

LET ME GET THIS QUEER: RECOGNITION OF AGE AND SEXUALITY IN *GRACE AND FRANKIE*

Daniele Atza
University of Turin

ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of older queer identities in the contemporary US sitcom *Grace and Frankie*, arguing that the series employs queer and feminist humor to counteract social disgrace and the dehumanizing effects of ageist stigma. The article explores various aspects of the sexual sphere of the elderly as depicted in the show, including heterosexual and homosexual desires, non-monogamous intimate relationships, and autoeroticism. By examining this show through the lens of Tison Pugh's work on the depiction of sexuality in US family sitcoms, as presented in *The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom*, this article demonstrates how *Grace and Frankie* destigmatizes older male and female bodies through the intersection of age and sexuality.

Keywords: queerness; representation; sitcom; aging; sexuality.

INTRODUCTION

The Netflix original series *Grace and Frankie* (2015-2022) portrays the lives of its protagonists as they navigate romance and sexuality throughout their seventies. Through its engaging storytelling, the show sheds light on a reality frequently misrepresented in mainstream media, giving voice to older queer identities and their experiences. By challenging ageist stereotypes, *Grace and Frankie* offers not just entertainment but also promotes an understanding of nonnormative expressions of love and intimacy. In fact, *Grace and Frankie* tries to eradicate the idea that 'sex is young' since its first episode, as it rejects the strict binarism of traditional sexuality, and acknowledges the diverse forms that a sexual relationship can take at any age.

Imogen Tyler's work in *Stigma: The Machinery of Inequality* (2020) offers a functional framework to reflect on the shame and judgment often associated with minoritarian subjects, such as the protagonists of the show. The author introduces the concept of stigma as a form of power that, influenced by colonialism and patriarchy, exacerbates social division and the dehumanization of minorities (Tyler 2020, 7). Moreover, Tyler is interested in how media and popular culture contribute to the

perpetuation of stigma and reinforce harmful stereotypes, thereby shaping public perceptions of marginalized groups (34). Additionally, Tyler focuses on the critical role that intersectionality plays in the experience of stigma, as factors such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and disability collectively amplify the challenges and disparities that individuals face (82-83). In this article, I adopt Tyler's argument, considering age as an additional factor contributing to the perpetuation of stigma in queer individuals. In addition to analyzing queer portrayals of current social and cultural issues, this article will focus on the intersection of age and sexuality in *Grace and Frankie*. Drawing on Tison Pugh's study on the depiction of sexuality in US family sitcoms provided in *The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom* (2018), I will analyze the language, generational approach, and sexual dimension of the elderly as portrayed in the show. This examination will delve into the ways in which characters navigate heterosexual and homosexual desires, further exploring non-monogamous intimate relationships and autoeroticism. Pugh (2018) first recognizes that the period from the 1950s to the 2010s reflects America's changing sexual and social norms, then he examines how fictional families resist and display the cultural shifts in sexuality at various historical moments (3); Pugh finally argues that by queering family sitcoms it is truly possible to represent the United States, giving voice to otherwise unrepresented identities (25) and transcending the traditional, heteronormative notion of family.

Grace and Frankie contributes to destigmatizing the representation of older male and female bodies by intersecting age and sexuality and employing queer and feminist humor. In doing so, the show denounces stereotypes, ageism, and lack of positive representation of the aging body in contemporary society. In the first part of the article, I present a descriptive account of the show and assess *Grace and Frankie's* queer representation according to the criteria of the Bechdel Test.¹ In the second section, I analyze the show's use of language to discuss questions around sex by drawing on Anna

¹ The Bechdel Test serves as a criterion for assessing female representation in movies, television shows, and other forms of media. While the Bechdel test serves as a thought-provoking interpretive tool and holds some relevance within the context of this article, its application here does not aim to assess the quality of the series I analyze, but rather its queer and female representation. See Bechdel, *Dykes to Watch Out For* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1986).

