay men and the gay-friendly straight people who surround them to reconfirm a liberal notion that the closet is gone and the homophobia that constructed it is increasingly irrelevant" (129).

If the LGBT collective memory, captured in film and television (among other narrative vehicles), is "almost always about the now" (Enke 9), it follows that memories of a closeted *past*, or *passed* (i.e., dead) queer elder figure, help construct the present temporal moment as a more livable time and space for queer subjects. In what follows, I explore Clint Eastwood's *J. Edgar* (2011), set in mid-twentieth century America, and its portrait of the 'closet case', to illustrate the role of the queer elder figure in the depiction of the past as tense and the present as perfect.

Eastwood's biopic *J. Edgar* represents the most extreme expression of the closeted queer elder in my corpus: the deeply repressed and shameful cross-dressing

‘homosexual.’ *J. Edgar* explores the life and career of John Edgar Hoover (1895-1977), a notoriously tyrannical and paranoid man who waged war on individuals perceived to be or rumoured to be radicals, communists, and homosexuals during the post-war years in America (Charles; Johnson). Eastwood’s *J. Edgar* traces an exaggerated and compromising legacy of Hoover, the founder of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and renders Hoover or ‘Edgar,’ as his mother and companion call him, an unreliable narrator in addition to a closeted man. (From here on out, I use ‘Hoover’ to discuss the historical figure, and ‘Edgar’ to reference Eastwood’s depiction of Hoover.) The film oscillates between two temporal frames, the present and the past, and thus relies on a flashback structure that is facilitated through the protagonist’s narration. Beginning in the 1960s (the narrative’s ‘present moment’), Edgar dictates to a series of biographers his life history and his central role in the development of the FBI, scenes that are enacted through flashbacks to life as a young adult (the narrative’s past). Leonardo DiCaprio portrays the titular figure as a young adult as well as an older adult, a decision Dee Michell and colleagues contend “is ageist and unnecessary” (223). They argue that the casting of DiCaprio, who at the time of filming was in his late thirties, as an old man, and the use of aging technologies, including prosthetic makeup and favourable lighting, engages in the increasingly common practice of “gray face” (Shary and McVittie 99).

J. Edgar offers a narrative within a narrative, a practice typical of romantic films featuring older adults. Evident in *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), *Titanic* (1997), *The Notebook* (2004), *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008), and *Water for Elephants* (2011), this classic framing device assuages cultural anxieties about sexuality in later life, as the elder’s sexuality is explored through flashbacks. In other words, the sexuality of

the elder is firmly and safely situated in the past, when they were young. A controversial biographical drama, *J. Edgar* also explores Hoover's sexuality, or perhaps lack thereof—a historically contentious subject that provided fodder for endless speculation throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries about Hoover's sexual orientation. Was Hoover gay? As FBI historian Douglas M. Charles concludes, “we do not, and cannot, know; and no” (1). According to Charles, the rumors about Hoover who lived with his mother into his forties and remained unmarried and without children “were largely based on gay stereotypes and potent US sociocultural influences that dictated gender roles during Hoover's lifetime” (1). Nonetheless, Oscar-winning gay screenwriter Dustin Lance Black's portrait of Edgar offers a less straightforward answer to the question of whether Hoover was gay.

Indeed, Eastwood's depiction of Hoover indulges rumors about the FBI Director's (non-hetero)sexuality. In the film, Edgar's sexuality, as Eastwood has admitted in interviews, is “ambiguous” (James). For Edgar is portrayed as being enamored with Clyde Tolson (1900-1975), the Associate Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Edgar's “number two man” (*J. Edgar*). For instance, Edgar hires Clyde (Armie Hammer), an interview candidate who “showed no interest in women,” and in spite of his disinterest in law (*J. Edgar*). The pair share quips about the fashion faux pas of colleagues, they dine and vacation together, and in one violent and passionate scene they kiss. Arguably, the most explicit evidence of their homoerotic bond, the scene is instructive. When Clyde learns of Edgar's intention to marry a woman, he becomes furious and insults Edgar, provoking a fight. In a startling scene that recalls the intimate brawl between Ennis and Jack of *Brokeback Mountain*, the pair of men exchange blows

to the face before becoming entangled in one another's bodies. Struggling on the floor together, Clyde suddenly kisses Edgar. "Don't you ever do that again," Edgar warns Clyde pointedly (*J. Edgar*). However, when Clyde begins to leave, Edgar desperately apologizes and begs, "please, don't leave me" (*J. Edgar*). Clyde excuses Edgar's misstep but threatens Edgar: "If you ever mention a lady friend again, it will be the last time that you share my company" (*J. Edgar*). Out of earshot, Edgar whispers the unspeakable, "I love you, Clyde," and in doing so reciprocates Clyde's earlier declaration of affection: "I love you, Edgar" (*J. Edgar*). Though it is unclear if Edgar's affection for Clyde is brotherly, romantic, or sexual, Eastwood and Black's message is clear: Edgar loves Clyde.

Commentators addressing the film's depiction of Hoover and Tolson's lifelong companionship, called the arrangement a "quasi-homosexual, buttoned-up platonic relationship" (Bradshaw); a dynamic that "was never allowed to flourish as a romance" (Shary and McVittie 244); and "a personal secret that—in [Hoover's] era—could have destroyed him if revealed" (Summers "The Secret"). More to the point, Roger Ebert writes, "in my reading of the film, they were both repressed homosexuals, Hoover more than Tolson, but after love at first sight and a short but heady early courtship, they veered away from sex and began their lives as longtime companions" (Ebert). Such interpretations accord with my reading of Eastwood's Edgar as a closeted aging man rather than as an aging heterosexual bachelor.

Though the film characterizes Hoover as a closeted gay man, the film does little to explore the ways in which Hoover systematically targeted 'homosexuals,' and thus personally contributed to the dynamics of the twentieth century closet. The film omits

key historical periods, such as McCarthyism and the lavender scare, as well as Hoover's significant contributions to these periods. Sanitized cold-war dynamics are only faintly evoked. Aside from Edgar calling communists 'cocksuckers,' the then dominant conflation of homosexuals with communists is barely referenced in the film. Indeed, despite the constrained homoerotic connotations of Edgar and Tolson's 'friendship,' the socio-political climate for LGBT individuals is almost completely elided in the film except for two brief yet revealing scenes.

The first scene of interest faintly recalls traces of Hoover's persecution of 'homosexuals' who, in the 1930s, were typically conceived of as 'sex offenders.' Eastwood's *J. Edgar*, aside from probing Hoover's historically rumored sexuality, primarily illustrates the various ways Hoover secretly abused his authority as FBI founder and director by surveilling, manipulating, and blackmailing key political figures, such as Franklin Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr. For instance, when Edgar suspects that he will be asked to resign by a newly elected President Roosevelt, Edgar leverages Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt's confidential file of illegally obtained transcripts which detail "an intimate moment" between Mrs. Roosevelt and "a known communist agitator" (*J. Edgar*). The tactical move secures and strengthens Edgar's position in the FBI during Roosevelt's presidency; his contravention is rewarded and he is granted "increased power of surveillance, secret surveillance of communists and radicals without warrant" (*J. Edgar*). In a later scene, however, Edgar unearths further evidence, a love letter that suggests that Eleanor Roosevelt was having an affair with a woman rather than a man as Edgar had assumed. Amused by the new information, Edgar reads to Tolson some lines of writing from the letter: "Only eight more days. Funny how

even the dearest face will fade away in time. Most clearly, I remember your eyes with a sort of teasing smile in them, and the feeling of that soft spot just northeast of the corner of your mouth against my lips” (*J. Edgar*). When Tolson inquires about the letter, Hoover explains, “it’s a letter from Lorena Hickok, the White House reporter with the bad breath, to Mrs. Roosevelt” (*J. Edgar*). “A woman,” Hoover chuckles, “can you believe it?” (*J. Edgar*). In this scene, the film briefly draws on the well-documented, historical affair between Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok, ‘lesbian’ women who had to engage in a heterosexual marriage or “a ‘bisexual’ compromise” to maintain their status as upper-class women (Faderman 99). Eleanor Roosevelt, the film implies, has a more devastating secret.

The scene is instructive in two important ways. First, the scene recalls Hoover’s surveillance of, albeit incidentally in this case, individuals suspected or confirmed to be ‘sex deviants,’ a critical historical episode of Hoover’s leadership that is conspicuously absent or conveniently omitted in Black’s re-telling of Hoover’s life history. Hoover began to systematically collect information about gays and lesbians as early as the 1930s (Charles). Rather than directly implicating Hoover in the systematic surveillance, discrimination, and persecution of LGBT individuals during the ‘40s and ‘50s, the scene renders Edgar as somewhat sympathetic to the same-sex couple’s ‘secret.’ “What are you gonna do with it,” Tolson asks Edgar (*J. Edgar*). “Nothing,” he responds (*J. Edgar*). In effect, the scene quickly evokes and then disregards Hoover’s notorious role in LGBT history. Second, the scene’s reference to same-gender desire, the forbidden relationship between Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok, is once again invoked in the film’s conclusion. After Edgar (now a septuagenarian) has died from a heart attack, Clyde,

devastated by the death of his longtime companion and ‘business’ partner, tenderly mourns the loss of Edgar. Admiring Edgar’s various possessions, previous remnants of Edgar, Clyde reads a letter found in Edgar’s bedroom. In the concluding non-diegetic lines of the film, Edgar repeats the confidential prose written by Lorena Hickok for Eleanor Roosevelt. The revealing conclusion strongly implies a likeness between Eleanor/Lorena and Edgar/Clyde. The love letter is thus symbolic of Edgar’s abuse of power and, more significantly, *his* secret love for Clyde, thwarted by an oppressive time and place in which same-gender desire is the stuff of secrets and blackmail for middle to upper class men and women. The film concludes on a melancholic note with three title cards. The second and third cards refer to Clyde: “Tolson inherited Hoover’s estate, moved into his house, and accepted the U.S. flag draped over his coffin” (J. Edgar). In addition, “Tolson’s grave is a few yards from Hoover’s in the Congressional Cemetery” (J. Edgar). It is only in death, outside the lifespan, the film intimates, that Edgar could be visibly and publicly proximate to or ‘out’ with Clyde.

In another significant scene, the impossibility of being gay, or of defying one’s gender and thereby implicating one’s sexuality (Butler *Gender*), in the mid-1900s is also evident when Edgar tries to assert himself and possibly even disclose his non-heterosexuality to his domineering mother Annie (Judi Dench). He proclaims, “Mother, I don’t like to dance. I don’t like to dance with anyone, but mostly I don’t like to dance with women. I think it’s time you knew this” (*J. Edgar*). Edgar confesses that he is out of sync with the “hidden rhythms,” the chrononormative binds of time, that “organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (Freeman 3), including the expectation that men *dance with women* for the express purpose of heterosexual

coupledom and reproduction. Edgar's refusal to participate in the tempos of 'chrononormativity', or the rituals of "straight time" (Boellstorff 229), is an example of "queer time," which is produced "at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (Halberstam *In a Queer* 1). Behind schedule as an aging yet still eligible bachelor, Edgar's revealing rejection of heterosexual courtship ('I don't like to dance with women. I think it's time you knew this'), is an excellent example of what Linda Hess calls "queer aging" or "aging at odds with and in resistance to the norms that shape aging within chrononormative culture (*Queer* 11). In response to this confession, Annie, an exemplar of Barbara Creed's "castrating mother" (*The Monstrous-feminine* 139) and not unlike Mrs. Bates from *Psycho* (1960), stops Edgar short and threatens him with the cautionary tale of Barton 'Daffy' Pincus, a boy Edgar's junior who shot himself after being publicly humiliated for his transgression of wearing women's clothing. The film's only reference to a boy with a deviant gender performance or what Edgar calls "off behaviour" is already dead in the film's narrative (*J. Edgar*). "Did you ever wonder why we called him Daffy," Annie asks with a terrifying smirk (*J. Edgar*). "It's short for 'daffodil,'" she explains, before disclosing, "I thank God every day that my own sons don't suffer from his condition. Edgar, I'd rather have a dead son than a daffodil for a son" (*J. Edgar*).

In addition to making her attitudes about 'daffy' boys and men abundantly clear, Annie's comments demonstrate the high stakes of failing to conform to heteromascularity: death. Daffy is not bound by time (i.e., the heteronormative tempos of the lifespan), but quite literally situated outside of the life course and out of time (i.e., dead). In her discussion of queer aging, Hess argues that,

the very narratives in which aging does not present itself as a possible future for LGBTQ characters reveal much about the anxieties around queer sexualities and age, for example when aging is forestalled by premature or accidental deaths, violent murders, or suicide. The non-representation of older LGBTQ persons, coupled with the presence of young LGBTQ persons who die prematurely while the heterosexual heroes prevail, sends a clear message about viable versus undesirable—or even unintelligible—identities and models of the life course. (*Queer* 10)

Following Hess, Daffy represents a form of queer aging in that a future and thus older age are denied to a queer like Daffy. In other words, Daffy (a dead gender deviant) will not age (i.e., grow old) or grow up toward “full stature, marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childishness” (Bond Stockton 4). The emblematic queer child, Kathryn Bond Stockton argues, is never allowed to explicitly materialize. Instead, the queer child grows *beside* and *outside* of temporalized cultural ideals in twentieth century texts; in effect, they grow ‘sideways.’ Like the queer child, Daffy’s expected growth—or *straight* “vertical movement upward” (4) toward hetero-masculine maturity—already distorted and *bent* through his inability to act like a man, is abbreviated; he is out of line and thus as Annie cautions Edgar, out of time. In this scene, the film most clearly constructs the old mother (a symbol of time herself) as the singular source of Edgar’s oppression, and as the origin of his inability to confront his inconceivable and incomprehensible love for Clyde. Indeed, more in keeping with Anthony Summers’ portrait of Hoover in his biography *Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover*, the film perpetuates a rather psychoanalytical explanation for Edgar’s absence of heterosexuality: an overbearing mother and an ineffectual father. In effect, Annie and, to a lesser extent, Edgar’s absent father are depicted as the monsters that produced a queer yet self-loathing

Edgar, a sympathetic monster in the closet. In these ways, Edgar exemplifies the first temporal framing of the closeted queer elder as self-hating, tragically repressed, and necessarily historical, demonstrating how the figure of the queer elder in film is portrayed as out of time and reproducing notions of present progressiveness and past ‘backwardness.’

2.2 The Backward Queer Elder: ‘OK (Gayby) Boomer’

The second temporal framing of the queer is the backward queer elder who, in possessing politically regressive attitudes and/or occupying identities assumed to be dwindling in number, is not keeping time with ‘progressive’ LGBT politics and is running out of time. The recent commercially successful expression ‘OK Boomer,’ intended to scorn and mock the apparently generational attitudes, values, and lifestyles typically associated with Baby Boomers, sums up the contemporary popular imaginary regarding intergenerational relations in many Western nations. Circulating on social media since 2018, ‘OK Boomer,’ described as “the digital equivalent of an eye roll” (Lorenz), conjures traditionally ageist imagery of the older adult as a ‘fuddy-duddy’ or ‘a stick in the mud.’ The expression, which implies that older people, specifically Boomers, fundamentally misunderstand or are indeed in opposition to the politics, concerns, and culture of Millennials, exemplifies ‘Boomer-bashing’ and naturalizes cohort difference and age hierarchy, or what Margaret Morganroth Gullette calls “age chauvinism” (*Aged* 46). In other words, ‘OK Boomer’ (and other disparaging attitudes toward other age groups or generational cohorts) strengthens age and cohort as commonsense categories of difference. As a consequence, age categorizations “are monotonously orchestrated in

terms of a war of the generations, placing us within uniform and competing age cohorts” (Segal 39). By this logic, Boomers with their alien worldviews might as well be from Mars, Millennials from Venus.

The expression participates in what Jen Harvie calls “adversarial ageism” whereby “old people are the enemy” (332). Boomer-bashing is far from new, however. Writing in the early millennium, Gullette argues that a ‘contrived’ generational war between Boomers and Gen Xers arose in the 1990s as a result of “major historic, economic, and social changes in post-industrial capitalism” (53). Boomers, “pictured as essentially rich, greedy, self-righteous, unwilling to share their vast economic and cultural power, reckless, undeserving of their luck, and of course *aging*,” functioned in the media as convenient scapegoats for everything from a rise in economic inequality to environmental ruin (44, original emphasis). Age-war rhetoric is thus chrononormative in practice because ‘it distract[s] attention from the real sources of contemporary insecurity and inequality: neoliberal capitalist ideologies, structures, and policies which prioritise success of individuals and corporations over the welfare of society” (Harvie 333). Critical age scholars contend that Boomer-bashing and age wars, in general, flatten difference within any given cohort, including dynamics related to gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and ability. Critical age scholars argue that we might do better to recognize “the growing inequality *within*, not *between*, the different age cohorts” (Segal 58, original emphasis). Nonetheless, mainstream discourse about cohort difference “finds it easy to forget that black women raising their grandchildren and last-hired first fired Latinas are also ‘ Boomers’” (Gullette *Aged* 47). And what of LGBT Boomers who have endured decades of employment discrimination (among other unique setbacks), and are

as a result disproportionately at risk of experiencing poverty and housing insecurity in later life (SAGE and National Centre for Transgender Equality (NCTE); Kia; Kia et al.; Redden; “The Facts”)? Are LGBT Boomers exceptions to the dominant contemporary portrait of the Boomer?

In my corpus, I found that several depictions of the queer elder reproduced instances of ‘adversarial ageism’ and ‘age-war rhetoric,’ which narrowly portray Boomers as reckless, self-righteous, and aging. These instances, however, were inflected and complicated by their specific placement in feminist and queer imaginaries. The ageist ethos of ‘OK Boomer’ and its attendant age hierarchy provide a useful segue for exploring representations of what I call the backward queer elder, a figure that reproduces rather than challenges age, generation, and cohort as commonsense categories of difference. Out for decades, the backward queer elder represents a post-closet identity. Nonetheless, similar to the closeted elder, the backward queer elder figure is fundamentally defined by their pastness. Specifically, the backward elder is characterized by a dated politic or attitude that needs to be overcome or dispelled. They are distinctly out of touch. Permitted to be visible in the present temporal moment as older adults, they are nonetheless *out of time* or *of a different time*; they are anachronistic. The backward queer elder recycles stereotypical depictions of older adults as stubborn, argumentative, ornery, suspicious, and traditional. Stuck in the queer organizing of the 70s or trauma of the 80s, representations of the backward queer elder achieve their backwardness through their inability to let go of politics or histories now considered failed, completed, or too simple. They cling to ‘naïve attachments’ rendered out of date or generational; namely, examples of the backward queer elder were often, I found, paired with essentialist or

single-issue politics in the films analyzed for my study. Importantly, the backward queer elder is not the narrative's only queer character. Unlike the closeted or belated queer elder (which I discuss in the next section), representations of the backward queer elder tell much more complicated tales about queer culture and history in part because multiple queer storylines are engaged in texts that employ this temporal figure. Most texts discussed in this section include an ensemble cast of queer characters that range in age from teenaged to 'aged.' Texts containing the backward queer elder are primarily by, for, and about queer individuals. Arguably, however, they are not for *older* queer individuals.

I argue that visual narratives containing the backward elder exploit age chauvinistic ideas about older LGBT individuals and the popular conflation between Boomers and particularly narrow and exclusionary forms of feminist-queer thought and politics, especially those that are routinely constructed in feminist and queer circles as *passé*, *past*, or *passed* (i.e., *dead*) despite evidence that suggests otherwise. Central to representations that include the backward or out of touch queer elder is overt generational conflict or tension between older and younger queers and feminists. One of many queer characters, the backward queer elder is never a protagonist in these texts, but a one-dimensional caricature. They function as the antagonist, fulfilling a didactic role in a story about the progression of LGBT history, politics, identities, and rights. And this story about LGBT politics and history intimates that previous chapters, such as lesbian-feminism, need to as the kids say these days 'stay in their lane,' or perhaps in their decade.

Indeed, key to the backward elder's definition is politics, especially feminist and lesbian-feminist politics. Unsurprisingly, the backward queer elder is more often than not

depicted as a lesbian or a feminist or *worse yet* as a lesbian-feminist. Distinct from historically specific notions of 'lesbian feminism,' Victoria Hesford's critical formulation of the 'lesbian-as-feminist' has "tended to be the figure through which generalized perceptions of second-wave feminism have been organized as memory in the academy and in queer and feminist subcultures" (15). Hesford writes, "she's a monster; she's ridiculous; she's laughable, contemptuous, shameful or fearless, joyful, and full of hubris...a repository for a complex array of affect and emotion" (15). The 'lesbian-as-feminist' figure "operates as a screen memory that works to contain and displace our knowledge, not just of the women's liberation movement but of the second-wave era more generally" (Hesford 16). Importantly, the 'lesbian-as-feminist' figure at once "screens us from the multiplicity and possibilities of the early years of the second-wave era" while continuing to be "a remnant of those possibilities" (17). Implicit in framings of the lesbian-feminist is the notion that she is from a different era, a different generation, and is thus not young. Put simply, the lesbian-feminist figure is about time. She conjures "all of the associations that the word 'drag' has with retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past upon the present" (Freeman "Packing" 728) and thus exemplifies Elizabeth Freeman's concept of "temporal drag," that "deadweight effect" that a designation like 'lesbian' or especially 'lesbian feminist' exerts on the *postmodern* 'queer' (*Time* 62). According to Freeman, temporal drag refers to "a stubborn identification with a set of social coordinates that exceed one's own historical moment" ("Packing" 728). Freeman argues that in many settings (e.g., the university classroom, activism, and the cultural imagination), the lesbian feminist is often "cast as the big drag" ("Packing" 728). The lesbian-feminist figure, therefore, conjures ideas of time, age, and generation.

Even as individual figures, the lesbian and the feminist themselves are often discursively framed as temporal phenomena; they are, like particular eras of feminist-queer politics and the ‘feminist-as-lesbian,’ passé. Running out of time, the lesbian is discursively constructed as a relic or as Bonnie J. Morris writes in her book *The Disappearing L: Erasure of Lesbian Spaces and Culture*, “a dinosaur facing extinction in this new queer jungle” (1). Similarly, feminism through the lens of post-feminism, “a sensibility that characterizes increasing numbers of films, television shows, advertisements, and other media products” (Gill 148), has become “decisively aged and made to seem redundant” (McRobbie 255, my emphasis); for feminism “is no longer needed, it is a spent force” (255). According to post-feminist representational logics, feminism is dead; it has “already passed away,” hence the ‘post’ (255). In the cultural imagination, the anachronism of the old lesbian feminist who fails to comply with the forward momentum of progress and instead stubbornly clings to political attachments or identities assumed to have expired is thus manifold.

Contemporarily, ‘lesbian-feminism,’ ‘radical feminism,’ ‘second wave feminism,’ ‘women’s liberation,’ and ‘the 1970s’ often circulate as shorthand for a politic that is unquestionably anti-trans, anti-men, and anti-heterosexual (including a rejection of lesbian subcultures perceived to imitate heterosexuality such as femme/butch and submissive/dominant dynamics). These diverse and complex, and by no means generationally monolithic strands of ideology and activism consistently get reproduced in the queer and feminist collective memory as wholly exclusionary and obsolete, and as linearly superseded by more progressive politics (for deeper explorations and critiques of this tendency see: Ahmed *Living: Brightwell and Taylor*; Castiglia and Reed; de Szegheo

Lang; Enke; Hemmings; Hesford; Kubala; Williams “Radical Inclusion,” “The Ontological Woman”; Winch et al.). Clare Hemmings, for example, argues that “the political grammar” (2) of Western feminism’s storytelling construct ‘past’ feminisms, namely those of the 1970s, as singularly caught up with essentialist frameworks. This repeated refrain, she contends, reflects feminist progress narratives, which fundamentally function to frame and bolster the intellectual superiority of the contemporary moment: “What takes place in the past is cast as irredeemably anachronistic, in order that the present can represent the theoretical cutting edge” (38). In feminist progress narratives, Hemmings outlines,

an older generation’s errors are moved away from, and the naïve attachments of the *then* young are replaced by dynamic investments in multiplicity and coalition of the *now* young. Previous generations of feminists do not understand contemporary political or theoretical concerns; indeed, that lack of understanding remains crucial for a new generation’s sense of itself as progressing, as leaving older issues (and subjects) behind. (147-148, original emphasis)

Indeed, progress narratives can be dangerous for older people, ‘the then young’, who are constructed as out of date, lagging. Like Hemmings, Mary Russo argues that progress defines itself *against* those commonly perceived as backward, including older people. She writes, “hope, desire, understanding, and optimism seem ineluctably joined against the forces of the past, the backward, the unenlightened, the old” (21).

Narratives about progress thus often reify oppressive and harmful logics related to generation and age, specifically the notion of “age chauvinism” (Gullette *Aged* 46).

Narratives about progress fundamentally portray newer periods of time and younger ages as categorically superior to older ones. For example, in the dominant linear narrative of

academic feminism, lesbian-feminism and radical feminism are often constructed as artifacts from a particular period of time and generation. Lesbian feminism and radical feminism are frequently associated with the 1970s, the era of second wave feminism and with ‘the *then* young’ Baby Boomers—that generation who may now, in 2021, be considered older. In short, in both scholarly and popular accounts of feminist activism and thought, lesbian feminism and radical feminism are assumed to be and often do circulate as the “product and possession” (MacKay 427) of a particular generation or age categorization rather than shared across generations or ages because in the linear logic of the progress narrative they are “assumed to have happened once and for all” (Hemmings 38). They have been displaced by a more sophisticated gender and sexual politic, as well as by a younger, more *advanced* cohort of feminist-queer thinkers. Not unlike ‘OK Boomer’, progress tales about feminism assume that older feminists are fundamentally out of touch, and as a consequence need to be necessarily dismissed, ignored, left behind, or even ‘cancelled.’ In effect, they are consigned a backward positionality.

It also seems important to note here that previous radical lesbian feminists were not monolithic in outlook and were prone to factionalism (Faderman). In other words, contra contemporary constructions of feminist-queer pasts, not all radical lesbian feminists were transphobic. Trans scholars (Enke; Stryker *Transgender*; Williams “Radical Inclusion,” “The Ontological Woman”; Whittle) have challenged the ways in which radical lesbian feminist histories are commonly narrated in the present as fundamentally in opposition to the existence of trans individuals or as inescapably trans-exclusionary. For example, critical of how feminist, queer, and trans pasts are remembered, Finn Enke observes, “in less than one generation, the ‘second wave’

became aka ‘white feminism’ and ‘trans-exclusionary feminism,’ and now, *1970s feminist* is often used as a shorthand genealogy of today’s racist and trans-exclusionary feminists (TERFs)” (10, original emphasis). Noting a similar conflation between radical feminism and trans-exclusionary attitudes, Cristan Williams argues,

something intrinsic to radical feminism is lost when we characterize ‘radical feminism’ as being locked in a bitter battle against transpeople. Such assertions hide an exceptionally courageous history of radical trans inclusion...Worse, when we fail to notice the voices of radical feminists who’ve stood by the trans community, we participate in diminishing the very feminism that braved violence and possible death to ensure that all women—even trans women—were included in their work toward the liberation of women. (Williams “Radical Inclusion” 257)

Enke and Williams argue for a more nuanced or “mixed up sensibility” (Enke 10) to the narration of queer and feminist history. In effect, they both demonstrate that the complexity of women’s organizing and thought in the 1970s cannot and, therefore, should not be reduced to a simplistic, unequivocally anti-trans perspective. Taken together, these scholars ‘queer’ binary constructions that posit feminist-queer pasts as vexed/exclusive and the present as harmonious/inclusive, and challenge progress narratives that uphold generational difference.

Representations of the backward queer elder, I argue, reproduce simplistic understandings of feminist and queer politics, ones that rely on age and generation to make their point. As I will demonstrate below, trans-exclusionary attitudes in particular stick to the backward queer elder figure, reinforcing the conventional tales we tell about older feminisms and lesbians. During a decade when trans-exclusionary arguments are increasingly becoming more mainstream (via, for example, bathroom bills in the United

States, or the cultural discourse around Elliot Page's public transition in Canada or J.K. Rowling's tweets in the UK), the easy conflation between old/er age, trans exclusionary politics, and lesbian-feminism (or other politics rendered dated) in film and television is worrisome and cause for concern. Although these supposedly 'dated' politics should be safely situated in the past where, according to feminist-queer progress narratives, they evidently belong, these 'backward' political attachments, I argue, have found current mainstream expression and visibility in representations of older lesbians and, to a lesser extent, gay adults in the form of the backward queer elder. Such confluences are dangerous because, as I have outlined above, they oversimplify earlier movements, overlook and ignore the ways in which transphobia is alive and well among younger people and generations (see MacKay for a British example that explores radical feminists in their twenties and thirties), and stereotype older adults as subjects of their time (i.e., the 1970s) and against time (i.e., progress).

To be clear, I am speaking here in this section about a *feminist and queer imaginary*, evident in the typical stories we tell about feminism, gay and lesbian organizing, and feminist-queer histories and presents. I am not talking about the realities of the present moment in Canada and the U.S. and elsewhere where people, including feminists and sexual minorities *of all ages*, participate in and perpetuate trans exclusionary activism and rhetoric, such as 'heteroactivism,' which seeks to protect (particular) children from being mistakenly or accidentally 'diagnosed' as trans (Nash and Browne; Slothouber), or subcultural 'butch/FTM border war' rhetoric, which mourns the supposed 'loss' of butch lesbians and 'baby dykes' to trans-masculine identifications and trans technologies (Halberstam "Transgender Butch"). Though I have provided some

instances where this current oppressive and violent reality can be spotted, the work of exploring the full shape of that immediate threat is not the work of this chapter. Instead, I am focused on the conventional stories that get told and remembered about older feminists and lesbians and how dominant assumptions about age, generation, and cohort, exemplified in representations of the backward queer elder, trouble or maintain those narratives.

To this end, it is important to intervene in simplistic renditions of politics assumed dead or, in the case of the backward queer elder, almost dead because anti-trans attitudes persist in current conversations across age, gender, and sexual spectrums. Akin to the “adversarial ageism” of ‘Ok Boomer,’ a conflation between old/er age and ‘dated’ politics in representations of the backward queer elder risks reproducing the simplistic logic that “old people are the enemy” (Harvie 332). Depictions of the backward queer elder use generation and age to construct the contemporary moment and younger queers as progressive. I argue that Hemming’s critical formulation of progress is useful for making sense of queer-themed film and television narratives that leverage the backward queer elder to reproduce rather than deconstruct “the politics of the representations of age” (Gullette 45). In texts that employ the trope, the backward queer elder stands in as reminder of the way things supposedly ‘used to be’, as symbols of ‘past’ attitudes and politics. In these representations, ‘past’ politics and old age work to mutually reinforce the backwardness of the queer elder. Moreover, in the texts analyzed, the backward queer elder is singularly represented as a white, cisgender lesbian or gay older adult. In these texts, older cisgender lesbians and gays are portrayed as narrowly and stubbornly focused on a single-issue politic, whereas their younger counterparts are attentive to

considerations of race, cissexism, class, and sex positivity, in addition to sexism and heterosexism. In what follows, I explore the expression of the backward queer elder figure in *3 Generations* (2015), *Transparent* (2014-2017), and *Tales of the City* (2019).

As the title implies, generation is salient to the plot of writer-director Gaby Dellal's *3 Generations*. The film explores some of the tensions imagined between Millennials, Gen Xers, and Boomers in a single family. Billed as 'a family in transition,' *3 Generations* (formerly *About Ray*) is a U.S. American indie drama about the struggle and journey of 16-year-old trans boy Ray (Elle Fanning). Ray wants to medically transition, that is, he wants to begin testosterone hormone therapy to masculinize his body. Ray, however, requires parental consent from his supportive yet apprehensive mother Maggie (Naomi Watts) and estranged father Craig (Tate Donovan). To a lesser extent, Ray is also seeking the blessing of his lesbian grandmother Dolly (Susan Sarandon) and her longtime same-gender partner Frances (Linda Emond), whom Ray and single mother Maggie have shared a home and life with for many years. The film's opening, non-diegetic narration immediately establishes that they are an atypical family: Ray says, "I was raised in New York by my mom, my mom's mom, and my mom's mom's girlfriend. My friends thought it was so cool, but all I ever wanted was normal" (*3 Generations*). In short, the three generations are made up of lesbian grand/parents, a single mom, and a trans grand/child. In addition to invoking family conflict between parents and children, mothers and 'daughters', the three distinct generations arguably recall another 'contrived' generational drama between lesbian-feminism, post-feminism, and transfeminism.

In the opening scene, all four family members attend Ray's medical appointment to discuss options to masculinize his developing body; this is a decision that will decidedly transform all of them. When the doctor explains that Ray will eventually need to have surgery to remove his breasts (i.e., a bilateral mastectomy), his grandmother buries her face into her hands. Though Dolly is fiercely protective of Ray and is represented as symbolically and theoretically like Ray (both characters have red hair and are queer), she proves to be Ray's greatest adversary. Dolly's views are, as one reviewer observes, "the most retrograde; she's smart, liberal, loving, and decidedly un-woke" (Yoshida). Unlike Ray's mother who struggles with but still attempts to respect Ray's gender journey, Dolly does not abide Ray's physical transition from female/girl to male/boy. Not only is she 'unwoke,' Dolly is the film's trans antagonist. Dolly, unlike the other adults in Ray's life, is portrayed as unenlightened, backward, and ignorant, or as her partner prefers "just difficult" (*3 Generations*).

For instance, when Ray becomes the topic of discussion during a family dinner, Dolly is depicted as stubbornly ignorant. In spite of her liberal, bohemian, and cultivated underpinnings, she simply does not or *will not* understand. Refusing to respect Ray's gender identity and pronouns, Dolly asks, "why can't she just be a lesbian?" (*3 Generations*). And then reasons, "she's a person who likes girls. That could be a boy or a lesbian. And she's still getting her period, so I vote lesbian" (*3 Generations*). "*He. He's still getting his period,*" Maggie snaps back (*3 Generations*), correcting Dolly's willful use of she/her pronouns to refer to Ray. Assuming biology is destiny, Dolly uses menstruation to justify her conclusion that Ray is a lesbian girl rather than a heterosexual boy. Unable to contain her 'retrograde' views, Dolly blurts out, "it just feels like

mutilation to me,” and draws an injudicious parallel between hormone therapy and “female genital mutilation” (*3 Generations*). Defeated, she eventually relents; however, in a later scene, when Maggie and Dolly are looking through Ray’s childhood photos, Dolly’s position proves to be unaltered when she laments, “but to think that I spent my whole life working so women could have control over their bodies, and now I have to call my granddaughter ‘he’” (*3 Generations*). Uttered with disapproval, Dolly’s comment paints her lifelong fight for women’s bodily autonomy as being misappropriated, perverted by the politics of the contemporary moment. Though the word ‘feminist’ is never uttered in the film, Dolly is vaguely associated with the movement. Her dialogue is riddled with indistinct feminist ‘buzzwords’, including ‘female genital mutilation,’ ‘bodily autonomy,’ and ‘the sexualization of culture.’ According to Dolly, progress regarding gender has taken a wrong turn. This belief is made more evident when Dolly refers to Ray’s desire to transition as the moment in which “she defected” (*3 Generations*). Dolly’s language treats trans masculinity as an expression of women’s oppression, a valorization of masculinity, a capitulation to misogyny.

Relatedly, Dolly’s seemingly apolitical comments smack of the trans-exclusionary arguments made by two of the most notorious lesbian feminist scholars—Sheila Jeffreys and Janice Raymond. For instance, in her recent book *Gender Hurts*, Sheila Jeffreys argues that “transgenderism” is a harmful phenomenon particularly for those individuals assigned female at birth (AFAB), who Jeffreys obstinately calls ‘women’ throughout the book. In her chapter “Women Who Transgender,” Jeffreys frames “transgenderism” as erasing lesbians, and as the “antidote to feminism” (101). According to Jeffreys, the androcentric “medical profession has sought to straighten out

lesbians” (107); that is, gender-affirming health care (e.g., testosterone hormone replacement therapies and masculinizing chest surgery) has been used, according to Jeffreys, to convert women who desire women (i.e., lesbian women) into men who desire women (i.e., heterosexual men). In effect, trans masculine identities are charged with reproducing heterosexuality and valorizing masculinity or “a simulacrum of maleness” (107), and by extension patriarchy and misogyny. According to Jeffreys, to support the production of trans masculinity is to be un-feminist, since “all forms of masculinity are problematic” (Jeffreys, *Unpacking* 13).

In these comments, Jeffreys echoes arguments made in Janice Raymond’s 1979 book *The Transsexual Empire*. Described by trans historian Joanne J. Meyerowitz as “an extended antitranssexual diatribe from a feminist standpoint” (260), Raymond’s book argues that the ‘transsexual empire’ (the notion that trans persons are produced and sustained by a sexist medical establishment) seeks to “diminish the number of women and/or create a new ‘breed’ of females” (Raymond qtd. in Riddell 145). For Raymond, the ‘transsexual empire’ thus acts in the best interests of (cisgender) men rather than (cisgender) women or feminism, which she aligns narrowly with women. Dolly’s comments also shore up a discourse of mutilation that *some* proponents of lesbian feminism mobilized and, indeed, continue to perpetuate in the contemporary moment. Like Dolly, Raymond recklessly draws comparisons between gender-affirming procedures and notoriously unethical and coercive procedures; namely, Nazi experimentation in concentration camps. In both accounts, gender-affirming procedures are essentially framed as torture. In her discussion of ‘the borderland’ debates, Jillian Weiss notes that some lesbian-feminists constructed ‘transsexuality’ as reproducing “the

beauty industry, heterosexist propaganda and economic pressure, foot-binding, genital mutilation, pornography and ‘other institutions whereby men shape women to conform to their needs and fantasies’” (Henry and Sturgis qtd. in Weiss 205).

By these accounts, trans women and men (non-binary identities are elided completely) are positioned in opposition to the agendas of feminism and lesbianism. Jeffreys similarly constructs feminism, specifically 1970s radical lesbian feminism, and trans rights as strange bedfellows, and contemporary academic feminism as off-course and disoriented: “Whereas once those involved in women’s studies, like other feminists, would have seen masculinity as the problem that feminism needed to dismantle, now it is being vaunted as a lifestyle choice that is consistent with, if not exemplary of, academic feminism” (109). According to Jeffreys, feminism that is inclusive of trans individuals, specifically academic feminism, has lost its way. Put frankly, this brand of feminism has, to borrow Dolly’s language, ‘defected’ since, according to Jeffreys (and others), it upholds rather than resists patriarchy; it reproduces rather than obliterates masculinity.

As many reviewers have noted, *3 Generations*, generally characterized as a well-intentioned but dated and disappointing film, is a text that *wants* to be about trans issues (Genzlinger; Goldstein; Lee; Lemire; Reed “*3 Generations*”; Yoshida). After all, the film does painstakingly explore barriers that trans and gender non-conforming teenagers frequently experience, such as gendered bathrooms, deadnaming, misgendering, transphobic harassment, and medical gatekeeping (Earnshaw; Nadal et al.). However, Dellal also received strong criticism for her decision to cast a cisgender actress to portray the trans teenage boy, as well as for misgendering the lead trans character. Moreover, the characterization of Dolly as an unenlightened grandma at best or an aging trans-

exclusionary feminist at worst is rather surprising in a film that is ultimately about a trans grandson. Unlike *Grandma* and *Transparent*, where queer grandmothers Elle and Maura represent the center of each intergenerational narrative in both name and practice, *3 Generations* situates Dolly and her partner Frances on the periphery, their lives sidelined by the tension of the film: Ray's journey to medically transition. Indeed, as one reviewer notes, the "title is misleading about the balance between the leads" who represent the three disparate generations, since "the film belongs to Fanning," the grand/child (Yoshida). Dolly and Frances, aside from their fraught relationship with daughter and grandson, have little substance as a queer elder couple. The details of their relationship are minimal: Dolly describes her decision not to marry Frances, her longtime partner, as "old school" (*3 Generations*), and Dolly and Frances want to grow old together in their Bohemian New York townhouse without Maggie and Ray. Dolly's primary role as judgmental mother and ignorant grandmother is that of an antagonist. Reduced to "an irritating caricature," Dolly is a "pernickety old hen" (Grierson). She is just another barrier for Ray (and Maggie) to overcome. Thus, *3 Generations* epitomizes the backward queer elder as stubborn, inappropriately drawing up 'past' or retrograde attitudes into the present, and therefore as against or out of time.

The backward queer elder is also evoked in possibly one of the most discussed episodes of Joey Soloway's critically acclaimed television series *Transparent*, which is also structured around an age-diverse ensemble cast of queer characters, including trans characters. In the penultimate episode of season two, "Man on the Land," the titular trans parent Maura and bisexual and lesbian daughters Sarah and Ali attend the fictional Idyllwild Wimmin's Music Festival, an imitation of the Michigan Womyn's Music

Festival or ‘Mitchfest’. Arguably, “the Land” of the episode’s title pays homage to the privately owned space that was used as the venue for the annual event. “The Man” evokes the deeply contested politics of Mitchfest, a space created for and by women. Founded in 1976, Mitchfest was one of the first women-only festivals and is now notorious for its “womyn-born womyn” policy. ‘Womyn-born womyn’ refers to a contentious designation for women who were assigned female at birth, and thus forecloses the inclusion of trans women. Reflecting essentialist understandings of sex and gender, ‘womyn-born womyn,’ as one attendee explains, names those who were “born with a vagina and a uterus” (“Man on the Land”). By this logic, sex/gender is a matter of biology, and trans women decidedly do not have the right biology. “Man on the Land,” which aired in 2015, the final year that Mitchfest would operate, explores the tensions both real and imagined between trans women and trans-exclusionary women, especially lesbian feminists. As one commentator observes, Soloway’s portrait of Idyllwild oscillates “between admiration and parody, esteem and pointed criticism” (VanArendonk).

Arguably, Soloway’s ‘pointed criticism’ is most apparent in the episode’s face-off between Maura, who has accidentally defied the festival’s policy, and a group of women that one critic calls “a parody of feminist stereotypes” (Murphy). Sandy (Sandy Martin) and Leslie (Cherry Jones), two older lesbian women, serve as the guardians and spokespersons of the group of women, who variously self-describe as “second-wavers” and “the last remaining extremists” (*Transparent*). Sandy, a sixty-something-year old butch woman with a grey crew cut, establishes herself as a founding member of the festival: “look, I drove the plow. I cleared these woods, and we did it with one thing in

mind: that we women could have one God damn safe space in the world” (*Transparent*). The group of women repeatedly refers to the ‘land’ and specifically the area where they have set up their tents as ‘a safe space.’ Indeed, when Ali (who later in the series goes by ‘Ari’ after they come out as non-binary) tries to convince a very unwelcomed Maura to stay, Ali refers to the circle of women as “a safe, nice space” (*Transparent*). The circle is ironically not a safe space, most especially for trans protagonist Maura who bears the brunt of a discourse that reduces trans women to their genitals and ‘male’ privilege. “Penises are triggering,” a younger member tells Maura who politely questions the festival’s exclusionary logics. “Because we have all been raped,” another younger member answers. When the younger women’s lines of argumentation start to unravel, Sandy and Leslie reframe the debate by painting Maura as an entitled intruder who has benefited socially and economically from privilege as a ‘man’.

In effect, Sandy and Leslie ‘correct’ the younger women’s ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’ reading of earlier feminist arguments, namely Robin Morgan’s charge that trans musician Beth Elliot was “an opportunist, an infiltrator, and a destroyer—with the mentality of a rapist” (Morgan qtd. in Enke). Taken together, the women’s arguments recall a familiar trans antagonist discourse of rape that was popularized by, though not exclusive to, radical lesbian-feminist Janice Raymond. In her book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, Raymond uses rape as a metaphor to describe trans women as invaders. According to Raymond, trans women (as agents of patriarchy) infiltrate and assume women’s bodies, minds, identities, and spaces. Raymond writes, “all transsexuals rape women’s bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves” (104). For Raymond, the trans woman becomes a co-conspirator of

patriarchy, “a ‘member’ invading women’s presence and dividing us once more from each other” (104), and thus “perform[s] total rape” (112). She contends that lesbian feminists who welcome trans women into the movement are “mutilating their own reality” (119). The discourse frames trans women as those who invade and steal rather than belong to the spaces of women.

When Ali (Maura’s child) sympathizes with the argument of Leslie (Ali’s romantic interest), Maura loses her composure and leaves the ‘safe space’. In a frenzied state, Maura tears through the festival site, yelling, “man on the land,” before departing from the campground by foot (*Transparent*). Vicki (Angelica Houston), an attendee of roughly the same age as Sandy and Leslie, picks up Maura. Vicki who insists, “I believe that trans women have the right to be here” (*Transparent*), and who in the third season becomes Maura’s girlfriend, acts as the antithesis to the backward queer elder and the festival’s *backward* trans-exclusionary politics. Not directly expelled from the space, Maura and Vicki intentionally leave the festival behind, as well as the women who *fit* into that space.

The acrimonious dispute between cisgender and transgender women, as well as the terms invoked (e.g., rapist) in this episode, point to a nearly 50-year-old conflict that cannot be attributed to a single generation or ‘wave’ of feminists or lesbians. In fact, the episode’s larger narrative depicts violence against trans people and particularly trans feminine people as timeless, spanning generations. “Man on the Land” ends poignantly with Ali entering the temporal plane of the past, where she witnesses Hitler youth destroy the Magnus Hirschfeld Institute (a ‘safe’ haven for gender and sexual minorities in the 1930s) and terrorize Maura’s trans feminine aunt ‘Tante Gittel’ (Hari Nef). Elaborating

on the season's thematic focus on inherited generational trauma, and the series' depiction of a trans lineage, the episode suggests that both gender non-conforming people and their victimization are perennial, and thus challenges a linear narrative about progress for trans people. It is important, however, to observe that two older women, who proudly claim to be "the last remaining extremists," are depicted as the keepers of 'true' lesbian-feminist values and wisdom (*Transparent*). *Transparent*'s Sandy and Leslie, like Dolly from *3 Generations*, are portrayed as antagonists, and more explicitly as trans antagonists. Of course, trans antagonists may happen to be older, but queer elder figures are rarely given opportunities in queer and age-diverse ensemble casts to be politically multidimensional. In this scene, trans antagonist attitudes are directly conflated with portraits of older lesbian-feminist women. The scenes reproduce the notion that lesbian-feminism is inherently both trans exclusionary and tied to dynamics relating to age and generation.

The 'dated' or backward queer elder is also evident in Lauren Morelli's Netflix revival of *Tales of the City* (2019), a ten-episode miniseries based on Armistead Maupin's series of novels (1978-2014), which chronicle the lives, loves, and friendships of the misfit residents of 28 Barbary Lane. The newest adaptation of the Maupin series loosely focuses on the last three novels, *Michael Tolliver Lives* (2007), *Mary Ann in Autumn* (2010), and *The Days of Anna Madrigal* (2014), which introduced a new generation of Millennial characters to Barbary Lane, explored the central theme of aging among its original characters, and attended to the death of Mrs. Anna Madrigal. The reboot similarly explores these themes but follows different plotlines than those developed throughout Maupin's final books of the series.

Returning to the small screen nearly 20 years after the third installment aired, central characters, Michael ‘Mouse’ Tolliver (Murray Bartlett), Mary Ann Singleton (Laura Linney), and Anna Madrigal (Olympia Dukakis), have aged. For instance, Anna Madrigal (the series’ den mother and ‘tranmother’ to Jake Greenleaf, a young trans man and Anna’s unofficial caretaker) turns 90 years old in the series’ pilot. Aging is also at the center of Michael’s characterization as well. An older HIV+ gay man, Michael struggles to come to terms with his aging in the context of the AIDS/HIV epidemic in San Francisco, which he both witnessed and lived through. Age is thus a key theme explored in Morelli’s reboot. The series, however, is also fixated with dynamics relating to generation as well. Morelli’s reboot is, as one commentator describes, centrally concerned with “how to reconcile the gay-rights movement and feminism of the ‘70s with a more *progressive 2019 understanding* of those ideals” (Pietzman, emphasis added). This observation is most evident in the episode “The Price of Oil,” wherein explicit generational tensions play out between two racially diverse, intergenerational dyads: Margot (May Hong) and DeDe (Barbara Garrick) and Ben (Charlie Barnett) and a group of 50- and 60-year-old white gay men. In what follows in this section, I detail these two examples of the backward queer elder figure.

When DeDe Halycon (a middle-aged white lesbian socialite) opens up to Margot (a twenty-something Asian-American ‘queer’ woman) about her previous same-gender sexual and romantic relationships, Margot is pleasantly surprised: “wait, you’re queer,” she asks (*Tales of the City*). The intergenerational pair explores the shifting and expanding lexicon for identifying gender and sexual minorities in the ensuing flirtatious conversation. Referring to the slippery definition of the word ‘queer,’ indeed, its capacity

to evade definition, DeDe scoffs, “I still have no idea what that word means. It’s like the price of oil. Changes every day” (“The Price of Oil”). The quick exchange serves to establish the generational difference between DeDe (“just [a] plain old dyke”) and Margot (a ‘queer’ Millennial).

Some research suggests that sexual and gendered subject positions, such as ‘queer,’ ‘lesbian’ and ‘dyke,’ have a generational component that can correlate with age (Wiess). ‘Queer,’ initially a derogatory term, was reclaimed in the ‘80s by AIDS activists and organizations, such as Queer Nation, to represent a collective identity across gender difference. Queer Nation, Lilian Faderman writes, “carefully selected the word as an umbrella term—a synonym not only for ‘faggots’ and ‘fairies,’ but also for ‘lezzies’ and ‘dykes’” (300). ‘Queer’ was also, Barry Adam suggests, developed at least in part in reaction to a growing weariness among lesbians and feminists with “the moral idealism of the ‘woman-identified’ *real* lesbian that implicitly excluded all but a few who could or who wanted to live up to its demands” (146, original emphasis). This change was reflected in gay and lesbian organizations, which started to include ‘bisexual’ and ‘transgender’ in their programming or “opted for ‘queer’ with the hope of encompassing everyone and even potentially to include those heterosexuals who rejected heterosexism as an ideology and a system” (Adam 146). As well, ‘queer,’ described as “the label of the 1990s” (Ainley 104) and conceived of as an identity or paradoxically an anti-identity, arose from the circulation of post-structuralist thought in some lesbian and gay communities. The label has since become a catchall for the diversity of gender and sexual minorities, especially among younger generations.

However, though a Millennial, identification with the term ‘queer’ has proven difficult for Margot who is struggling to come to terms with the gender transition of her partner Jake (Garcia), a former lesbian woman. “Jake says we are *queer now*,” Margot tells a friend in an earlier episode (*Tales of the City*). Lamenting the loss of a same-gender partner and by extension her own identity as a lesbian, Margot admits to a friend, “I miss being a lesbian” (*Tales of the City*). Invoking subcultural debates about the erasure of the category ‘lesbian’ or ‘the disappearing L’ (Morris), and the “necessity of keeping the category intact” (Farquhar 220), the friend teases, “It’s very ‘90s of you” (*Tales of the City*). Margot defies the attachments of her generation (i.e., the fragmentation, dissolution, and proliferation of identity/ies), fixating instead on ‘past’ attachments associated squarely with DeDe, “just [a] plain old dyke” (*Tales of the City*). Though the scene establishes the two age-disparate women as different along lines of generation, Margot arguably finds DeDe’s rejection of the term ‘queer’ and by extension her rigid identification with the *stable* category ‘lesbian’ as appealing. Margot, depicted as an exception to her generation, finds community with an older lesbian woman. In effect, DeDe (a middle-aged woman) stands in as a symbol for an inflexible collectivist lesbian identity. The scene plays with competing naming practices among non-heterosexual women and contrasts the label lesbian/dyke (i.e., older, outdated, uncool, woman-centered) with queer (i.e., trendy, current, younger, encompassing multiple genders).

Generational tensions are made more explicit in the following scenes between intergenerational gay couple Ben (a 28-year-old Black gay man) and Michael (an aging HIV+ white gay man), which are framed by the context of the AIDS epidemic. The

representation of Michael as an aging HIV+ gay man bears witness to a generation of U.S. American gay men whose aging as a cohort was postponed, delayed, and cut short by their government's murderous neglect of the AIDS epidemic. Indeed, for many gay men in the 80s and 90s, "the thought of getting older was suspended" (Ramirez-Valles 5). Michael represents those aging HIV+ gay men who, with the help of antiretroviral therapies (ARTs), could start to imagine a future for themselves (Ramirez-Valles).

Greying Baby-Boomer Michael, portrayed by the age-incongruous Murray Bartlett who was in his late 40s when filming, describes his relationship with the Millennial Ben in these terms: "it's like we are from different countries" (*Tales of the City*). Generational difference is represented as a drawback to Michael's relationship with Ben. Although Ben's youthfulness is implied to be an obstacle, it is also frequently perceived by Michael and others, especially other gay men, to be a status symbol, an indicator of Michael's potentiality to attract much younger men as an older and, by implication, less desirable gay man (explored in detail in Chapter 3). Generational difference, though occasionally fetishized as a power-laden sexual dynamic in the series, is framed as a key site of conflict for the series' characters.

This is best illustrated during the dinner party scene. When Michael discovers that Ben has been rooting through his personal belongings, including his old address book, a symbol of the countless number of gay men lost to AIDS, Michael vindictively invites Ben to attend a dinner party among a group of shallow well-to-do older gay men. The dinner party scene, which recalls the gay elitism of Maupin's condemnatory and mocking portrait of the 'A-Gays', explores dynamics related to class, race, and generation, especially as they relate to AIDS. Ben is visibly different than the rest of the gay men

attending the dinner party. Not only is Ben nearly half the age of the men in attendance, he is also the only Black man, indeed, the only man of colour, at the event, which he later describes as the “gay version of *Get Out*” (*Tales of the City*). Ben’s pop culture reference to Black director Jordan Peele’s film *Get Out* (2017) evokes the horror film’s plot about a Black man who finds himself trapped in a dangerous and overwhelmingly white-populated space. Ben grows increasingly uncomfortable during a discussion about travel that shifts from lewd objectifying accounts of Sherpas to tactless stories about “a Mexican tranny club” (*Tales of the City*). Ben, troubled by the men’s language use, interrupts the chorus of laughing men, “I don’t think that we use that word,” referring to the word “tranny” (*Tales of the City*). Offended, the older men bristle. Ben’s correction becomes a matter of generation: one older guest Dan (Dan Butler) snarls, “why is *your generation* obsessed with labels” (*Tales of the City*). The condemnatory remark recalls Margot and DeDe’s discussion of naming, but more pointedly invokes the shifts that occurred in the 90s in Canada and the United States around gender and sexual nomenclature and identity politics. Another guest, one of “the Chrises,” portrayed by Stephen Spinella (an actor well known for his performances in AIDS-themed plays and films), smugly asks Ben how old he is. Chris paints a picture of Ben as entitled, the privileged beneficiary of rights fought for and secured by older gay men who witnessed an unbelievable amount of death during the height of the AIDS epidemic: “when I was 28, I wasn’t going to fucking dinner parties. I was going to funerals. Three or four a week. All of us were” (*Tales of the City*). The incensed older ‘queen’ constructs the time and space that Ben occupies as being one of “safe spaces” and “intersectionalities” (*Tales of the City*). He continues:

This entitlement you now have to dignity and visibility as a *gay person*. Do you even know where that came from? Do you know who built that world? Do you know the cost of that progress? No, of course not. Because it would be more than *your generation* could ever bear to comprehend. So, if a bunch of *old queens* wanna sit around a table and use the word ‘tranny,’ I will not be told off by someone who wasn’t fucking there. (*Tales of the City*, emphasis added)

In this statement, progress is tied to the labor of older gay men; however, the larger scene complicates this point. Although the old queens attempt to establish a distinct generational difference from Ben, suggesting that they were born into and lived through a completely different set of social circumstances than the Millennial, the post-dinner dialogue between Ben and Michael reveals that Ben, despite his age, is acutely aware of what it is like to live in “a society that doesn’t care whether [gay men] live or die” (*Tales of the City*). Invoking though not directly naming the lethal effects of state violence toward gay and Black people, as well as the historical and ongoing legacies of the HIV/AIDS epidemic for both straight and queer Black populations, Ben inserts considerations of race into a conversation that is narrowly trained on generation and age: “you’re going to say that to me, a *Black* man” (*Tales of the City*, original emphasis). Emphasizing his race in this statement, Ben implies that he too lives under oppressive and violent structures that threaten his life and those who look like him. The larger scene suggests that Chris, the spokesperson for the group of ‘old queens,’ effaces Ben’s reality as a young *Black* gay man who does not benefit from safe spaces or considerations of multiple and intersecting oppressions, such as homophobia *and* anti-Black racism. Although conditions have improved for gay men, insofar as the advancements of ARTS have made a life with HIV, a future, and, indeed, old age possible, the scene suggests that

many gay lives, including black lives, still do not matter. By including considerations of race and racism, *Tales of the City* suggests that gay men experience multiple forms of discrimination in addition to homophobic structures that devalue and, indeed, threaten gay life.

The scene, though it arguably frustrates the common progress narrative that life has uniformly and evenly gotten better for gay men, it also frames the *older* gay men as ignorant, fixated on one-dimensional politics, and thus as willfully dated in perspective. It is important to emphasize that *older* gay elitists are used to make a point about racial and trans issues regarding lethal race-based discrimination and offensive language use.

Although Michael, an older gay man himself, is associated with the group of ‘old queens,’ he is not politically aligned with this group. “You don’t even like them,” Ben reminds Michael at the close of the dinner party scene (*Tales of the City*). Michael, like Vicki from *Transparent*, is depicted as being the exception to his generation. Michael follows Ben, leaving the party and the ‘old queens’ behind. The antagonistic “old queens” facilitate tension and then growth between Ben and Michael as an intergenerational and interracial couple, and then are disregarded; they are quite literally left behind at the dinner party. In fact, after Ben and Michael settle their conflict the ‘old queens’ are never seen or mentioned again.

Informed by queer and feminist work on progress narratives and the contemporary feminist-queer imaginary, as well as by the concept of adversarial ageism, I have demonstrated how *3 Generations*, *Transparent*, and Morelli’s *Tales of the City*, deploy older lesbian and gay characters as backward figures, that is, as possessing a regressive orientation toward politics or attitudes often constructed as belonging to

previous, ‘less advanced’ decades of feminist and queer activism, such as lesbian feminism or single-issue gay organizing which overlooks considerations of race. In this way, the backward queer elder figure is depicted as anachronistic or simply against the present moment which is fixated on ‘younger,’ ‘more advanced’ queer identities and politics, such as trans identities and politics that address intersecting forms of oppression. Each text that deploys this figure is quite clear in where its support lies, since old characters and ‘past’ issues are either figuratively or literally left behind (moved away from) in the narrative. In this way, the backward queer elder exploits logics related to age and generation to tell a story about progress, one in which past politics and subjects are superseded by contemporary politics and subjects.

2.3 The Belated Queer Elder: ‘Why Now?’

Finally, I explore the trope of the belated queer elder in mainstream LGBT representation. The closet has been central to many previous mainstream LGBT representations. On television in the ‘70s and 80s, gay and lesbian identities were treated as a *topic* rather than a *subject* that were explored largely through the ‘coming out’ episode (Walters; Gross; Becker *Gay TV*; Tropiano). By the 90s, the “obligatory ‘gay episode,’” which swiftly introduces and casts aside gay and lesbian characters and storylines through a multi-episode arc, became a staple of television (Walters 97). Whether explored in a single episode or through multiple episodes, coming out scenes were rarely for or by LGBT people. Instead, the coming-out scene, “a moment that almost always involves heterosexual unease, fear, and rejection, and therefore still allows for the centering of heterosexuality” (Walters 105), casts non-heterosexuality as

problematic. “The single cataclysmic moment” (105), which often consumed the character’s entire narrative arc, presented an obstacle that had to be overcome by a “straight character (a parent, child, sibling, or friend) who has the greatest difficulty accepting a loved one’s homosexuality” (Tropiano 109). These storylines were generally reserved for adults; however, “when the homosexuality of adult characters became less of an issue, the coming out stories shifted to teenagers and young adults, first in made-for-TV movies in the mid-1980s and then teen dramas in the 1990s” (109). Coming out stories were decidedly the material of the youthful or those deemed capable of possessing a sexuality. Older adult characters were almost never afforded this storyline in television or film. (The grandmother in *Roseanne* (1988-1997), portrayed by Estelle Parsons, offers one rare exception; however, in the series’ finale, the grandmother’s surprising claim of a lesbian identity is revealed to be a fictional twist.) By the 2000s, coming out stories largely fell out of fashion in the televisual imagination, a shift that marked the onset of ‘post-closet’ representation (Becker “Guy Love”). Twenty-first century gay characters, Rob Becker argues, “are openly gay; they are rarely caught up in the kind of closeted or coming out narrative that defined much of the gay-themed programming from previous eras. Being openly gay is often the starting point for their stories, not the end point” (“Guy Love” 126). Becker asserts that the growth in popularity of the post-closet character in the 2000s “supports the illusion of a post-closet world” (127) and reinforces the liberal assumption “that we have entered a ‘post-gay’ or civil rights era” (126). In other words, the closet has become irrelevant for LGBT characters in ‘post-closet’ television because its underlying assumptions are that queer rights have been secured, gays and lesbians are now formally recognized and protected, and homophobic attitudes

only remain in the individual acts of a minority. Becker maintains that post-closet television and characters, however, belie the social conditions experienced by LGBT individuals in the twenty-first century.

In my analysis, I found that coming out narratives were pivotal to representations of the queer elder. And while coming out often narratively functioned as ‘the starting point for their stories,’ it also ironically marked ‘the end point’ of the queer elder’s construction, since almost always the queer elder’s narrative, which began with a disclosure, ended with a death—a common motif across representations of later life in general (Shary and McVittie). In other words, though coming out is not the endpoint of their narrative arc, like in images of closeted gays and lesbians in the 70s and 80s, a foreshortened ‘out’ life is central to the narrative of the queer elder figure. Coming out narratives, too passé for adults and teens, have evidently found new expression in the representation of what I call the *belated queer elder*, an older adult character who comes out later life and often lives a distinctly short life outside of the closet.

The centrality of the coming out narrative to the queer elder’s depiction, especially televisual illustrations, begs the question, why now in the 2010s is the belated queer elder so prevalent? One possible explanation lies in the success of the critically acclaimed film *Beginners* (2010), a semi-autobiographical romantic comedy-drama about an older man who comes out near the end of his life. Directed by Mike Mills, the film was inspired by the late life coming out of Mills’s own father, Paul Mills who, like the film’s belated queer elder figure (Christopher Plumber), came out as a gay man at the age of 75 and died of terminal cancer five years later. The success of the queer elder’s representation was confirmed by the number of awards and nominations the film

garnered. Christopher Plumber alone received a host of prestigious accolades for his portrayal of the fearless septuagenarian, including an academy award for best supporting actor. *Beginners* arguably established a successful precedent for what would become a popular motif in film and television in the 2010s: late life LGBT disclosures.

In part, the emerging motif also observes and reflects the development of an increasingly visible set of late life coming out experiences in the twenty-first century. “The trend is undeniable,” reports a 2010 *CBS News* article titled, “Coming Out of the Closet, in Retirement.” Indeed, news reports, self-help books, and documentaries all attending to the phenomenon of sexual and gender disclosures in late life have proliferated since the beginning of the millennium. Autobiographies and edited collections of the life stories of 2SLGBT older adults also bear witness to this unique and emergent generation of gender and sexual minorities, including Ma-Nee Chacaby and Mary Louisa Plummer’s *A Two-Spirit Journey: The Autobiography of a Lesbian Ojibwa-Cree Elder*, Margot Wilson and Aaron Devor’s *Glimmerings: Trans Elders Tell Their Stories*, Jane Traies’s *Now You See Me: Lesbian Life Stories*, Arden Eversmeyer and Margaret Purcell’s *A Gift of Age: Old Lesbian Life Stories*, Jess Dugan and Vanessa Fabre’s *To Survive on This Shore: Photographs and Interviews with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Older Adults*, and Vinnie Kinselle’s *Fashionably Late: Gay, Bi, and Trans Men Who Came Out Later in Life*. Memoirs written from the perspectives of adult children navigating the disclosure of a parent also help illustrate the recent cultural visibility of aging and older LGBT individuals, such as Alison Wearing’s *Confessions of a Fairy’s Daughter: Growing Up with a Gay Dad*, Karen McClintock’s *My Father’s Closet*, Honor Moore’s *The Bishop’s Daughter: A Memoir*, and Joey Soloway’s *She*

Wants It: Desire, Power, and Toppling the Patriarchy which explores the late life gender transition of Soloway's parent Carrie Soloway (the inspiration for late life transitioner Maura in *Transparent*). Taken together, these cultural products demonstrate that late life sexual and gender disclosures became a popular topic of discussion in the 2010s.

While representations of late life disclosures have certainly been in vogue over the last decade, I argue that the belated queer elder, rather than merely reflecting socio-cultural trends, serves an important function in bolstering 'post-closet' and 'post-gay' logics which maintain that "gay rights have been achieved" (Aguirre-Livingston; Battles and Hilton-Morrow 257; see also: Ghaziani; Monaghan; Ng; Seidman; Warner *The Trouble*). In light of Becker's argument, this conclusion might at first seem illogical. 'Already out' identities are, according to Becker, key to post-closet representations, and closet dynamics, as outlined above, are often central to the belated queer elder's expression. How then does the queer elder articulate a 'post-closet' or 'post-gay' sensibility? On the one hand, the lingering centrality of sexual disclosure in representations of the queer elder subtly suggests that the closet and the homophobia/transphobia and heterosexism/cissexism that constructed and sustained it are still relevant for the contemporary moment. In this way, the coming out narratives of queer elders challenge post-closet representational politics. On the other hand, queer elder narratives support post-closet logics since their disclosures are constructed as belated, anachronistic, and late.

I argue that the temporal logics of belatedness and age are central to the queer elder's relationship to a post-gay politic. Though briefly closeted in the present, the queer elder is the exception to the post-closet society they inhabit. The queer elder is late

precisely because gay liberation is assumed to have already happened. In other words, I argue that his *late* age and *long overdue* identity-claiming participate in logics that bolster a progress narrative that assumes that LGBT individuals have already been sufficiently integrated and accommodated. Deviating from earlier generations of depictions of gay and lesbian characters on television, the belated queer elder's *lateness* rather than *queerness* is rendered problematic because in post-gay and post-closet imaginaries being gay is inconsequential. Specifically, the belatedness of the queer elder is articulated in two distinct responses to their disclosure. The queer elder's disclosure is either met with a surprising lack of understanding or a far-fetched indifference that suggests that their sexuality is no trouble at all. In effect, the queer elder occupies a strange atemporal position in which they are at once ahistorical (emerging as non-heterosexual suddenly and without historical contextualization to make sense of such a trajectory) and 'post-gay' (appearing several decades after pride, LGBT civil rights, and assimilation). Together, both responses work, I argue, to reify 'post-closet' and 'post-gay' sensibilities.

Whereas former depictions of disclosures suggested that there was no good time ever to come out, recent depictions imply that there are more appropriate times in history and the life course to come out. This is articulated most clearly through family members who exclaim, '*why now.*' Rhetorical questions, such as "why is he doing this now?" (*Transparent*), "why did he wait so long?" (*Transparent*), and "[do you] think there was a better time to tell us this?" (*Grace and Frankie*), directly convey the belated queer elder's untimeliness. Inconvenienced by the disruptive, non-linear timelines of their spouses and parents, heterosexual and/or cisgender characters continue to be centered in these narratives. Arguably, the queer elder's coming out scenes are not by, about, or for LGBT

older adults. Unlike Mills's *Beginners*, a film that Linda M. Hess argues highlights the specific cultural framework from which its aging gay character emerges ("Portrait"), narratives of the belated queer elder elide the social conditions that might enable or prevent the visibility of or the possibilities for LGBT older adults. Texts that feature the belated queer elder figure do not historicize LGBT older adults and/or attempt to make sense of late life disclosures. As a result of these elisions, the queer elder figure is rendered inexplicably belated. And closeted-ness, treated as a symptom of the structural constraints of the past, is presented as baffling for family members, who are variously represented as liberal-minded or queer themselves. Late life disclosures, conceived of as both inexplicable and avoidable, function as disruptions to heterosexual and cisgender characters' engagements with time and the future. It is necessary to emphasize once again that coming to a gender or sexual identity *late* in life, rather than the identity itself, is framed as the obstacle to heterosexual and/or cisgender happiness. Late to a proud (i.e., modern, post-liberation) identification with the label 'gay' or 'transgender,' the belated queer elder is also behind time because they frustrate linear expectations about the life course, namely that sexual and gender identities are discovered and claimed in puberty before work, coupledness, marriage, children, and retirement. In what follows, I explore these temporal dynamics in the television series *Grace and Frankie* (2015-), *This Is Us* (2016), and *The Cool Kids* (2018-2019).

Co-creators Marta Kauffman and Howard J. Morris's *Grace and Frankie* begins with an end. The show begins with the ends of the two titular character's heterosexual marriages. *Grace and Frankie* is a situation comedy about two dissimilar seventy-year old women who are forced to bond together over their unusual yet shared situation—gay

husbands. In the opening scene, the adversaries Grace (Jane Fonda) and Frankie (Lily Tomlin) meet for a couple's dinner: their husbands Robert (Martin Sheen) and Sol (Sam Waterson) have an announcement. Grace and Frankie anticipate that their husbands, long-time business partners at a law firm, are going to jointly announce their retirement, a milestone in keeping with their age. In a manner typical to his characterization, Sol delicately blathers, "well, as you know, we're getting better with age. And this can be a very exciting chapter we're about to open in the book of life. It feels alive with possibility. And change. And Frankie herself says change is always good" (*Grace and Frankie*). The wives assume that their husbands are ready to open that chapter known as the 'third age,' that period of time in the life course between 'formal' productivity and abjection, wherein older adults are expected to take part in leisure, consumption, and grandparenthood (Gilleard and Higgs "The Third;" Katz and Laliberte-Rudman; Laslett). The change is normative in this equation, following the *straight* line from re/production to productive consumption, which will be followed eventually by death and inheritance (Halberstam *In a Queer*). Sol and Robert, however, have a different change in mind. Robert and Sol announce that they are leaving their wives. When Grace and Frankie assume that they are being left for other women, the men simultaneously come out as gay, as well as disclose their relationship:

Robert: Oh, it's not what you think. It's a *he*.

Grace: Excuse me?

Robert: And it's Sol. I'm in love with Sol. Sol and I are in love.

Frankie: My Sol?

Sol: Your Sol.

Frankie: You mean you're gay? And this is who you're gay with?

Sol: This is who I am in love with. (*Grace and Frankie*)

The humorous announcement is in part shocking because it defies normative life course narratives for both straight and queer individuals: affairs (if they are permitted to happen at all in comedic television series) generally happen with women, as the wives suspect, and in mid rather than late life; and gay men, the series strongly implies throughout, should come out earlier in life. For Robert and Sol who come out late in life, coming out is literally at the beginning of the gay character's narrative arc. Queering expectations about the life course, as well as the conventions of the coming out narrative, the pilot episode titled, "The End," paradoxically also marks beginnings: the beginning of the television series (one of Netflix's longest running original shows), and the beginning of a 'new chapter' for Robert and Sol, as well as for Grace and Frankie who are left to 'deal' with the life-altering 'cataclysmic' disclosures of their husbands. Though late life sexual disclosures, initially framed positively by Sol ("change is always good"), have the potential to 'queer' or trouble the expectation that later life is a necessary time of decline and desexualization, Robert and Sol's joint sexual disclosure is more often portrayed as problematic throughout the series.

Specifically, the series represents the queer elder figure as sorely behind time—belated. When Grace and Frankie learn that their husbands have been both sexually and romantically involved for two decades, half the time of their marriages, the jilted wives render the gay men's hasty disclosures as not just unfair, but as ill-timed. For example, after learning of the lengthy affair, they press Robert and Sol for an explanation as to why they are only *just now* disclosing their sexual identities and by extension their relationship. The men explain that their late life disclosures were precipitated by the United States' 2015 Supreme Court ruling that legalized same-gender marriage, and

announce unceremoniously their intention to marry: “We want to get married,” Sol explains (*Grace and Frankie*). “‘Cause we can do that *now*,” Robert finishes Sol’s sentence (*Grace and Frankie*, emphasis added). The answer is clear: the men are coming out *now* in their seventies, rather than before in mid-life or even earlier, because legal recognition of their same-sex relationship is possible; they are, in this respect, on time—made legible and valid through the sands of time. Visibility in and liberation from a heterosexist culture is afforded to the gay couple in the form of legal recognition and protection. Implicit in this framing is the notion that marriage, and perhaps only marriage, can bestow validation, legitimacy, and recognition onto same-sex couples. Legal rights, the series indicates, can enable the pursuit of ‘authentic’ lives and identities. To Sol’s point that gay marriage is legal *now*, Frankie (a vocal and visible advocate for gay rights), retorts, “I know! I hosted that fundraiser” (*Grace and Frankie*). The comment functions to not only situate her character as an accepting and liberal older woman, but it also serves to establish the belatedness of Robert and Sol’s decision to come out *now*, rather than *before*, as illogical. Further, without greater contextualization of the socio-historical environment that would undoubtedly bear on the consciousness of the closeted older gay man, including, for example, an understanding that those aged 70 years old in the 2010s came of age during a period when homosexuality was both pathological and criminal (Rosenfeld “Identity;” *The Changing*), this opening scene renders the men anachronistic.

It is worth highlighting that the legalization of same-sex marriage, rather than any of the common social barriers routinely reported by LGBT older adults, such as fear of rejection from family, friends, co-workers, and neighbours, employment discrimination, or anti-LGBT prejudice and harassment in health and care settings, including senior

homes (Cook-Daniels; Finkenauer; Fredriksen-Goldsen, et al.; Guasp; Movement Advancement Project (MAP) and SAGE; Persson; Witten “Graceful Exits;” “The Intersectional”), is offered as justification for Robert and Sol’s late life disclosures. Instead, the present is portrayed as a time of guaranteed legal protections and social acceptance for gays and lesbians. It is also important to highlight that Sol and Robert’s identity claims are rooted in love/marriage instead of desire/object choice:

Frankie: You mean you’re gay? And this is who you’re gay with?

Sol: This is who I am in love with. (*Grace and Frankie*)

Sol’s rejection of the label ‘gay’ is framed through an aspirational desire for sameness, a value that reflects post-gay discourses that privilege the “heterosexualization of gay culture” (Mendelsohn qtd. in Ghaziani 100). His semantic correction serves to position his same-gender desire for Robert as being no different than heterosexual ‘love’. It is not accidental that gay marriage is the only context offered for the viewer to make sense of Robert and Sol. *Grace and Frankie* joins a host of other popular television shows that uncritically celebrate same-sex marriage, such as *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005-) and *Modern Family* (2009-2020). These series position same-gender marriage as the final political obstacle to gay and lesbian liberation. Same-gender marriage, as many queer scholars and anti-assimilationist activists have observed, “has come to dominate the political imagination of the national gay movement in the United States” (Warner 84). For many, the overwhelming attention paid to same-gender marriage in Canada and United States is emblematic of a turn to homonormativity, a twenty-first century politic “that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized constituency and a privatized,

depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan 179).

Though legal recognition, as critics have illustrated, does not eliminate homophobia or significantly challenge heteronormativity, “laws do, however, allow for claims about the progressive present to be made” (de Szegheo Lang 233). The show’s reference to the legalization of marriage is thus far from apolitical in relation to its depiction of aging, time, and gay rights. Therefore, it is important to recognize how Robert and Sol, who are represented throughout the series as arriving late to their sexual identities, are operationalized within a larger contemporary discourse about progress.

For example, in one scene, Robert happens upon another older gay man (John Getz) while walking in a busy park. From a distance, the old men watch in awe as a pair of young men engages in an unabashedly conspicuous display of intimacy in public. The stranger describes the scene as “amazing,” and attributes the couple’s lack of inhibition to generation and earlier self-acceptance (*Grace and Frankie*). The stranger explains that he too might have behaved like the young lovers if he had come out earlier rather than later in his fifties. Robert admits that he came out even later in life: “I came out at 70,” Robert says, to which the stranger responds, “better late than never” (*Grace and Frankie*).

Explicit in Robert’s exchange with the stranger is the notion that younger queers, at least young white gay men, can be and in fact are visible and proud. In deeming the admired behaviour “generational,” the scene reinforces a progress narrative about gay life and espouses post-gay discourses that imply that “gay rights have been achieved” (Battles and Hilton-Morrow 257). “We have come a long way though,” Robert comments approvingly at the scene in front of him (*Grace and Frankie*). For Robert, a supposedly credible witness to the distant past, public displays of same-gender affection indicate that the

political goals from his time have been realized. From the perspective of the queer elder, life has fundamentally improved for gay men. The scene suggests that life is better than it was before.

In the absence of ‘good’ reasons that might further contextualize the belatedness of the queer elder figure, Robert and Sol are rendered as rather uncharitable depictions of older gay men. As one commentator notes, “the show’s sympathies are so heavily slanted towards Grace (Fonda) and Frankie (Tomlin) that it’s hard to see the positivity in Sol and Robert’s decision. Instead, the show, consciously or otherwise, pits gay men against aging women” (Saraiya). Indeed, it is only near the end of the first season, in a flashback episode, which reveals that Robert and Sol had intentions to tell their wives about the affair five years earlier, that the men are treated sympathetically. In the episode, Sol and Robert’s attempts to be ‘honest’ with their wives are thwarted by the unexpected arrival of their adult children, including a daughter in labour as well as a son with an addiction to drugs. The confession proves difficult to fit into the tempos of family time, and the adulterous pair ultimately worries about the hurt the confession may inflict upon the wives, rather than the rejection they might experience. The scene, though it renders Sol and Robert more likeable as considerate and caring gay men, evades the macro structures that shape how and when LGBT people come out, and, as a result, responsabilizes Sol and Robert’s late life disclosures for the families’ disorder.

The belated queer elder figure also surfaces in the critically acclaimed NBC television show *This Is Us* (2016-), a dramatic series that follows the non-linear development of the Pearson family through flashbacks and flashforwards. In a rare example of a racialized queer elder figure, Ron Cephas Jones portrays William

‘Shakespeare’ Hill, a Black 62-year-old recovering addict with Stage 4 stomach cancer. In the pilot episode, William is introduced to the audience as the estranged biological father of Randall Pearson (Sterling K. Brown), the adopted Black son of white adoptive parents Jack (Milo Ventimiglia) and Rebecca Pearson (Mandy Moore), whom the series follows. When Randall locates and confronts William about abandoning him at a fire station as a baby, he learns that his father is dying. An aging man who is running ‘out of time,’ a recurrent theme across representations of the queer elder figure, William and his son are forced to restore their relationship quickly. William unofficially moves in with his son’s family, and swiftly becomes a beloved member of the family. Several episodes later, during the series’ midseason finale (an episode known to characteristically introduce major plot developments or include suspenseful conclusions), an embittered white man of similar age named Jessie (Denis O’Hare) confronts William at an AA meeting. He says, “William Hill, I loved you and you left. Now I’d like to spend whatever time you have remaining together” (*This is Us*). The scene establishes suddenly that Jessie, a fellow recovering addict, was William’s former romantic partner before William disappeared to make up for lost time with his biological child and grandchildren.

Later in the episode, arriving last to his family’s intimate Christmas Eve celebrations, William is accompanied by uninvited ‘friend’ Jessie. When William’s son Randall spots Jessie caressing his father’s back from across the room, he inquires about the mysterious guest’s relationship to William. Randall’s daughter Tess, who in a later season has her own coming-out episode, easily interprets the intimacy between her grandfather and his ‘friend.’ She explains the intimacy to her father, comparing the encounter to that of classmate Roy, “the one with the two dads” (*This Is Us*). Randall,

perplexed by the information, gawks at the couple before Tess enlightens, “Dad, Grandpa’s gay. Or at least bi” (*This Is Us*). Aside from Randall’s initial moment of puzzlement, there is no other action or dialogue in the episode that references the revelation. This same-gender pairing is not momentous or even noteworthy. There is no verbal disclosure from William about his sexuality and/or his relationship to Jessie. After the ‘non-disclosure,’ the Pearson family collectively socializes, laughs, plays, eats, and takes *family* photos together. Aside from Randall’s initial surprise, William’s non-disclosure barely causes a ripple. William’s ‘coming out’ is rendered a non-event; it is insignificant, a matter-of-fact, incidental. In this ‘coming out scene,’ same-gender romance and perhaps even the hint of bisexuality are unassuming—both just happen; gay or bisexual characters, the series implies, simply are. In this way, the episode eschews the coming out altogether and in doing so participates in ‘post-gay’ logics that represent sexual orientation as incidental to the lives of LGB characters.