Freixas' research on aging and the sexuality of senior citizens (Freixas 2005), Laura Mulvey's work on the representation of gender in cinema (Mulvey 1975), and Cynthia and Julie Willett's analysis of "fumerism" (Willett and Willett 2019, 27). The focus then shifts, in the third section, to the homosexual couple in *Grace and Frankie*, Robert and Sol: the fictional representation of same-sex couples is considered as a potential challenge to a rigid patriarchal system, as I explore changing notions of relationship and intimacy by drawing on Scott Wirth's work on gay male monogamy (Wirth 2010). The fourth and last section examines the manufacturing—and use—of a vibrator to subvert the notions of masturbation and sex as taboos when discussed by older females.

It is worth noting that *Grace and Frankie* depicts an optimistic and successful aging experience primarily due to the protagonists' economic privileges: in fact, Katsura Sako and Maricel Oró-Piqueras (2023) argue that this portrayal might reduce relatability for some of the audience (6). Nevertheless, in this article, I suggest that by presenting a positive portrayal of the intersection between age and sexuality, the show facilitates identification and provides potential role models for older viewers, regardless of economic class.

ON GRACE AND FRANKIE

Grace and Frankie is a series featuring Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin. Created by Marta Kauffman—one of *Friends*' co-creators—and Howard J. Morris for the streaming platform, the show premiered in May 2015 and ran for seven seasons, from 2015 to 2022, receiving numerous Emmy nominations (Pereira and Gutiérrez San Miguel 2019, 3). *Grace and Frankie* is a witty sitcom that gains relevance in this discourse through its exploration of societal challenges at the center of the public debate in the United States during the 2010s. The show introduces innovative and queer themes within the framework of a traditionally conservative format. In her study on the representations of underrepresented minorities in film and television, Hannah Wold (2017) contends that Netflix granted *Grace and Frankie* an unusual degree of creative freedom concerning representation and language (24). This autonomy allowed the show to candidly address

subjects rarely explored in popular culture while refraining from visual representations of sexual activity, a measure taken to avoid discomforting older viewers (Wold 2017, 35).

The pilot begins with the confession of Robert and Sol, two law partners in their seventies, who decide to divorce their respective wives—Grace and Frankie—and get married to each other following the legalization of same-sex marriage. From this abrupt beginning, viewers witness the struggle of this extended family through seniority, sexuality, and emotional difficulties. Set in the San Diego suburbs, the show portrays ordinary moments of life in a melodramatic and comic way, offering a sympathetic depiction of the reality and the everyday of an extended diverse family. Pugh (2018) recognizes many of these same elements in the ABC sitcom *Modern Family* (161). Both shows suggest that today's families come in many colors and shapes, ages, and sexualities. The innovative elements introduced in *Grace and Frankie*, however, include the emphasis on the senior members of the family as main characters and the openness about their sexual needs and desires (Pereira and Gutiérrez San Miguel 2019, 5).

The main characters in the show are Grace Hanson (portrayed by Jane Fonda), a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant who embraces traditional ideals of femininity, dutifully adhering to societal norms of beauty, and Frankie Bergstein (played by Lily Tomlin), who serves as a captivating counterpoint, embodying a spirit that is both bohemian and nonconformist. Their ex-husbands are equally relevant from a queer perspective: Robert Hanson (Martin Sheen) is a stern and practical lawyer who will eventually reveal his tender side, while Sol Bergstein (Sam Waterson), Robert's law partner and future husband, is an emotional and fierce activist for LGBTQ+ rights. The age of these four characters prompts a reflection on ageism and *Grace and Frankie's* satirical deployment of ageist stereotypes to comment and criticize stigmatized representations of the elderly.