Bisexual representation on television has historically been the representational territory of women, specifically feminine women (San Filippo). Annual reports from GLAAD, an organization that tracks and quantifies media representations of LGBT characters, including non-binary characters and topics, suggest as much. The organization reported that there was “zero bisexual men” represented on broadcast television between 2010 and 2011 (“Where We Are on Television 2010-2011” 8). A decade later, male bisexual characters comprise 28% of representations of bisexuality on television whereas female bisexual characters make up 70% (“Where We Are on Television 2019-2020”). In these reports, GLAAD paints a clear picture of progress wherein visibility for bisexual characters (among others) is increasing.

The depiction of William as a Black bisexual elder in 2016, when “bisexual women far outnumber[ed] men on every [programming] platform” (“Where We Are on Television 2017-2017” 25), is remarkable and does indeed suggest that images of male bisexuality are becoming more visible and varied. A minority within a minority, William Hill represents a ground-breaking representation of bisexuality, especially since identification as a bisexual man is made explicit in *This Is Us* rather than merely implied. In other words, the spectator need not adopt a ‘bisexual perspective’ (Pramaggiore) to *see* that William is bisexual. Despite his family’s insistence on referring to him as “gay now,” William represents an unambiguous depiction of bisexuality because the character tells the audience as much. William insists, “I’m not gay *now*” (*This is Us*). “I’ve always loved both women and men,” he explains (*This is Us*).

As bisexuality scholars have previously demonstrated, the concepts of time and narrative are important to representations of bisexuality, for *when* bisexuality is revealed in a character’s plot and for what *length of time* are central to how we commonly depict and understand bisexuality. In her book *The B Word: Bisexuality in Contemporary Film and Television*, Maria San Filippo illustrates how televisual representations of ‘bi-suggestive’ women have largely been confined to “the sweeps-week syndrome” (208), that is, bisexual representations have been “*timed* to coincide with network sweeps periods or as a last-ditch effort to revive flagging ratings” (203, emphasis added). A gimmick to increase viewership, bisexuality is thus often evoked and then conspicuously forgotten or rejected after a few episodes. Bisexuality in this sense is fleeting—ephemeral. Bisexual visibility and temporality intersect in other ways as well. Notions of bisexuality, B.C. Roberts argues, “operate on a time/space continuum, whereby the

factors of presence, duration, and order determine how it is expressed and understood” (339). For instance, “if a narrative depicts bisexual behaviour over time (i.e., serially)...the character would not be read as ‘bisexual’ but as ‘coming out’ (*Lianna*) or ‘going straight’ (*Personal Best*), depending on the ordering of partners” (339). Given the timing of the non-disclosure (i.e., during sweeps) and the treatment of William and Jessie’s relationship after their introduction as a same-gender couple, the representation of a Black bisexual male elder rings as slightly hollow.

Another instance of the belated queer elder figure is evident in Fox sitcom *The Cool Kids* (2018-2019), a twenty-two-episode show that was cancelled after a single season due to poor ratings. The show focuses on the misbehaviour of four irrepressible sexagenarian friends who reside at the generally peaceful Shady Meadows Retirement Home. *The Cool Kids* joins a growing number of films and television shows that depict what is often colloquially referred to as ‘the senager’, evident in films such as *Last Vegas* (2013) and indie productions like *Land Ho!* (2014) and *Old Goats* (2011). A portmanteau, ‘senager’ combines the words ‘senior’ and ‘teenager’ to name an older adult whose actions, attitudes, and responsibilities are more in keeping with those expected of a teenager. Liberated from ‘adult’ responsibilities, such as raising a family and building a career, senagers are depicted as carefree and as possessing disposable income and flexible schedules. Senagers date, party, engage in casual sex, use drugs, consume alcohol, and value friendships over romantic coupledness. In this way, *The Cool Kids*’ group of ‘inappropriate’ agers engages with “elder kitsch,” a “trope [that] presents elder figures as a source of amusement, juxtaposing their obviously aged physical appearance with youthful activities, behavior, and statements” (Shary and McVittie 86).

Among this group of inappropriate agers, these ‘cool kids’, is Sydney ‘Sid’ Delacroix (Leslie Jordan)—the group’s token gay friend. Pastel-clad and swishing, Sid embodies and reifies the stereotype of the ‘sissy.’ A source of ridicule and amusement, the sissy is a non-threatening representation of queerness (Russo; *The Celluloid Closet*). The classic documentary *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), based on Vito Russo’s book *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Closet*, identifies ‘the sissy’ as the most popular trope for depicting homosexuality in the twentieth century. As many have argued, the desexualized sissy is a palatable representation of queerness for U.S. American cinema and television because it conveniently forecloses the possibility of gay intimacy, sex, and/or romance onscreen (Russo; *The Celluloid Closet*).

As a ‘kitschy’ and sissy elder, Sid and his deviant gender and age performance are often used as comedic fodder in *The Cool Kids*. Nowhere is this more evident than in the episode “Sid Comes Out.” Though patently out to the other residents of Shady Meadows, Sid (a late bloomer) has not yet come out to his adult son Walt. The episode opens to Sid offering his best imitation of hetero-masculinity: “Howdy folks! Boy, it’s a nice day to drink beer, watch football, and not have sex with men” (*The Cool Kids*). When Sid’s ridiculous behaviour and dress are questioned, he explains that his son Walt is unaware of his sexual identity as a gay man. This divulgence is amusingly unbelievable to the group (and presumably the audience) since Sid’s effeminacy is both central to his character and key to many of the sitcom’s punch lines. Sid’s friend, confounded by the news that he is not out to his son, mockingly remarks, “I am just still trying to wrap my head around the fact that someone could see you and know you and think that you’re straight!” (*The Cool Kids*). Determined to keep his sexuality hidden from his son, Sid recruits the help of his

friends to ‘de-gay’ his apartment, which is represented as being excessively and insuppressibly flamboyant, like Sid. Recalling *The Birdcage* (1996), a gay-themed comedy film engaged chiefly in the marriage of the film’s young heterosexual characters, *The Cool Kids*’ comedic scene employs and adapts the well-used plot device of ‘cleansing’ the queer home to garner ‘acceptance’ from the gay character’s heterosexual family members. In the ‘straightened’ version of Sid’s apartment, blue plaid replaces animal-print fabrics, a football-shaped telephone and a poster of a woman in a bikini take the place of a peacock decoration and a small replica of Michelangelo’s David, and colourful flowers are replaced with leafy green plants. Chips are strewn over the couch as the final symbol of hetero-masculinity. However, when the ruse starts to unravel and Sid’s conventionally masculine son presses him to be more honest and unreserved about his life, Sid comes out:

Sid: I. AM. GAY! Walt, I ‘ve always been gay. I’m really sorry I kept it from you. But I like ice dancing and musical theatre and making love to men. I suppose that last one is the main take away.

Walt: Wow. My dad is gay. I have a gay dad! That explains a lot. Well, this is awesome! I am happy for you, pop.

Sid: Thank god. I’m so glad. I’m so relieved. I should have done this years ago. But I must say I was hoping for a *little* dramatics, some tears, or a slow clap. (*The Cool Kids*)

The moment is decidedly anti-cataclysmic. In this scene, Sid’s fear of being rejected by his adult son is unfounded, and humour is drawn from his son’s incongruent response. Belying the realities of anti-gay exclusion and rejection from families, the threat of not being accepted is evoked early in this episode only to be swiftly resolved, a hallmark of post-gay television. Like late twentieth century coming out scenes that focus on gay and

lesbian adults in shows, such as in *Ellen* (1994-1998) or *Will & Grace* (1998-2006), homophobia is discreetly invoked “in order to be trivialized and easily dismissed” (Walters 110). In effect, the fear of ‘familial homophobia’ (Schulman) is reduced to an empty and benign spectre, and the queer elder figure, who anticipates such an apparently unfounded fear, is rendered absurdly out of time and place. This traditional motif is taken one step further, for Sid’s coming out isn’t even met with “a *little* dramatics” because disclosures and gayness are, the scene strongly implies, unexceptional in the 2010s (*The Cool Kids*). Moreover, the significance of Sid’s late life disclosure is interrupted and further minimized when his friend Hank finally and proudly announces that he needs glasses: “Now, this is hard for me to say, but I’ve been living a lie. And the truth is I can’t see. I need glasses. There. I said it. I need glasses” (*The Cool Kids*). Hank’s age-appropriate disclosure is described as ‘brave’ and is celebrated by the senior community and Sid’s son with a congratulatory slow clap that quickly erupts into overwhelming approval. The juxtaposition of scenes of disclosure implies that coming out as gay is inconsequential, passé, no big deal—not worth a slow clap. The insignificance of Sid’s confession is further emphasized in the last scene of the episode: Sid admits to his hetero-masculine son that he has also deceptively feigned an interest in the Dallas Cowboys. Played for jokes, the confession is more surprising and devastating for the son than Sid’s sexual disclosure: “well now, that’s gonna take some time to process” (*The Cool Kids*). Taken together, the scenes minimize the potential threat of homophobia and frame sexual disclosures as obsolete and unremarkable. Both effects reproduce the queer elder as belated.

Read together, *Grace and Frankie*, *This is Us*, and *The Cool Kids* exemplify how the queer elder is represented as belated. Specifically, by presenting ‘coming out’ as inexplicably and selfishly belated (*Grace and Frankie*) or as an insignificant non-event (*This is Us* and *The Cool Kids*), these shows construct the 2010s as post-gay and post-closet. The figure of the queer elder as belated, then, supports my larger argument that the queer elder is ‘out of time’ and deployed to uphold arguments about progress.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced the emergent ‘queer elder,’ a figure that seeks but often fails to reflect the identities and lives of LGBT older adults. I have argued throughout that the queer elder has become a valuable figure in the 2010s principally because it participates in a dominant triumphalist tale of progress regarding the gains won for LGBT individuals. Specifically, I have identified and delineated three ‘timely’ constructions of the queer elder: closeted, backwards, and belated. In various ways these three motifs engage dynamics related to age and generation that when taken together mutually reinforce a progress narrative that casts the past and older adults (especially those who just need to ‘die off’) as patently oppressive/anachronistic and the present and young as liberated/advanced. These motifs reflect age chauvinistic and post-gay politics that in effect reproduce differences between generations and confirm the future-oriented mythology that ‘It Gets Better.’ These narratives reveal that for some queer subjects, namely middle-class white lesbian and gay subjects, social conditions have drastically

improved. Conditions have improved so much so, these televisual and filmic universes imply, that LGBT identifications rarely make any difference at all. These narratives, however, overlook the realities of many Canadian and U.S. American LGBT individuals and scapegoat older adults for any residual anti-LGBT perspectives. During a decade in which LGBT older adults are increasingly expressing concern for their futures and both young and old are reproducing transphobic and homophobic attitudes, depictions of privileged LGBT older adults and antagonistic older adults should give us pause.

Chapter 3

3 The May-December Romance Queered: From Man-Boy Love to *Gerontophilia*

“The ‘Love that dare not speak its name’ in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man” – Oscar Wilde

“Young gay men don’t go for old gay men” –Hal from *Beginners*

In the previous chapter I argued that the queer elder figure has in part become visible in film and television through particular temporal framings that reproduce dominant age and generational logics. Part of this argument focused on the imagined and contrived tensions between Millennials and Boomers. Contrastingly, this chapter explores the queer elder figure’s orientation toward and association with youth through their frequent representation in cross-generational relationships. Evident in many texts analyzed for this study, including *AJ and the Queen* (2020), *Beginners* (2010), *Behind the Candelabra* (2013), *Gerontophilia* (2013), *Grandma* (2015), *Looking* (2014-2016), *A Perfect Ending* (2012), *Tales of the City* (2019), *Transparent* (2014-2017; 2019), and *Tru Love* (2013), cross-generational relationships (variously referred to in popular and scholarly discourses as ‘May-December romances’ or as ‘intergenerational,’ ‘age-variant,’ ‘age-different,’ and ‘age-gap’ relationships) play a constitutive role in the depiction of the queer elder figure as a romantic and sexual subject. Certainly, notable LGBT age-gap couples, such as Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy, Sarah Paulson and Holland Taylor, Armistead Maupin and Christopher Turner, Ellen DeGeneres and Portia De Rossi, Rupaul and Georges LeBar, and Miss Major Griffin-Gracy and Beck Witt, have garnered considerable public attention in the last decade,

ranging from disparaging to celebratory to patronizing. Evidently, cross-generational relationships are experiencing a moment of (uneven) visibility, at least within queer-themed productions and news media.

Although depictions of gay and lesbian cross-generational pairings are not new (e.g., *Gods and Monster* and *Notes on Scandal*), the growing popularity of this dynamic in film and television is ripe for analysis in part because such asymmetrical representational logics have become less common for depicting the romantic and sexual lives of older straight couples in film (Shary and McVittie; Wearing “Subjects”) and because LGBT affiliations are increasingly conforming to a “democratic, egalitarian partnership model” (Weeks et al. 106), a model that has gradually been displacing older, less egalitarian and non-reciprocal forms of queer affiliation, such as cross-generational relationships (or what Kadji Amin calls ‘modern pederasty’) and ‘trade economies’ (38). A growing number of films and television series that include a queer age-gap couple, especially those that contain the queer elder figure, is particularly interesting because sex or relationships defined by differentials related to age and social status are generally, as Amin argues, “offensive and nauseating to an era defined by its subscription to the ideal (if not always the practice) of erotic egalitarianism” (37). Noting the potential for cross-generational relationships to disturb in his methodologically innovative *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History*, Amin writes,

Insofar as erotic egalitarianism is now the ideal, if not the reality, of heterosexual and homosexual couples, alike, those couples that too ostentatiously broadcast their structuration by age, race, and class polarities appear far more *aberrant, suspicious, and threatening* than do comparatively innocuous age-, race-, and class-‘appropriate’ homosexual couplings. (Amin 38, emphasis added)

In other words, according to Amin, in both straight and queer communities alike, same-gender and opposite-gender age-gap pairings in the twenty-first century are increasingly perceived as more non-normative than LGBT couples that contain individuals of similar ages and/or generations. Amin argues that from about the late 1970s onward, the gay rights movement actively constructed pederasty, which he defines as “any male same-sex relation...built around an eroticized differential of age or generation”, including sex between adult men of different ages, as *outmoded*, *backward*, and distinctly *historical* (39). This political temporal framing, he argues, functioned to separate the enlightened present (the 1980s onward) from the unenlightened past, and distance ‘unsavory’ queer political attachments (e.g., cross-generational relations), exemplified by Michel Foucault’s “Friendship as a Way of Life,” from *modern* homosexuality, that is, respectable post-liberation constructions of homosexuality. Once an organizing principle of same-gender relations, queer cross-generational sex and romance thus represent an embarrassing or repulsive object for contemporary queer scholars and theory, Amin argues, in part because this asymmetrical, inegalitarian dynamic, laden with backwardness and “presumed to be politically useless, if not counterproductive” (29), does not hold any promise or utility for the future.

In this chapter, I intervene in this conversation to explore the backward-looking dynamics of representations of gay and bisexual male cross-generational pairings that were created in the 2010s and contain the queer elder figure. These contemporary representations make visible a longing for ‘disturbing’ sexual relations often conceived of as historical, blurring a neat division of the past from the present. Such texts present cross-generational relationships as not necessarily an ancient tradition, one that might

help distinguish modern from ‘dated’ relationships, but instead as post-liberation romantic and erotic configurations that continue today. Importantly, these dynamics built around age differentials draw the queer elder figure into focus. In this chapter, I argue that representations of gay and bisexual male cross-generational relationships reproduce reductive dominant discourses of aging gay men as predatory and pathetic, and cross-generational relations as pathological and insufficient in relation to age-similar relations. However, at the same time, these representations offer glimpses of alternative framings of cross-generational gay and bisexual relations as productive sites of queer kinship and erotics that currently *feel* and *look* backward (i.e., historical, less progressive, retrograde), while facilitating complicated and thus more sympathetic expressions of aging gay men as not simply *attracted* to (or desiring of) youth, but as *attractive* to youth as well. In what follows, I elucidate the history and function of the heterosexual (though not necessarily heteronormative) May-December trope in U.S. American film, as well as some of the scholarly literature on cross-generational intimacy. From there, I move into an analysis of the texts that contain May-December relationships, namely *Behind the Candelabra* (2013) and *Gerontophilia* (2013), both of which include depictions of old feminine gay men in sexual and romantic relationships with bisexual or sexually ambiguous teenage boys, to explore the ‘backward’ possibilities of father-son tropes and the eroticization of the older gay man. Given the stigmatization of the sexualization of older men, as well as cross-generational relationships, especially those among men and adolescent boys, such representations offer timely contributions to contemporary discussions about age, sexuality, and time.

3.1 The May-December Trope

The term ‘May-December romance’ refers to an age-variant or age-different relationship that is motivated by romantic and/or sexual desire and has a considerable age difference. In their study about the representational conventions of older age in U.S. American cinema, Timothy Shary and Nancy McVittie note that the term “arises from the notion of the younger person being in the springtime of life and the older being in the slowly darkening winter’s end of life” (143). By this definition, a May-December relationship must include at least one older adult assumed to be nearing death. Indeed, May-December romances are often punished via the death of an older character because, as Shary and McVittie caution, “a price must always be paid for breaking age boundaries” (143). Unlike general age-variant or age-gap relations, which can occur throughout early- to mid- life, May-December relationships are distinctive because they feature an old person as both desiring *and* desirable. May-December narratives thus hold the potential to challenge gerontophobic culture and disrupt an overwhelming emphasis on youth in film and television.

Shary and McVittie identify the May-December trope as a popular genre device of elder romance. Evident in the 1910s and early 1920s, the trope was initially quite moralizing, and frequently the trope “ridiculed elders for being both susceptible to the feigned affections of youth and gullible about threats to their wealth” (139). Shary and McVittie observe that after World-War II, and coinciding with an increasingly visible aging population, May-December romances became more prominent and comedic in tone. As a result, May-December romances are generally divided between two filmic modes: “those that are ultimately redemptive for both lovers and tend toward the comic,

and those that are destructive or exploitative” (Shary 672). By the ‘50s and ‘60s, the dynamic celebrated “the theme of sacrifice inherent in depictions of parental elders” (Shary and McVittie 144). For example, elder characters in May-December romances fulfill an instructive role for younger partners, sharing knowledge, experience, and lessons. In these arrangements, “the assumption is that younger people benefit far more from their relationships with older people than vice versa” (Shary 676). Though May-December relationships rarely survive the conclusion of the film, this dynamic is “difficult to criticize as exploitative or sinister, because on some level both lovers’ lives are more complete as a result of their relationship” (677). The themes of education and sacrifice, typical of the May-December dynamic, culminated in the production of Hal Ashby’s now-cult classic *Harold and Maude* (1971).

The quirky *Harold and Maude*, the most striking example of the May-December romance in film, takes the motif to the extreme with an age difference of 60 years between the two title characters. Described as “a touching love story between perhaps the most unlikely couple in cinema history” (Graham), the comedic *Harold and Maude* explores the romantic and implied sexual relationship between a disillusioned 20-year-old man named Harold (Bud Cort), who drives a hearse, stages fake suicides for his mother’s attention, and enjoys observing destruction at demolition yards, and a life-affirming 79 ‘years-young’ Holocaust survivor named Maude (Ruth Gordon), who steals vehicles, liberates trees from noxious and suffocating city streets, and prefers to “watch things grow” (*Harold and Maude*). Harold and Maude, despite vast differences in age and outlook, share the peculiar pastime of attending random funerals, a hobby that engenders their introduction and “alleviates many of the otherwise sinister or pathological concerns

that would inevitably arise if a character deliberately sought a lover so much younger or older” (Shary 674):

Maude: Did you know him?

Harold: No.

Maude: Me neither. I heard he is 80 years old. I’ll be 80 next week. Good time to move on, don’t you think?

Harold: I don’t know.

Maude: Well, I mean, 75 is too early...but at 85 you’re just marking time. You may as well look over the horizon. (*Harold and Maude*)

Death unites this improbable couple and death, as Maude intimates in the passage, will separate them and return Harold to the natural order of reproductive coupledness, for the lively Maude intends to take her life on the night of her 80th birthday. In the week that follows their chance encounter, Maude introduces an initially hesitant Harold to various sensual pleasures, including tactile and olfactory artworks and, perhaps most importantly, sexual intercourse, alluded to in successive shots of fireworks that conclude with a shot of Maude sleeping peacefully next to Harold’s half naked body. Maude fulfills an educative purpose; she teaches Harold to appreciate a life that, before her, he saw no value in living. She rescues and rights Harold and then departs suddenly from his life. It is however “*because of Maude*” and her own love of life that Harold will now live his life (Shary 675, emphasis added).

Though May-December narratives frequently result in the death of the older lover and thus contribute to a construction of old age as a natural time of decline (Gullette *Aged*; Gravagne; Krainitzki; Shary and McVittie), the unique configuration is remarkable for the way it depicts older adults as desiring and sometimes, as is the case in *Harold and Maude*, as desirable. Despite this detail, Shary and McVittie offer a paranoid reading of

the May-December dynamic in their survey of elder romance, arguing that prior to the '80s elder romance was only representable onscreen if it was oriented toward youth. They argue that before this shift, representations of the love lives of elders were generally contained by two representational conventions characterized by youth: older adults falling in love with younger characters (i.e., May-December romances) or older adults nostalgically remembering "earlier days in love" (142). Both conventions, they argue, (re)turn desire to youth and circumvent any discomfort provoked by representing a desiring elder. In other words, representing older adults as sexual and romantic partners past their prime was only permissible, possible, or palatable when young bodies, both the young body of the older adult's love interest or the former young body of the wistful older adult, were featured. Shary and McVittie argue that film representations of "romance *between* elders" (140, original emphasis), rather than simply with an elder, only began in the 1980s. By the authors' account, the May-December dynamic was a logical step in the development or 'maturation' of elder romance in U.S. American film from moralizing cross-generational constructions of romance to "*honest* depictions of romantic feelings among the aged" (139, emphasis added), evident in films such as *On Golden Pond* (1981), *Grumpy Old Men* (1993), and *Grumpier Old Men* (1995). In this progressive framing, cross-generational romances between an older adult and a much younger adult or adolescent are implicitly cast as suspect, inauthentic, and transitory in relation to the romance between two people of roughly similar ages. Shary and McVittie are not alone in this argument. In a study about sexual representations of older adults, Thomas Walz makes a similar argument about the paucity of 'authentic' romantic elders when he writes, "few writers appear able to conceive of a truly healthy passionate

relationship between an older person and younger person, let alone between two older persons” (102). For Walz and Shary and McVittie, May-December arrangements present an incomplete portrait of elder romance; they are never the endpoint, only a step toward more ‘honest’ (i.e., age-similar) depictions of elder romance and sexuality.

I concede that the elder romance genre could benefit from more varied representation in general; however, I am reluctant to frame the motif as the immature precursor to elder-elder romance—the ideal of elder romance. Certainly, visual mediums that feature a May-December romance violate the bounds of contemporary sexual propriety. Indeed, Gayle Rubin in her classic essay “Thinking Sex,” identifies cross-generational sexual relations, “those whose eroticism transgresses generational boundaries” (149), as “the lowliest of all” (149) in the “hierarchal system of sexual value” (149). Devalued, if not straightforwardly condemned, cross-generational relationships, Rubin argues, may be *hetero*, but not necessarily *normative*, that is, “‘good,’ ‘normal,’ and ‘natural’” (151). Given that age-variant relationships, including the May-December dynamic, figure so prominently in representations of the queer elder, I ask, how does this *insufficient* and *inferior* motif signify in texts focused on LGBT romance and sex? Moreover, will the queered May-December dynamic similarly represent the first step toward representing more ‘mature’ or ‘authentic’ versions of romance *between* queer elders? Finally, what might be the productive or generative effects of this dynamic?

In the texts analyzed for this study, representations of gay male cross-generational relationships participate in, sustain, and uphold several of the discursive May-December traditions outlined previously. For instance, in the Netflix series *AJ and the Queen*, a

cross-generational relationship between the show's protagonist Robert/Ruby (RuPaul), an aging gay Black drag queen, and his much younger, handsome boyfriend Hector (Josh Segarra) is revealed to be not unadulterated love, but a scam that targets and defrauds aging (and thus, the series implies, less valued) and more desperate drag queens and gay men. In other texts, gay male cross-generational relationships are framed as sites of predation and exploitation (*Behind the Candelabra*), sexual perversion (*Gerontophilia*), generational conflict (*Looking* and *Tales of the City*), and pathological 'daddy-issues' (*Beginners* and *Behind the Candelabra*). These same representations, however, also explore intergenerational gay and bisexual same-gender relations as authentic sites of education, support, nurturance, mentorship, love, and pleasure. Importantly, the motif facilitates complex and sympathetic depictions of aging gay men and challenges the cultural myth that casts "the 'older' gay male as an isolated, miserable, and bitter sexual pervert" (Goltz, *Queer* 6). In this section, I have outlined the scholarly literature pertaining to the May-December dynamic, a representational convention of heterosexual (and cisgender) elder romance that largely celebrates youth and offers a *retrograde* illustration of elder romance.

3.2 Gay Cross-generational Relations: Reviewing the Literature

In this section I provide an overview of the scholarship on cross-generational relationships. Specifically, I am concerned with scholarly discursive constructions, both dominant and subcultural, of same-gender cross-generational relationships. A review of such literature is necessary to contextualize the dominance of the May-December motif

and cross-generational kinship ties generally in representations of the queer elder figure.

Though cross-generational romances have historically been the norm, they have increasingly become atypical within the last century. Within many Western nations, including Canada and the United States, age-matched or age-similar relations constitute a taken-for-granted and unmarked norm. Indeed, contemporary designations for both younger and older members of age-variant relationships, such as ‘gold digger,’ ‘cougar,’ ‘cradle robber,’ and ‘sugar daddy/mommy,’ mark age-different couples as abnormal (Collison and Ponce De Leon). That no such colloquial terms exist to describe individuals in age-similar relations is revealing of the normalness of age-similar couples. Terms such as ‘gold digger’ indicate a dominant perception of cross-generational relationships as fundamentally inequitable (Collison and Ponce De Leon). Such perceptions are pronounced in Canada’s ‘gold-digger’ legislation, which prohibits surviving spouses of military veterans from collecting pension benefits if the deceased got married after the age of 60 (Duhatschek). Even powerful heterosexual age-gap couples, such as 45th president of the United States Donald Trump and wife Melania Trump, are not immune from such perceptions. Take, for example, Jimmy Kimmel’s recent spoof of the U.S. American reality dating show *The Bachelorette*, which imagines Melania Trump as recently single and ready to mingle after Trump’s 2020 election defeat to President Joe Biden. The spoof, which implies that Melania was only with Donald Trump because of the status, power, and wealth he offered as president, joins a host of other popular discursive framings of the age-gap couple as unequal, inauthentic, and doomed to fail. Indeed, research reveals that couples with a significant difference in age are met with great suspicion and prejudice (Banks and Arnold; Collison and Ponce De Leon; Cowan).

Studies about perceptions of heterosexual cross-generational relationships found that couples with an age difference of 15 years or more were viewed as unacceptable, unhappy, and unlikely to succeed (Banks and Arnold; Cowan). In Collette Banks and Paul Arnold's study, respondents described an age gap of 20 years as exploitative and "disgusting" (10). In Brian Collison and Luciana Ponce De Leon's recent study, they found that age-variant relationships were even "evaluated...less favorably than interracial, mixed-weight, or mixed-socioeconomic status couples" (6). Moreover, Gloria Cowan's study found that respondents expressed greater disapproval of "female-older relationships," (9) indicating a gendered bias in perceptions of age-variant relationships. Indeed, woman-older age-variant relationships are conceptualized as particularly inexplicable, deviant, and biologically nonsensical since this configuration goes "against the evolutionary perspective that men seek fertility and reproductive value" (Banks and Arnold 16).

Though these studies evidently confirm a cultural disdain for and devaluation of age-variant relationships, especially woman-older relationships, this body of scholarship largely approaches perceptions of age-different couples from the perspective of evolutionary psychology. Consequently, these studies disproportionately and uncritically focus on heterosexual attraction, and overemphasize the importance of the biological imperative, or reproductive fitness, when making sense of participants' perceptions of age-different relationships. To assume, however, that people attract, desire, and couple for the express purpose of reproduction problematically flattens human sexuality, evades discussions of pleasure, and reifies the notion that mid and late life are inherently desexualized. Not to mention, these studies bypass socio-cultural considerations that

might account for a societal investment in youth. Evolutionary logics are particularly troubling when one considers same-gender age-variant couples that are rendered doubly unintelligible and aberrant by this argumentation.

Even when same-gender attraction is considered (Hayes “Age Preferences”; Kendrick et al.), evolutionary science and reproductive logics are still deployed, perhaps nonsensically, to explore and make sense of age preferences among queer subjects. For instance, Andrew F. Hayes found that the age preferences of ‘homosexuals’ were strikingly similar to those of their heterosexual counterparts: men generally preferred younger partners and women generally preferred partners near their own age or older. Even though Hayes suggests that biological reproductive value is less of an issue for same-gender couples, he speculates that “genes directly influence preferences” (131), and thus reproduces reductive understandings of attraction and desire and ultimately naturalizes ageism.

Conversely, in Barry D. Adam’s study, one of few scholarly qualitative texts to shift discussions of age preference conceptually from a narrow focus on evolutionary instincts to “the experiential and discursive” (432), age difference is expressed as “a category of desire,” and is acknowledged as “a larger norm favoring, sometimes contradictorily, youthfulness and age egalitarianism in relationships” (432). Exploring gay and bisexual men’s sexual and romantic preferences for both older and younger partners, Adam identifies “discursive fragments from gay and nongay cultures” (432), including a sub/cultural obsession with youth or, as others have observed, a “one-way attraction of age to youth” (Simpson 294); tropes of sexualized older gay and bisexual men (e.g., sugar daddies, father figures, daddies, and chicken hawks); and age-

differentiated sexual subcultures. Moreover, Adam's study makes a case for understanding sexual mentorship, "a somewhat subterranean cultural tradition that *is now* little celebrated" (432, emphasis added), as a significant erotic logic that underpins a preference for both older and younger men among gay and bisexual men. Adam found that younger and older adult men both implicitly and sometimes explicitly referenced the "ancient Greek" (419) and "lost" (420) tradition of sexual and intellectual mentorship. For instance, a 22-year-old student reported in Adam's study, "I like that. That teacher-student type of complex" (420). Similarly, another 22-year-old said, "I am fascinated by this older-man-younger-man relationship type of thing. It's the ancient Greek thing" (421). Moreover, a 41-year-old participant demonstrates the flexibility and relationality of this erotic age-inflected dynamic: "I'm attracted to those older than myself. That's because I don't wish to be the teacher" (421). In contrast, a participant who prefers younger men said, "I want to be their teacher. I want to be their leader, trainer...I want to break you in and show you what good sex is all about" (426). These statements indicate that the eroticized age-differentiated mentor-mentee dyad, far from only being an 'ancient' (homo)sexual practice, possibly existed as a meaningful gay subculture at the turn of the millennium when Adam conducted his study and published his findings. They also demonstrate how the discourse about ancient Greek erotic practices gave gay and bisexual men a language and structure to explain their preferences to themselves, as well as to others. Significantly, Adam's study makes visible controversial and even 'taboo' age preferences among gay and bisexual men, including attractions to old/er men, young/er men, and older adolescent boys. For, as Kadji Amin argues, cross-generational relations are "so suffused with pastness that [they are] all but invisible and inaudible in

the present” (*Disturbing* 31). Adam, however, makes visible some of these supposedly ‘older’ and ‘lost’ forms of gay male kinship “despite the silence of the larger society concerning the eroticization of older men and its stigmatization through the propagation of ‘child molestation’ and ‘sex abuse’ discourses in the mainstream media” (432).

As Adam’s statement makes clear, cross-generational intimacy and the sexualization of older men are almost always associated with sexual contact and abuse, specifically the sexual abuse of young children (Jones). In fact, scholarship on gay cross-generational relationships is, as John R. Yoakam observes, “almost entirely framed in terms of adult-child relationships (pedophilia) or adult-adolescent-relationships (ephebophilia)” (70). This distinction of pedophilia (prepubescent) from other erotic age orientations including hebephilia (pubescent) and ephebophilia (older adolescent), is significant because the terms ‘pedophilia’ and ‘pedophile’ are frequently misused in scholarship and popular discourse and by law enforcement (Jones). Amin also draws a distinction between pedophilia and pederasty, arguing “I think it is important to provisionally distinguish these terms, since pedophile connotes the abuse of young children and is a product of a neoliberal moment, while the longer history of pederastic practice was centered around either pubescent boys or younger adult men” (33). Similarly, Gerald Jones argues that a collapse of the categories ‘child’ and ‘adolescent’ flattens and ignores “the enormous developmental differences between grade-schoolers, for example, and those about to graduate from high school” (283).

In an attempt to counteract the harmful stereotype of “the aging queen qua paedophile” (Knauer 58) and forward a more inclusive picture of age-variant relations, some scholars have argued that gay and bisexual male cross-generational intimacy is *also*

or perhaps *altogether* about platonic *friendship* and/or only *between* young and older adult men (Grube; Yoakam). For instance, Yoakam cites “the tradition of ‘aunties’ in pre-World War II gay communities” (74) to emphasize the significance of cross-generational friendship and the role of old/er gay men figured, especially to the transmission of gay culture:

What a gay man in his teens or twenties couldn’t often get from his peers was a feeling for the ways in which his sexuality might take on the dimensions of a full life outside the mainstream. In this realm, the ‘aunties’ were indispensable. (Laughrey 112 qtd. in Yoakam 74)

Indeed, young gays, lesbians, and bisexual have often grown up in households where heterosexuality is the only referent offered for sex, sexuality, and romance. In the absence of cultural or familial gay role models, aunties fulfilled an educative role, sharing invaluable instruction with the expectation that the younger boy or man would repay his auntie by occupying “the same role for others” in the future (Laughrey 117 qtd. in Yoakam 74). Similarly, John Grube, recognizing Stonewall as the division between a *traditional* and *organized* gay community, argues that older gay men had unique “privileges and duties” before Stonewall happened (134). Grube states that this community of gays, largely and necessarily closeted (though not always), had “basic structural units such as the mentor/protégé couple...the queen-and-entourage formation...and the party and dinner circles” (134). As experienced and knowledgeable members, older gay men facilitated the introduction of young men into social circles that were otherwise invisible or hidden to them. Unlike Yoakam, Grube acknowledges that sex was sometimes exchanged for this service. Such examples indicate that age-different

relationships were once central forms of gay male kinship, and that older gay men were often valued as knowledge keepers by younger gays.

In effect, a perceivable binary discourse emerges in the scholarship: cross-generational gay relationships indicate abuse *or* care; these relationships are inherently sexual *or* platonic; and older men in these relationships are sexual predators *or* nonphysical mentors. Binary constructions that position cross-generational relationships as either redeemable (good) or irredeemable (bad), risk flattening the complex history of LGBT kinship structures, dismissing those individuals who have benefitted from or enjoyed cross-generational intimacy, and glossing over real instances of harm and sexual abuse committed in the community.

Conversely, both public and academic discourse about lesbian cross-generational relations is much scarcer. Age differences between lesbians “have been ignored, assumed to be positive, or framed as encouraging healthy relationships” (Bruns 266). Whereas inequitable power relations have generally been highlighted in both woman- and man-older opposite-gender and gay and bisexual men’s cross-generational relationships, lesbians and their “membership in two oppressed classes (woman and lesbian)” are largely assumed to displace “any socially ascribed power differences within the [age-variant] couple” (Bruns 226). When acknowledged, age-variant relationships among women are often congratulated and glorified, as these queer and mainstream magazine titles attest: “Lesbians Love Older Women, Says Survey and Our Hearts” (Riese), “May-December Romance: When Ewww Becomes Cute” (Teitel), and “I Want What They Have: Sarah Paulson and Holland Taylor” (Spector). Perceptions of cross-generational same-gender relations are evidently gendered. Therefore, in this chapter, I focus on filmic

and televisual representations of gay and bisexual men's cross-generational relationships, considering how they reproduce and resist the discourses of gay cross-generational relationships I have elaborated on here, which generally do not offer conceptual space for considering the complex meanings of these relationships. In what follows, to illustrate my argument, I explore three main representational categories of aging gay men in cross-generational relationships: the sexy daddy, the abject fem(me)inine daddy, and the sexualized granddaddy.

3.3 Sexy Daddies: *Looking* and *Tales of the City*

A first way that gay older men are represented in cross-generational relationships in television series is in the form of the 'sexy daddy.' Writing in the early millennium, when depictions of sexualized and 'sexy' older men and women were rare though developing, Walz identifies the stereotype of the 'dirty old man' as the exception to the then-dominant depiction of "old people as sexless" (100). He defines this figure as "the older man who is sexually driven, but also sexually inappropriate and/or sexually impotent" (100) and associates him with classic filmic predators who prey on children and young women, such as Humbert Humbert (James Mason) from Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita* (1962) and Dr. Stephen Fleming (Jeremy Irons) from Louis Malle's *Damage* (1993). For others, Grandpa Gustafson (Burgess Meredith) from the comedy films *Grumpy Old Men* (1993) and *Grumpier Old Men* (1995) epitomizes the 'dirty old man' trope. He is portrayed as "ribald and randy" and "disgustingly sexual and humorously old" (Chivers *The Silvering* 101; Gatling et al.). The 'dirty old' man trope then refers to an inappropriate male heterosexuality that was depicted as being 'off time;' that is, out of

sync with the expectations of later life and improperly oriented toward age-dissimilar (i.e., young) bodies. Although an unflattering depiction of late life sexuality, the dirty old man stereotype in film and television was one of the first to challenge the notion that later life was a time of ‘natural’ sexual decline.

An exception to a once dominant belief that old people are asexual, the ‘dirty old man’ image and his reception is arguably a product of rapidly shifting contemporary notions of (a)sexuality in later life that are, according to critical gerontology scholars Barbara Marshall and Stephen Katz, informed by nineteenth century ideologies of gender and sexual convergence (“From Androgyny”). Marshall and Katz argue that though the loss of sexual function and desire, caused by a presumed natural decrease in sex hormones in later life, was assumed to be an inevitable, intrinsic, and universal characteristic of old age in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it later signified a dysfunction that could be treated using biomedical technologies (“Forever functional”). Consequently, near the turn of the millennium, “gerontology and sexology continued to cross common ground in claiming that sexual activity, particularly sexual intercourse, was a healthy and necessary component of successful aging” (Katz and Marshall 7). As sexuality in later life came to increasingly mark a ‘healthy’ aging subject in the late twentieth century, representations of sexualized seniors moved away from the ‘dirty old man’ trope and became more normative. Exemplified by the new myth of the ‘sexy oldie’ (Gott) and the biomedical construction of the ‘sexy senior’ (Marshall), representations of aging and older adults have become increasingly sexualized in film, television, and advertisements since the early 2000s. Indeed, Hollywood films depicting lusty and sexual seniors, including *It’s Complicated* (2009), *Last Chance Harvey* (2008), *Lovely,*

Still (2008), *Must Love Dogs* (2005), *Something's Gotta Give* (2003), *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008), and *You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger* (2010), were plentiful in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Shary and McVittie). Informed by the 'new aging' conviction that "age without sex was literally old-fashioned" (Katz and Marshall 7), these sexualized aging figures are arguably an attempt by gerontological and health literature, as well as popular media, to challenge and replace traditional ageist discourses that construct the aging body as post-sexual, desexualized, or asexual (Gott; Marshall). However, Marshall argues that the sexualization of later life, generally perceived to be a 'positive' and 'liberating' trend, required a paradoxical embrace of youthful and overwhelmingly heterosexist notions of sexual attractiveness and penetrative intercourse, and thus counterproductively reinforced traditional notions that situate old age and sexuality as incompatible. In other words, where 'sexiness' and 'hotness' were once body projects of the chronologically young, they increasingly represent an important means for third agers to distinguish themselves from the physical and symbolic decline and abjection of the fourth age because "to cease having sex would hasten aging itself" (Katz and Marshall 7). As these critical gerontology scholars outline, remaining sexually active in later life has become part and parcel of a wider imperative of successful, active, and positive aging agendas.

For aging men, the shift from post-sexual to sexy senior took the form of replacing feminizing and thus emasculating images of old men as grandparents, a designation typically associated with family and caregiving, with new, more productive (i.e., valued) forms of 'doing' for men in later life (Calasanti and King). Specifically, Toni Calasanti and Neal King contend that advertisement images of competitive activity

and heterosexual virility, tropes they call “playing hard” (10) and “staying hard” (13), redefine aging masculinity at the turn of the millennium. The tropes of playing and staying hard, “derived from the experiences of younger men,” (16) construct aging masculinity as “not aging” (7). Similarly, feminist media and critical age scholars observe an analogous trend in film, whereby aging men become ‘subjects of rejuvenation’ through heterosexual romance and fatherhood rather than *grandfatherhood* (Wearing “Subjects;” Hamad; Gravagne). For example, in her analysis of *Something’s Gotta Give* (2003), “a romantic comedy about the reformation of a sixty-three-year-old man who never dates women over thirty and...a ‘woman of a certain age’ who...never dates at all” (Wearing “Subjects” 300), Sadie Wearing argues that the film’s aging protagonists offend *temporal* rather than *sexual* propriety, and thus must undergo a “generationally appropriate, heterosexual makeover” (301). In other words, the male protagonist must replace *inappropriate* cross-generational heterosexuality with *appropriate* same-generational (hetero)sexuality while the female protagonist must reject asexuality or post-sexuality for (hetero)sexuality, reinforcing the developing expectation that (hetero)sexuality be a lifelong project (Marshall). Reflecting new aging agendas, sexuality, far from something that naturally decreases in later life, is represented as “conduit for rejuvenation” (Wearing “Subjects” 305). Indeed, as Timothy Shary observes, in film “romance for the elderly is often a form of rejuvenation and rediscovery, an opportunity to live longer and fuller” (672). Similarly, in her analysis of the films *Beginners* (2010), *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2011), and *Up* (2009), Hannah Hamad argues that aging men are rejuvenated through a restorative turn toward a paternal role with their estranged grandchildren, both biological and symbolic. Put

simply, aging men, including gay men in the film *Beginners*, must enact fatherhood rather than *grandfatherhood* to avoid being marked as old. It is within these developments in the construction of aging and a/sexuality that the ‘dirty old man’ image becomes increasingly difficult to comprehend in the twenty-first century.

Arguably, an analogous trend has been emerging in representations of older gay men whereby a previously stigmatized and stigmatizing construction of older gay men as pederasts and pathetic ‘old sickies,’ evident in films such *Death in Venice* (1971), *Love and Death on Long Island* (1997), and *L.I.E* (2001), is being replaced with a newer construction of older gay men as sexualized and desirable ‘daddy’ figures. Though the term’s eroticization has become somewhat “ubiquitous” (Rodríguez 58; Dark), ‘daddy’ can refer to a specific queer subculture, and though the term is “frequently associated with the sexualization of older gay men,” its “meanings and applicability [are] dependent on context and period” (Mercer 318). For example, in the sexual subcultures of bondage and discipline, domination and submission, sadism and masochism (BDSM), ‘daddies’ can be found in erotic age play, intergenerational play, and kinship play, also referred to sometimes as ‘incest play’ (Bauer). Intergenerational play eroticizes real (or performed) age differentials between players (Bauer). As an expression of cross-generational play, daddy/boy play might focus on sexual scripts that involve mutually agreed upon ‘punishment,’ or ‘daddying’ might be “about love, support, nurturance, and guidance, about helping and teaching,” depending on the players (Hale). BDSM and daddy/boy play, specifically, can also be an important means of “queer redress of familial wounds” (Rodríguez 57), including sexual and childhood trauma (Dark, Cvetkovich, Lindemann), racism (Lindemann, Rodríguez), and absentee fathers (Rodríguez). Importantly, although

daddy/boy dynamics use and play with uneven or inegalitarian power dynamics, daddy/boy play is ultimately a form of consensual and erotic recreational play or what Staci Newmahr calls ‘serious leisure.’ As well, the power differentials occupied during play “need not be based on real world differences in social power” (Amin *Disturbing* 26). In other words, the role of ‘daddy’ may be occupied by people of marginalized genders, including women and trans, Two-Spirit, and/or gender non-binary individuals (Califia; Dark; Hale); racialized groups of people (Rodríguez); and “daddy may be younger than her boy, according to their birth certificates” (Hale 224). Put simply, age differences (or other power dynamics) can be performed or real during daddy/boy play.

Conversely, in gay male pornography, older men generally portray daddies, but as John Mercer notes ‘older’ is “an elastic category... encompassing a range of ages, physical characteristics and body types, performative characteristics, and stylistic choices” (318). For Mercer, the ‘daddy,’ as a subcategory of the eroticized older man in pornography, “is marked more by what [he] is not than what [he] is” (318). Daddies are generally not “youth fixated” nor “grooming and body culture focused” (318). A perpetually fluctuating and context-specific term, ‘daddy’ variously refers to “a macho older gay male, a dominant ‘master’ in sado-masochistic sexual play, and to the sexual role of a domineering and potentially aggressive father figure in the enactment of abuse fantasies” (320). Given the multiple and conflicting significations, the term ‘daddy’ is a “problematic” and “loaded” (320) designation.

Representations of ‘daddies’ as older sexy men were evident in my visual corpus of representations of the queer elder figure. For example, recent LGBT-themed shows, such as *Looking* (2014-2015) and Lauren Morelli’s reboot *Tales of the City* (2019),

include portraits of greying sexy daddies in age-gap couples. In such depictions rather youngish actors portray this sexualized ‘older’ figure. For example, a chiseled Murray Bartlett, who portrays Michael Tolliver in the newest adaptation of Armistead Maupin’s book series *Tales of the City*, was only in his forties when portraying the character Maupin describes as “pushing sixty” (*Mary Ann* 15) and “a portly silver-haired figure” (70) in his final three books—the inspiration for Morelli’s reboot. “Daddy” thus often functioned as a reference for middle-aged, older gay masculinity in *Tales of the City* and *Looking*. As well, the age gap between the age-dissimilar men was no greater than 20 years, and the younger partner in the relationship was no younger than 30-years-old. Put another way, these young men are not teenagers or even young men. They are firmly located in adulthood, according to contemporary Western definitions.

Importantly, ‘sexy daddies’ are (like their heterosexual figural counterparts) depicted as working hard and being hard; that is, these characters are depicted as productive and successful businessmen and as sexually ‘fit’ (i.e., chiseled and ‘functional’) lovers. Racy sex scenes reveal older men with trim bodies, hard erections, and athletic and robust sex lives, including participation in threesomes. In both series, older gay men Lynn (Scott Bakula) and Michael (Murray Bartlett) are re-signified as desirable (rather than as disgusting) through their relationship to youth, both in their proximity to the youthful bodies of their younger lovers and to their own age-defying bodies. These shows also both playfully and ironically reflect sexual daddy/boy dynamics, and the term ‘daddy’ is used both mockingly and approvingly in these shows to refer to aging men as sexual and romantic partners. For example, in the HBO series *Looking*, friends of 40-year-old Dom (interestingly also portrayed by Murray Bartlett)

often tease him about his ‘sugar daddy’ partner Lynn who, 20 years Dom’s senior, is misrecognized as Dom’s father by strangers. In *Tales and the City*, Ben teases Michael about his unoriginal or unfunny ‘dad’ or “*daddy joke[s]*” and describes the age-gap couple as a “hot young techie and *sexy daddy*” when exploring options for a threesome (*Tales of the City*, emphases added). Arguably, such images of older men as sexy, desirable, desiring, and sexually fit seek to positively reflect some of the otherwise generally stigmatized age-differentiated relations in gay and bisexual male sexual subcultures, while moving away from a stereotypical image of aging gay men as dangerously and voraciously fixated on youth, especially young boys. In the next two sections, I explore more ‘historically dated’ and ‘unsavory’ versions of gay age-gap couples, namely, queered May-December romances in the films *Behind the Candelabra* and *Gerontophilia*, which were both released in 2013 (a couple of years before the above mentioned, more palatable representations of ‘aging’ bodies and age-gap couples).

3.4 The Abject Fem(me)inine Daddy: *Behind the Candelabra*

The second representational category of older gay men in cross-generational relationships is the abject fem(me)inine daddy. Following critical femininity scholar Allison Taylor’s use of the term, I use ‘fem(me)inine’ to refer to both ‘feminine’ and ‘femme’ identities—gender and sexual identifications that are not the sole domain of women (Taylor “Fashioning;” “Flabulously”; McFarland and Taylor). The fem(me)inine and visibly aging daddy is evident in Steven Soderbergh’s biographical HBO film *Behind the Candelabra* (2013), which imagines the last ten years of the opulent, immoderate, and

effeminate pianist Wladziu Valentino Liberace or, more famously, just ‘Liberace,’ before he dies from AIDS-related complications at the age of 67. Adapted from Scott Thorson’s memoir *Behind the Candelabra: My Life with Liberace*, Soderbergh’s *Behind the Candelabra* charts the tempestuous relationship between the teenage bisexual Scott Thorson (Matt Damon) and the toupeed gay yet fiercely closeted Liberace (Michael Douglas). Soderbergh’s Liberace represents another instance of the closeted queer elder figure (see Chapter 2). Again, like Hoover, Liberace’s closetedness is located firmly in the past far away from the 2010s when closet motifs became a central representational logic for depictions of the queer elder figure. The biographical film participates in the rather recent tradition of celebrating the lives of influential gay and lesbian individuals onscreen.

Though a twenty-year age difference exists between the actors (Damon was in his early forties and Douglas was in his late sixties when they took up their respective roles as Scott and Liberace), there is meant to be an even greater forty-year age gap between the characters in the film. Scott, an aspiring veterinarian still living at home with his foster parents, is an 18-year-old teenager and Liberace, referred to as ‘Lee’ by lovers and friends in the film, is a 57-year-old man when they first meet backstage in 1977 after one of Liberace’s Las Vegas shows. Liberace, entranced by the handsome young Scott, invites him back to his ostentatious palatial home, where Scott notices that one of Liberace’s many dogs is suffering from treatable blindness. Liberace, impressed with Scott’s care for his dog and spotting an opportunity to spend more time with Scott, offers Scott a shadowy appointment as his “right-hand man” (*Behind the Candelabra*). Scott, in spite of his foster parents’ suspicions about “that old fag” (*Behind the Candelabra*),

moves in with Liberace, and effectively replaces Mr. Billy Leatherwood (Cheyenne Jackson), Liberace's former young 'number two.' Over the next couple of years, Liberace showers Scott with gifts, offers to adopt Scott to assert and validate them as kin, co-signs for a house for Scott, and finances Scott's extensive cosmetic surgery that Liberace orders. As the couple encounters increasing conflict (drug addiction, the loss of a parent, and an affair), Scott, expendable like Liberace's previous 'right-hand man,' waits to be replaced as Liberace's lover and assistant. Spurned and vengeful, Scott contacts the press, outs Liberace, and files as well as unsuccessfully fights for palimony. Years after the acrimonious split, Liberace, weakened by HIV/AIDS, calls Scott to inquire about his health, and by extension his own status, and asks Scott to visit with him before his death, which is later falsely publicized as a result of cardiac arrest. In the last scenes of the film, Scott attends Liberace's lackluster funeral, and imagines a different, more opulent send off for Liberace—an encore with feathers, a Rolls Royce, a sumptuous fur coat, vintage Vegas showgirls, and an aerial exit from the stage.

Behind the Candelabra revels in the stereotypical image of the pederast as a pitiful old 'queen' who must pay for the intimate company of young men. The film imagines Liberace engaging in a systematic approach to what seems like an endless string of young, gay male lovers: he woos them, relocates them to his home, showers them with lavish gifts and his unrelenting attention, offers them prominence by incorporating them into his shows, and discards them when he has grown weary of them. According to Scott Thorson, one of Liberace's many young lovers, "it was his [Liberace's] way, his lifelong pattern" (189). Early in the film, the writing is on the wall. In one scene, Liberace's

houseboy, Carlucci attempts to set an unruly Scott straight about his inevitably fleeting position in the mansion. Irritated with Scott's treatment of him, he retorts:

Here's what's going to happen. You listening? You think you're so hot and sexy with your hard ass and that bisexual bullshit. You know how many there have been? Bobby, Hans, Chase. Oh, and some country boy stripper who was so dumb he wore his G-string backward. He got rid of all of them. But I'm still here. And one day, Lee is going to call Seymour and he's going to tell him to get rid of you. (*Behind the Candelabra*)

The statement indicates an alarming cycle of exploitation and foreshadows Scott's ill-fated relationship to Liberace. By Carlucci's account, Scott is not necessarily unique but a number in a seemingly long line of adolescent boys that Liberace has pursued, purchased, and discarded.

On the one hand, this depiction of Liberace conjures images of age-inappropriate (hetero)sexual figures like the 'sugar daddy,' 'cradle robber,' and the feminized 'cougar.' By definition, these terms cast the older partner of an age-variant couple as active predators or aggressors, and imply that an age-variant relationship, straight or queer, "could never be one based on equality and shared desire" (Ames and Burcon 171). Arguably, Scott, like Liberace's other young companions, is a 'sugar baby;' that is, an attractive, young sexual partner who participates in a transactional relationship with a much older partner, who is popularly imagined as being unable to attract a young romantic or sexual partner otherwise. After all, Scott enters into the arrangement with Liberace with at least some understanding that he will be compensated as "a companion" (*Behind the Candelabra*). Despite his foster parents' concerns about what "that kind of job" (*Behind the Candelabra*) might entail, Scott assures them that the poorly defined

arrangement “pays better than getting two” jobs, and thus is mutually beneficial: Scott reassures, “I can take care of him. And he can take care of me” (*Behind the Candelabra*). Indeed, the relationship is largely painted as transactional, exploitative, and eventually ruinous, especially for Scott. In these ways, Liberace and Scott’s relationship looks no different from heterosexual, asymmetrical and inequitable relationships. In a review of the film, Emily Nussbaum characterizes Scott and Liberace’s relationship as

a typical Hollywood marriage...[where] a powerful star spots a young blonde, drapes her in jewelry, foots the bill for plastic surgery to suit his fetishes, and makes promises of security that ping all her daddy issues...He’s her sugar daddy, the one who calls her Baby. (Nussbaum)

This reading situates the older yet wealthy, powerful, and influential gay man as being no different than heterosexual patriarchy; Soderbergh’s Liberace, Nussbaum implies, is simply a gay Hugh Hefner.

On the other hand, the archetype of the aging gay man who cycles through young innocents and is unable to form lasting relationships evokes the enduring stereotype of “the aging queen qua paedophile” (Knauer 58). Nancy Knauer argues that this stereotype emerged from U.S. American psychoanalytical explanations of homosexuality as experiential rather than as congenital in the first half of the twentieth century. “Made—not born” (24), homosexuals were thought to exist as a result of a cycle of pedophilic abuse:

the homosexual lifecycle began with the seduction of an innocent by an older homosexual. The early seduction would trigger a phobic response to the opposite sex, causing the young victim to become a homosexual. The victim would then mature into an unhappy and disaffected homosexual who would

in turn prey on young children and the cycle of perversion and seduction would continue. (Knauer 24)

Effectively collapsing same-gender desire and pedophilia (a psychiatric disorder), homosexuality is constructed as contagious or infectious, and the older gay adult is conceived as the necessary site of transmission. Indeed, Gust Yep and colleagues argue that the depiction of Liberace in *Behind the Candelabra* reinforces the “cultural stereotype of gay men as sexually predatory” (70). They argue that Liberace “reifies popular conceptions of the hypersexual older gay man who preys on seemingly ‘innocent’ younger men...to satisfy his unquenchable sexual appetite” (70). Though the rendering of Liberace as oversexed defies a conventional image of “old people as sexless” (Walz 100), Yep and colleagues contend that the film’s portrayal of aging gay sexuality risks recuperating a dated stereotype of gay men as hypersexual predators.

Notably, the portrait of Liberace, especially the handling of his breakups, is rendered more sympathetically in Thorson’s memoir *Behind the Candelabra: My Life with Liberace* than in Soderbergh’s HBO adaptation. The film exaggerates Liberace’s ruthless indifference to and efficient method for replacing his young lovers. In the film, Mr. Leatherwood is swiftly dismissed from his dual position as Liberace’s business and romantic partner, and forcibly escorted from Liberace’s home at the same moment that Scott is welcomed into the mansion. The transition runs like clockwork; one young lover moves out while one even younger lover moves in. In Thorson’s memoir, however, Liberace tells Scott that ‘Jerry O’Rourke’ (the inspiration for Mr. Leatherwood’s character in Soderbergh’s adaptation) must continue to live in the house until his contract is finished, suggesting that the rejected paid lover was remunerated fairly. In the memoir,

the dismissed former lover is removed from Liberace's room and relocated to another room in the mansion; he is not immediately ejected from the mansion as the film depicts. The film's timeline and execution of Mr. Leatherwood's departure differ greatly from the memoir's description of the break-up. Though both texts depict Liberace as methodical and stonyhearted in his consumption of teenage boys, this scene overstates Liberace as an especially calculated predator.

From the beginning to the end of his relationship with Scott, Soderbergh's Liberace is portrayed as manipulative. For instance, Liberace often makes empty promises to Scott to corner and control him when he is alone and vulnerable. Liberace asks Scott to fly to Las Vegas to treat his dog's eyes: "*I promise you, I'll fly you right back to L.A. after my first show. I promise,*" Liberace assures Scott (*Behind the Candelabra*, emphasis added). This promise, far from being fulfilled, is followed by an immediate cut to both men, naked, soaking and drinking in a hot tub. The juxtaposition between the promise and the outcome produces a humorous effect in the film's narrative. Again, later that night, when Scott expresses apprehension at Liberace's unmistakable sexual advances, Liberace persuades Scott to stay over at his place, in his bed, with another promise: "Look, I completely understand, and *I promise I'll stay on my side of the bed. I promise*" (*Behind the Candelabra*, emphasis added). Scott, in spite of the spoken agreement, recoils in alarm whenever Liberace moves in bed, indicating fear and suspicion of Liberace's intentions. Scott's instincts about Liberace are confirmed the following morning when Scott awakes to Liberace's wolfish grin, which is focused on Scott's off-screen morning erection. Liberace, despite Scott's look of discomfort, treats

Scott's erection as an invitation to perform oral sex. These early scenes immediately render Liberace as guileful, and his promises as meaningless.

Nearing the complete deterioration of the relationship, Liberace engages in emotionally abusive tactics to evade accountability for his calculating and deceitful behaviour. For instance, after suggesting that they open their relationship to other sexual partners, Liberace (though more likely to take advantage of the arrangement) becomes irrationally accusatory and provokes unnecessary strife to justify the dissolution of their relationship. Instigating conflict, Liberace accuses Scott of exploiting him, his generosity, and his wealth: "You're just like the rest of them. All I do is give and give and give. All you want is what you can get out of me. I bet you can't wait for me to die so then you can get everything" (*Behind the Candelabra*). The cunning tactic positions Scott as predator and Liberace as victim, evoking the distorted narrative Liberace once peddled to Scott about his relationship with Mr. Leatherwood. Meanwhile, Liberace has, indeed, started to pursue a new young lover. After Scott witnesses an enamored Liberace flirting with the much younger opening act of the show, a configuration all too familiar to him, Scott becomes increasingly agitated and aggrieved. Suspecting that he is being replaced like his predecessor was, he confronts Liberace about "that boy" (*Behind the Candelabra*). Although Liberace is engaging in the same cycle of abuse that displaced Mr. Leatherwood, Liberace blames Scott's addiction for the accusations. Liberace, once again, deflects attention from his transgressions by using Scott's vulnerabilities against him.

Relatedly, Liberace's insatiable "desire to have sexual variety with a younger lover" (Thorson 177), to consume youth, is matched by his pursuit to appropriate youth.

After observing his aged appearance on television, Liberace, worried that he is beginning to look like his “father in drag,” seeks cosmetic surgery (*Behind the Candelabra*).

Though the doctor ensures that Liberace will “look as young as Scott,” a benchmark of youth, Liberace inquires about surgery for the twenty-year-old without his prior knowledge or consent (*Behind the Candelabra*). To Scott’s surprise, Liberace presents the comically taut and expressionless plastic surgeon Dr. Jack Startz (Rob Lowe) with a cumbersome painting of a younger rendering of himself. In this scene, Liberace’s obsession with youth and his narcissism are underscored. Liberace’s pursuit to suspend youth, however, is depicted as a shared norm among gay men rather than a unique preference. In one scene, Scott divulges his reservations about the surgery to Bob (Scott Bakula), his mentor, friend, previous lover, and initiator into all things gay and Hollywood:

Bob: Are you fucking kidding me? The man wants to spend to make you thinner, prettier, and younger and you’re thinking about not doing it.

Scott: But I *am* young.

Bob: Honey, in gay years, you’re Judy during the Sid-Luft-obese-period.

Scott: Really? They were talking about me like I wasn’t even there.

Bob: If Lee doesn’t get what he wants, *you won’t be*.

Scott: [sighs] Well, I guess I should be flattered, him wanting me to look like him. (*Behind the Candelabra*)

The exchange illustrates the conditional dynamic of Scott and Liberace’s relationship; the *elective* surgery is less chosen and more mandatory for the continuation of the relationship. The exchange between Scott and the older, trusted adviser also underlines subcultural beliefs that gay men value an “attractive presentation of the body” above all (Jones and Pugh 251) and are governed by gay-specific temporalities (‘gay years’). The

temporal reference to “Judy during the Sid-Luft-obese-period” refers to the last decade of gay icon Judy Garland’s career and life—a time when she notoriously became visibly fatter and older. The comparison between twenty-year-old Scott and forty-year-old Garland implies that Scott, ‘in gay years,’ is already over the hill, past his prime, declining, and is in crucial need of beauty- and body-work. The revelation evokes the concept of ‘accelerated aging’ and gay men’s early identification with aging (Bennett and Thompson, 1991; Goltz, 2010; Jones and Pugh, 2015); that is, that “gay men perceive themselves to be old at a much earlier chronological age than their heterosexual counterparts” (Jones and Pugh 256). Bob’s message is clear: If Scott is to keep the attention and stay in the graces of the powerful and philandering Liberace, though old himself, he must maintain a youthful appearance, even if it is not his own.

In addition to Liberace’s thirst for youth, made apparent by his predilection for teenage boys and the sizeable amounts of bodywork he underwent to defy physical signs of aging, the film underscores an alarming narcissism that evokes the incest taboo. Once Scott acquiesces to Liberace’s wishes and completes a grueling cycle of bodywork, including a nose job, the injection of silicone implants in the cheeks and chin, and a compulsory diet, he does indeed resemble a younger, blonde-haired version of Liberace. Liberace and Scott share a familial resemblance that is mistaken for genetic inheritance. At a Liberace show a fan asks Scott, “you’re Liberace’s son, aren’t you?” (*Behind the Candelabra*). Later, Scott relays the story to Liberace during an argument. Liberace is tickled by the idea that Scott was misrecognized as his son.

The scene is interesting for the way it situates father-son dynamics as distinct from or exterior to sex. The father-son dynamic, or the daddy/boy configuration

discussed previously, is not articulated before, during, or after sex as an expression of erotic role-playing or ‘daddy playing’, as was the case in other representations of age-gap relations (e.g., Dom/Lynn in *Looking* and Ben/Michael in *Tales of the City*). Instead, a father-son dynamic is most clearly and repeatedly articulated through a discussion of adoption. In one scene, several months into their relationship, Liberace enjoys a post-sex cigarette, and shares with Scott his regrets about being childless:

Liberace: I’ve always wanted children. I regret that—not having children. I love Christmas. I think I’d be a good daddy, don’t you think?

Scott: Oh, you’re such a loving man.

Liberace: Mmm. Well, maybe I’ll adopt you. I want you to take the money that you’re earning and buy a house here in Las Vegas. I’ll co-sign. But it’ll be in your name, so you’ll have some security. Would you like that?

Scott: Lee, are you serious?

Liberace: I want to be everything to you, Scott. I want to be father, brother, lover, best friend, everything. You know I love you. Does that mean anything to you? Maybe all those years, all those foster homes. Maybe I’m your real family. (*Behind the Candelabra*)

In the absence of actual biological children, as well as perhaps the channels to produce them, Liberace suggests that Scott be his child. The scene, which evokes and complicates dated stereotypes about gay men as pedophilic predators as well as developmentally stunted men with absent fathers, perversely draws together ideas of chosen family, fictive kinship, gay parenthood, adoption, and incest. Through adoption Lee can demonstrate his commitment to another man, one he happens to be sexually and romantically involved with.

Friends and family, gay and straight, receive news of Liberace and Scott’s arrangement as perplexing. For instance, during one of Scott’s infrequent calls to

his foster family, he tells his foster mother Rose that Liberace is preparing to adopt him. “*Adopt* you? I don’t understand. Why would a grown man want to adopt another grown man,” Rose questions in confusion (*Behind the Candelabra*). Scott replies, “So we can be family” (*Behind the Candelabra*). Similarly, in a later scene when Scott, panicked about his slipping sense of security in his relationship, confides in a friend about Liberace’s unfulfilled promise to adopt him; his baffled friend scoffs, “really? You can adopt someone you’re fucking? That’s a great law” (*Behind the Candelabra*). In both instances, the strange arrangement is unintelligible.

John R. Yoakam, reviewing the scholarly literature about, and historical examples of, intergenerational gay male relationships, traces a history or at least a precedent for the type of fictive and ‘perverse’ kinship explored in *Behind the Candelabra*. Of the historical examples cited in his work, two are of particular relevance for the discussion of the father-son dynamics demonstrated in *Behind the Candelabra*. In both cases, the older gay man takes his younger gay lover as a son:

Their [W. Somerset Maugham and Alan Searle’s] relationship lasted 19 years. Maugham adopted Seale as his son in an attempt to cut his daughter, Elizabeth, out of his will. But his daughter had the adoption nullified and had herself restored as the writer’s legal heir. (Yoakam 73)

[James] Inscot adopted [Harry Stack] Sullivan’s last name as his own and became known as his ‘foster son,’ living with the psychologist for 22 years, serving as Sullivan’s secretary, housekeeper, office manager, and long-time companion until Harry’s death in 1949. Inscot inherited the psychologist’s entire estate. (Yoakam 73)

Both examples demonstrate that legal adoption has previously been used strategically in both England (though unsuccessfully) and the United States by gay couples of disparate ages as recourse to their exclusion from the social and legal benefits of marriage. The father-son dynamics often articulated through adoption, though unsettling for their incestuous implications and dangerous associations to boy-man love, has a “poignant legal logic” (Nussbaum) when one considers the socio-political climate for gays. Richard Brody argues that at the heart of *Behind the Candelabra* is a “marriage that couldn’t speak its name or take its form, because a marriage is precisely the creation of a new family” (Brody). Without access to marriage, paternity could grant Scott and Liberace legal and public status as kin. Soderbergh’s complicated portrait of a charming yet disreputable aging gay man, I argue, repurposes *disturbing* and *dated* motifs to explore ‘older’ gay kinship forms that increasingly appear ‘backward.’

3.5 Sexualizing Granddaddies or Old Queens: *Gerontophilia*

The final representational category of older gay men in cross-generational relationships is the sexualized granddaddy. Given “the western obsession with the body of youth” (Woodward “Performing” 62), Canadian director Bruce LaBruce’s *Gerontophilia* is as revolutionary as its elder-worshipping protagonist Lake. Over a decade after Yoakam issued his invitation to imagine a film that depicted a young man longing for and after a man of *a certain age*, LaBruce offered audiences *Gerontophilia*, a film about an adolescent French-Canadian teenager who has an erotic orientation toward the elderly or toward what some gerontologists call ‘the old-old.’ Described as a

“romantic-comedy about a love triangle between two young people and a rather old man,” *Gerontophilia* is a film that suggests “that we should do more than just respect our elders” (Abrams). In an interview for *IndieWire*, queer director LaBruce provocatively describes *Gerontophilia*, though initially conceptualized as “a gay *Harold and Maude*,” as “a reverse *Lolita*” (Knegt). Indeed, *Gerontophilia* flips the power-laden gaze; an obsession with *old age* rather than *youth* is foregrounded in the film.

The film centers on Lake (Pier Gabriel Lajoie), an attractive, sexually ambiguous 19-year-old, and his sexual proclivity for older bodies, especially those of men. Although the film opens to the passionate sounds of Lake and his age-appropriate girlfriend Desiree (Katie Boland) breathlessly kissing, it takes but a minute for the narrative to establish that Lake has a competing or, perhaps, dominant attraction to much older men. In one of the first scenes, Lake lingers at a crosswalk in a reverie as he adoringly stares at an elderly crossing guard who slowly approaches him. Following this scene, Lake, fixated on his sketch of an older swimmer rather than the pool he is meant to be supervising, realizes that the model of his artwork is unresponsive. During slow, drawn-out shots that make plain the eroticization of older bodies, Lake performs mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on the elderly man and, as a result, experiences a shamefully revealing erection. After his swift departure from his duties as a lifeguard, Lake’s mother secures him a job at an assisted living facility or “the wrinkle ranch,” as Lake’s boss uncharitably refers to it (*Gerontophilia*). Here he meets Mr. Melvyn Peabody (Walter Borden), an 81-year-old, Black gay man who resides at the facility. Lake and the charming self-proclaimed “old queen” quickly strike up an explicitly erotic connection, and after Lake witnesses the

unnecessary and callous drugging of Melvyn, he promises, “I’m going to get you out of here” (*Gerontophilia*).

With the help of his sympathetic ex-girlfriend, Lake breaks Melvyn out of the care home, a repeated trope in films starring older adults (Chivers “Blind;” Kriiebernegg). A road movie of sorts, *Gerontophilia* takes to the wintry Canadian highway, with the hopes of fulfilling Melvyn’s wish to see the Pacific Ocean one last time. Outlaws on the road, Melvyn offers a playful twist on the daddy/boy dynamics of the previous texts explored when he introduces Lake as his grandson to nosy onlookers: “this is my grandson...although some days, I really wish he weren’t. He’s quite the looker, isn’t he?” (*Gerontophilia*). Reminding viewers that the film is a quintessential May-December romance as well, Melvin recites lines from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73 (a poem that employs winter imagery and thus themes about old age and death) to Lake, who articulates not lust but love for Melvyn on his final night and incidentally last birthday. As the sonnet foreshadows, Melvin passes away in his sleep in a Canadian motel after spending a sensual night with Lake, a scene that recalls *Harold and Maude*’s sexual transgression and its attendant punishment. However, Lake, unlike Harold after the death of his age-inappropriate beloved Maude, is not returned to the safe confines of heteronormativity, nor his age-appropriate girlfriend Desiree. Instead, in the film’s final scene, Lake introduces himself to the elderly crossing guard seen at the beginning of the narrative. The crossing guard considers Lake’s implicit overture, looks Lake up and down, resonant with Melvin’s earlier looks of excitement and suspicion, and smiles. The *mise-en-scène* promises that the cycle has been reset: no longer winter, spring brings a new opportunity—a new chance for romance with someone in the winter of life.

Gerontophilia received generally unfavorable attention from popular commentators. Commentators described *Gerontophilia* as “mild” (Rapoid), “tame and lifeless” (Hoffman), and “kinder, gentler” and “immediately palatable” (Abrams), implying that the film marks an obvious departure from LaBruce’s oeuvre, which is renowned for its pornographic quality. Scholarly reviews of the film, however, illustrate that *Gerontophilia* develops many of LaBruce’s typical themes, such as his traditional queering of sexual desires, sexual identifications, and beauty norms, including those relating to queer subcultures (Richardson; McGowan). Specifically, Jasmine McGowan argues that *Gerontophilia* is “consistent with LaBruce’s strategy of queer punk negation,” which she traces through his oeuvre from his seminal role in the formation of ‘queercore,’ also known as ‘homocore,’ to his more commercial *Gerontophilia* (McGowan).

Gerontophilia does indeed challenge categorical understandings of sexuality and sex. For example, Lake and Desiree are presented as an unconventional, though hetero-passing, couple from the opening scenes of the film. The film opens to passionate kissing that overlaps the opening credits; a teenage boy and girl kiss. Each kiss is fervently pointed by the name of a woman revolutionary: “Lizzie Borden, Violette Nozière, Ulrike Meinhof, Kim Gordon, Patty Hearst...” (*Gerontophilia*). After speaking the final name, Desiree gasps in ecstasy. Kissing, but also fantasizing about women, brings Desiree to the climax of an orgasm. Moreover, Lake is unperturbed by Desiree’s erotic fixation with women, especially controversial women. The scene defies conventional teenage sex scenes, which are generally undergirded by heterosexist and gendered assumptions, including the expectation that if anyone should ‘get off’ in the scene it should be the boy

and ideally through the pinnacle of heterosexual romance—vaginal-penile sexual intercourse. The unusual, even strange, kissing scene situates Desiree as aroused by at least two genders, complicating a straightforward interpretation of the couple as heterosexual from the beginning.

Lake's sexuality is similarly represented as ambiguous, dangerous even. Niall Richardson argues that the film's opening scenes deploy "the cinematic clichés that have been used to signify 'perversity'" (189). In successive shots, Lake's gaze moves from a dead bird, to children, to an elderly crossing guard. According to Richardson, the narrative sequence "distinguish[es] gerontophilia from both necrophilia and paedophilia" (190). Lake is, as the film's title strongly intimates, a gerontophile, a person with a sexual preference for the elderly. Coined by Richard von Kraft-Ebing in *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1901, the term 'gerontophilia' refers to "the love of persons of advanced age" (Kraft-Ebing qtd. in Bering 169). The gender-neutral "persons" in Krafft-Ebing's definition is key to understanding Lake's sexuality. Though shown sexually and romantically invested in men for the majority of the film, Lake defies neat sexual categorization as a gay or even bisexual teenage boy. Put simply, Lake's sexual identity is determined more by his orientation toward age rather than gender. Lake's sexual desire for older bodies, irrespective of gender, is made plain by his compromising sketches. When Desiree furtively rifles through Lake's sketchbook, she reveals to the audience an array of wrinkled and sagging bodies of both men and women. Acknowledging that Lake is "a gerontophile and not 'otherwise gay-identified'" is key, McGowan argues, to understanding *Gerontophilia* as an extension of rather than a break from LaBruce's queer oeuvre. For McGowan, Lake's fetish for older bodies is what is obscene, unsettling, and

queer. McGowan argues that *Gerontophilia* retains LaBruce's radical edge in the way it criticizes society's general disapproval of cross-generational intimacy and its dismissal of older adults as legitimate romantic and sexual options.

As Richardson has argued, *Gerontophilia* reworks the erotic power dynamics of past age-variant films, such as *Gods and Monsters* (1998) and *Love and Death on Long Island* (1997), "in which the older, gay man pursues the affections of much younger men" (189). Lake, unlike the young object of desire in these previous films, serves as the stand-in for the audience to identify with rather than look at. In turn, the audience sees Melvyn from Lake's perspective, through the eyes of a much younger man who desires much older men. Melvyn rather than Lake is the site of erotic investment. In *Gerontophilia* the object of desire is unequivocally the older, soft and wrinkled body whose "iconography usually inspires erotic numbness if not even revulsion" (189). Queering "the youthful structure of the look" (Woodward *Aging* 62), Lake re-conceptualizes visible signs of aging, such as wrinkles, slack skin, lesions, varicose veins, and loss of body hair (signs that are otherwise popularly treated as unsightly), as alluring and exquisite instead.

For instance, in one of their first scenes together, Lake is tasked with giving Melvyn a bath. The often-despised duty of washing a patient's body is re-imagined as a titillating activity for both the resident and the care assistant. As one commentator observes, the sponge bath scene "is filmed lovingly for the sake of earnestly relating what Lake sees when he looks at [Melvyn] Peabody" (Abrams). Bathed in soft lighting and accompanied by mesmerizing music that repeats the refrain "I'll never let you go," we see Lake slowly and tenderly wash Melvyn's body. Tight intimate shots focus on particular parts of Melvyn's naked body, namely, an erect nipple that is circled and

stimulated by a sponge Lake holds. In shots of close-up flesh, varicose veins are visible on Melvyn's relatively hairless Black body. This rare *mise-en-scène* demonstrates an appreciation for and worship of the eroticized body of an octogenarian, a body generally deemed "difficult to imagine" (Woods qtd. in Gatling et al. 23) and almost certainly 'unwatchable' when sexualized (Walz; Vares). These images are unsettling and shocking because not only do they defy contemporary notions of beauty and sexiness (Richardson), but they also force the spectator to view the old, Black, gay, and effeminate body, a "stubbornly less visible" representation of gay men (Johnson Jr. 227), through Lake's adoring gaze.

In later scenes, Lake verbally confirms his compulsion to the aging body. In one scene, Melvyn shows Lake a picture of a much younger version of himself. Somewhat unrecognizable in the picture, Melvyn notes, "that's me. I was in rather good shape, don't you think?" (*Gerontophilia*). Defying convention, Lake responds, "I guess so. I like the way you look now" (*Gerontophilia*). Melvyn receives the curious comment with incredulity yet amusement. Again, later in the film, after exploiting ageist structures that treat old women and men as invisible, Melvyn shows Lake that he has stolen sun block from the gas station. Lake offended, confiscates the bottle: "I already told you, I like your wrinkles" (*Gerontophilia*). The scene confirms that Lake, a 'true' gerontophile, finds Melvin attractive not in spite of his wrinkles, but precisely because he has wrinkles. Lake's appreciation of the old body challenges the supremacy of youthism in society generally, but also in gay male subcultures as well.

Traditionally, the older gay man has been cast as "monstrous and predatory" and as "always subject to the humiliation of young boys" (Goltz *Queer* 64). *Gerontophilia*,

however, reworks the conventional power dynamics of previous representations of gay aging that situate older men as predatory. Given the representational legacies of the “dirty old man” (Walz 100) and “the aging queen qua paedophile” (Knauer 58), one might expect the representation of an elderly gay man to be especially associated with predation. As a Black elderly gay man, Melvyn’s sexuality is arguably triply at risk of such an interpretation, given that Black male sexuality has traditionally been characterized as hypersexual, aggressive, and promiscuous (hooks; Hill Collins). However, Melvyn defies these stereotypes, and is rendered quite sympathetically as a sexually desiring and desirable older gay man or, as he teases, an ‘old queen’. Arguably, Melvyn’s depiction dodges these filmic tropes of aged sexuality because he is portrayed as reactive rather than active. In other words, Melvyn represents a palatable representation of aging gay male sexuality because he is pursued.

Melvyn’s roommate, however, who is rendered inappropriately sexual in his onscreen appearances, arguably fulfills a similar function to Grandpa Gustafson in *Grumpy Old Men* (1993) and *Grumpier Old Men* (1995). In his first appearance, the roommate is depicted as a sexual voyeur, furtively spying on Lake undressing Melvyn behind a cracked curtain. Later, he is portrayed as a debauched degenerate, casually masturbating to a sexually explicit magazine next to his slumbering roommate. When Lake, high on psychotropic drugs intended for the elderly residents, enters Melvyn’s shared room, he stumbles upon the licentious neighbour. Caught in the act yet unflinching, the neighbour pauses briefly before Lake removes his clothing and closes the dividing curtain; the neighbour audaciously continues to masturbate as Lake approaches the foot of his bed with a lustful grin comparable to the smirk of Douglas’s Liberace.

These scenes mark Melvyn's roommate's sex as voyeuristic, casual, public *as well as* cross-generational, and arguably function to naturalize Lake's sexual acts with Melvyn.

Moreover, save for the hypersexual roommate, it is the young, teenage characters that occupy the role of predatory and dangerous sexuality. An inversion of traditional power dynamics, Desiree and Lake produce unease. When Lake is critical of one of Desiree's role models, she becomes defensive and vindictive. She accepts a date with her much older boss Mr. Guerrero (Brian D. Wright) to spite Lake. During the date, Desiree makes inappropriate and confusing overtures at Mr. Guerrero who appears uncomfortable and even worried when Desiree jokingly says she will have to kill him. In the scene following, Lake sketches a semi-naked and sleeping Melvyn. Smirking at his unconscious body, Lake sketches Melvyn's torso and head. He is thoughtful for a moment, before reaching forward to pull down the sheet covering Melvyn's lower naked half. The spectator is complicit in the transgression. Lake continues to sketch the parts of Melvyn that were previously hidden and exaggerates the size of Melvin's penis. Lake looks around anxiously and then puts the sketchbook away to masturbate to Melvyn's naked, unconscious body. Given Melvyn's unconscious state and inability to consent, the scene is alarming. Again, arguably these scenes serve to defamiliarize the portrait of the "aging queen qua paedophile" (Knauer 58).