Ageist language can impact both intimate and non-intimate relationships: stereotypes about the elderly can be found in the media, healthcare, and everyday conversations, and that intergenerational encounters may rely on ageist stereotypes (Nussbaum et al. 2005, 287-88). When these encounters occur in an intimate sphere, such as the family context, interactions can be harmful to the elderly due to the use of

patronizing speech. *Grace and Frankie* displays numerous iterations in which the protagonists experience this kind of discrimination, namely an attempt at social control often misinterpreted as a display of concern (Nussbaum et al. 2005, 292), from their adult children—Brianna, Mallory, Bud, and Coyote. Grace and Frankie often respond to moments of tension arising from intergenerational encounters with sarcastic comments: they harness ageist stereotypes to their advantage through the employment of humor while simultaneously challenging assumptions of comedy as a male-dominated field. On the other hand, interactions with friends are more empowering primarily because they involve voluntary relationships, without obligations based on kinship; additionally, in these particular bonds, older adults tend to perceive each other as equals (Nussbaum et al. 2005, 293). The show proves the positivity of these relationships, not only between Grace and Frankie, but also with some of their other friends, like Arlene or Babe. Scenes depicting these gatherings between friends reveal that the characters act more naturally and feel free to discuss issues related to sex, dating, aging, and the fact that ageism is of special concern to older women.

Due to its candid approach, *Grace and Frankie* attracted a substantial and intergenerational audience. On the one hand, in her study of older women's intense appreciation for this show, Anne Jerslev (2018) acknowledges the profound sense of identification and representation that they find in the two main characters (191). Moreover, older viewers value the narrative that portrays the complexities of aging without dismissing the possibility of joyful, sensuous moments, all while humorously addressing real issues related to the aging process (Jerslev 2018, 197). On the other hand, according to the premise of this Netflix original, one could argue that it does not appeal to younger viewers; however, it managed to gain wide popularity across generational lines. For instance, in a *NYLON* article, Sesali Bowen (2019) collected several statements to demonstrate that among different target viewers, millennials love *Grace and Frankie*. Bowen suggests that this popularity stems from the show's discussion of unconventional themes in a simple and direct way, unveiling the issues that come with seniority to younger generations.

Arguably, the show presents itself as a model for queer representation in popular culture. As Thomas Peele (2007) suggests, the examination of such representations is necessary because they mirror contemporary values and serve as an effective platform for educating the public (2). To determine whether the representation of queerness in *Grace and Frankie* challenges or reinforces dominant narratives, it is useful to examine the show through the lens of the Bechdel Test, as it provides an alternative framework to ideas of identification and role model criteria (Selisker 2015, 516). In an early installment of her weekly comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (Bechdel 1986), Alison Bechdel presents her test to evaluate female representation in movies, television shows, and other forms of media (Goldberg 2018, 107). According to Bechdel, if the plot revolves around at least two women who engage in a conversation not centered on a man (Bechdel 1986, 22), the movie passes the test and attains political significance. Moreover, Scott Selisker (2015) suggests that the test helps determine whether female characters are created to be subordinate to males or if they are mediators, thus central to the narrative (511).² When these criteria are applied to the analysis of *Grace and Frankie*, the show meets the requirements by endorsing strong female representation and reinforcing the roles of the main characters. Most notably, the show offers viewers fresh perspectives for self-identification and serves as a source of inspiration by introducing new role models to the audience.

A SUBVERSIVE PORTRAYAL OF SEXUALITY

In discussing the portrayal of sexuality within the context of the US family sitcom, Pugh (2018) asserts that “a foundational irony of family sitcoms emerges from their tendency to camouflage or otherwise cloak sex, thus overlooking the foundational role of sex in building the families depicted onscreen” (4). However, the candid discussions about sex in *Grace and Frankie* reveal the unabashed approach adopted by the creators to

² Selisker draws on Bruno Latour’s categorization of mediator and intermediator. See Latour quoted in Selisker, “The Bechdel Test and the Social Form of Character Networks,” *New Literary History* 46, no. 3 (2015): 511.

represent the intimate sphere of the elderly, which is often ensconced. The characters' use of language is of particular interest because, from early episodes, they set a tone that will be maintained throughout the entire show. A few examples include sentences such as "I've been *bonking* my law partners for twenty years" (1x01 – The End; emphasis mine) and "If you had been *fucking around* with women, we wouldn't be here eating cake!" (1x03 – The Dinner; emphasis mine). These lines aim to provoke laughter or a chuckle in the audience, but they also reinforce the idea that the characters are openly talking about the sexual life of two 70-year-old homosexual men. This dynamic recalls Willett and Willett's (2019) analysis of fumerism, a form of queer and feminist activism that counteracts oppressive norms through feminist humor (27).³ Both authors consider how, in the 1980s and 1990s, female comedians and actors—Lily Tomlin included—started targeting unjust forms of social power related to gender, class, and race through a creative use of anger and emotions (24). Additionally, the authors underscore the intersectional function of humor, which is able to counteract oppressive and discriminant norms also related to sexual orientation (40-41). Consequently, I suggest that *Grace and Frankie* employs fumerism, using its humorous approach as a vehicle to discuss and criticize oppressive behaviors, ultimately fostering societal change.

Although the show is concerned with the sexuality of older characters in general, there is a focus on elderly women openly discussing sex. In season two, when Frankie negotiates with Grace's former beauty company to produce her lubricant, she discovers that the company plans to use palm oil, which is harmful to the environment and orangutans. Frankie's concern for the environment and her desire to succeed in the business world create a dilemma for her:

FRANKIE: And now I've turned into a—an orangutan-genocide profiteer.

GRACE: No, you mean a profiteer of orangutan genocide. Because the way you said it, it sounds like you're a morally bankrupt orangutan.

³ The term was originally coined by stand-up comedian Kate Clinton. See Willett and Willett "Fumerism: Feminist Anger and Joy from Roseanne Barr to Margaret Cho and Wanda Sykes," in *Uproarious: How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth*, ed. Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett (Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 2019), 27.

FRANKIE: Not the time, Grace. I can't lube a vagina with one hand and smack an orangutan with the other. (2x08 – The Anchor)

This brief exchange normalizes the idea of two elderly women talking about sex, relying on Frankie's endeavors to make sex a more accessible experience for older people through the production of her organic lubricant. Moreover, this exchange also presents meaningful models of older women that allow recognition for other women in the audience, thus underscoring the importance of positive representations of female aging in society and media. To understand the relevance of this dialogue, it is useful to reflect on the categorization of women's lives into menarche, motherhood, and menopause: this classification, according to Freixas (2005), excludes achievements such as employment or retirement and reinforces the idea that, once sexual reproduction is no longer possible, women are no longer useful to society (71-72). Likewise, Kathleen Woodward (2006) suggests that age and gender are manipulated to "render the older female body paradoxically both hypervisible and invisible" (163). In other words, elderly women face intense scrutiny in terms of social expectations regarding their appearance, while simultaneously experiencing marginalization for no longer complying with their roles as procreators. Consequently, the potential for older female viewers to identify with Grace and Frankie engaging in open discussions about sex fosters the normalization of the sexual desire of the elderly and the destigmatization of a subject that sitcoms usually avoid.

This examination of the sexuality of the elderly also encourages considerations of the notion that growing older often corresponds to a decrease in sexual activity. Though the ability to experience sexual pleasure is reduced with age, cultural prejudices surrounding sex and desire for the elderly make it difficult for them to obtain the necessary information to address these challenges. For example, Freixas (2005) considers that traditional views on menopause transform women into asexual beings: according to societal expectations, sexual desire not only disappears with seniority, but it should disappear because it is inappropriate (123). Freixas recognizes two main difficulties that influence the sexual experience of older women: a) the difficulty to orgasm, and b) the lack of desire, clarifying that both problems are related to