Despite the film's radical reworking of dynamics related to age, race, and sexuality, the film as previously suggested has been harshly criticized, especially among gay commentators, for its less 'radical' depiction of gay culture, including gay sex. For example, one commentator writes, "while the severely May-December romance at the film's center certainly breaks taboos in itself, it doesn't feature explicit sex—a first in

LaBruce's filmography" (Knegt). Peter Knegt's observation, representative of *Gerontophilia's* critical reception generally, suggests that the film is without visuals of sex. Building from the general view that *Gerontophilia* is a softer, less sexually explicit shift from LaBruce's 'raunchy' canon, and from Richardson and McGowan's celebratory critiques of the film, I argue that LaBruce's *Gerontophilia* actually offers a radical depiction of sex, one that defies and expands limited notions of what constitutes sex. The film, I argue, can be imagined as sexless in part because it values forms of intimate tactility that challenge the sexual norms of what Tom Shakespeare and colleagues call 'fucking ideology' (96). According to critical disability scholars, 'fucking ideology' constructs *successful, normal, and healthy* sexual interactions between (heterosexual and cisgender) bodies as those that are penetrative, necessary, orgasmic, genital-oriented, mutually satisfying, and without assistive devices, such as care aids, chairs, and lifts but also other aids like sex toys (Shakespeare et al.; Liddiard). Within this paradigm, sex that falls outside of this set of sexual norms is rendered incoherent, unrecognizable, and failed. Notably, 'fucking ideology,' while oppressive for many groups of people, including lesbians and gays who generally do not derive sexual pleasure from vaginal-penile sex, as well as asexual persons who exhibit a lack of desire for sexual activity, is also oppressive for "disabled people, who often cannot operate according to 'fucking ideology,' because of difficulty with positioning, erectile dysfunction, etc." (Shakespeare 97). Though 'fucking ideology' has proven to be a successful concept for studies reporting on the lived experiences of people with disabilities (Shakespeare et al.; Liddiard), 'fucking ideology' remains relatively unexplored in relation to representations

of the aging sexual body, which also can and does experience bodily changes that can make ‘fucking ideology’ an impossible goal.

I argue that the film renders sex more, rather than less, expansive. Unlike films that subscribe to the representational logics of the ‘sexy senior’ (Marshall), *Gerontophilia* includes considerations of how erotic logics might very well change through the life course. In a systematic review of the literature on later life sexuality, Lieslot Mahieu and Chris Gastmans found that older adults in institutionalized care settings express themselves sexually in a variety of ways, some of which *do* align with widely acknowledged sexual practices, indicating that intercourse and other predictable sexual expressions are not the sole territory of young/er bodies. Notably though, Mahieu and Gastmans’s list of sexual expressions also includes behaviours that regularly evade dominant definitions of sex, including daydreaming, reminiscing, reading romantic and erotic books, flirting, giving compliments, being physical proximate, holding hands, hugging, touching, stroking, caressing, kissing, and feeling fascinated (1900). These findings indicate a need for recognizing and affirming the sexual practices of older adults that fall outside of the remit of ‘fucking ideology’.

In addition to queering sexual identity and desire (McGowan; Richardson), *Gerontophilia*, I argue, queers ‘fucking ideology’. Melvyn’s sex scenes, associated generally with intimacy rather than sex and eroticism, offer a challenge to dominant depictions of youthful, heterosexist, masculinized, and thus ‘hard’ depictions of sex that are premised on erections, penetration, and orgasms. For instance, in their first sexual encounter Lake gives Melvyn a sponge bath. During the erotic sequence, close-up shots of body parts traditionally not understood as sexual organs, such as the neck, legs,

nipples, armpits, arms, hands, and fingers, are framed as sites of sexual excitement, titillation, and pleasure. Though rarely represented as such, many of the body parts pictured in these libidinal scenes hold great significance for sex acts commonly associated with queer bodies (e.g., fingering, fisting, bondage, and nipple stimulation) and disabled bodies (e.g., caressing ‘atypical’ erogenous areas). Not to mention, these fleshy parts are relatively genderless when isolated in tight frames, reinforcing a queer aesthetic that prioritizes pleasure over identity (McGowan). Though the film does briefly reference a singular instance of off-screen penetrative sex, touch rather than penetration generally patterns the sexual intimacy between *Gerontophilia*’s May-December couple. Similar framings are used in their final sexual encounter, where Melvin and Lake share sensual touches in slow motion: Melvin slowly traces the contours of Lake’s ear, cheek, nose, and lips with his fingertips, and Lake reciprocates, caressing Melvin’s chest, collar bone, back, and shoulder. The tight and slow shots recall a scene in *Beginners* where Andy, a much younger man, sensually styles Hal’s hair. Such scenes displace the primacy of penetration and ejaculation in both mainstream and queer (cisgender) male subcultures, valuing other forms of sensuality, intimacy, and eroticism.

In *Gerontophilia*, erotic scenes between a teenager and a very old man eroticize non-genital parts of the body, and arguably recall Michel Foucault’s quite famous insistence that S/M practices, especially fisting, “produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations” (“Sex” 165). In “The Gay Science,” Foucault argues that inventive and non-normative uses of the body, such as “fist fucking or other extraordinary fabrications of pleasure,” can serve as a “desexualized, devirilized” and thus subversive form of relationality for gay men (396).

For David Halperin, Foucault's concept of 'desexualized, devirilized' pleasure more precisely translates as non-genital pleasure: "By desexing (that is, degenitalizing) bodily pleasure, gay male S/M practices make possible the creation of a masculine sexual identity that need no longer be centered in the penis (or that finds new uses for the penis which mortify rather than celebrate it)" (90). By this logic, touch and caresses might be also understood as a desexualized, that is, *degenitalizing*, and thus a devirilized form of pleasure. In drawing this comparison, I do not mean to set up a false binary, whereby penetrative sex is un-queer and non-genital sex is queer. Instead, I draw attention to these scenes to argue that *Gerontophilia* offers a different representation of the sexualized queer elder—one that need not depend on hard bodies or 'fucking ideology' to eroticize older 'queeny' gay men engaged in cross-generational relations.

When commentators dismiss the eroticism and sexual expressions within *Gerontophilia* as 'tame' or 'absent,' they risk perpetuating the primacy of 'fucking ideology,' as well as the tenacious notion that older adults, especially those marked by the feminizing abjection of the fourth age (e.g., pain, dependence, loss, and 'dysfunction'), are without sexual erotic logics. Sexual, yet apparently without sex, Melvyn's construction also disrupts the conventions of the 'sexy senior' image, a role generally reserved for masculine, heterosexual, and white, 'tough-guy' actors, such as Jack Nicholson and Bruce Willis (Lennard; Wearing "Subjects"). Melvyn is sexually active but in a manner that is incommensurate with penetrative penile-vaginal intercourse, the benchmark of biomedical and positive aging discourses (Marshall and Katz; Sandberg "Just Feeling;" Calasanti and King). Neither his body, nor his penis is firm. And sexuopharmaceutical medications and technologies that could 'cure' sexual

‘dysfunction’ (e.g., Viagra) are not even referenced in the film, unlike *Behind the Candelabra*, which frames the loss of the erection as precisely that—a loss. The only reference to Melvyn’s penis is a singular shot of his flaccid penis that Lake sketches admiringly while Melvyn sleeps. Similar to earlier re-workings of the ‘youthful look’ wherein undesirable signs of age (e.g., wrinkles) are re-signified as desirable, Lake portrays the flaccid old body and penis with the grandness of a neoclassical nude, and thus renders the old gay male body a subject of beauty. The eroticization of Melvyn eschews ‘new aging’ agendas, specifically the imperative to firm “the floppy penis” (Calasanti and King), and challenges the “youthism” (Berger 190) of gay male culture, including its “hegemonic taste for, if not obsession with, appearance and celebrity” (Simpson 293), as well as popular depictions of gay aging as tragic (Goltz).

Gerontophilia’s portrait of the sexualized queer elder does not treat aging gay male sexuality as impotent, absent, pathetic, or disgusting. Instead, *Gerontophilia* offers a new construction of both ‘senior’ and ‘queer’ sex, one that recognizes that sex for many people, straight or queer, may look different than it did during earlier life stages.

LaBruce’s *Gerontophilia* thus offers more expansive understandings of sex, ones that are more inclusive of the bodies of aging and/or disabled individuals.

Generally, sexuality in later life is thought of as tame at best and non-existent at worst. Although ‘new aging’ constructions challenge the once dominant stance that later life is a time of natural sexual decline, they counterproductively perpetuate the notion that later life and sexuality are incompatible because they privilege and reproduce narrow and (hetero)normative understandings of sex (Marshall), ones that in effect exclude many groups of people who have sex without erections and without penile-vaginal penetration,

such as disabled, old, and/or queer people. Images and narratives that challenge ‘fucking ideology’ expand the definition of sex to include non-genital pleasure and make possible different ways of thinking about the articulation of sexuality in later life. It is my contention that *Gerontophilia* recognizes sexual pluralism in a way that might offer older adults, straight or queer, a more livable and inclusive portrait of sexuality in later life than the sexy senior construction can. Therefore, representations of cross-generational gay and bisexual male relationships can resist reductive and oppressive discourses of age and sexuality, providing more nuanced and generous interpretations of the sexualization of later life.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that representations of gay and bisexual male cross-generational relationships can and do reproduce reductive discourses of desiring aging gay men as predatory and exploitative, and cross-generational relationships as inferior and immature. At the same time, however, these representations also offer some possibilities that allow us to look backward to a time when older gay men held a more important role in gay and bisexual male culture, as well as forward to the expansion of youth-centric and ableist sexual norms that not only write off older subjects as desirable partners and sexual subjects. Specifically, I have identified three representational categories for depicting older gay men in age-variant relationships: the sexy daddy, the abject fem(me)inine daddy, and the sexualized granddaddy. To illustrate this argument, I have explored four texts that make visible cross-generational relations, a once venerated form of kinship that is increasingly becoming taboo with the mainstreaming of LGBT

identities. Although all four texts make cross-generational relationships visible in unprecedented ways, *Behind the Candelabra* and *Gerontophilia* are particularly fixated on the ‘lost,’ ‘ancient,’ and/or ‘backward’ forms of queer affiliation organized around age difference.

Sexy daddies, exemplified in the LGBT-themed series *Looking* and Morelli’s reboot of Maupin’s *Tales of the City*, arguably seek to ‘positively’ depict the sexualization of ‘older’ gay men in cross-generational relationships. In these representations, cross-generational relationships move away from the stigmatizing stereotype of older gay men as pedophilic by locating daddy-boy dynamics safely in the realm of sexual *play* between *adult* men. Although he exhibits a desire for younger men like the other ‘daddy’ figures, the ‘older’ gay man in these representations reflects an ‘aging’ masculinity that dodges the feminizing effects, indeed, the abjection of aging by remaining productive, hard, and fit. He is therefore youthful himself, an effect that further levels the age differential between younger and older partners. In these ways, sexy daddies embody perhaps a safe or palatable representation of cross-generational relationships generally and the erotization of older gay men specifically.

Sexy daddies differ from the backward-looking dynamics of the gay and bisexual cross-generational relationships at the center of the narratives of *Behind the Candelabra* and *Gerontophilia*, which both focus on the daddy- and granddaddy-boy dynamics between a visibly aging old gay man and an attractive, sexually ambiguous adolescent boy. While *Behind the Candelabra* revels in the stereotypes of the predatory aging old queen and age-gap couples as exploitative and inegalitarian, the film queers daddy-boy dynamics through ‘perverted’ adoption logics that simultaneously evoke historical gay

male kinship traditions, wherein older gays would mentor, ‘parent,’ or adopt young gays who were otherwise without access to a family that reflected their ways of being, and contemporary gay rights agendas that focus almost exclusively on marriage and procreation. Evoking the same stereotype of aging gay men as ‘old sickies’ who prey on innocent boys, *Gerontophilia* inverts the conventional power dynamics imagined between older gay men and adolescent boys. In *Gerontophilia*, an attraction to elderly gay men (those who could convincingly be misrecognized as granddaddies), though depicted as a pathological sexual perversion (i.e., ‘gerontophilia’), offers a defiant rejection of the youthism of both straight and queer culture, especially cisgender gay male subcultures. The ‘retrograde’ same-gender sex scenes, which displace hard bodies, erections, and ‘fucking’, valuing instead softer bodies and forms of sexual tactility, imagine a sexual culture for aging bodies. Taken together, the three contemporary representational categories make visible a longing for ‘disturbing’ sexual relations between adolescent boys (or young men) and older men—a dynamic that is overwhelmingly constructed as historical and thus as only ever *backward-looking*.

In the next chapter, I continue to explore the representational logics of cross-generational relationships containing the queer elder figure. Specifically, I investigate the raced dynamics of the intergenerational and interracial friendships of trans characters in the LGBT-themed television shows *Transparent* and *Tales of the City*.

Chapter 4

4 The Tragic Trans Elder: Reimagining Trans Aging and Futurity

“Life is short. Celebrate each transition” –tagline for *Transparent Musicale Finale*

“Ladies like us, we don’t live that long” –Ysela from *Tales of the City*

On December 17, 2014, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) released a report that provided an overview of the various forms of violence that lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex (LGBTI) persons experienced during a fifteen-month period (January 2013 to March 2014) in the Americas. The report found that gay men and trans persons, especially trans feminine individuals, were disproportionately affected by lethal gun violence. Corroborating this finding, a recent report from the Human Rights Campaign (HRC)—America’s largest LGBT advocacy group—found that, “since 2013, three-fourths of homicides against transgender people have involved a gun, and nearly eight in ten homicides of Black trans women involve a gun” (Acosta). As Black, femme scholar Che Gosset argues, “for Black trans women in particular, the struggle for life in all its capaciousness is a struggle against ongoing premature death” (“Blackness” 183). Since the release of IACHR report, violence against marginalized genders of colour, including racialized trans and cis women, trans men, and drag queens, has been crystalized by the Orlando, Florida LGBT nightclub massacre in 2017, and publicized by the Black Lives Matter, #SayHerName, and Black Trans Lives Matter demonstrations that occurred in 60 countries across the globe in spring 2020 after George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade (a Black trans man) were killed

through state-sanctioned violence. These events demonstrate that skin colour can determine life chances. Moreover, LGBT organizations and advocacy groups have routinely reported that the last couple of years have been especially lethal for transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, with each succeeding year being recorded as the deadliest yet (Roberts “Marking;” Cohen “2021 Marks”). Taken together, these developments throughout the last decade indicate that trans life, particularly Black, Afro-Latinx, and Latinx life, is increasingly under attack and vulnerable to compounding violence—a finding that has been given a considerable amount of attention in queer of colour and trans of colour scholarship that attends to discourses of trans death and trans necropolitics (Bettcher; Edelman “Walking”; Lamble; MacKenzie and Marcel; Salamon; Snorton and Haritaworn; Wood et al.; Valencia).

To return to the IACHR report previously mentioned, what was particularly unique to the document, and of particular relevance for my purposes here, is a disturbing statistic that underscores that trans death, in addition to being an outcome of racial and gendered dynamics, was and continues to be a matter concerning age dynamics. According to the 2014 report, “the life expectancy of trans women in the Americas is between 30 and 35 years of age” (3). A cursory glance of the HRC’s list of transgender and gender non-conforming victims fatally shot in 2020, reveals that over half of the victims were in their twenties when their lives were violently taken. The list is a grim reminder that for too many Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) and trans individuals, there simply is no future because death “is presumed and prescribed” for these populations (Shackelford 254; Muñoz *Cruising*; “Cruising”; Mallow; Smith). As José Esteban Muñoz reminds, “the future is only the stuff of some kids. Racialized kids,

queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity” (*Cruising* 95). Lives taken too early, these individuals depart from normative notions of the life course and aging; simply they will not grow old. ‘Out of time,’ these racialized and often poor individuals are also, Kara Keeling reminds:

Figure[s] of our time, one[s] we invoke as a way of making palpably present the objectionable distance between, for instance, the legality of gay marriage won in the United States by national lesbian and gay political organizations and an innovative, radical politics that looks after and therefore looks out for the lives of Black folks and queer and trans youth of color. (103, emphasis added)*

As ‘figures of our time,’ the deaths of trans people of colour have been used in the last decade by queer organizing (e.g., Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR) ceremonies) and liberal mainstream advocacy groups (e.g., HRC) to demonstrate the precarity of trans life. Critical of the ways in which dead young trans of colour communities become visible through the frame of ‘transgender’ instead of ‘Black’, ‘brown’, or ‘poor,’ Sarah Lamble argues that “the political narrative of TDOR has been reduced to a singular cause (transphobia) and a singular identity (victim of transphobic violence)” (33). In other words, often framed as victims of *trans* violence rather than *racial* violence (or through the interlocking oppressions of cissexism, sexism, *and* racism), the deaths of many trans people of colour only come to matter through their ‘use value’ to the fight for recognizing a race-less trans subject in hate crime legislation (Lamble). For Lamble, this discursive framing, which obscures the ways in which race and class disproportionately increase one’s vulnerability to violence, sustains the structures that threaten trans lives (e.g., white supremacy and colonialism), and “allows

Whites to deny the ways in which we/they enable and benefit from the ongoing legacy of colonial and racialized violence” (39). Discursive framings of trans death are thus often problematically at once about race and not about race.

Meanwhile, researchers studying population aging in Canada and the United States, among other countries situated in the Global North, have been warning about ‘the demographic time-bomb.’ In these accounts, aging and the old are framed as an expensive burden, a discourse some refer to as “apocalyptic demography” (Robertson; Gee and Gutman). And since, on average, women outlive men (a trend commonly referred to as the feminization of later life), this discourse is inherently gendered. Indeed, at the heart of this discourse is “*the problem of old women*” (Carney 246, original emphasis). These ageist and sexist discourses have been exacerbated most recently by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has reductively been framed in public discourse as “an ‘older adult’ problem” (Lichtenstein). Age studies scholar Margaret Morganroth Gullette argues that this ageist discourse has created a construction of a large, immensely diverse group of older adults as simply “those who tend to die,” a perspective that she argues irrevocably contributed to the disproportionate death toll of older adults during the pandemic (“Instead”). For example, in 2020, U.S. American President Donald Trump defied the information and advice of key public health officials, conflated the risks of COVID-19 with older adults, and demonstrated a complete disregard for the health and/or lives of this heterogeneous group people when he offered this information about COVID-19: “It affects elderly people, elderly people with heart problems and other problems. That’s what [sic] it really affects” (Bella). Framing the virus as largely affecting older adults, Trump maintained that the virus affected “nobody young” (Bella).

“It affects virtually nobody,” he concluded (Bella), making plain “a rhetoric of disposability” (Lichtenstein) in which older adults are essentially perceived to be ‘dispensable’ nobodies (Lush). Even seemingly benign campaigns that seek to prevent or reduce the spread of COVID-19, including the Government of Canada’s public statement that implores Canadians to limit their contact with older adults, “depict an oversimplification of both ‘age’ and the risks of COVID-19 associated with ‘age,’ which represents and reinforces ageism” (Meisner 2). The success of this oversimplification is evident in flippant yet popular designations for COVID-19, namely, ‘Boomer Remover’ and its various insensitive alternatives such as ‘Elder Repeller,’ ‘Boomer Doomer,’ ‘Grandma/Grandpa Killer,’ and ‘Senior Deleter’ (Meisner; Lichtenstein). Aside from evincing a straightforward connection between COVID-19 and the arbitrarily defined ‘old,’ the callous expressions demonstrate the intensification of intergenerational tensions between Millennials and Baby Boomers (i.e., ‘boomer-bashing’), and growing unbridled ageism in public discourse (Gullette *Aged*; “Instead”; Lichtenstein; Meisner). In his analysis of age-centric discourses related to COVID-19, social gerontologist Brad A. Meisner observes that social media users have implied that COVID-19 has been created to:

Efficiently address global and domestic overpopulation by targeting older adults and sparing the lives of children, youth, and younger adults; decrease the demand and burden that older adults put on health care and tax systems; remove older adults from society so that more jobs, opportunities, and resources can be provided to younger and healthier people; and reduce the number of right-wing conservative voters. (Meisner 3)

Key to such attitudes, Meisner contends, is the concept of ‘population’ or ethnic cleansing, the deliberate removal of an undesirable group of people (3). Specifically, gerontologist Martin Hyde calls this type of cohort-specific rhetoric (e.g., #boomerremover) ‘geronticidal’ (Hyde). For Gullette these attitudes reveal a murderous ‘new ageism’ that is distinct from but builds on previous expressions of ageism. Gullette explains, “in the ‘age of longevity,’ pre-COVID, older people were too strong to die, and likely to live too long and expensively. Suddenly, in the COVID era, we became those who are doomed to die” (“Instead”). Central to Meisner and Gullette’s arguments is the notion that older adults, who are perceived culturally to be “close to death already,” are figured as expendable (Gullette “Instead”). In the popular imaginary, older people are thus also conceptualized as those who are ‘out of time,’ as well as those who stand in the way of the future.

Discourses that construct both trans people, especially those of colour, and older adults as those who tend to die, produce and reproduce a perceived cultural norm, an expectation even, that trans, racialized, and old people are simply those who are ‘out of time’. Further, these framings of trans, non-white, and old death raise the possibility that some lives are conceptualized as ‘doomed’ to die and, therefore, not worth fighting for. I begin this chapter with these two disparate yet related discussions of (trans)gender, age, race, and death—two ‘categories of disposability’—because they provide discursive backdrops for exploring filmic and televisual representations of trans and old life (or death, as the case may be). These two frames of disposability offer some of the competing racialized, gendered, and aged discourses about cis and trans vitality and death in the U.S. in the last decade. They also complicate Jack Halberstam’s assertion that, “we

create longevity as the most desirable future, applaud the pursuit of long life (under any circumstances), and pathologize modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity” (*In a Queer* 4). According to Halberstam, longevity is a normative temporal logic. However, as I indicate above, longevity and the pursuit of longevity are structured by dynamics related to race, age, gender, and gender non-conformity. BIPOC and trans communities who involuntarily “live in rapid bursts” (4) in a racist and transphobic culture are not pathologized but normalized. When these deaths are recognized as abnormal and devastating (e.g., at Transgender Day of Remembrance ceremonies), they are generally made visible for leveraging trans rights (Lamble). Relatedly, older adults’ anticipated longevity is cast as undesirable and, more recently, as merely expendable.

This parallel cultural devaluation of trans of colour and old subjectivities is useful for examining the increasing visibility of trans lives (and deaths) on screen generally. These discourses inform, complicate, and contextualize the increasingly prominent representation of ‘trans aging’ into middle and late life, and trans elders on television. This chapter is dedicated to exploring trans depictions of the queer elder figure or instances of what I call ‘the trans elder’ in the streaming series *Transparent* and *Tales of the City*. Aside from containing a trans elder figure, the shows share the themes of family, biological and chosen (or what Armistead Maupin calls ‘logical’ family), aging, and trans identification, and conclusions that include the death of the trans elder. In the first half of this chapter, I provide a brief review of the tropes of trans representation, as well as a discussion of the paradox of trans mainstream visibility, especially for trans of colour populations. I then introduce the large plotlines and trans characters of *Transparent* and *Tales of the City*, highlighting how both series simultaneously use and sublimate race

relations in their plots. In the second half of the chapter, I explore the dialectic relationship between the *white transfeminine elder* and the *transfeminine of colour younger* in each series. Specifically, I look at the interracial and intergenerational friendships of white trans elders Maura and Mrs. Madrigal with trans of colour ‘youngers’ Davina and Ysela. Highlighting the series’ insidious colorblind logics, I explore notions of trans aging and futurity as they relate to the onscreen deaths of Maura and Mrs. Madrigal. Overall, I argue that, although both representations participate in a clichéd depiction of old age as a time of death (Gullette *Aged*; Gravagne; Krainitzki; Shary and McVittie), the deaths of Maura and Mrs. Madrigal complicate stereotypical portraits of elder and trans death on screen in ways that are potentially significant for trans spectators. Representations of death in old age offer trans viewers the possibility to imagine a future.

4.1 Trans (In)visibility in Mainstream Media: The Tipping Point for Whom?

The depiction of trans life in film and television, if at all represented, has often relied on a set of limited and harmful stereotypes. Prior to the 1990s, gender non-normative characters in mainstream films were frequently depicted as monsters, psychopaths, and killers (Sullivan; Phillips). The ‘psycho-trans’ figure, evident in films such as *Psycho* (1960), *Dressed to Kill* (1980), and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), depicts gender non-normative behaviours such as ‘cross-dressing’ “as perverse or hysterical symptoms of a psychotic condition” (Phillips 85). In comedic film, ‘cross-dressing’ has commonly been represented as a practice cisgender characters, especially

cisgender heterosexual men, participate in “to gain access to privileges, material goods or relationships that they otherwise lack” (Sullivan 38). Chris Straayer calls this trope the “temporary transvestite” (42), evident in comedic texts such as *Some Like it Hot* (1959), *Tootsie* (1982), and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993). On television, trans people have historically been most visible on talk and reality shows. Trans individuals, as well as other embodiments that challenged the stability of sexual and gender binaries (e.g., ‘cross-dressers’ and bisexuals), were largely depicted as “exotic phenomena” (Halberstam *Trans* 96*) and ‘freaks’ (Gamson). Televisual representations of trans individuals, Halberstam contends, signified “a condition of radical instability against which other gendered identities appeared legible, knowable, and natural” (*Trans* 96*). When included in scripted television, trans characters were “either witnesses to or victims of crimes” (Tropiano 88). More sympathetic representations of trans individuals appeared in film and television at the turn of the century. In *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, Jack Halberstam argues that three films in particular, *The Crying Game* (1992), *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), and *By Hook or Crook* (2001), have disrupted “the tendency to represent transgender people as mad, bad, and dangerous” (92). Kim Pierce’s *Boys Don’t Cry*, for instance, represented the body of a transmasculine character as “simultaneously viable and vulnerable, sexy and powerful” (94). Although representations of trans people were slowly shifting in film at the turn of the century, the trans figure was largely not a ‘suitable’ character for scripted television.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, however, trans visibility in mainstream media made notable and significant gains. On May 29, 2014, *Time* magazine released a cover story written by Kathy Steinmetz titled “The Transgender Tipping

Point.” According to Steinmetz, America was experiencing a newfound wave of increased trans visibility, politics, rights, and social justice. Trans rights and visibility, the magazine’s title states, are the “next civil rights frontier” (Steinmetz). Steinmetz argued, “Transgender people—those who identify with a gender other than the sex they were ‘assigned at birth’...are emerging from the margins to fight for an equal place in society” (Steinmetz). Indeed, an unprecedented number of celebrities came out publicly as trans and/or non-binary during the 2010s, including Chaz Bono, Janet Mock, Laura Jane Grace, Caitlyn Jenner, and Lana and Lilly Wachoski (‘the Wachoski sisters’). In addition to celebrity culture, film and television also played an important role in the increased mainstream visibility of trans people and issues. In the 2010s, popular television series and celebrated films introduced complex and sympathetic trans characters to a wide audience. For example, in 2013, Netflix debuted its immensely successful original series *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019), a comedy-drama series about a racially diverse group of inmates at a women’s federal prison, including Black transfeminine inmate Sophia Burset, portrayed by trans actress Laverne Cox (the subject featured on the cover of the May 2014 *Time* magazine). As well, Jean-Marc Vallée’s critically acclaimed film *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), the biographical story of AIDS patient Ron Woodroff, included a fictional HIV-positive transfeminine character named Rayon, a role that landed cis actor Jared Leto an academy award for best supporting actor in 2014. Finally, and most relevant for this dissertation about representations of LGBT older adults in film and television, the queer elder figure also made valuable contributions to the ‘trans tipping point’. For example, on February 5, 2014, Amazon Studios debuted non-binary creator Joey Soloway’s *Transparent*, a series about the late life gender transition of

retired sexagenarian *trans parent* Maura Pfefferman (Jeffrey Tambor), and its impact on the Pfefferman family, namely Maura's ex-wife Shelly and Maura and Shelly's adult children Sarah, Josh, and Ari (formerly 'Ali' in seasons 1-4). Indeed, the trans elder figure would play an important role during this surge of cultural visibility for trans people, as some of the most mainstream images of trans femininity, namely, 'Mrs. Madrigal' from *Tales of the City* (1993) and 'Bree Osbourne' (Felicity Huffman) from *Transamerica* (2005), have also relied on the representation of the aging or older trans parental figure. Thus, "the politics of the representations of age" (Gullette 45) played a notable role in the construction of mainstream trans visibility in the 2010s.

Though often celebrated, mainstream trans representation in the 2010s (i.e., 'The Transgender Tipping Point'), has also been limited and limiting in several ways for trans audiences (Capuzza and Spencer). As Andre Cavalcante observes, "there are noticeable absences, including transgender men, transgender people of colour, working-class individuals, and gender ambiguous or non-binary people" (*Struggling* 64). The mainstream representation of trans people, as Anson Koch-Rein and colleagues note, "remains often deeply and conflictingly gendered in a binary" (4). In film and television, trans people are frequently represented as "either/or: pre-op or post-op, transvestite or transsexual" (Siebler 75). In other words, many trans representations center a monolithic gender journey that is largely characterized by "wrong body rhetoric that constitutes the dominant media discourse on transgender issues today" (Funk and Funk "An Analysis" 74). Relatedly, Richard MocarSKI and colleagues found that transgender and gender diverse participants described representations of transition as stereotypical, unrealistic, and failing to reflect the experiences and embodiments of the wider community. Instead,

representations of transition “often result in heterosexual outcomes, often center on persons of privilege (e.g., celebrity, wealth), and rarely include details about the lived experiences (e.g., surgeries, shots, discrimination)” (426).

Relatedly, the contentious matter of casting is another salient element of trans representation in film and television (Mocarski et al.). For over two decades, trans communities have expressed concern and have been vocal about the routine casting of cis actors to portray trans characters, a practice sometimes called “transface” (Reynolds; Ford). As critics point out, many cis actors who portray trans characters have disproportionately received critical acclaim and screen industry accolades, such as Oscar, Emmy, and Golden Globe awards, for ‘playing’ or ‘acting’ trans, including Chris Sarandon (‘Leon,’ *Dog Day Afternoon*, 1975), John Lithgow (‘Roberta,’ *The World According to Garp*, 1982), Jaye Davidson (‘Dil,’ *The Crying Game*, 1992), Olympia Dukakis (Anna, *More Tales of the City*, 1998), Hillary Swank (‘Brandon,’ *Boys Don’t Cry*, 1999), Felicity Huffman (‘Bree,’ *Transamerica*, 2005), Jared Leto (‘Rayon,’ *The Dallas Buyers Club*, 2013), Jeffery Tambor (‘Maura,’ *Transparent*, 2014-2017), and Eddie Redmayne (‘Lili,’ *The Danish Girl*, 2015). Somewhat of a convention now, this practice has been criticized by some of its detractors for the way it perpetuates employment discrimination for trans actors, especially “the extreme underemployment of trans women in acting” (Rand 44). For other commentators, opposition to this practice lies in a concern for what these decisions convey ideologically to cis viewers. Casting cis actors in roles that portray transgender characters, as Mocarski and colleagues argue, “reflects the stereotypical, harmful, and heteronormative notion that being transgender is just a man pretending to be a woman, or vice versa” (426). In other words, casting a cis

actor, such as Jeffery Tambor as a trans woman (as is the case in *Transparent*, one of the television series I offer a close reading of in this chapter) can unintentionally reinforce the idea that trans women are simply ‘men in dresses’. Importantly, trans audiences, actors, and scholars have argued that such representations can also have direct lethal implications for trans and gender diverse individuals (Cavalcante ‘Breaking;’ Struggling; Gosset et al. *Trap Door*; MocarSKI et al.). For example, in Sam Feder’s *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen* (2020), a documentary that examines depictions of trans and gender non-binary people in film and television, trans actress Jen Richards describes what is at stake for trans people, especially transfeminine individuals, when cis men are cast as trans women:

In my mind, part of the reason that men end up killing trans women out of fear that other men will think they are gay for having been with trans women, is that the friends (the men whose judgment they fear of) only know trans women from media, and the people who are playing transwomen are the men that they know. (*Disclosure*)

Casting and representation generally, Richards implies, can be a matter of life or death for trans individuals. Arguments such as these, less concerned with whether cis actors can authentically represent trans embodiments and identities, indicate that opposition to the routine casting of cis actors in trans roles might have more to do with the material and ideological repercussions of these representational decisions for trans livelihoods and lives.

Indeed, this notion that the lives, or to Richard’s point, the deaths of trans individuals are understood as intimately connected to trans media representations resonates with Andre Cavalcante’s concept of “mediatized linked fate” (“Breaking” 544).

In his study, Cavalcante found that trans audiences discern the visibility of trans characters in film through the lens of ‘mediatized linked fate,’ whereby “one’s own everyday life experiences, chances, and potentialities—and those of their social group—are tethered to a media text or character” (“Breaking” 544). In other words, representations of trans characters, including stereotypical images and casting decisions, possess significant import for the trans audiences they seek to re-present. Given the significance of representation to trans populations, concerns related to casting, which are popularly rendered inconsequential, should thus not easily be dismissed.

Relatedly, other commentators, especially trans of colour scholars and activists, have argued that trans mainstream visibility has dangerous implications for queers and trans people of colour. For instance, Che Gossett argues that trans visibility is always already premised on the invisibility of others: “to bring a select few into view, others must disappear into the background, and this is always a political project that reinforces oppression” (183). Some argue that the increased visibility of trans people, particularly transfeminine individuals, in mainstream media has rendered particular populations of trans subjects more vulnerable. In an interview with journalist Toshio Meronek, Black trans activists and community leaders Miss Major Griffin-Gracy and CeCe McDonald assert that mainstream trans visibility has carried with it deadly implications for trans people, especially for poor trans women of colour and sex workers. Directly referencing the *Time* cover, and the mainstream visibility of Black trans actress Laverne Cox, Griffin-Gracy contends, “for the girls who have to live on the streets and off their wits, this was not something that was beneficial to their existence. What I have noticed, since that happened, is that there are more girls being murdered or beaten up” (Griffin-Gracy et al.

26). McDonald similarly identifies a relationship between trans visibility and anti-trans violence: “trans visibility also puts trans women in unsafe positions. With the height of trans visibility has also come the height of trans violence and murder” (26). Trans of colour scholars and activists maintain that mainstream cultural visibility can be dangerous, even lethal, for trans communities of colour (Gosset et al. *Trap Door*). Such arguments complicate a straightforward celebration of the ‘Trans Tipping Point’, while demonstrating the significance of trans representation to both trans life and death.

In part, the relatively recent visibility of transgender lives is “the result of transformations in media and technologies of communication such as television, the Internet, and social media platforms” (Cavalcante *Struggling* 61). During the same decade that witnessed a marked increase in racial and anti-trans violence, subscription-based streaming services, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, made trans visibility more possible. Indeed, the televisual trans and queer elder emerged during a period when television was and still is undergoing significant transformation regarding its production and consumption. As several have noted, streaming platforms have created new spaces of expression for representing trans characters in the last decade, evident in original series, such as *Orange is the New Black* and *Sense 8* (2015-2018), and documentaries, such as *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* (2017), *Laerte-se* (2017), and *Disclosure* (2020). Indeed, streaming television, as Christopher Hogg argues, “is itself in a process of ‘transing’ and acquiring ever new medial forms and representational aesthetics” (262).

Notably, these platforms have also offered greater visibility to not only trans characters, but also to *aging* gender-variant characters in particular. For example, since 2014, streaming services have released two original series that star a trans elder character.

In addition to *Transparent*'s trans sexagenarian Maura (mentioned previously), Lauren Morelli's adaptation of Armistead Maupin's book series *Tales of the City* (1978-2014) also includes a trans elder character, the 90-year-old Mrs. Madrigal (Olympia Dukakis). Similar in narrative and production, both television series were also made for, by, and about LGBT individuals. Though *Transparent* and *Tales of the City* used cis actors and actresses to portray the trans elder, both series have been celebrated for their adherence to "an all-queer writers room" (Evans) and to what Amy Villarejo calls "trans-firmative action" (20). In other words, queer and trans writers, directors, advisors, actors, and crewmembers were central to production in an unprecedented manner.

The history of trans media representation has thus been inadequate for trans spectators in a number of ways. As the previously mentioned research indicates, representations of trans characters are deeply connected to both trans life *and* death. And *Transparent* and *Tales of the City* contributed to the visibility of trans people, especially trans women, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, posing an interesting opportunity to explore media representations of the intersection of trans/gender, race, and aging. In the next section, I introduce the plots, trans elder characters, and racial dynamics of *Transparent* and *Tales of the City*.

4.2 Introducing *Transparent* and *Tales of the City*

Transparent and *Tales of the City* offer the only two representations of trans aging and the trans elder in my visual corpus. A widely successful yet controversial series, Joey Soloway's *Transparent* follows the lives of the Pfefferman family after the Pfeffermans' patriarch discloses a big 'secret,' and comes out as a trans woman in her late sixties.

Maura (the series' trans parent) reveals to her daughter, "ever since I was five, I felt that something was not right. And I couldn't tell anyone about my feminine side"

(*Transparent*). The critically acclaimed series includes four seasons (2014-2017) and a feature-length musical *Transparent: Musicale Finale* (2019). The first season explores Maura's social transition to living openly as a woman while she and her family adjust. The second season, partially set at Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute of Sexual Research in Weimar Berlin in 1933, employs magical realism to blur the lines between the past and present, and to explore the parallel histories of Jewish and trans persecution. The third season begins with Maura facing hospitalization after encountering a near-death experience, which prompts her to announce on her 70th birthday her intention to medically transition. Near the third season's conclusion, Maura finds out that she cannot have gender-affirming surgeries because of an uncertain heart problem. In the fourth season, the last to contain Tambor's Maura, the Pfefferman family go to Israel following Maura's discovery that her father, who was previously thought to be dead, has made a new family and life for himself in Israel. The series concludes with the sudden death of Maura in the 2019 musical finale, a plot point precipitated by Soloway's 2018 dismissal of Jeffrey Tambor for allegations of sexual harassment by trans actresses, including those on the set of *Transparent*.

A hotly contested series, Soloway's *Transparent* has received a considerable amount of academic attention regarding the show's depictions of women, Jews, and queer and trans individuals. A contemporary instance of a "transgender breakout text," a text considered to be "the first of their kind" (Cavalcante "Breaking" 545), many scholars have praised the series (Becker and Todd; Hess "My Whole Life"; Horvat "Crossing";

“Haunting”), arguing that, “*Transparent* gives voice to marginalized people, battles stereotypes, and diversifies production” (Villarejo 21). Others have criticized the series for its reproduction of cissexist ‘coming out’ and ‘wrong body’ discourses (Funk and Funk “An Analysis”; “Transgender;” van der Weele); its narrow emphasis on the “transition narrative” (Seymour 84); and its clumsy depiction of race and intersectionality (Horvat “Streaming;” Villarejo). Scholars concerned primarily with *Transparent*’s reputation as “the Jewiest show ever” (Nussbaum Cohen), evident in its fixation with Jewish ritual primarily (Rosenberg), have explored the connections between Jewish and queer representations and histories (Moss; Dempsey). For Jewish characters, like queer characters, have often signified a form of otherness in the cultural imagination—one that disturbs, complicates, and frustrates straightforward racial, gender, and sexual binaries and identification (Moss; Harrison-Kahan). Although most criticism of the series focuses on the representational logics of depicting trans bodies, histories, and identities, a handful of thoughtful pieces have considered the series’ poor handling of representations of race as well as the series’ preoccupation with whiteness (Villarejo; Horvat “Streaming”). Feminist and queer media scholar Amy Villarejo, for instance, observes that “almost everyone in *Transparent* is white” and that the Pfeffermans reside in a “carefully constructed white world” (12). In part, Villarejo’s observations are derived from Soloway’s depiction of the Pfefferman family as a white family of Jews.

A conflation between Jews and whiteness is a contentious, contested, and complicated topic in both Jewish and non-Jewish communities, one that has been exacerbated by the rise of white nationalism and the alt-right in the United States and Canada (Gordon; Green). Although Jews were initially “cast as non-white” or “off-white”

when they fled to the United States (Brettschneider 20), the racial or ethnic contours of Jewish identification were gradually redefined through assimilative structures in the twentieth century and increasingly Jews were conceived of as white (Brodkin; Jacobsen; Goldstein; Green). Although many Jews in Canada and the United States identify as white, the concept of ‘Jewish whiteness’ is for some an offensive suggestion, an oxymoron, an impossibility (Green; Gordon; Levine-Rasky). Indeed, recent coordinated attacks on Jews, such as the Charlottesville white supremacist rally in 2017 and the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting in 2018, stand as “constant reminder[s] of Jewish differentiation from the white norm” (Levine-Rasky 362). Jewishness thus “simultaneously signifies whiteness *and* racial otherness” (Harrison-Kahan 22, emphasis added). Although Jewish people have historically experienced and continue to experience oppressive racialization and violent Anti-Semitic racism, Jews are often excluded from discussions about racialization, racism, and white supremacy, including in some strands of anti-racist theorizing that prioritize skin colour as the most common or only signifier of racial difference (Reed “The Omission”). However, a tendency to conflate Jewishness with whiteness not only overlooks the ways that Jews were and continue to be racialized and persecuted across the world, but the common conflation also risks erasing or annihilating the existence and experiences of Black Jews and Jews of colour who experience unique forms of racialization in addition to Anti-Semitic racialization (Gordon; Levine-Rasky). Recent discussions of colourism, racism, and white privilege, as well as “white denial of privilege,” often emanating from and within Jewish communities and scholarship, have further complicated the question, “Are Jews White?” (Green; Gordon; Levine-Rasky). Such discussions contend that light-skinned or ‘white’ Jews,

though a racial minority themselves, possess a significant amount of racial privilege, unlike Jews of colour who are “racialized as something other than white” (370). The relationship between Jewishness and whiteness is thus fraught, and I acknowledge that an interpretation of Maura and the Pfefferman family as occupying privileged white identities is contestable and open to alternative readings.

My reading of Maura and the Pfefferman family as white Jews is informed by the representational racial logics of *Transparent*, as well as by an understanding that light-skinned Jews in the United States, especially those who are middle to upper-class, can and do benefit from being perceived as white in white supremacist colonial nations, while still experiencing Anti-Semitic racialization. *Transparent*, however, offers little evidence to suggest that Maura and her children understand themselves as contemporary targets of racialization. In fact, *Transparent* relegates anti-Semitism and its place within racist discourse to the past. Specifically, Anti-Jewish racialization is consigned to the Holocaust, and the persecution of Jews is largely framed through the experience of ‘Tante Gittel,’ a shadowy family ancestor who the Pfefferman children think was murdered in the gas chambers during the 1940s. However, through flashbacks to the end of Weimar Berlin in the 1930s, the viewer learns that Gittel (Hari Nef) was a casualty of the Holocaust not because of her *Jewish* identity but because of her *gender* identity as a ‘transvestite.’ Exploring a less well-known history of Nazism and Adolf Hitler’s ascent to power in 1933, *Transparent* illustrates the attack on sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld’s Institute of Sexual Research, as well as on those who were gender non-conforming, including ‘homosexuals’ and ‘transsexuals.’ Therefore, Gittel’s death, the only familial referent to anti-Semitic racialization and violence for the Pfefferman family, is gradually

reframed by the series as being a matter of gender primarily. Consistent with the series' primary focus on the violence of cisnormativity and the gender binary, trans histories rather than histories of racialization inflect the plotlines of the Pfeffermans. Instead, race is assigned to characters of colour in the series, especially Black characters, and Maura's racialization as a Jew is largely left unexplored. In other words, Jewishness is largely depicted as a religious rather than racial or ethnic difference in the series. Maura and the Pfeffermans, though patently Jewish, are depicted as an otherwise white family.

A reading of Maura and the Pfeffermans as white Jews aligns with existing scholarship exploring the racial dynamics of the series (Villarejo; Horvat "Streaming"). Villarejo, for instance, describes the Pfeffermans as "a TV family: a big, white, unruly mob in a big, expensive house" (12). She writes, "Yes, I am suggesting that whiteness is being naturalized by Jewish cultural identity. Yes, I do think that it becomes an alibi for evacuating *Transparent*'s locale of black and brown and yellow people" (12-13). She argues that when characters of colour do appear, such as the two Black men Ali seeks out for a threesome, they emerge as "stereotypical understandings of difference" (13). Scholarship exploring *Transparent*'s portrayal of people of colour often focuses on the brief storyline of Elizah (Alexandra Gray), a Black trans teenager who calls an LGBT crisis hotline that Maura, a new and ill-equipped volunteer, receives. This episode is significant because, as many have already argued, it mishandles representations of race while at the same trying to say something profound about race. For example, citing their difference, Elizah challenges Maura when she tries to empathize: "I bet you don't fucking understand what it's like. Have you ever been to South L.A.? Probably not" (*Transparent*). After Maura is unable to provide effective counsel to the distressed teen,

Maura sets out on a misconceived mission to find Elizah in South Central L.A., a markedly racialized and working-class area. Depicted as distinctly out of place, Maura struggles through crowds of men and women of colour in a foreign mall. Throughout the disorienting odyssey, she experiences a series of unfortunate misunderstandings informed by dynamics related to class, race, and culture. For instance, when Maura stumbles across a group of Latinx trans women—who Maura refers to as her “*familia trans*—” she offends them by asking if they have seen Elizah on “the streets” (*Transparent*). In another scene, Maura skips a line of people at a fast-food restaurant and opens a bottled drink before paying, instances of race and class privilege that are met with hostility by the working-class shoppers of colour. As others have commented, the scenes emphasize a fundamental gap between Maura and the people she meets in the strange mall. These scenes also represent some of the only instances of representations of people of colour in *Transparent*. Almost immediately after Maura has located the distressed teen she was seeking to find, Maura collapses to the ground from exhaustion. Maura is removed from the shopping center on a stretcher and taken away by an ambulance. Confused, Elizah walks away from the scene, and never appears again throughout the series. The episode attempts to make a pointed comment about Maura’s privilege as a wealthy, white Jewish trans woman.

Niall Richardson, concerned primarily with age dynamics, reads this scene between Maura and Elizah as an instance of the shared vulnerabilities between ‘young’ and ‘frail’ (i.e., old) trans women. In contrast, Anamarija Horvat argues that the episode questions “whether there is such a thing as a transgender or queer community alongside intersections of race and class” (“Streaming” 469). She argues that the episode, though it

dodges the ‘White Savior’ trope, reproduces problematic representational politics that reaffirm the overall whiteness of the series. According to Horvat, the show conflates a thematic focus of intersectionality with “characters of colour who fail to reappear” (470), and reproduces “whiteness ‘as invisible, as the unseen or the unmarked, as a non-colour, the absent presence or hidden referent, against which all other colours are measured as forms of deviance” (Ahmed qtd. in Horvat 470). For Horvat, the series racializes others while obscuring Maura’s own racialization as an otherwise white character.

Unlike *Transparent*, Lauren Morelli’s *Tales of the City* (2019) has frequently been celebrated for its racially diverse cast. A 10-episode revival of Armistead Maupin’s LGBT-inclusive series of novels and television miniseries, Morelli’s Netflix adaptation updates a ground-breaking classic for the contemporary moment. As an adaptation, Morelli’s *Tales of the City* draws heavily from previous installments of the series, which require some explanation. In the 1990s, Maupin’s original three books, which explored the intersecting lives of queer and cis-heterosexual characters during the 1970s and 1980s in San Francisco, were adapted into three original miniseries: *Tales of the City* (1993), *More Tales of the City* (1998), and *Further Tales of the City* (2001). In 1993, the six-episode miniseries *Tales of the City* was produced jointly by the U.S. American public television network PBS and the British network station Channel 4, which had “aired a long list of gay-themed fictional and non-fictional features and miniseries,” unlike PBS (Tropiano 138). Though the series received high ratings, plans for a sequel were abandoned after the religious right accused PBS of distributing “pro-homosexual propaganda” (Gross 192), a homophobic accusation that “provoked a wave of censorship” (Walters 96). Several years later, *More Tales of the City* and *Further Tales of*

the City were produced by the U.S. American television network Showtime, one of many cable channels willing “to tackle projects considered too controversial for public television” (Gross 193). Nonetheless, production in the United States still proved to be difficult and, as a result, the sequels’ production was moved to Canada.

Airing nearly a decade earlier than the more routinely recognized gay- and lesbian-themed series *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005) and *The L Word* (2004-2009), these miniseries pioneered LGBT representation on television. The miniseries focused on the lives of those residing at the fictional 28 Barbary Lane, a three-story house of flats owned and run by Mrs. Anna Madrigal, an eccentric middle-aged woman who is revealed at the end of the original *Tales of the City* to be a trans woman. Often described as “the most human character” (Einstadter and Sinclair 688) and “the emotional center” of the series (Poole 15), early televisual representations of Mrs. Madrigal generally defied traditional representations of trans characters at the time. Indeed, for many queer spectators, Mrs. Madrigal’s address at 28 Barbary Lane was “the first proper home of generations of LGBT+ people” (Ramaswamy). Both book and television versions of *Tales of the City* were disruptive for many reasons not least being that the show configured “families, couples, and coupling in antitraditional and unpredictable patterns” (Warhol 386). As Werner Einstadter and Karen Sinclair explain, “it is those relationships uncomplicated by sex that endure: Mona and Michael, Brian and Michael, Mrs. Madrigal and her tenants” (688). Nonetheless, a surprising dearth of scholarly literature attends to the queerness of the series and/or the televisual depiction of Mrs. Madrigal, one of the most celebrated trans characters in literature and on television. In one rare scholarly mention, Ralph J. Poole briefly refers to the original series and characterizes the depiction of Mrs. Madrigal

as being “exceptional in many ways” (15). In the televisual rendering of Mrs. Madrigal, Poole writes, she is neither “treated dismissively,” nor “ruled out” (15). A relatively unexplored trans representation then, Mrs. Madrigal is a rich site for examining the depiction of the trans elder figure.

A classic LGBT-themed series, *Tales of the City* was rebooted by Lauren Morelli almost 20 years after the last installment. Described as “well-meaning pride month programming” (Lawson) and “flawed, narcissistic and doing its best” (Ramaswamy), Morelli’s adaptation was generally not well received. Unlike the original three miniseries, the revival was harshly criticized for its failure “to address its current era” (Lawson). The reboot includes both original characters Mary Ann Singleton, Michael “Mouse” Tolliver, Mrs. Anna Madrigal, and DeDe Halycon and new characters Jake and Ben, characters Maupin develops in his last three books of the series. In Morelli’s revival, Mrs. Madrigal’s coterie of new tenants, playfully referred to in the series as ‘barbarians,’ are noticeably more racially diverse than their white predecessors, who in the latest installment are aging into middle rather than old age (a vexing temporal discrepancy that many commentators noted when reviewing the reboot). Indeed, in the book series and previous imaginings, Barbary Lane was, like *Transparent*, “a carefully constructed white world” (Villarejo 12). For instance, Maupin’s characters Ben and Jake, though portrayed by actors of colour Charlie Barnett and Garcia in the reboot, were originally depicted in the novels as white gay and trans men.

Morelli’s *Tales of the City* centers on key character Mary Ann Singleton (Laura Linney), who after being away for nearly 20 years, returns to 28 Barbary Lane to attend the celebration of Mrs. Madrigal’s 90th birthday. The pilot episode, which is largely about

biological and ‘logical’ (i.e., chosen) family and children, concludes on a suspenseful note when Mrs. Madrigal opens an intimidating note, mistaking it for a birthday card, that reads, ‘I know you’re a fraud’ (*Tales of the City*). After receiving another threatening envelope, Mrs. Madrigal makes a shocking announcement to her tenants: “I am selling Barbary Lane” (*Tales of the City*). From this point onward, much of the series’ action is derived from the tenants who, suspicious about Mrs. Madrigal’s sudden and inexplicable news, try to locate the source of her decision to sell Barbary Lane. Indeed, Mrs. Madrigal is being blackmailed, for she has an awful secret.

Mrs. Madrigal’s shameful secret is revealed to the spectator in the eighth episode “Days of Small Surrenders,” an uncharacteristic flashback episode that explores the year 1966 when a much younger Mrs. Madrigal, portrayed by trans actress Jen Richards, arrives in San Francisco to begin her life as ‘Anna’ instead of ‘Andy.’ (I use ‘Anna’ when referring to the younger Mrs. Madrigal, portrayed primarily in the flashback episode “Days of Small Surrenders,” and ‘Mrs. Madrigal’ when referring to depictions of her in middle- and old-age.) The episode reveals that Anna began a relationship with a cop (Luke Kirby), a largely unwilling yet still profiting member of the ‘tax squad’ (a group of unpredictable cops that harass, rob, and rape trans women in the Tenderloin district). When the cop’s colleagues discover that he is in a relationship with a trans woman, he is coerced into terminating his involvement with Anna: “Our life, it’s gone. Everything we had is destroyed,” he cries to Anna (*Tales of the City*). However, in spite of their impossibility as a couple, the cop does love Anna and wants her to survive the violent world he contributes to. He reveals to her a hidden cupboard full of wads of bills. After all, “the Tenderloin’s a lucrative beat,” Anna learns (*Tales of the City*). “Take it,” he tells

her. “Find a place to live. And become the woman you were meant to be,” he begs (*Tales of the City*). Anna objects, acknowledging that the money belongs to the trans women who were robbed. He pleads, “you have to survive, Anna. You have to make a life for yourself, and we both know this is your only chance” (*Tales of the City*). The sentiment underscores the precarity of trans feminine embodiment, and we learn as spectators that Anna accepts the money resignedly. The 90-year-old Mrs. Madrigal, the episode implies, has survived—that is, has aged—in part because she was able to purchase a rental unit (i.e., 28 Barbary Lane), a source of protection and income, as well as gender-affirming surgery. The secret, we learn, is that Anna/Mrs. Madrigal ‘chose’ survival: Barbary Lane, “the first proper home of generations of LGBT+ people” (Ramaswamy), was purchased with money “that was stolen from her community” (*Tales of the City*). In Morelli’s *Tales of the City* reboot, it is Mrs. Madrigal who is rendered problematic, rather than intersecting systemic oppressions, including racism, classism, and anti-trans violence.

Notably, while the first three miniseries (*Tales of the City*, *More Tales of the City*, and *Further Tales of the City*) closely adapted the first three books in Maupin’s book series, Morelli’s recent revival diverges drastically from the final books in the saga. For instance, the focus on Mrs. Madrigal being the victim of blackmail for her new, dark secret, as well as the strategic placement of a young Mrs. Madrigal (‘Anna’) at the 1966 Compton’s Cafeteria riot, is original content that is not reflected in the books. Though Maupin’s final book *The Days of Anna Madrigal* explores Mrs. Madrigal’s backstory, namely her childhood in Winnemucca, it exhumes a different shameful secret than the one explored in the Netflix miniseries. In *The Days of Anna Madrigal*, a 92-year-old Anna returns to her hometown to attend to unfinished business. Specifically, Anna

returns with the express intention to apologize for a shameful secret that she has been harboring since the age of 16: Anna was at least partially responsible for the suicide of Belasko ‘Lasko’ Madrigal, a teenage boy that she loved, but betrayed when she revealed to his family that he was interested in boys. She explains, “I told Lasko’s father he was gay. It must have been the final straw. His father was a terrible, angry man, and...the shame was too great, I suppose. He [Lasko] took an overdose of sleeping pills” (232).

Interestingly, in both narratives (Morelli’s and Maupin’s) Mrs. Madrigal is ensnared in lateral violence that is directed against her queer and trans peers. Morelli’s directorial decision to implicate Mrs. Madrigal in the systemic oppression of a community of marginalized trans women, which is represented simultaneously as evenly populated by women of colour and as *curiously* ‘post-racial,’ is worth noting. Mrs. Madrigal’s betrayal of the trans community is underscored in the series, while the racial politics of Mrs. Madrigal’s decision to keep the money, which is framed as an individual choice rather than as a choice constrained by structures of transphobia, cissexism, and femmephobia, are elided. In other words, racial politics are absent, but haunting in the series. Typical of U.S. American depictions of race, “the rhetorics of postracism function to insist that racism is elsewhere but not here in this time or place, thus bracketing or altogether ignoring present day racism” (Ono 302). Unlike the original, Morelli’s *Tales of the City* endeavoured to include a racially diverse cast of characters, and even to incorporate some overt engagement with racial tension in the queer community (see chapter 2 for a more fulsome discussion). On the one hand, the revival is hyperaware of race. On the other hand, its race-related representational logics are similar to other twenty-first century television depictions of race, wherein people of colour are visible

(even if only temporarily) and racial discrimination no longer exists (Esposito; Molina-Guzmán; Ono; Horvat “Streaming”; Turner and Nilsen). In other words, characters of colour and race relations are at once both deliberately present and insidiously sublimated in Morelli’s revival. Both *Transparent* and *Tales of the City*, therefore, offer representations of trans elder figures that reproduce problematic structures of racial representation.

4.3 Trans of Colour Youngers: Trans Mentors and Props

In this section, I investigate how these racial dynamics in both *Transparent* and *Tales of the City* inflect the intergenerational and interracial friendships between white trans elders Maura and Mrs. Madrigal and trans of colour ‘youngers’ Davina and Ysela. Though persons of colour, Davina and Ysela’s non-white racial difference largely remain unremarkable throughout both series, reproducing the post-racial and ‘colourblind’ logic that racialized difference “ultimately should not ‘make a difference’” (Kretsedemas 295) in these two series. The ‘trans of colour younger’ is a character that is visually marked as different; however, like other television characters of colour created and distributed in the 2010s (Belcher; Enck; Ono), her race does not ‘make a difference’ in *Transparent* and *Tales of the City*. In other words, her difference should be visible as a character of colour, but race dynamics, especially those that identify racist structures or challenge the supremacy of whiteness, must not surface. The trans of colour younger, I contend, is characterized by colorblind ideology, “the dominant mode of televisual racialization” (Nilsen and Turner 4). Media scholars studying televisual representations of race contend that such dynamics are indicative of post-race ideologies that relegate racism to the past

and deny that race and racism inform current social and economic inequities (Nilson and Turner). “Serving to reify and legitimize racism and protect certain racial privileges by denying and minimizing the effects of systemic and institutionalized racism,” colorblind politics, evident in public as well as popular discourse, sustain rather than trouble white supremacy (Nilsen and Turner 4). Colourblind dynamics are insidiously harmful because they “shift the discussion of difference and inequality away from macro-level racial disparities and toward a field of deracialized, individual subjectivities” (Kretsedemas 288). In other words, colourblind politics deemphasize racism as a structure, insisting that racial inequality is the result of individual shortcomings. Although characters of colour are appealing, and profitable even, during a moment when audiences are demanding greater diversity and inclusion across representation, their racial difference must avoid the particulars of their raced experiences. Therefore, the possibility that Maura and Mrs. Madrigal benefit from structural racism, or that Davina and Ysela experience racism, is displaced. Racialized difference in *Transparent* and *Tales of the City* does not matter, nor does it explicitly inform the ‘life chances’ of its trans characters.

Moreover, the trans woman of colour younger is a secondary character that, though curiously central to the development of the white trans woman elder, has no major narrative arc of her own. And, though she is not afforded the same development in representation as the white trans elder protagonist, the trans woman of colour younger is crucial to the white trans elder’s self-actualization and survival as a trans person. In effect, she becomes a token, a symbol of ‘diversity,’ a gesture toward acknowledging that ‘trans’ of colour stories *also* exist, but at the margins rather than at the center of the story, and ultimately in support of the growth of a white character.

It is within this context, where race, racism, and white supremacy do not meaningfully affect the lives of characters of colour yet determine which characters' stories will be centered, that Davina and Ysela resemble what has been referred to as the 'transgender' or 'trans*' mammy (Ryan; Copier and Steinbock). Despite the term's connection to Black women, variations of the trope of the trans mammy have been used somewhat problematically to refer to both people of colour and white gender-variant characters. Joelle Ruby Ryan describes 'transgender mummies' as "guardian angel figures who come to save the day and fix the other people's problems" (127), such as the racialized gender-variant characters of Noxeema (Wesley Snipes) and ChiChi (John Leguizamo) from *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995). The primary function of this figure is to serve; she "exist[s] to fix the problems of gender-normative people, add color and spice to their broken lives, and become worthy through their devoted service to the hegemonic class" (iv). She has no narrative arc of her own. Instead, 'transgender mummies' function as "loyal helpmates and subordinated sidekicks" (123) who take "care of other people: friends, family members, neighbors and townspeople" (122). For example, Laura Copier and Eliza Steinbock characterize the white transfeminine character Rayon, described as "a productive 'helper,'" (928) from the film *Dallas Buyers Club* as a "trans* mammy" (927). They argue that the "trans* mammy is strikingly similar to racialized forms of mammyism" (928). Copier and Steinbock argue that the character of Rayon ultimately serves and sacrifices for "white heterosexual masculinity" (938). Integral to both articulations of the trans mammy is the notion that this figure serves people *outside* of her community, namely white cis heterosexuals.

Unlike the trans mammy figure, Davina and Ysela help, protect, educate, guide, and support the development of a *trans* rather than *cis* character. In fact, both Davina and Ysela are depicted as guardians of the trans community at large. Davina works at the Los Angeles LGBT Center and Ysela is portrayed as a fierce, life-long advocate of gender-variant people. In fact, in Morelli's rewriting of the Compton's Cafeteria riot (a mid-twentieth century instance of collective trans resistance), it is Ysela who is represented as committing the first act of defiance (throwing a cup of coffee into an officer's face), an action which has been described by trans historian Susan Stryker as the spark that ignited the historical 'melee'. Though affiliated with the larger trans community, Davina and Ysela are depicted principally as necessary supports to their older (white) trans elders, who are depicted as privileged yet naïve, and thus as in need of guidance and nurturing. Trans of colour characters, while no longer depicted in service of cisnormativity and heteronormativity, serve middle to upper class, aged whiteness.

In both series, Maura and Mrs. Anna Madrigal are presented as being much older than their trans woman of colour counterparts, Davina and Ysela. Nonetheless, Maura and Anna are depicted as ignorant and naïve. The conventional correlation of age and wisdom is ruptured by Maura and Mrs. Madrigal's relationships with their younger trans of colour counterparts. For instance, though Maura is 70 years old, and a couple of decades older than her mentor and friend, Davina refers to her as "a baby trans" (*Transparent*). Maura is simultaneously 70 years old and, as the epithet 'baby' indicates, approximately less than a year old in 'trans years,' a temporal phenomenon that can govern trans identities, experiences, and aging (Pearce). According to trans feminist scholar Ruth Pearce, trans individuals can possess at least two ages: a chronological age

determined by the date of their birth and a trans age prompted by the date they came out and/or started to transition with the assistance of gender-affirming medications, procedures, and/or surgeries. For example, Mrs. Madrigal is both 90 years old and 46 ‘trans years’ old since she underwent gender confirmation surgery when she was 44 years old. Indeed, the self-chosen name ‘Anna Madrigal,’ an anagram for “a man and a girl,” neatly encapsulates Mrs. Madrigal’s multifarious gender and age identities (*Further Tales of the City*). The concept of trans years, an illustrative example of the “disruption, disjuncture and discontinuity” that many trans persons experience (Pearce 62), demonstrates that aging for trans individuals is not straightforward but, indeed, non-linear (Pearce). Trans temporalities disrupt ageist binaries and stereotypes that configure older adults as necessarily experienced/mature and younger adults as intrinsically inexperienced/immature. Pearce writes:

Chronologically younger trans individuals may be considerably older in trans years than chronologically older trans people. In such cases, chronologically older trans individuals may seek the knowledge and experience of those ‘younger’ individuals who came out and/or transitioned before them. (Pearce 66)

Though chronologically younger than the trans elder figure, Davina and Ysela are markedly older in trans years because they embraced trans identities in young adulthood rather than in middle or late life. Thus, the trans woman of colour younger is portrayed as knowledgeable, wise, and experienced.

Though an integral character to the white trans elder’s development, Davina is simply a recurring character that in later seasons grows in importance. Davina is introduced early in the series in the second episode of season one (*Transparent*).

Portrayed by mixed race trans actress and singer Alexandra Billings, who self-identifies as Native American and African American, Davina represented one of the few trans of colour characters on television in 2014 when the series began. Though a visible character of colour, Davina's ambiguous racial difference is rarely if at all explored in *Transparent*—a representational politic typical of post-racial and colourblind television (Belcher; Brüning; Enck and Morrissey; Molina-Guzmán; Nilsen and Turner; Warner “The Racial”). Instead, difference between Maura and Davina is largely articulated through class dynamics. Indeed, as one critic notes, “‘*Transparent*’ is very conscious of the dollars-and-cents costs of transitioning” (Poniewozik). For example, when Maura tells Davina that she deserves better than Sal, Davina's ‘transamorous’ partner, Davina replies sharply, “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” (*Transparent*). Implicit in Davina's response is the notion that her options for romantic and sexual partnership and, by extension, her life chances, are significantly constrained by the multiple, stigmatized social locations she embodies. Notably, her racial identity, and the ways in which this shapes her material security, employment opportunities, romantic options, and life chances, is glaringly absent. This erasure is compounded by her own complex self-identification, which references her age, transness, and the precarity associated with her class and health (i.e., her history of sex work and her HIV+ status) but neglects to name race. Though the episode makes an effort to acknowledge that ‘the trans experience’ is informed along lines of socioeconomic status, similar logic is rarely explored in relation to Davina's race.

From Maura's coming out in season one to Maura's well-timed death at the beginning of the musical film finale, Davina functions as Maura's key confidante, mentor, and friend. Maura meets Davina at a trans support group at the Los Angeles LGBT Center, Davina's place of employment. Maura and Davina become quick friends, and Davina becomes an integral support for Maura as she navigates the world as an out trans woman. For example, Davina accompanies Maura to intimate family gatherings, such as a Shabbat dinner and a family wake; shows up for Maura when her children—who Davina describes as “those...rude fucking kids—” simply do not (*Transparent*); shares her home with Maura even though Maura owns a spacious and sumptuous house and has several family members she could stay with; and educates Maura about feminine presentation in particular and trans life generally, including how to access gender-affirming medications, such as testosterone blockers and hormone replacement therapy, and how to re-gender childhood photos. Notably, in an episode in the third season “To Sardines and Back,” Davina provides emotional support for Maura when she announces to her partner Vicki, ex-wife, children, and grandchildren that she intends to medically transition, and that she wishes to be called ‘grandma’ and ‘mom.’ In this same episode, Maura describes Davina as her “chosen family” (*Transparent*), indicating Davina's relatedness to her.

In the first four seasons, Davina's character is largely constituted through her relationship to Maura; however, in one rare episode, “Born Again,” Davina's past is explored through flashbacks—a device generally reserved for biological members of the Pfefferman family. In the episode, Davina moves into the Pfefferman family's home after Sal, Davina's demanding partner of many years, tells her to leave *his* home. Settled at the

property, Davina reflects on a lifetime of living at the whims of cis men, like Sal, to simply survive; she reminisces with friends, other trans women, “as long as I can remember, I’ve had to do some kind of mental gymnastics, trying to keep a roof over my head” (*Transparent*). “We all had to do things to survive,” a Black trans woman says (*Transparent*). In a flashback scene to the ‘80s, a 16-year-old Davina (Jaime Navarro) sleeps with a wealthy, old gay white man, who disapproves of what he perceives to be her ‘cross-dressing.’ Similar to Sal, he offers her conditional affection and temporary respite from homelessness. However, the flashback reveals that he was the origin of Davina’s HIV infection. Davina’s singular flashback, a narrative that Billings has revealed is largely her own (Clasen), depicts the precarity of (some) trans lives. Arguably, Davina’s flashback functions to highlight differences among the trans community. Though Maura’s multiple flashbacks evince a lifetime of struggle, her struggle is predominantly articulated as one of gender identity. Davina’s struggle, on the other hand, is a battle for survival—to evade premature death. Filtered through a lens of homelessness that privileges readings of class, this struggle is abstracted from raced dynamics, which are evoked visually but are otherwise left unexplored.

Unlike Davina whose presence is woven throughout *Transparent*, Ysela only appears in the concluding episodes of Morelli’s *Tales of the City*. Although Ysela is not a central character, she is a key driver of suspense, nonetheless. For Ysela is associated with Anna’s new secret. Latina trans actress and singer Daniela Vega portrays Ysela, Anna’s trans friend and mentor. Vega, who was in her late twenties during filming, portrays both young and old Ysela. In the crucial episode “Days of Small Surrenders,” Ysela is introduced through a flashback to the 1960s, when a naïve and demure, forty-

something-year-old Anna arrives in San Francisco. In comparison, Ysela is depicted as aggressive, confrontational, and, most importantly, as unable to avoid detection as a trans person—that is, Ysela does not pass, unlike Anna. Because she does not pass, Ysela is implied to belong to the streets of San Francisco, specifically the Tenderloin district.

Though Ysela seeks out Anna’s guidance, desperate to know how she ‘survived’ as an aging trans woman, it is often Ysela who teaches Anna about how to avoid the sanctions for being a trans woman, including death. For instance, when Anna spots a beautiful scarf in a boutique and insists that they go inside to take a closer look, Ysela chides, “you kidding? Stores like that don’t let us try on clothes. [If] you keep acting like a farm girl, you’re going to be dead by tomorrow” (*Tales of the City*). In another scene, Ysela warns Anna to be wary of the ‘tax squad,’ corrupt police officers that profit from the illicit activities in the neighbourhood and exploit marginalized communities such as ‘street queens’ (gender variant individuals that we might now recognize as trans women), who were “considered bottom-of-the-barrel sex workers and who were the least able to complain about mistreatment” (Stryker *Transgender* 89). “They’ll take a cut of whatever you make,” Ysela cautions Anna (*Tales of the City*). Certain that the unsolicited advice does not apply to her, since she’s “not planning on doing any hooking,” Anna quickly dismisses Ysela’s wisdom (*Tales of the City*). Anna, it is implied, is distinct from the other trans women and street queens. After all, Anna is a respectable woman. Indeed, Anna, unlike her poor and racialized counterparts, has employment options and thus does not have to turn to the underground economy for her survival. In fact, Anna finds employment at a local bookstore within days of arriving in San Francisco and with minimal effort because she passes as a cis woman, but also in part because she embodies

the values of white, middle-class femininity. Avoiding the law, she assumes, will be straightforward. However, simply being gender nonconforming in San Francisco was conceived as unlawful in the 1960s, since 19th century ‘cross-dressing’ laws prohibited people from “wearing a dress not belonging to his or her sex’ or ‘wearing the apparel of the other sex’” (Sears 3). Antiquated cross-dressing laws, Clare Sears writes, “became a tool for policing lesbian, gay, and transgender communities in the mid-twentieth century” (4). Indeed, just having “buttons on the wrong side of your shirt,” Ysela explains to Anna, could lead to arrest (*Tales of the City*). Ysela’s last piece of advice—or what one Black trans woman calls, “queen lessons”—for Anna is: “if you see a cop named Boone, you run” (*Tales of the City*). Anna, however, flouts Ysela’s guidance because she can, unlike Ysela, approximate “the norms of white womanhood;” namely, “domesticity, respectability, and heterosexuality,” ideals that, Emily Skidmore argues, have historically been central to the raced, classed, and (hetero)sexualized twentieth-century construction of trans women (271). Anna enters spaces that are hostile to trans women and, arguably, women of colour, falls in love with a corrupt cop, and is arrested by Boone at the riot. Nonetheless, Anna experiences few to no consequences. Instead, she ultimately benefits from these actions because Anna purchases Barbary Lane (a home and an asset) and gender-affirming surgery with the stolen money she is gifted from the cop.

When Ysela accidentally learns that Anna has been quite literally ‘sleeping with the enemy,’ she confronts her:

How do you live with yourself knowing you go to sleep beside a man who steals from us? Those men, the ones you drink and dance with, those men are killing us one by one. But you’re in love, so who cares, right? I always

thought you survived for so long because you pass. But I was wrong. You survived because you are spineless. (*Tales of the City*).

Complicit in the systemic violence committed against trans women, Anna is perceived as a traitor. She benefits materially from the harassment and oppression of other trans women. “You can’t have it both ways. You can’t have both lives,” Ysela explains (*Tales of the City*). For Ysela, Anna cannot be trans and be in a relationship with a cop; they are antithetical existences. Absent from such passages and the episode in general is the racial politics that haunt these exchanges. The series suggests that cops harass and kill trans women, not people of colour or trans women of colour. In effect, the salience of race and class dynamics to trans lived experience is sublimated in *Tales of the City*. Anna is depicted as betraying her ‘trans sisters’, rather than as remaining loyal to white supremacy while benefiting from state-sanctioned violence toward trans individuals *as well as* poor people of colour. The simultaneous emphasis on a shared trans sameness and de-emphasis on race and class difference reinforce a universal rather than a particular construction of trans identity.

Therefore, in Morelli’s reboot of Maupin’s rainbow universe, we learn that the site of violence toward the LGBT community can reside within the community itself. On the one hand, LGBT narrative themes are becoming more complicated and varied. These narratives suggest that the trans community, if there even is such a monolithic entity, is not unified. On the other hand, a radical exploration of the raced and classed politics within the trans community is displaced by a narrative focus on individual culpability and personal responsibility. The story emphasizes Mrs. Madrigal’s individual ‘choices’ instead of the structural oppressions that she concurrently benefits from and is

disadvantaged by. Ultimately, cisnormativity, white supremacy, and state-sanctioned violence are overlooked in favour of intercommunity conflict that is largely devoid of race or class tension. Overall, in both *Transparent* and *Tales of the City*, colorblind logics intersect with constructions of the ‘trans mammy’ in relation to trans of colour ‘youngers’ Davina and Ysela to sanitize issues of race and, simultaneously, relegate characters of colour to the background.

4.4 Representing ‘Ordinary’ Death and the ‘Tragic’ Trans Elder

In this final section, I consider what cultural work the dominant raced and gendered logics elaborated on throughout this chapter do in relation to the onscreen deaths of the trans white elder figure. In film and television, death has been and continues to be a central motif within representations of both queer and elder characters. As Heather Love observes,

the history of Western representation is littered with the corpses of gender and sexual deviants. Those who are directly identified with same-sex desire most often end up dead; if they manage to survive, it is on such compromised terms that it makes death seem attractive. (*Feeling 1*)

Relatedly, an appendix titled “Necrology” in Vito Russo’s twentieth century classic *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* archives and evinces the various ways in which queer characters, primarily gay and lesbian characters, have been put to death in twentieth century film: murder, suicide, castration, execution, and old age. The relationship between queer characters and the common motif of death was later outlined and articulated via the trope of the ‘tragic queer,’ explored in Rob Epstein and Jeffrey

Friedman's *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), a documentary film adaptation of Russo's pioneering work. This work demonstrates that even in sympathetic and complex portraits (e.g., *Philadelphia*), queer characters have traditionally been expendable or conveniently 'killed off'. Feminist film theorist Barbara Creed sums up the trope nicely. Same-gender love, she writes, is "almost always punished at the close of the narrative: sometimes they were murdered, sometimes they died of a tragic illness or conveniently committed suicide" (*Media* 152). These scholars suggest that a death sentence was inevitable for lesbian and gay characters in film and television. Although *The Celluloid Closet* seemed to imply that representations of lesbians and gays had steadily been improving throughout the years, this traditional representational practice continues to be observed in both contemporary film and television through the 'bury your gays' trope, "the narrative arc wherein queer characters die, often violently, in service of someone else's character development" (Cameron 1-2).

In the cultural imagination, death is a common ending for trans characters as well. In film, cross-dressing, gender non-conforming, and trans characters die onscreen from physical violence (e.g., *Albert Nobbs*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Boys Don't Cry*), suicide (e.g., *Glen or Glenda*), medical accidents (e.g., *The Danish Girl*), and AIDS (e.g., *Rent*, *The Dallas Buyers Club*). This list does not include the countless number of often unnamed trans characters who routinely surface as murder victims in crime and police procedurals such as *CSI* and *Law & Order: SVU*. Although homicide, suicide, and physical and sexual assault are fundamental to the genre and cis and heterosexual characters overwhelmingly make up the bulk of representations of death and tragedy in these shows, the genre "almost exclusively frames transgender characters as victims of

violent crime” rather than as protagonists, lawyers, police officers, or simply as minor characters going about their daily lives (Cavalcante *Struggling* 81). According to a study from GLADD, nearly half of all representations of trans characters were cast as victims of violence on television (“Victims or Villains”). Indeed, as many trans spectators contend, trans representation is all too commonly framed through tragedy or what Jos Truitt calls the ‘tragic trans narrative’. The continuous spectacle of trans death on screen, one that constructs violent death as almost inevitable for trans people, is limited and limiting for trans audiences who desire to see “transgender ordinariness and everydayness represented in the media” (Cavalcante *Struggling* 89). The methodical killing of trans characters in film and television narrowly represents trans people as those who are ‘out of time.’

Likewise, death is a dominant cultural script for elder characters. In one of the most comprehensive examinations of representations of aging in U.S. American cinema to date, Timothy Shary and Nancy McVittie surmise, “elder characters likely have the highest rate of mortality in movies” (174). Even still, they observe that the representation of elder death is significantly limited and contained by three representational strategies. For onscreen elders, dying is “glorious and fulfilling” (174), “peaceful and respectable” (175), or “continually postponed so that life may somehow go on forever” (175). All three categorizations, they contend, curiously avoid the realities of actual elder death. Take, for instance, the glorious, self-inflicted death of Walt (Clint Eastwood) in *Gran Torino* (2008). Suspicious of “Walt’s choice to die” (58) since the decision conforms to rather than departs from the demands of decline ideology (Gullette *Aged*) and the

pervasive Western cultural script that casts older adults, especially ‘unhealthy’ older adults, as burdensome, critical age scholar Pamela H. Gravagne observes:

He is sick and probably dying (although we never really know what illness he has) and, rather than face the possibility of debilitating treatments or a future of rapid physical deterioration leading to a further loss of autonomy, he normalizes the course of his disease as unrelieved decline and loss and chooses to bypass the abhorred physical states associated with age and illness by arranging his own death before he becomes infirm. (56)

Unlike Walt, many older adult U.S. Americans do not die in a blaze of glory. For many off-screen elders, death generally “occur[s] with little drama, and most Americans aged sixty-five and over die in hospitals or other care facilities outside their homes” (175). For Shary and McVittie, Hollywood’s penchant for melodramatic and spectacular elder death is “in conflict with actual geriatric existence, pointing to the ultimate contradiction between the aged on screen and in life” (177). In other words, elder death is rarely represented as realistic on screen, evincing broader cultural anxieties about later life and death. Taken together, these two disparate scholarly discussions demonstrate that death is a common plotline for trans and older characters, and that the means of death is rarely ordinary or realistic. Trans characters are overwhelmingly victims of transphobic structural violence (e.g., hate crimes, suicide, and AIDS) and elder characters evade the grim realities of late life decline (e.g., hospital visits, hospice care, and chronic pain).

Like most explorations of late life and elder death, the onscreen deaths of Maura and Mrs. Madrigal evade the slow degenerative realities of the final stage of life known as the fourth age, the period marked by a failure to exercise bodily self-control and agency (Gilleard and Higgs “Ageing”). However, as 70- and 90-year-old trans women

they dodge traditional representations of premature trans death. To my knowledge, Maura and Mrs. Madrigal are the first trans characters to die of natural causes in late life. In this way, Maura and Mrs. Madrigal's deaths are extraordinary (i.e., unusual and remarkable) as far as representation goes. (Though direct violence resulting in death is a serious threat that many trans community members continue to face, especially those who are racialized and/or sex workers, trans individuals can and do live long lives and experience ordinary deaths in late life like their cis counterparts.) In contrast to other representations of trans death, *Transparent* and *Tales of the City* imply that Maura and Mrs. Madrigal die somewhat peacefully and suddenly in their sleep—Maura in her bed and Mrs. Madrigal outside under the stars in her rocking chair. Their deaths are also somewhat exceptional since representations of elder death, according to Shary and McVittie, scarcely align with a 'peaceful and respectful' death, which permits the onscreen elder "character [to] pass away with a sense of control and completion" (175). Indeed, in both series, death is meted to the white trans elder figure conveniently and curiously after she has achieved a sense of closure in her life. Her death then is somewhat fated. This is made abundantly clear in *Tales of the City*. As Mrs. Madrigal's tenants celebrate her life at the conclusion of the narrative, Mrs. Madrigal's final, non-diegetic words indicate as much: "I read something once that our souls have chosen this exact life, that death comes after you've fulfilled your prescribed journey. There's something I quite liked about that. It's a bit of magic. Isn't it?" (*Tales of the City*). Indeed, Maura and Mrs. Madrigal's deaths do seem magical and even delightful in such a way that departs from everyday life and thus are not ordinary.

To be sure, Maura and Mrs. Madrigal's deaths are both seemingly fanciful and inexplicable. Their deaths are fanciful because they elide the grim details of decline in later life, and inexplicable because they emerge suddenly and with little textual evidence to anticipate such a conclusion. Instead, the trans elder figure 'dies of old age,' a common misnomer that captures cultural attitudes about older adults or "those who tend to die" (Gullette "Instead"). By this, I mean, that the deaths of Maura and Mrs. Madrigal are explicable, anticipated, and justified because they are old, but are otherwise baffling given that the trans elder figure showed limited to no signs of 'decline'. This paradox is evident in both texts. For instance, when a sympathetic colleague provides their condolences to Davina about Maura's *sudden* passing, Davina offers a vague response that provides the audience with little detail about Maura's physical state in between the fourth season's conclusion and the musical finale's introduction—roughly a six-month period. She explains that things got better "and then they didn't, and then they did, and then...I don't know" (*Transparent Musicale Finale*). The deterioration of deep old age, including the signs leading up to the terminal process, are elided from the text. Maura's previous uncertain heart problem, explored briefly in the third season as both the catalyst for and barrier to her medical transition, is underscored in the musical's recap of the series, providing some clue to viewers about the cause of her death. A 'bad heart' is also alluded to in a dream sequence, wherein Ari (Maura's youngest child) asks Maura if she died of a "broken heart" (*Transparent Musicale Finale*). Aside from these clues that point broadly to a heart problem, no other explanation for Maura's death is given. Arguably, the audience does not require evidence because of the supremacy of "the age/death connection" (Copper qtd. in Gullette *Aged* 107), wherein "aging discourse slides into

dying discourse without critique” (Gullette *Aged* 107). The paradox is best encapsulated by the exchange between Mrs. Madrigal’s grieving generations of ‘logical’ or chosen children who are confounded by her sudden death:

Jake: She seemed fine last night.

Margot: Was it all the stress from the last couple of months?

Brian: No. The doctor said this *just happens*, and it was as peaceful as you could hope for.

Michael: And she lived such a long life.

Jake: Do you think she was waiting? That like, having all this stuff about her past finally come out, gave her some peace?

Mary Ann: I’ve been thinking that, too. I hope so. (*Tales of the City*, emphasis added)

Though spontaneous and mysterious, her death is justified and made acceptable through reference to chronological age; the dis-ease of old age (‘a long life’) is framed as the logical *cause of death* of the trans elder figure.

In this way, death is reimagined for the televisual trans character as ordinary, as a natural conclusion, as a reward even for a long life. Put simply, the death of the trans character is normalized through their white old age. These representations suggest that trans characters can now, like their cis, white counterparts, die a ‘normal’ death on screen, rather than one of suicide or murder. Their deaths are not spectacularized, sensationalized, or gratuitously violent, and thus depart from common depictions of queer, elder, and racialized death. Most importantly, these trans deaths, unlike the ones cited at the beginning of this chapter, are not premature; instead, they are timely because Maura and Mrs. Madrigal are old—they exist in that category of people to whom death “just happens” (see above quotation) and “who tend to die” (Gullette “Instead”). Though

these images of the trans elder figure reify a typical and unfortunate ‘decline’ narrative (Gullette *Aged*), this emerging representational trend arguably responds to the desire from trans audiences “to see transgender ordinariness and everydayness represented in media” (89). Although “transgender possibility” (Cavalcante *Struggling*) is in obvious ways foreclosed through the death of the trans elder figure, the ‘ordinary’ nature of their death (i.e., ‘died from old age’) might afford trans spectators “transgender possibility” in other ways. Namely, both series invite the audience to imagine trans life otherwise—not foreshortened by forces of structural violence and thus as long.

For many, the imagined long lives of Maura and Mrs. Madrigal may signal progress. Indeed, to some extent, this is progress; the significance of cultural representations of trans older adults, of cultural role models, should not be easily dismissed. The visibility of Maura and Mrs. Madrigal indicates that for at least some queer and trans people there is a future. The representation of trans elder death, I contend, ought to be treated suspiciously, nonetheless. Aside from participating in conventional and problematic representational age logics, the deaths of Maura and Mrs. Madrigal serve an important function within the overall narrative. Following Kelsey Cameron’s definition of the ‘bury your gays’ trope, Maura and Mrs. Madrigal do arguably die “in service of someone else’s character development” (1-2). I argue that Maura and Mrs. Madrigal die a ‘natural’ or ‘ordinary’ death in the service of their younger characters of colour counterparts Davina and Ysela and by extension the larger trans community. Though peaceful, Maura and Mrs. Madrigal’s deaths emerge as narrative sacrifices for their younger trans mentors of colour, who are depicted somewhat inexplicably as less privileged; that is, though the concept of privilege is explored broadly in both texts, Ysela

and Davina simply occupy less privilege in a way that does not excavate race or class difference.

For instance, in the opening scene of *Transparent Musicale Finale*, Davina enters Maura's room and discovers an unresponsive body: "Maura's dead," Davina notifies the family (*Transparent Musicale Finale*). Shortly after viewing Maura's body, the Pfefferman children receive more astonishing news: "Maura left it [the house] to Davina" (*Transparent Musicale Finale*). Maura's will reads, "I leave the house to Davina Rejennae and the profits to the trans community" (*Transparent Musicale Finale*). Precariously housed in the fourth season, Davina is implied to be dependent on Maura's support. In the penultimate scene of the film, Davina and queer and trans youth from the Los Angeles LGBT Center gather comfortably around the dinner table in Maura and the Pfefferman family's previous home. Similarly, at the conclusion of *Tales of the City*, Ysela receives a property transfer and a note that reads: "This should have been yours a long time ago" (*Tales of the City*). Ysela, who is portrayed as the legitimate guardian of the trans community, including the most marginalized (i.e., homeless individuals), holds the note to her chest. The death of Mrs. Madrigal provides narrative closure and justice to the text; Mrs. Madrigal had to die, the narrative implies, to return the stolen money and the goods acquired with it to their rightful owner (a largely racialized trans community via character of colour Ysela). In effect, *Transparent* and *Tales of the City* offer a similar conclusion: trans death for trans life.

This touching conclusion, however, is complicated by racial dynamics that are at once visible yet left unaddressed. Though *Transparent* and *Tales of the City* are somewhat attentive to racial dynamics and to a broader discussion of privilege generally

(Villarejo; Horvat “Streaming”), both series fail to meaningfully explore race, especially the racial tensions that linger between the visibly white trans elder figure and the trans woman of colour younger. Instead, narrative justice and closure are achieved through a tidy conclusion, wherein the white trans elder dies and bequeaths her property and assets to a younger, non-white trans friend, who is narrowly aligned with the ‘trans community.’ On the one hand, by bequeathing their luxurious properties located in wealthy neighbourhoods (the Pacific Palisades in Los Angeles and Russian Hill in San Francisco) to Davina and Ysela, Maura and Mrs. Madrigal queer “the time of inheritance,” the final convention or logistic of reproductive temporality, whereby “values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next” (Halberstam *In a Queer* 5). Wealth stays in—or, in the case of *Tales of the City*, returns to—the trans community rather than the bio/logical family. Indeed, both shows are preoccupied with the importance of intentional or chosen family within the queer community, especially among trans individuals. The trans elder’s gifting of substantial wealth to Davina and Ysela actively and materially promotes trans longevity and futurity. The series’ rejection of reproductive temporality is appealing, redeeming even for the privileged and deceitful white trans elder protagonist in particular and the series in general. In each of their conclusions, *Transparent* and *Tales of the City* ‘return’ the narrative focus to trans of colour characters who, unlike their elders, are portrayed by actual trans women. Symbolically, this decision acknowledges that it is now time for different, more expansive representations of trans characters. Both series seem to suggest that the attention should now focus on ‘other’ trans protagonists—those who have traditionally been absent or cast as minor characters.

On the other hand, the representational politics of the deaths of Maura and Mrs. Madrigal risk reproducing a trans white saviour in death. In his article “Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism,” Matthew W. Hughey examines depictions of inter-racial friendships and the theme of redemption in films such as *The Green Mile* (1999), *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000), *Crash* (2005), *The Blind Side* (2009) and *Gran Torino*. Hughey outlines two types of racialized saviours endemic to this popular racial motif: ‘the magical negro’ and ‘the white savior.’ Both, he argues, reproduce racist ideology that reinforces racial hierarchy, specifically the supremacy of whiteness. The ‘White Savior film,’ he maintains, “is an important cultural device and artifact of our modern ‘post-racial’ era because it helps to repair the myth of White supremacy and paternalism in an unsettled and racially charged time” (761). In these films, white characters assist or “help people of colour who cannot or will not help themselves” (761). In contrast, people of colour are rarely represented as “helping their own communities or resisting the racist status quo” (763). Hughey suggests that such narratives are superficially satisfying because they “help assuage feelings of White guilt by insulating Whites from the claims that they are still over-privileged or reap the benefits of a racialized and racist order” (764). Indeed, a “White character assisting a down-on-their luck, non-White character, delivers a touch that resonates” (761). Evident in recent critically acclaimed films, such as *The Help* (2011) and *Green Book* (2018), the white saviour remains a relevant trope in the 2010s, including in scripted television series such as *Orange is the New Black*, which notably was also written by Lauren Morelli (Belcher). To be sure, this genre of ‘feel-good’ post-racial representation is apparent in *Transparent* and *Tales of the City*, which conclude with the benevolent, white trans elder figure

assisting the trans woman of colour younger. In this way, the representations of Maura and Mrs. Madrigal arguably join a long history of racialized saviours on screen.

According to Koch-Rein and colleagues, trans representation should “intervene and *trans* our ways of looking at the world” (7). *Transparent* and *Tales of the City* ‘*trans*’ images of elder death and trans death. That is, in a world where trans and BIPOC death is often violent and spectacular, *Transparent* and *Tales of the City* render (white) trans death ‘ordinary’ and peaceful and imagine trans of color subjects as capable of aging into middle and later life, living longer lives, and as capable of having a future. However, my reading suggests that this optimistic interpretation comes at the expense of the benevolence of the white trans elder figure, who must pass on for the trans woman of colour younger (and others like them) to secure stability in the form of shelter and wealth.

Nonetheless, the depiction of Davina and Ysela living into middle and later life demonstrates Lavelle Ridley’s concept of ‘imagining otherly.’ ‘Imagining otherly,’ Ridley argues, “seeks to suggest an epistemological escape from the precarious confines that trans necropolitics posit” (482). In other words, ‘imagining otherly’ allows racialized trans people the space “to catch one’s breath” (482) through “the possibility of escape to some imagined elsewhere” (483). Ridley’s concept builds from Juana María Rodríguez’s argument in support of “the political force of fantasy,” including “utopian fantasies of futurity, survival, and pleasure” (26). Following Judith Butler’s contention that “fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise,” Rodríguez contends that fantasy enables “us to suppose potentialities beyond and before the now, to step across the borders of the possible” (27). Rodríguez maintains that for femmes of colour, fantasy functions as “a way to conjure and inhabit an alternative world in which other forms of

identification and social relations become imaginable” (26). *Transparent* and *Tales of the City* do indeed imagine potentialities that for many marginalized groups, including racialized and trans spectators (Ridley; Cavalcante *Struggling*), seem impossible.

Namely, these texts imagine hopeful worlds where trans older adults are respected and valued members of queer communities; trans people die in and ‘of old age’; and people of colour, specifically trans of colour people, are anticipated to grow up and have a future. Moreover, both shows imagine queer televisual universes where interracial and intergenerational kinship ties among trans people trump biological (*Transparent*) or even logical (*Tales of the City*) family. At the same time, however, these texts imagine, albeit in typical and arguably harmful ways, post-racial worlds “in which racial categories have no meaning” (Esposito 521). Despite being diversity-oriented television, both shows erase meaningful racial difference between the white trans elder and trans of colour younger, reproducing post-race logics that in their own way represent a U.S. American fantasy.

4.5 Conclusion

In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz argues that theories of queer temporality that fail to account for race and class dynamics, specifically Edelman’s anti-futural thesis in *No Future*, reproduce a queer “subject whose time is a restricted and restricting hollowed-out present free of the need for the challenge of imagining a futurity that exists beyond the self or the here and now” (94). For Muñoz, to not care about the production of the future is a privilege unevenly experienced by *white* queer subjects. He argues that queers, especially queers of colour, and Rodríguez

and Keeling further specify, *feminine* queers of colour (e.g., trans feminine persons, lesbians and bisexual women, female sex workers, and effeminate gay men), cannot lose sight of the future because “the here and now are simply not enough” (96). Although Muñoz concurs with Edelman—“it is important not to hand over futurity to normative white reproductive futurity” (95)—Muñoz reconfigures queerness *as*, rather than against, futurity, as a “utopian political imagination that will enable us to glimpse another time and place, a ‘not-yet’ where queer youths of color actually get to grow up” (95-96). In these ways, *Transparent* and *Tales of the City* offer imaginings and fantasies of liveable lives for trans and trans of colour elders where death occurs ‘ordinarily’ in old age. Queer of colour scholarship makes clear how important these representations are for trans and racialized audiences whose death is expected and prescribed within transphobic and racist structures (Gosset; Griffin-Gracy et al., Ridley; Shackelford; Snorton; Stryker “We Who”). Accordingly, both series, I believe, actively seek out and construct queer articulations of the future (i.e., social horizons of hope), ones that try to suggest and ensure that at the end of the narrative trans of colour characters live, even if at the expense of their white trans elders. Such representations are valuable because they deviate from dominant representations of trans lives as cut short by violence. However, the colourblind treatments of Davina and Yslea reproduce a contemporary post-racial view of race and racism as dead or as not mattering for the lives of characters of colour. Therefore, while *Transparent* and *Tales of the City* offer their trans of colour characters a future, their representational logics, which fail to meaningfully account for race and class, risk reducing trans futurity as a race-less and class-less issue, minimizing how trans life and death are structured by race, racism, and white supremacy.

Chapter 5

5 Coda: The Future of the Queer Elder Figure

In this dissertation, I have argued that the queer elder figure is a temporal phenomenon. To varying degrees, all the chapters explore how the queer elder is figured as both of time (i.e., old) and out of time, that is, out of sync with the present moment and/or nearing death. In chapter 2, I argued that the queer elder is depicted as anachronistic. As a timely figure, the queer elder either inappropriately draws up ‘the past’ into the present, such as the *backward* queer elder who cannot let go of politics often conceived of in the contemporary feminist and queer popular imaginary as retrograde, passed, or dead, or embodies a mistake in the organization of normative time, such as the *closeted* queer elder and the *belated* queer elder. The closeted queer elder, a relic from the past, ages in opposition to time’s binds (e.g., marriage and childrearing) and is therefore out of time. And the belated queer elder who comes out later in life, years after gay liberation and the assimilation of gays and lesbians into the normative fold, lags behind a progressive liberal moment that is imagined as both post-closet and post-gay, rendering the belated queer elder not only late but also selfish and ridiculous, and coming out as a non-event. Taken together, these three representations of the queer elder figure, I argued, function to construct a narrative about the progressiveness of time, specifically the present moment, which is presented as a safe temporal moment for LGBT individuals. These temporal dynamics that situate the past as unlivable/oppressive and the present as livable/liberated, as well as represent LGBT older adults as unadvanced/narrow-minded and LGBT younger adults as liberal/advanced, elide the

ways in which the structural conditions of the 2010s and ‘the now’ often fail LGBT older adults, who frequently express fear of being re-closeted in the near future. These temporal logics also reproduce adversarial ageism and overlook the ways in which younger adults, including those from LGBT communities, *also* participate in politics and attitudes that are far from dead or over. Depictions of the queer elder as closeted, backward, and belated, therefore, risk reproducing LGBT older adults as distinctly and problematically different from younger LGBT generations (e.g., Millennials), and the closet and homophobia as presently irrelevant. These depictions construct difference and opposition, rather than similarity and continuity, between LGBT generational cohorts.

In chapter 3, I explored representations of May-December romances between young and old men. Instances of a substantial age-gap, portraits of May-December romances among men risk reifying stereotypes about aging gay men as pedophilic and miserable, as well as inappropriately drawing up ‘the past’. In these ways, these depictions are ‘out of time’. Indeed, relations built around a significant age differential, especially among young and old gay and bisexual men, have largely been constructed as ancient (‘gay’) history. To this end, contemporary depictions of cross-generational love and sex are backward-looking. At once, these images *look* to another time (i.e., ‘the past), and *feel* backward (i.e., less progressive) in the present when erotic egalitarianism is increasingly embraced by a particularly visible and privileged population of gays and lesbians. Created in the 2010s and set in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, these May-December romances thus make visible a desire for a backward-looking and feeling eroticism organized around age difference, complicating a neat division of the past from the present. Not only do recent representations of May-

December relations among men indicate some longing for age inegalitarian relations, but they also reflect a desire to restore the important roles older gay men once played in male sexual subcultures as erotic, romantic, and platonic mentors (e.g., aunties), role models, and father figures for young gay and bisexual men. While the texts explore in this chapter offered conventional framings of cross-generational relationships as asymmetrical, exploitative, and inferior, and older gay men as predatory and pathetic, they also offered alternative framings of cross-generational relationships—ones that disrupt normative ideas about family, marriage, adoption, and sex.

In chapter 4, I focused on trans feminine depictions of the queer elder figure. Doomed to die, discursively speaking, the trans feminine queer elder is anachronistic or out of time in the sense that they are marked for death as an old and trans subject; they are running out of time. I argued that, although the trans feminine queer elder figure participates in a stereotypical portrait of old age as a time when people die, she complicates conventions for depicting trans death as violent and premature. Instead, her death is ordinary (i.e., caused by old age) and well timed (i.e., occurring in old age and for the betterment of future generations, namely *other* generations of trans women). The death of the trans feminine queer elder functions somewhat like fantasy or an orientation toward a future horizon wherein trans women live long lives, including trans women of colour characters. Such representations of trans death offer trans spectators the possibility of seeing a future for themselves and thus are valuable representations. They aspire to cultivate futures for trans individuals, who traditionally die violent deaths onscreen, especially for racialized trans folks whose violent deaths offscreen have repeatedly been linked by trans of colour scholars and activists to a spike in cultural visibility. I argued

that the futuristic potential of these constructions is, however, simultaneously weighted down or, perhaps, haunted by the contemporaneity of post-race colourblind logics.

Because racialized difference is visible yet does not narratively ‘make a difference’ in texts containing the white trans feminine queer elder figure, trans futurity is imagined as a race-less project that overlooks how trans longevity and death are mediated by transphobia and cissexism *as well as* racism and white supremacy.

5.1 Does the Queer Elder Figure Have a Future?

At the close of the decade and the conclusion of this dissertation, contemporary representations of the queer elder figure appear unabated. Although *Grace and Frankie* (2015-), the longest running Netflix series, is wrapping up the narratives of its protagonists, including older gay couple Robert and Sol, the queer elder figure does not appear to be a passing trend of the 2010s. Currently, the queer elder figure is evident in films such as *Supernova* (2020), *Swan Song* (2021), and Christian Coppola’s *Daddy* (2020), a short film about an 80-year-old man (Rob Rifkin) who hires a young male escort (Dylan Sprouse) to mark his first wedding anniversary apart from his late wife. These narratives continue to center older white gay men, especially couples, a finding that is consistent with existing scholarship about representations of LGBT aging (Johnson; Hurd et al.). Emergent narratives of the queer elder figure, however, appear to be reckoning with age-related disabilities and mortality in more explicit and complex ways than ever before. Although many queer elders died onscreen in the 2010s, their deaths appear suddenly with little explanation or context. As explored in Chapter 4, older adults (not to mention trans persons) are those who tend to die in film and television and,

therefore, are simply expected to die; “she was old,” we are told. Destined to die, these characters ‘died of old age’ without any of the decrepitude, dependence, and/or disability that generally marks the final stage (the fourth age) of life (Gilleard and Higgs “Ageing”). In contrast, impairment and illness, especially age-associated diseases, including cancer, dementia, and strokes, appear to be at the center of queer elder narratives in the 2020s.

For instance, at the beginning of 2020, *Grace and Frankie* (2015-) released its sixth season on Netflix in which queer elder figures Robert and Sol face serious health concerns that derail their honeymoon. When Sol sees Robert out of breath, he insists that the couple get physicals that result unexpectedly in a clean bill of health for Robert and further testing for Sol. In the episode “The Funky Walnut,” Sol’s blood tests reveal that he has slow-growing prostate cancer, an age-related cancer that affects people with prostates. The doctor explains rather flippantly, “you’ve got a funky walnut. That’s all. It’s fairly common at your age” (*Grace and Frankie*). Sol is presented with two options: undergo surgery, which holds the potential for complications, infection, and loss of sexual function, or do nothing, “so, he can keep doing everything,” the doctor adds encouragingly (*Grace and Frankie*). The doctor reasons that at Sol’s age (75 years old), he is likely to die of something else, and thus encourages Sol to actively monitor an otherwise “indolent” form of cancer. Sol initially chooses to do nothing, reasoning that quality rather than length of life is more important to him. Sol and Robert’s larger exchange, however, reveals that Sol’s chief concern is about the implications of the surgery for Robert and Sol’s sex life as a *gay* couple. Indeed, though not stated explicitly in the episode, prostatectomies carry the possible side effects of erectile dysfunction,

decreased libido, ejaculatory dysfunction, and urinary and bowel incontinence, many of which are particularly relevant to the sexual practices and cultures of gay and bisexual men (Blank; Rosser et al.). For example, for men who have had prostate surgery and engage in anal sex, bottoming will likely feel different without a prostate and topping may become more difficult with weakened erections. And for both receptive and penetrative cisgender men who have had the surgery, they will be unable to ejaculate, a sexual act that has been documented as being paramount to gay men's sexual cultures (Rosser et al.). For Sol, sexual health is associated with "quality of life" (*Grace and Frankie*). Dissatisfied with Sol's decision Robert responds, "but I want you here, in whatever shape, for as long as possible" (*Grace and Frankie*). The episode concludes with Sol deciding that he can live without his 'walnut,' and opts for surgery to remove the cancer. The implication is that a longer life together, and Sol "in whatever shape," is ultimately more important to both men than an altered sex life (*Grace and Frankie*). The episode evokes critical disability scholar Alison Kafer's concept of "curative time," an orientation to futurity that is framed by "an understanding of disability that not only *expects* and *assumes* intervention but also cannot imagine or comprehend anything other than intervention" (27). At the same time, though, given the longstanding concern that gay men are an "invisible" demographic in prostate cancer research and discourse (Blank), the episode is culturally significant for the way it centers older gay men and (if only marginally) age-related disease and impairment, including the disabling effects of prostate cancer for gay men's sexual intimacy.

The remainder of season six, however, does not explore Sol's surgery, his recovery, or the aftereffects of such a surgery—a missed opportunity, perhaps, to

thoughtfully explore an older gay man aging into illness, impairment, and/or disability. Viewers might be left wondering at the end of the season if Sol even underwent the surgery. In fact, prostate cancer and Sol's hasty decision are not once mentioned again. The important topic that prioritizes impairment, late life, and queerness simply falls out of visibility. It re-emerges suddenly in the first episode of the seventh and final season of *Grace and Frankie* ("The Roomies"), which was meant to air in early 2021 but was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On August 13, 2021, *Grace and Frankie* released the first four episodes of the season to keep fans captivated until the season's official release in April 2022. The episode "The Roomies" begins directly where it left off at the conclusion of season six with Robert and Sol taking refuge from flood damage in Grace and Frankie's home. Quickly the episode establishes that Sol and Robert have been having sexual intimacy issues: "It's been a while," Robert intimates to Sol ("The Roomies"). Confiding in Frankie, his ex-wife, Sol reveals that the lack of intimacy between him and Robert is a direct result of his prostate surgery. In the discussion, it is implied that Sol is 'cured' of cancer but that his body is forever changed. Sol confesses, "I feel like I'm being betrayed by my own body. How can I ever trust things will be the same? What if I am not the same man? I feel like damaged goods" ("The Roomies"). Sol's confession acknowledges that (bodily) change, a common theme in the series, especially for protagonists Grace and Frankie, has affected his self-esteem. The episode's topic has the potential to explore how gay men must re-negotiate masculinity, sex, and intimacy. Indeed, sex after prostate cancer treatment holds the potential for exploring new ways of giving and receiving pleasure that defy heteronormative and ableist expectations about sex generally and sex between men specifically. After all, illness and disability in

later life can present the opportunity to think differently about sex, gender, and touch in productive and generative ways—in ways “that contest dominant discourses on decline and phallogentric masculinity” (Sandberg “Closer” 140; “Just Feeling;” Gallop). The episode, however, takes a different direction that ultimately reduces the rekindled (and perhaps changed) sexual intimacy between the men to a horrific off-screen sight gag, when Grace accidentally walks in on the couple having sex. The scene, which is played for laughs, relies on ageist, homophobic, and quite possibly ableist cultural assumptions that render the sexual desire and sexual practices of old, gay, and/or disabled men as nauseating, repulsive, unwatchable, and laughable. The episode’s subject matter is in keeping with the age-related topics generally afforded to the series’ title characters; however, it is handled with much less care and sensitivity.

The poor handling of Sol and Robert’s health issue is surprising given that aging and disability have been at forefront of Grace and Frankie’s plotlines. For instance, the central plotline of season six develops from Grace’s dwindling ability to get up off the toilet and couch, a humiliating, yet common, experience that gives rise to the protagonists’ development of “The Rise Up,” a hydraulic-powered toilet designed for older adults who struggle to sit down and/or stand up. Similarly, in the third season, Grace and Frankie create “Vybrant,” a vibrator for older women who experience arthritis. Though a comedic series, neither masturbation nor toilet use are treated as jokes. The show handles other age-related topics, including the cultural invisibility of older women (season 1), assisted suicide (season 2), structural ageism (season 3), dementia (season 4), fast crosswalks (season 5), and hearing loss (season 6), as serious late life ‘issues’ that warrant re-presentation. These sorts of representations thoughtfully acknowledge that

mobility, pace, cognition, and hearing (among other things) change as one ages. Though complicated for Grace and Frankie as relatively able-bodied and able-minded people, bodily changes are ultimately framed narratively as adventures and as opportunities for growth rather than as indicators of decline. Similarly, the series generally portrays accommodations as practical, normalizing rather than stigmatizing assistive devices and technologies (e.g., hearing aids) in a society that devalues old and disabled embodiments. In contrast, Sol's prostate cancer is reduced to a sanitized depiction of age-related illness that Sol overcomes in the span of two episodes and ultimately gets used for laughs in the end.

In another recent example of the queer elder figure, writer and director Harry Macqueen's *Supernova* also focuses on an age-related disease. Released in the United States in 2021, the film follows aging long-time couple Sam (Colin Firth) and Tusker (Stanley Tucci) as they travel around England visiting family and friends. Unbeknownst to Sam, this is, however, the last trip they will take together as a couple. For Tusker, who has been diagnosed with dementia and has decided to stop taking his medication, intends to privately take his life while Sam, a pianist, will be preoccupied at his concert—the final stop of their journey together both literally and figuratively. The title of the film foretells the predictable destination of their trip and of Tusker who adamantly does not want to further 'burden' Sam or others as his cognition deteriorates. A supernova refers to the final stage of a mature star's lifespan, which ends suddenly with a cataclysmic explosion—quite literally with a bang. Importantly, the dying star's brightness increases rather than dims at its expiry. The bright and rapid burst, referenced in the title, foreshadows the suicide of Tusker who refuses to slowly lose his sense of self, but also

the demise of Tusker and Sam's relationship, which is most explosive, most passionate, the night before Tucker's premeditated death, when Sam surrenders to Tusker's end-of-life wishes. The film suggests that Sam, though initially resistant and unsupportive, confirms his deep love for Tusker by letting him go.

Aside from being a romantic film about an aging gay couple, *Supernova* is ultimately a film about dementia and assisted suicide. While complicating the topic of gay (teen) suicide, as well as depictions of the 'tragic queer,' *Supernova* draws parallels to other dementia-themed films, such as *Still Alice* (2014) and *The Leisure Seeker* (2017). Indeed, the film could be charged with participating in the recent popularization of (particular) dementia narratives, or what Aagje Swinnen and Mark Schweda call "a cultural 'dementia boom'" (10). They argue that dementia, a biological as well as a cultural phenomenon, "is increasingly used as a metaphor for the aging process itself as a stage in the human experience that needs to be fought by all means" (Swinnen and Schweda 11; Zeilig). Here, the 'aging process' refers presumably to deep old age or the fourth age, which is distinguished less by chronological age and more by the presence of dependence, disability, abjection, and loss (loss of speech, memory, bowels, bladder, self) or simply "the body's failure" (Twigg 146; Gilleard and Higgs "Ageing"). In film, dementia, especially Alzheimer's disease, is so readily conflated with representations of aging and late life that it would seem that "those not living with the disease can define themselves as not yet old" (Chivers *The Silvering* 60). Dementia thus often functions narrowly within cultural discourse as shorthand for aging, specifically old age.

Supernova participates in and reinforces dominant cultural constructions of dementia as a "story of...tragic loss and decline" and of "sufferers as 'lost selves'"

(Swinnen and Schweda 11). This is best illustrated through Tusker's notebook, which Sam finds among Tusker's other private belongings, including a tape that discloses Tusker's intention to take his life. A key symbol of his advancing dementia, the notebook begins with thoughtful prose that devolves into inexplicable scrawl followed by blankness. The notebook symbolizes Tusker's decline and the scene suggests that Tusker, like his writing, will become smaller, increasingly incomprehensible, incapable of meaningful communication, and eventually empty. Critical age studies scholar Sally Chivers argues that representations of dementia and other related conditions "come to signify a lack of memories that translate similarly into a fear of the loss of story" (*The Silvering* 60). *Supernova*'s narrative strongly suggests that Tusker, a writer who is increasingly losing his ability to tell stories, will lose the ability to tell his own story—to narrate the self. Indeed, Tusker's biggest concern is loss of selfhood. For example, in one exchange, a friend tells Tucker, "You're still you, Tusker. You're still the guy he [Sam] fell in love with," to which Tucker responds, "No, I'm not. I just look like him" (*Supernova*). Highlighting his anticipated loss of self, Tusker insists in his final plea to Sam, "I want to be remembered for who I was, but not for who I am about to become" (*Supernova*). The film imagines dementia as a departure from rather than a continuation of the self, reifying the ableist image of dementia as "death in advance" (Hautz 186). The film's narrative suggests that even if alive and breathing, Tusker will be dead anyway. Aging with a cognitive disability is thus conceptualized as no life at all, justifying Tusker's suicide and his partner Sam's complicity in his suicide.

Finally, most promising of this group of images created and released at the beginning of the 2020s is director Todd Stephens' *Swan Song*, a U.S. American dramedy

about an old, retired gay hairdresser who is offered \$25,000 to style the hair of a former client for her funeral. As the title suggests, *Swan Song* focuses on a penultimate quest before death, and thus epitomizes what Timothy Shary and Nancy McVittie call ‘elder odyssey’. Elder odysseys such as David Lynch’s *The Straight Story* (1999) and Alexander Payne’s *Nebraska* (2013) “celebrate the process of traveling or searching as a redemptive experience” (108). They write,

“[unlike] the bildungsroman tradition, in which young people come of age through knowledge gained from new experiences, the elder odyssey focuses more on resolution through rediscovery of what was already known, or on serenity through acceptance of what had been denied” (107).

For queer elder figure Patrick “Mr. Pat” Pitsenbarger (Udo Kier), an old gay man who over the course of his life has experienced the loss of his lover, business, home, and friends due to homophobic and heterosexist people, institutions, and structures, the latter is certainly true. Mr. Pat must come to terms with a society that quite literally left men like him behind. Specifically, Mr. Pat must get over how his former friend and client Rita Sloan Parker (Linda Evans), a Republican socialite, abandoned him and subsequently brought down Mr. Pat’s business in the process. Initially presented as a petty falling out between a wealthy client and a former eminent hairdresser, the conflict between Mr. Pat and Rita is gradually revealed to be more complex, more painful. For Rita, too embarrassed by Mr. Pat’s partner’s cause of death (AIDS), betrayed her longtime companion in his most desperate time of need. In death, a specter, Rita acknowledges, “I left you. And the whole town followed. I’m sorry” (*Swan Song*). The narrative arc of *Swan Song* reveals that Mr. Pat’s odyssey, his final act before death, is actually about forgiving the homophobic actions of his beloved friend of 33 years. *Swan Song*, I

suggest, presents a rare image of the queer elder figure, one that generally departs from the representational logics outlined in this dissertation.

Indeed, Mr. Pat is in many ways unlike the queer elder figures produced and distributed in the 2010s. Unlike Hal (*Beginners*), Sol and Robert (*Grace and Frankie*), and Sid (*The Cool Kids*), Mr. Pat is not new to an ‘out’ lifestyle as an old gay man. Mr. Pat, a pioneer in the gay community, has grown into old age as a gay man. He is not grappling with his sexuality late in life, a common motif among the texts analyzed in my visual corpus. According to director Todd Stephens, “being gay is not the conflict; the conflict is getting old, the conflict is losing your love for what you love to do, losing your purpose” (Gao). Moreover, unlike Ben and George (*Love is Strange*), Dot and Stella (*Cloudburst*), Dolly and Frances (*3 Generations*), he is not coupled. Mr. Pat’s partner David died in the 1990s from complications due to AIDS, a sad reality for many gay and bisexual men and trans women of a ‘certain age.’ Present yet dead, David’s specter is a haunting reminder of the legacy of the AIDS epidemic, as well as property and inheritance rights denied to same-sex couples. Also, unlike William (*This Is Us*), Maura (*Transparent*), Mrs. Madrigal (*Tales of the City*), and Elle (*Grandma*), he is not a parent, nor a grandparent. Instead, Mr. Pat describes his city’s local gay bar and the adult men who once upon a time frequented the bar, including Mr. Pat’s friends and lovers, as his kin; “this place was family,” he recalls poignantly (*Swan Song*). Unlike Dom (*Looking*), he is not terrorized or repulsed by signs of aging (his or others). For instance, when one of Mr. Pat’s few living companions Gertie (a non-verbal wheelchair user who also lives at the nursing home) loses control of her bladder, he tenderly caresses her cheek and responds with empathy, “Don’t worry. We will clean it up” (*Swan Song*). Nor is he

“eager to recapture lost youth” (Yoakam 66) through the consumption or attainment of youthful bodies, unlike Leslie (*Transparent*) and Liberace (*Behind the Candelabra*).

Although alone, uncoupled, and resentful, Mr. Pat’s characterization also does not revert to a stereotypical depiction of “the single, miserable, and bitter old queen” evident in twentieth-century portraits of gay aging (Goltz 9).

A fundamental part of Mr. Pat’s odyssey is his experience of ill health and frailty. Like Edgar (*J. Edgar*), Liberace (*Behind the Candelabra*), Melvyn (*Gerontophilia*), and Alice (*True Love*), Mr. Pat does die, as the film’s title presages. However, unlike the deaths of Mrs. Madrigal (*Tales of the City*) and Dot (*Cloudburst*), Mr. Pat’s impending death is alluded to throughout the film. Eerie signs, including disorientation, confusion, severe headaches, forgetfulness, nosebleeds, and visions of and textured conversations with deceased lovers and friends, foreshadow his death, while troubling the finitude of death as marking the end of life. Indeed, late lover David and both passed and past friends Eunice and Rita are revealed to have life after death as specters in Mr. Pat’s memories and visions. Though disability and illness might be said to signify old age and death in *Swan Song*, these signs are not necessarily imbued negatively. After all, his visions, which seem to be produced by his severe headaches and disorientation, facilitate opportunities for him to reunite with and ultimately find peace with his late friends. In *Swan Song*, signs of aging produce instances of joy, laughter, reflection, and relief for its queer elder figure. Signs of bodily decline, though they spell the death of the queer elder figure, are in effect re-signified in *Swan Song*.

Similarly, the nursing home in *Swan Song*, unlike in other popular representations, does not symbolize “cultural failure and a fate worse than death,” as is

typical of many films about old age and later life (Chivers “Blind” 134). Nor is it a place that requires an escape plan. Though Mr. Pat does make a swift break for freedom from the nursing home, the doors are unlocked as a fellow resident reminds him, undermining the seriousness of his ‘escape’. Neither a hell nor a prison, the nursing home, however, is portrayed as a place where not much happens—a site of monotonous everydayness and banality. For example, when a fellow resident is asked why she keeps reading the same old book, she responds blankly, “I haven’t got anything else to do” (*Swan Song*).

Similarly consumed by boredom and repetition, Mr. Pat compulsively hoards and folds napkins, an activity that initially calls Mr. Pat’s sanity into question, since the activity is unproductive and therefore stigmatizing within an ableist and neoliberal capitalist paradigm. A stroke survivor, Mr. Pat could be participating doggedly in a rehabilitative exercise, or he could be losing his mind. The aim of the activity is ambiguous. Like a big cat pacing in a cage, the repetitive behaviour serves no ostensible function otherwise.

In small ways, *Swan Song* arguably celebrates disability in later life. For example, when an orderly at the nursing home praises Mr. Pat for walking the hallways, he immediately and defiantly sits down in a wheelchair and rolls away. Part approval, part instruction, the orderly’s comment (“keep those legs moving”) evokes the ‘use it or lose it’ rhetoric that is typical of active or successful aging discourses. The concept of ‘active’ or ‘successful’ aging (also known as ‘healthy’ and ‘positive’ aging) refers to the prevention of disability and the maintenance of physical and cognitive function (Rowe and Kahn). Active or successful agers are thus those who embody agelessness or show no signs of aging, including cognitive and physical ‘decline’. In essence, active aging signifies “not aging and not being old” (Calasanti and King 7), or “growing older without

aging” (Katz 188). Non-stop activity and only particular types of “prescribed busyness,” such as extended paid employment and volunteerism, are viewed as necessary to prevent or delay bodily change (Cruikshank 164). As many have illustrated, active aging agendas and the moral imperative to remain busy can discipline aging bodies (Cruikshank; Katz). From critical age and disability perspectives, successful or active aging discourses can, as a result, further stigmatize and marginalize people aging *with* disabilities as well as those aging *into* disabilities (Minkler and Fadem). Accordingly, critical social gerontologists critique such discourses for privileging ideals of activity, productivity, and the moral imperative or ‘duty’ to age well, and for ultimately reproducing ageism and ableism (Laliberte Rudman “Embodying;” “Shaping”; Mendes; Minkler and Fadem).

Mr. Pat, however, is uncooperative with and resistant to the ‘duty’ to age well or successfully. Following José Esteban Muñoz’s understanding of “queer failure,” I argue that Pat’s failure to walk can be read as refusal to comply with, or as an escape from, neoliberal capitalist mandates, including active aging agendas that insist upon productive citizens. In a chrononormative society, Elizabeth Freeman reminds, “the state and other institutions...link properly temporalized bodies to narratives of movement and change” (4). In contrast, stasis and immobility, essentially pauses or interruptions in the forward and linear progression of time, disrupt the seemingly invisible “logic of time-as-productive” (5). Using philosopher Paolo Virno’s *A Grammar of the Multitudes*, which speaks about the ‘bad sentiments’ or seemingly hopeless attitudes of post-Fordist laborers, Muñoz traces a politics of hopefulness in the laborer’s negative sentiments, which include “cynicism, opportunism, depression, and bitchiness” (176). Muñoz writes, “these bad sentiments can signal the capacity to transcend hopelessness. These sentiments

associated with despondence contain the potentiality for new modes of collectivity, belonging in difference and dissent” (Muñoz 176-177). Therefore, bad feelings, such as Pat’s petulance and unreasonable obstinacy, can be “critically redeployed and function as refusals of social control mandates that become transformative behaviors” (177). Pat’s failure to walk as an older gay man aging into disability is not a failure of the material body, but a political refusal of ableist and ageist values. By sitting, he defiantly refuses to “keep those legs moving” (*Swan Song*). In doing so, the scene arguably exposes and defies one of the “hidden rhythms” of chrononormativity, “the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (Freeman 3).

For critical social gerontologists, the imperative to age well, or age without disability, frailty, and/or dependence, promotes a neoliberal rationality that governs or, to use Freeman’s language, *binds* aging individuals (Laliberte Rudman “Embodying”). Notably, Mr. Pat continues to move through the hallway using the wheelchair (as well as his upper body strength) rather than his legs. The rebellious gesture might be described as ‘crip,’ the defiant “position that disability is a desirable part of the world” (Hamraie and Fritsch 2) and that people with disabilities, including those aging into disabilities, do not require cures or fixes (Clare *Brilliant; Exile*; Kafer; McRuer). Such an interpretation is further encouraged near the film’s conclusion, which seems to flagrantly celebrate disabled and old ways of being. After sustaining a serious head injury, Mr. Pat ironically comes to his senses: he must fulfill his quest to style Rita Parker Sloan’s hair, accomplishing his swan song. Making his way to the funeral home, the final stop of his quest and life course, Mr. Pat *fabulously* rides a turquoise motorized scooter (a stigmatized and stigmatizing symbol of both old age and disability) legs crossed while

casually puffing away at a cigarette. In his book *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric*, Madison Moore writes,

fabulousness is dangerous, political, confrontational, risky and largely (but certainly not only) practiced by queer, trans, and transfeminine people of color and other marginalized groups...it's about making a spectacle of yourself not merely to be seen but because your body is constantly suppressed and undervalued. (8)

Similarly, Juana Rodríguez argues that gestures of fabulousness act “to counteract demands for corporal conformity, to refuse to alter our bodies and our movements for the sake of the social comfort of others” (6). Mr. Pat drives defiantly, slowly, and perhaps fabulously down the middle of a busy road that has been designed for high-speed vehicular traffic. Holding up rush hour traffic (i.e., the flow of workers coming from or going to work), Mr. Pat seated in the motorized scooter occupies the middle of the road, as well as the frame. The scene literally centers his body—a body that is comfortably accommodated by a device. The scene is confrontational and arresting. In these moments of crip defiance, *Swan Song* can be said to celebrate ‘unproductive’ bodies and ways of being in this world that are generally ‘suppressed and undervalued.’ Thus, whereas *Supernova* and *Grace and Frankie* seem to superficially invoke and then dismiss the possibility of older gay men experiencing disability as they age, *Swan Song* joyfully imagines later life with cognitive and physical disabilities for the queer elder figure. In this way, I understand *Swan Song* to offer an instance of representational transgression from ageist *as well as* ableist portraits of the queer elder figure.

Aside from the film’s unique and rare framing of disability and queerness in later life, *Swan Song* offers possibilities that invoke Muñoz’s concept of ‘cruising utopia,’ or

the notion that “queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future” (1). Quoting Frankfurt School social theorist Ernst Bloch, Muñoz emphasizes, “the essential function of utopia is a critique of what is *present*” (Bloch qtd. in Muñoz 37, emphasis added). In the film, glimpses of queerness, that “warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (1), occur when Mr. Pat (an old gay man aging into disability and death) experiences the conditions of the present, which, as I have explored elsewhere (Chapter 2), is generally thought to be progressive, especially in relation to the past. The film, through the figure of the queer elder, critically interrogates what is lost to ‘progress,’ as well as which subjects and ways of being are overlooked, devalued, sacrificed, and forgotten during the process of accomplishing such ‘progress.’ In evaluating the present from the perspective of the past, the film begins to illuminate other ways of being in this world. Put differently, the film calls back the past to question the present to ultimately imagine something different for the future. *Swan Song* deploys, what Muñoz calls, “a backward glance that enacts a future vision” (4).

For instance, when Mr. Pat returns to his old stomping ground, a relatively empty gay bar called “The Universal Fruit and Nut Company,” he is surprised to find out that the beloved community space that he and his friends and lovers (i.e., his family) labored to create is doomed to be converted into a “straight, gastro micro brew pub” by a young gay couple (*Swan Song*). Confused, Mr. Pat asks earnestly, “but where will we dance?” (*Swan Song*). The poignant question evokes the sadness and regret that many have expressed over the loss of queer spaces, communities, and subcultures to gentrification and the assimilation of LGBT people. Enacting what Muñoz calls a “queer utopian memory” (35), Mr. Pat re-members the bar for the young gay bartender:

You see that stage? My lover David built that. He was, uh, very handy. I sewed the curtains and Eunice put the glitter in the paint. Every queen in town pitched in to open this dump. But maybe you're too young to know who Tim and Mike was. They opened the bar. There were so many people I remember. This place was family. (*Swan Song*)

Mr. Pat's remembrances of a community realized through the bar scene, drag culture, and queer nightlife (spaces at which people out of sync with straight and cis time were once imagined as fitting into, even if not always in practice), subtly calls into question the strange culture of this new generation of gay men for whom sexually segregated spaces are imagined as less necessary or altogether unnecessary. As Mr. Pat's friend Eunice asks rhetorically, "who needs the Fruit and Nut when they can hold hands at Applebee's" (*Swan Song*). Mr. Pat's alien-like observations and reactions to twenty-first century gay culture make strange what has become normal and taken for granted.

This is most clearly illustrated in the following scene when Mr. Pat encounters a gay couple and their two children unabashedly occupying public space as a family. Flabbergasted by the sight, Mr. Pat tries to make sense of the scene playing out in front of his eyes: "what on earth are they doing, these daddies with their babies? I wouldn't even know how to be gay anymore" (*Swan Song*). Increasingly out of place, Mr. Pat is experiencing a new gay world that is at once both fascinating and alienating. Although Mr. Pat does not condemn this portrait of homonormative domesticity, his questioning of the assimilationist present models a "mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (Muñoz 1). Indeed, Mr. Pat's provocative questions ("where will we dance" and "what are they doing") remind us that something might be missing. Queerness, Muñoz reminds, "is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not

enough, that indeed something is missing” (1). Taken together, the two scenes cruise utopia, yearning for social relations that evade the short-sighted ‘pleasures’ of the present (i.e., trendy establishments and children), the “here and now” that Muñoz calls “a prison house” (1). Indeed, unlike previous queer elder narratives, *Swan Song* is arguably less concerned with coupledness, family, and children than it is with community, friendship, and intergenerational extra-familial kinship.

The film, I argue, insists on another possibility: a queer futurity that pays close attention to the past through the figure of the queer elder for the purpose of critiquing the present and imagining other ways of relating. Specifically, the film complicates reproductive futurity, and opens up the possibility of appreciating other forms of generativity and inheritance that are not rooted in reproduction, the nuclear family, and heterosexuality. Generativity, the seventh and penultimate stage of Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development, refers to the developmental task of “establishing and guiding the next generation” (247). According to Erikson, generativity represents a form of meaning-making for older adults, one that links them directly to the future. Generativity, a desire for futurity, is thus “fundamentally about relationships to and of time” (Hostetler 397). An age-related concept, generativity closely resembles one of Jack Halberstam’s final markers of the heteronormative timeline—inheritance. Halberstam states, “the time of inheritance refers to an overview of generational time within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next” (*In a Queer* 5). Notably, both generativity and inheritance are rooted in cis/heteronormative notions of family, lineage, and children (Halberstam; Hostetler; Chazan and Baldwin; Sandberg and Marshall). Indeed, because heteronormative,

reproductive, and gendered values undergird dominant conceptualizations of generativity, LGBT older adults, especially older gay cisgender men, are rarely understood as capable of generative expressions (Hostetler). Andrew Hostetler argues that “homosexuality and generativity remain, in the popular imagination, somewhat mutually exclusive” (402) because homosexuality has been predominately conceptualized as a “dead-end lifestyle” (403). He writes,

whereas generativity invokes a utopian vision of progressive movement toward a better future for humankind, a collective endeavor that binds generations together, homosexuality was seen as destructive to the social fabric. And whereas generativity is fundamentally about the future, homosexuality has been portrayed as a hedonistic, present-oriented ‘lifestyle’. (403)

This is certainly the image that Lee Edelman draws on in his anti-social polemic *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Edelman, of course, invites queers to say ‘no’ to the future, emblemized through the figure of the child, and say ‘yes’ to the threat queers always already signify: the death drive. Queers, Edelman contends, must “inhabit the place of meaninglessness associated with the *sinthome*” and “figure an unregenerate, and unregenerating, sexuality” (47). In other words, the *sinthomosexual*, like the hedonistic queer of the cultural imagination who is thought to endanger the Child, embodies a distinctive non-generativity, a drive that disturbs and disrupts the reproduction of the future. Thus, queers, most especially gay men, are often figured as non-generative, antithetical to future generations, and thus as against the future.

In contrast, *Swan Song* intervenes in dominant understandings of generativity rooted in reproduction, rejects Edelman’s call to refuse affirming the future, and implies

instead that older gay men *can be* and *are* implicated in the dynamics of futurity, namely for other generations of gay men. This is illustrated near the end of the film when Mr. Pat speaks with Rita's grandson Dustin (Michael Urie). In this exchange, Dustin explains the important role that Mr. Pat played in his grandmother's life, as well as in his own life as a *young gay man*:

I was 15 when Grandma Rita sat me down and asked me if there was anything I needed to tell her. We were so conservative. I was scared to death to tell her the truth. But finally, I did. "Don't worry," she said. "My best friend's gay too." We stayed up all night. She told me all about you and David. Even though I never really knew you, I want you to know you changed my life. (*Swan Song*)

Having fulfilled his purpose (a purpose), Mr. Pat dies immediately after hearing Dustin's affirmation. An unusual deathbed scene in part because Mr. Pat is not in bed and Dustin is not Mr. Pat's biological descendant, the scene 'queers' the traditional deathbed scene which "serves to close the gap in social relations produced by death" wherein "the continuity that is assured is one that involves the dying person in her or his relation to ancestors as well as to survivors" (Bronfen 77). Although the (white) "Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" (Edelman 3), not least through the logics of generativity, *Swan Song* conceives of its Child as gay—a possibility not engaged by Edelman. For Edelman, the innocent (i.e., asexual or proto-heterosexual) child structures futurity, as well as sociality, and thus disciplines LGBT individuals because queerness is antithetical to futurity, that is, to the "cult of the child" (Edelman 19). However, what if, as is the case in *Swan Song*, the innocent child *is* queer as young Dustin is presumed to be by his

grandmother? What does it mean when the *queer* child or teen becomes the acknowledged site of generativity, of reproductive futurism? And what does it mean for the queer elder figure's relationship to the future?

Dustin's comments indicate that Mr. Pat unintentionally, yet significantly, shaped subsequent generations of gay men. He made a visible existence for young gay men, like Dustin, a little more possible. In this way, Dustin is represented as the inheritor or benefactor of Mr. Pat's legacy. Mr. Pat's influence, life, and resilience paved the way for gay children and teens to imagine a future. In other words, as an older gay man, Mr. Pat leaves a blueprint, a legacy, for Dustin to inherit. Different from his heterosexual parents and grandparents, Dustin saw himself in the image of Mr. Pat, an unwitting role model. Dustin's comments confirm Eunice's earlier assurances to Mr. Pat: "You left a big mark" (*Swan Song*). They also indicate that Mr. Pat has offered support outside of conventional hetero-reproductive, pro-natalist dynamics that privilege the pursuit of children, exposing alternative forms of kinship, generativity, and inheritance.

In *Swan Song*, queer parenthood and grandparenthood, as well as other common representational logics (e.g., the May-December motif), are decentered, and other forms of queer intergenerational relationality, such as "gay generativity" (Hostetler 416), are imagined. In this way, the film complicates or *queers* the concept of generativity, and expands the category of the children we should be "fighting for" (Edelman 3). The film's final message also implies that older queers have been and will continue to be important and visible to younger generations. *Swan Song* acknowledges the non-familial contributions of an early cohort of gay men who for various reasons could not or would not have biological descendants, and in doing so suggests that the queer elder figure is

integral to creating rather than impeding more livable social orders for future generations. The intergenerational commentary between Dustin and Mr. Pat suggests continuity between generations, between past and present, rather than a departure from or opposition to older generations of gay men. Unlike the backward queer elder figure (see chapter 2) and Edelman's *Sinthomosexual* who are both imagined as delaying progress and threatening the future, *Swan Song* imagines its queer elder figure as crucially paving the way for the advancement of LGBT communities. The film thus imagines connection across generations of queer people. Finally, *Swan Song* does not romanticize the conditions of queer adulthood, nor indulge the liberal rhetoric of *It Gets Better*. After all, Mr. Pat manages to live through and with the effects of structural violence. For example, after his partner David's death, Mr. Pat loses the home they created together to one of David's estranged biological relatives. Instead, the film explores how those shaped detrimentally by heterosexism and homophobia can nonetheless be resilient, and ultimately how the queer elder figure, despite social stigmatization and collective trauma, leaves positive legacies for subsequent LGBT generations to inherit. In these ways, I conceive of *Swan Song*'s portrait of Mr. Pat as holding the potential to shift the temporal, as well as ageist and ableist, representational logics of the queer elder figure.

5.2 Future Directions: Time for the Aging-Disability Nexus

Increasingly representations of the queer elder figure are exploring to varying degrees the intersections of disability and aging or what Katie Aubrecht and colleagues call the 'aging-disability nexus,' the contentious concept that people age *with* and *into* disabilities. Unlike dominant aging discourses that define 'successful aging' as the

prevention of disability and the maintenance of physical and cognitive function (Rowe), and disability discourses that overlook age-related disabilities (e.g., hearing and vision loss), the aging-disability nexus conceptualizes disability as a *part of* rather than *distinct from* the aging experience and vice versa (Aubrecht et al.). Although there is productive overlap between critical disability and age discourses, both disciplines tend to overemphasize their distinction from one another. In contrast, the ‘aging-disability nexus’ demonstrates that considerations of aging and later life need not dismiss or neglect the realities of age-associated illness, disability, and mortality to do justice to older adults. In fact, part of the injustice experienced by older adults may be the outright dismissal of disability and death in ‘positive’ images of aging, which increasingly deflect “attention from the physical deterioration of deep old age” and “aim above all not to present the aged as signs of the terminal process” (Featherstone and Wernick 13). Critical age studies scholar Leni Marshall has similarly called for greater critical inquiry at the intersections of disability and aging. Rather than adapting the theoretical tools of critical disability studies for the study of aging or vice versa, Marshall argues, “there needs to be a place where the academic arenas of disability studies and age studies merge,” and offers the critical concept of “conscious ageility” as a starting point (34). Building from Margaret Cruikshank’s model of “conscious aging,” which practices an awareness of critical age studies concepts, namely the notion that “aging is shaped more by culture, beliefs, customs, and traditions than by bodily changes” (Cruikshank ix), Marshall combines *aging* and *disability* to advance a consideration of “ageility studies” (21). Lenses and concepts that explore the intersections between aging and disability, ones that embrace rather than reject a potentially stigmatizing overlap between old age and disability, might

be an important next step for studies interested in representations of the queer elder figure.

To date, very little literature has explored mainstream representations of aging, disability, and queerness. Sally Chivers's pioneering monograph *The Silvering Screen: Old Age and Disability in Cinema* offers the only sustained analysis of the intersections of aging and disability onscreen. Through detailed analyses of a collection of films about aging and old age, Chivers demonstrates how representations of age rely on disability to become visible, for disability is narrowly conflated with aging in the popular imagination. She writes, "on the silvering screen, old is believed to indicate (at the very least) ill health, and ill health often visually appears in the form of a disabled body" (8). Chivers's study, conducted before the queer elder figure came to popular visibility in the cultural landscape, focuses perhaps necessarily on representations of *heterosexual* and *cisgender* aging, disability, impairment, and illness. And although an emerging small body of literature concerning the intersections of aging and disability considers the experiences of LGBT individuals, including some of my own work (McFarland and Taylor; Changfoot and Rice; Changfoot et al.; Finkelstein; Gallop), such analyses have not yet been extended to representations of the queer elder figure in film and television.

Building from Chivers's critical discussion of the ways in which representations of aging and old age rely on disability to be seen, as well as my analysis of the temporal arrangements and timing of the queer elder figure in film and television, future studies might investigate how disability is being deployed in representations of the queer elder figure. Does the emerging queer elder figure simply operationalize illness and disability to mark old age? Or does this figure meaningfully explore the intersections of being

disabled, old, and LGBT? As mainstream depictions of LGBT communities and individuals continue to move toward reifying the normative (Duggan; Grandena and McFarland; Warner *The Trouble*), future scholarship might consider exploring the role representations of the queer elder figure play in challenging and/or reinforcing depictions of successful aging (i.e., ‘aging without aging’) and thus compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness. Such lines of inquiry could be partially supported by scholarship focused on the intersections of cripp and queer temporalities (Clare *Brilliant; Exile*; Kafer; McRuer; Piepzna-Samarasinha) and may become even more salient as critical disability scholarship develops and notable LGBT *and* disabled scholars and writers, such as Eli Clare and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, continue to age.

As well, future scholarship about constructions of aging and queerness might explore how populations of LGBT older adults interpret and respond to films and television series containing the queer elder figure. Although there are some studies exploring LGBT audiences’ perceptions of mainstream depictions of queerness (Cavalcante “Breaking;” *Struggling*), as well as older adults’ perceptions of representations of aging (Chan and Leung; Hodgetts et al.; Vares), there is little to no qualitative data about how LGBT older adults interpret, or aspire to re-story, representations of the queer elder figure. Given the importance of representation to a sense of belonging, as well as LGBT older adults’ exclusion from emergent theoretical scholarship regarding images of later life and queer representation, greater qualitative research about the significance of these images *for* LGBT older adults is vital.

5.3 Conclusion

LGBT aging is not a new phenomenon; however, the recent mainstream representation of it is. As the queer elder figure continues to be deployed and redeployed in film and television, and the youngest LGBT Baby Boomers enter their sixties, it is imperative that queer theorists and critical age scholars remain attentive to how the queer elder figure is being operationalized and for what ends. Although the queer elder figure holds the potential to challenge norms and assumptions about age, gender, sexuality, and time as in the case of depictions of queer May-December romances and portraits of trans longevity, the queer elder figure can also reproduce conventional age politics that render older adults as problematic for the future as in the case of constructions of the figure as backward or as part of the ‘dementia boom’. As critical age scholars routinely remind, the images we see about later life shape the ways in which we as a culture value or devalue the aging process as well as older adults. If LGBT older adults are to continue to gain greater visibility in the mainstream cultural landscape, it is my hope that my dissertation offers a productive entry point for critical discussions about age, gender, sexuality, and time.

Filmography

Films

- 3 Generations*. Directed by Gaby Dellal, performances by Elle Fanning, Linda Emond, Susan Sarandon, and Naomi Watts. Big Beach, 2015.
- About Schmidt*. Directed by Alexander Payne, performances by Jack Nicholson, Hope Davis, Dermot Mulroney, and Kathy Bates. New Line Cinema, 2002.
- Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*. Directed by Tom Shadyac, performances by Jim Carrey, Sean Young, Courtney Cox, and Alice Drummond. Warner Bros., 1994.
- Albert Nobbs*. Directed by Rodrigo Garcia, performances by Glenn Close, Mia Wasikowska, and Janet McTeer. Entertainment One, 2011.
- Away From Her*. Directed by Sarah Polley, performances by Julie Christie, Gordon Pinsent, Olympia Dukakis. Lionsgate Films, 2006.
- Before You Know It*. Directed by PJ Raval, performances Dennis Creamer, Ty Martin, Robert Mainor, and Cassie Cass. Unravel Films, 2013.
- Beginners*. Directed by Mike Mills, performances by Ewan McGregor, Christopher Plummer, Mélanie Laurent, and Goran Visnjic. Universal, 2010.
- Behind the Candelabra*. Directed by Steven Soderbergh, performances by Michael Douglas, Matt Damon, and Dan Aykroyd. HBO, 2013.
- Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, The*. Directed by John Madden, performance by Judi Dench, Dev Patel, Bill Nighy, Maggie Smith, and Tom Wilkinson. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2011.
- Birdcage, The*. Directed by Mike Nichols, performances by Nathan Lane, Robin Williams, Hank Azaria, and Dan Futterman. MGM, 1996.
- Blind Side*. Directed by John Lee Hancock, performances by Sandra Bullock, Tim McGraw, Quinton Aaron, and Kathy Bates. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2009.
- Book Club*. Directed Bill Holderman, performances by Diane Keaton, Jane Fonda, Candice Bergen, and Mary Steenburgen. Paramount Pictures, 2018.
- Boys Don't Cry*. Directed by Kimberly Peirce, performances by Hillary Swank, Chloë Sevigny, and Peter Sarsgaard. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 1999.
- Brokeback Mountain*. Directed by Ang Lee, performances by Heath Ledger, Jake Gyllenhaal, Michelle Williams, and Anne Hathaway. Focus Features, 2005.
- By Hook or Crook*. Directed by Harry Dodge, performances by Silas Howard and Harry Dodge. Steakhaus Productions, 2001.
- Can You Ever Forgive Me*. Directed by Marielle Heller, performances Melissa McCarthy and Richard E. Grant. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2018.
- Children's Hour, The*. Directed by William Wyler, performances by Audrey Hepburn, Shirley MacLaine, James Garner, and Miriam Hopkins. United Artists, 1961.
- Cloudburst*. Directed by Thom Fitzgerald, performances by Olympia Dukakis, Brenda Fricker, Kristin Booth, and Michael McPhee. Wolfe Video, 2011.
- Coming Back Out Ball Movie, The*. Directed by Sue Thomson. performances by Tristan Meecham and Bec Reid. CBOB Films, 2018.
- Crash*. Directed by Paul Haggis, performances by Don Cheadle, Sandra Bullock, Thandiwe Newton, and Matt Dillon. Lions Gate Films, 2004.

- Crying Game, The*. Directed by Neil Jordan, performances by Stephen Rea, Miranda Richardson, Jaye Davidson, and Forest Whitaker. Palace Pictures, 1992.
- Curious Case of Benjamin Button, The*. Directed by David Fincher, performances by Brad Pitt, Cate Blanchett, and Tilda Swinton. The Kennedy/Marshall Company, 2008.
- Daddy*. Directed by Christian Coppola, performances by Ron Rifkin and Dylan Sprouse. 2019.
- Dallas Buyers Club*. Directed by Jean-Marc Vallée, performances by Mathew McConaughey, Jared Leto, and Jennifer Garner. Focus Features, 2013.
- Damage*. Directed by Louis Malle, performances by Jeremy Irons, Juliette Binoche, Miranda Richardson, and Rupert Graves. New Line Cinema, 1993.
- Danish Girl, The*. Directed by Tom Hooper, performances by Eddie Redmayne and Alicia Vikander. Focus Features, 2015.
- Death in Venice*. Directed by Luchino Visconti, performances by Dirk Bogarde and Björn Andrésen. Warner Bros., 1971.
- Deux* “Two of Us.” Directed by Filippo Meneghetti, performances by Barbara Sukowa, Matine Chevallier, and Léa Drucker. 2019.
- Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*. Directed by Sam Feder, performances by Laverne Cox, Susan Stryker, Alexandra Billings, and Jamie Clayton. Netflix, 2020.
- Dog Day Afternoon*. Directed by Sidney Lumet, performances by Al Pacino, John Cazale, James Broderick, and Charles Durning. Warner Bros., 1975.
- Dressed to Kill*. Directed by Brian De Palma, performances by Michael Caine, Angie Dickinson, and Nancy Allen. Filmways Pictures, 1980.
- Edie & Thea: A Very Long Engagement*. Directed by Susan Muska and Gréta Ólafsdóttir, performances by Edie Windsor and Thea Spyer, Breaking Glass Pictures, 2009.
- Edward Scissorhands*. Directed by Tim Burton, performances by Johnny Depp, Winona Ryder, and Dianne Wiest. 20th Century Fox, 1990.
- Empty Bed, An*. Directed by Mark Gasper, performances by Dana Bate, Chandra Anderson, Lenore Andriel, and Sabrina Artel. 1990.
- Englishman in New York, An*. Directed by Richard Laxton, performances by John Hurt, Denis O’Hare, Jonathan Tucker, Swoosie Kurtz, and Cynthia Nixon. Breaking Glass Pictures, 2009.
- Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Directed by Stephen Daldry, performances by Tom Hanks, Sandra Bullock, Thomas Horn, and Max von Sydow. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2011.
- Freeheld*. Directed by Peter Sollett, performances by Julianne Moore, Ellen Page, Michael Shannon, and Steve Carell. Summit Entertainment, 2015.
- Gen Silent*. Directed by Stu Maddox, performances by Lois Johnson. Interrobang Productions, 2011.
- Gerontophilia*. Directed by Bruce LaBruce, performances by Walter Borden, Pier Gabriel-Lajoie, Katie Boland. Filmoption International, 2013.
- Glen or Glenda*. Directed by Ed Wood, performances Ed Wood, Timothy Farrell, Delores Fuller, and Bela Lugosi. *Screen Classics*, 1953.
- Gods and Monsters*. Directed by Bill Condon, performances by Ian McKellen, Brendan Fraser, Lynn Redgrave, and Lolita Davidovich. Lionsgate Films, 1998.

- Gran Torino*. Directed by Clint Eastwood, performances by Clint Eastwood, Bee Vang, Christopher Carley, and Abney Her. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2008.
- Grandma*. Directed by Paul Weitz, performances by Lily Tomlin, Julia Garner, Sam Elliot, and Marcia Gay Harden. Sony Pictures Classics, 2015.
- Green Book*. Directed by Peter Farrelly, performances by Viggo Mortensen, Mahershala Ali, and Linda Cardellini. Universal Pictures, 2018.
- Green Mile, The*. Directed by Frank Darabont, performances by Tom Hanks, Michael Duncan, David Morse, and Bonnie Hunt. Warner Bros., 1999.
- Grumpy Old Men*. Directed by Donald Petrie, performances by Jack Lemmon, Walter Matthau, Burgess Meredith, and Daryl Hannah. Warner Bros., 1993.
- Grumpier Old Men*. Directed by Howard Deutch, performances by Jack Lemmon, Walter Matthau, Ann-Margret, and Daryl Hannah. Warner Bros., 1995.
- Hannah Free*. Directed by Wendy Jo Carlton, performances by Sharon Gless, Maureen Gallagher, Kelli Strickland, and Ann Hagemann. Ripe Fruit Films LLC, 2009.
- Harold and Maude*. Directed by Hal Ashby, performances by Bud Cort, Ruth Gordon, Vivian Pickles, and Cyril Cusak. Paramount Pictures, 1971.
- Harry and Tonto*. Directed by Paul Mazursky, performances Art Carney, Herbert Berghof, Phillip Bruns, and Ellen Burstyn. 20th Century Fox, 1974.
- Help*. Directed by Tate Taylor, performances by Emma Stone, Viola Davis, Bryce Dallas Howard, and Octavia Spencer. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2011.
- If These Walls Could Talk 2*. Directed by Jane Anderson, Martha Coolidge, and Anne Heche, performances Vanessa Redgrave, Chloë Sevigny, Michelle Williams, and Sharon Stone. HBO Films, 2000.
- Iris*. Directed by Richard Eyre, performances by Judi Dench, Jim Broadbent, Kate Winslet, and Hugh Bonneville. Miramax Films, 2001.
- It's Complicated*. Directed by Nancy Meyers, performances by Meryl Streep, Steve Martin, Alec Baldwin, and John Krasinski. Universal Pictures, 2010.
- Itty Bitty Titty Committee*. Directed by Jamie Babbit, performances Melonie Diaz, Nicole Vicius, Daniela Sea, and Guinevere Turner. Pocket Releasing, 2007.
- J. Edgar*. Directed by Clint Eastwood, performances by Leonardo DiCaprio, Armie Hammer, Naomi Watts, and Judi Dench. Warners Bros., 2011.
- Killing of Sister George, The*. Directed by Robert Aldrich, performances by Beryl Reid, Coral Browne, Susannah York, and Patricia Medina. Cinerama Releasing Corporation, 1968.
- L.I.E.* Directed by Michael Cuesta, performances by Brain Cox, Bruce Altman, Paul Dano, and Billy Kay. New Yorker Films, 2001.
- Laerte-se*. Directed by Elaine Brum, performances by Laerte Coutinho, Eliane Brum, and Rita Lee. Netflix, 2017.
- Land Ho!* Directed by Martha Stephens and Aaron Katz, performances by Paul Eenhoorn, Earl Lynn Nelson, Karrie Crouse, and Elizabeth McKee. Sony Pictures Classics, 2014.
- Las herederas* "The Heiresses." Directed by Marcelo Martinessi, performances by Ana Brun and Margarita Irún. Luxbox, 2018.
- Last Chance Harvey*. Directed by Joel Hopkins, performances by Dustin Hoffman, Emma Thompson, Kathy Baker, and James Brolin. Overture Films, 2008.

- Last Vegas*. Directed by Jon Turteltaub, performances by Michael Douglas, Robert De Niro, Morgan Freeman, Kevin Kline. CBS Films, 2013.
- League of Their Own, A*. Directed by Penny Marshall, performances by Geena Davis, Madonna, Tom Hanks, and Lori Petty. Columbia Pictures, 1993.
- Legend of Bagger Vance, The*. Directed by Robert Redford, performances by Will Smith, Matt Damon, Charlize Theron, and Jack Lemmon. DreamWorks Pictures, 2000.
- Leisure Seeker, The*. Directed by Paolo Virzì, performances by Helen Mirren, Donald Sutherland, Christian McKay, and Janel Moloney. 01 Distribution, 2017.
- Lolita*. Directed by Stanley Kubrick, performances by James Mason, Shelley Winters, Peter Sellers, and Sue Lyon. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1962.
- Looking: The Movie*. Directed by Andrew Haigh, performances by Jonathan Groff, Frankie J. Alvarez, Murray Bartlett, and Lauren Weedman. HBO, 2016.
- Love and Death on Long Island*. Directed by Richard Kwietniowski, performances by John Hurt and Jason Priestley. Cinepix Film Properties, 1997.
- Love is Strange*. Directed by Ira Sachs, performances by Alfred Molina, Jon Lithgow, and Marisa Tomei. Sony Pictures Classics, 2015.
- Lovely, Still* (2008), Directed by Nicholas Fackler, Martin Landau, Ellen Burstyn, Adam Scott, and Elizabeth Banks. Monterey Media, 2008.
- Major!* Directed by Annalise Orphelian, performances by Miss Major Griffin-Gracy. Floating Ophelia Productions, 2015.
- Milk*. Directed by Gus Van Sant, performances by Sean Penn, Emilie Hirsch, Josh Brolin, and Diego Luna. Focus Features, 2008.
- Mrs. Doubtfire*. Directed by Chris Columbus, performances by Robin Williams, Sally Field, Pierce Brosnan, and Harvey Fierstein. 20th Century Fox, 1993.
- Must Love Dogs*. Directed by Gary David Goldberg, performances by Diane Lane, John Kusak, Stockard Channing, and Christopher Plummer. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2005.
- Nebraska*. Directed by Alexander Payne, performances by Bruce Dern, Will Forte, June Squibb, and Bob Odenkirk. Paramount Vantage, 2013.
- Normal Heart, The*. Directed by Ryan Murphy, performances by Mark Ruffalo, Matt Bomer, Taylor Kitsch, Kim Parsons, and Julia Roberts. HBO, 2014.
- Notebook, The*. Directed Nick Cassavetes, performances Ryan Gosling, Rachel McAdams, James Garner, and Gena Rowlands. New Line Cinema, 2004.
- Notes on a Scandal*. Directed by Richard Eyre, performances by Judy Dench, Cate Blanchett, and Andrew Simpson. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2006.
- Old Goats*. Directed by Taylor Guterson, performances by Britton Crosley, Bob Burkholder, and David Vanderwal. Gutay Films, 2011.
- On Golden Pond*. Directed by Mark Rydell, performances by Henry Fonda, Katherine Hepburn, Jane Fonda, and Doug McKeon. Universal Pictures, 1981.
- Owls, The*. Directed by Cheryl Dunye, performances Deak Evgenikos, Guinevere Turner, V.S. Brodie, and Lisa Gornick. Parliament Film Collective, 2010.
- Perfect Ending, A*. Directed by Nicole Conn, performances by Jessica Clark, Barbara Niven, and Morgan Fairchild. Wolfe, 2012.
- Philadelphia*. Directed by Jonathan Demme, performances by Tom Hanks Denzel Washington, Mary Steenburgen, and Antonio Banderas. TriStar Pictures, 1993.

- Psycho*. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, performances by Anthony Perkins, Vera Miles, John Gavin, and Martin Balsam. Paramount Pictures, 1960.
- RED*. Directed by Robert Schwentke, performances by Bruce Willis, Morgan Freeman, John Malkovich, and Helen Mirren. Summit Entertainment, 2010.
- Remember*. Directed by Atom Egoyan, performances by Christopher Plummer, Martin Landau, and Heinz Lieven. Entertainment One, 2015.
- Rent*. Directed Chris Columbus, performances Anthony Rapp, Rosario Dawson, Wilson Jermaine Heredia, and Idina Menzel. Sony Pictures Releasing, 2005.
- Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, The*. Directed by John Madden, performance by Judi Dench, Dev Patel, Bill Nighy, and Maggie Smith. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2015.
- Secret Love, A*. Directed by Chris Bolan, performances by Terry Donahue and Pat Henschel. Netflix, 2020.
- She's Been Away*. Directed by Peter Hall, performances by Geraldine James, Peggy Ashcroft, James Fox, and Rebecca Pidgeon. BBC, 1989.
- Silence of the Lambs, The*. Directed by Jonathan Demme, performances by Jodie Foster, Anthony Hopkins, and Ted Levine. Orion Pictures, 1991.
- Some Like it Hot*. Directed by Billy Wilder, performances by Marilyn Monroe, Tony Curtis, Jack Lemmon, and George Raft. United Artists, 1959.
- Something's Gotta Give*. Directed by Nancy Meyers, performances by Jack Nicholson, Diane Keaton, Amanda Peet, and Keanu Reeves. Sony Pictures Releasing, 2003.
- Still Alice*. Directed by Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland, performances by Julianna Moore, Alec Baldwin, Kristen Stewart, and Kate Bosworth. Sony Pictures Classics, 2014.
- Stonewall*. Directed by Roland Emmerich, performances by Jeremy Irvin, Jonny Beauchamp, Ron Perlman, and Jonathan Rhys Meyers. Roadside Attractions, 2015.
- Strangers in Good Company*. Directed by Cynthia Scott, performances by Mary Meigs, Cissy Meddings, Constance Garneau, and Alice Diabo. First Run Features, 1990.
- Straight Story, The*. Direct by David Lynch, performances by Richard Farnsworth, Sissy Spacek, and Harry Dean Stanton. Buena Vista Pictures, 1999.
- Suk Suk* "Twilight's Kiss." Directed by Ray Yeung, performances by Tai Bo, Ben Yuen, and Patra Au. New Voice Film Productions, 2020.
- Supernova*. Directed by Harry MacQueen, performances by Colin Firth and Stanley Tucci. Studio Canal, 2020.
- Swan Song*. Directed by Todd Stephens, performances by Udo Kier, Jennifer Coolidge, Linda Evans, and Michael Urie. Magnolia Pictures, 2021.
- This is Where I Leave You*. Directed by Shawn Levy, performances by Jason Bateman, Tina Fey, Jane Fonda, and Adam Driver. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2015.
- Titanic*. Directed by James Cameron, performances by Leonardo DiCaprio, Kate Winslet, Billy Zane, and Kathy Bates. Paramount Pictures, 1997.
- To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*. Directed by Beeban Kidron, performances by Wesley Snipes, Patrick Swayze, John Leguizamo, and Stockard Channing. Universal Pictures, 1995.
- Tootsie*. Directed by Sydney Pollack, performances by Dustin Hoffman, Jessica Lange, Teri Garr, and Bill Murray. Columbia Pictures, 1982.

- Transamerica*. Directed by Duncan Tucker, performances by Felicity Huffman, Kevin Zegers, Carrie Preston, and Elizabeth Peña. The Weinstein Company IFC Films, 2005.
- Transparent Musicale Finale*. Directed by Jill Soloway, performances by Jeffrey Tambor, Gaby Hoffman, Amy Landecker, and Alexandra Billings. Amazon Studios, 2019.
- Tru Love*. Directed by Kate Johnston and Shauna MacDonald, performances by Shauna MacDonald, Kate Trotter, Christine Horne, and Anna Cyzon. IndieCan Entertainment, 2013.
- Up*. Directed by Pete Docter, performances by Ed Asner, Jordan Nagai, Christopher Plummer, and Bob Peterson. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2009.
- Water for Elephants*. Directed by Francis Lawrence, performances Reese Witherspoon, Robert Pattinson, Christopher Walz, and Hal Holbrook. 20th Century Fox, 2011.
- Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*. Directed by Robert Aldrich, performances by Bette Davis and Joan Crawford. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1962.
- Wild Strawberries*. Directed by Ingmar Bergman, performances by Victor Sjöström, Bibi Andersson, Gunner Björnstrand, and Ingrid Thulin. AB Svensk Filmindustri, 1957.
- Woman's Tale, A*. Directed by Paul Cox, performances by Sheila Florance, Gosia Dobrowolska, Norman Kaye, and Chris Haywood. Orion Classics, 1991.
- World According to Garp, The*. Directed by George Roy Hill, performances by Robin Williams, Mary Beth Hurt, Glenn Close, and John Lithgow. Warner Bros., 1982.
- World's Fastest Indian, The*. Directed by Roger Donaldson, performances by Anthony Hopkins, Diane Ladd, Jessica Cauffiel, and Christopher Lawford. Magnolia Pictures, 2005.
- You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger*. Directed by Woody Allen, performances by Naomi Watts, Anthony Hopkins, Josh Brolin, and Antonia Banderas. Sony Pictures Classics, 2010.

Television

- AJ and the Queen*. Created by Charles Rupaul and Michael Patrick King, performances by RuPaul Charles, Izzy G., Michael-Leon Wooley, and Josh Segarra. Netflix, 2020.
- Cool Kids, The*. Directed by Charlie Day and Paul Fruchbom, performances by Leslie Jordan, David Alan Grier, Vicki Lawrence, and Martin Mull. 20th Century Fox Television, 2018-2019.
- CSI*. Created by Anthony E. Zuiker, performances by William Peterson, Marg Helgenberger, George Eads, and Eric Szmanda. CBS, 2000-2015.
- Ellen*. Created by Neal Marlens, Carol Black, and David S. Rosenthal, performances by Ellen DeGeneres, David Anthony Higgins, Joely Fisher, and Clea Lewis. ABC, 1994-1998.
- Further Tales of the City*. Directed by Pierre Gang, performances by Olympia Dukakis, Laura Linney, Paul Hopkins, and Barbara Garrick. Showtime, 2001.
- Gaycation*. Produced by Allen Otto, performances by Elliot Page and Ian Daniel. Viceland, 2016-2017.

- Grace and Frankie*. Created by Marta Kauffman, performances by Jane Fonda, Lily Tomlin, Sam Waterston, and Martin Sheen. Netflix, 2015-present.
- Grey's Anatomy*. Created by Shonda Rhimes, performances by Ellen Pompeo, Sara Ramirez, Jessica Capshaw, and Chandra Wilson. ABC, 2005-.
- I am Cait*. Performances by Caitlyn Jenner, Candis Cayne, Jenny Boylan, and Kate Bornstein. E!, 2015-2016.
- L Word, The*. Created by Ilene Chaiken, performances by Jennifer Beals, Leisha Hailey, Laurel Holloman, and Katherine Moennig. Showtime, 2004-2009.
- Last Tango in Halifax*. Written by Sally Wainwright, performances by Derek Jacobi, Anne Reid, Sarah Lancashire, and Nicola Walker. BBC One, 2012-2016.
- Law & Order: SVU*. Created by Dick Wolf, performances by Mariska Hargitay, Ice-T, Christopher Meloni, and Dann Florek. NBC, 1999-.
- Looking*. Created by Micahel Lannan, performances by Jonathan Groff, Frankie J. Alvarez, Murray Bartlett, and Scott Bakula. HBO, 2014-2015.
- Modern Family*. Created by Christopher Lloyd and Steven Levitan, performances by Ty Burrell, Julie Bowen, Jessie Tyler Ferguson, and Eric Stonestreet. ABC, 2009-2020.
- More Tales of the City*. Directed by Pierre Gang, performances by Olympia Dukakis, Laura Linney, Paul Hopkins, and Barbara Garrick. Channel 4, 1998.
- Orange is the New Black*. Created by Jenji Kohan, performances by Taylor Schilling, Laura Prepon, and Laverne Cox. Netflix, 2013-2019.
- Queer as Folk*. Developed by Ron Cowen and Daniel Lipman, performances by Gale Harold, Randy Harrison, Peter Paige, and Scott Lowell. Showcase, 1999-2005.
- Roseanne*. Created by Matt Williams and Roseanne Barr, performances by Roseanne Barr, John Goodman, and Estelle Parsons. ABC, 1988-1997.
- Six Feet Under*. Created by Alan Ball, performances by Peter Krause, Michael C. Hall, Frances Conroy, Lauren Ambrose. HBO, 2001-2005.
- Tales of the City*. Directed by Alastair Reed, performances by Olympia Dukakis, Marcus D'Amico, Laura Linney, and Barbara Garrick. Channel 4, 1993.
- Tales of the City*. Created by Lauren Morelli, performances by Olympia Dukakis, Elliot Page, Murray Bartlett, Laura Linney, and Barbara Garrick. Netflix, 2019.
- This Is Us*. Created by Dan Fogelman, performances by Milo Ventimiglia, Mandy Moore, Sterling K. Brown, and Ron Cephas Jones. NBC, 2016-.
- Transparent*. Directed by Jill Soloway, performances by Jeffrey Tambor, Gaby Hoffman, Amy Landecker, and Alexandra Billings. Amazon Studios, 2014-2018.
- Vicious*. Created by Mark Ravenhill and Gary Janetti, performance by Derek Jacobi, Ian McKellen, and Frances de la Tour. PBS, 2013-2016.
- Will & Grace*. Directed by James Burrows, created by David Kohan and Max Mutchnick, performances by Eric McCormack, Debra Messing, Megan Mullally, and Sean Hayes. Warner Bros Television Studios and NBCUniversal Television Distribution, 1998-2006, 2017-2020.

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