unsatisfying sexual partners and fantasies (124). To feel sexy, desirable, and desired makes individuals feel like they still have meaning, because the desire to be desired and touched remains unchanged despite the aging process (Freixas 2005, 92); nevertheless, feeling desirable poses one of the greatest challenges of growing older. According to Freixas (2005), the problem is that cultural messages continue to portray a negative, demeaning image of the aging body, and such messages have a demoralizing effect on the self-esteem of the elderly (83). In this regard, it is useful to consider Mulvey's (1975) overview of the representation of gender in cinema according to which women on screen are often objectified and sexualized for the pleasure of the male viewer (19). By drawing on the Freudian concept of scopophilia—the pleasure derived from looking—Mulvey argues that women exist primarily as images to be gazed at by both male characters within the narrative and the male spectator outside of it (20). Therefore, women effectively become nonexistent when they are dismissed by the male gaze because of their seniority. In light of this objectification, Mulvey suggests that feminist filmmaking can challenge and subvert the male gaze, as well as disrupt the conventional fetishization of women (16). Accordingly, I suggest that *Grace and Frankie* offers an instance of a feminist and empowering narrative when an insecure Grace has her first—disappointing—sexual encounter after her divorce. Although the visual representation of sex is camouflaged, Grace and Frankie discuss genuine issues such as vaginal dryness and sexual stimulation the morning after:

FRANKIE: Did you remind him that direct clitoral stimulation is essential before, during, and often after penetration?

GRACE: Yes, I used those exact words. No! I'm 70 years old! Actually, I've never once talked about my c-l-i-t-o... (1x08 – The Sex)

The contrasting use of language displayed by the two protagonists when they talk about sex represents the sarcastic vehicle through which the show criticizes the awkwardness and shame related to the sexuality of the elderly. In fact, *Grace and Frankie* manages to discuss issues especially relevant to older viewers through an inventive use of humor, which serves as a rhetorical device that enables the discussion of controversial topics.

Another example of empowering narrative can be found in the show's uninhibited treatment of menopause, as it is portrayed as a more comfortable and fulfilling experience of womanhood, free from the inconveniences associated with menstruation. In this section, I propose three dialogues between the protagonists that illustrate how menopause is used to address the normality of elderly women's sexual desire. The first instance occurs when Frankie finally convinces Grace to go on a date and gives her a handful of condoms, to which the latter replies:

GRACE: Why do I need condoms, anyway? I'm not exactly at pregnancy risk.
FRANKIE: Well, no shit. But with all the new penis drugs out there, old people are doing it like rabbits and the STDs are on the rise. (1x06 – The Earthquake)

This exchange implies Grace's menopause and the possibility of having unprotected sex since she cannot conceive, but it also candidly refers to medications for erectile dysfunction and the risk of sexually transmitted diseases among the elderly. By discussing such topics with genuineness and spontaneity, *Grace and Frankie* asserts that seniors are not asexual entities. The second dialogue I propose sees Grace threatening Frankie to pass her lice, to which she humorously replies "Let me have it! I would love to host life!" (2x03 – The Negotiation). The subtext of this brief line can be related to menopause, of course, but it addresses the issue of fertility as well. Here, humor serves a dual purpose: it lightens the revelation that Frankie could not get pregnant and acts as a representational tool to connect with viewers who may share similar experiences. The third dialogue is an exchange of opinions between the protagonists' concerning menopause, safe sex for older people, and intergenerational inconveniences one may face during sex:

FRANKIE: You've made such a big deal out of sex in the vagina. And you were right, it is a big deal. [...] condoms are hell to open and having a pair of scissors on the bedside table just doesn't set the right...tone.

GRACE: You guys use condoms?

FRANKIE: I still haven't emerged completely from perimenopause.

GRACE: I'm gonna bet you have.

FRANKIE: Well, regardless, Jacob is a pretty hot number, and I don't want to wonder every time I get a new itch or scratch down there.

GRACE: Okay, score one for safe sex. (3x02 – The Incubator)

This exchange addresses the various challenges of sexual engagement for seniors: menopause and safe sex are accompanied by the accessibility of sex for the elderly, a subject that becomes central to the storyline of the show. The three dialogues provided exemplify the humorous and spontaneous use of menopause as a tool for destigmatizing the sexual desire of older women. Additionally, the show addresses the physical and psychological insecurities that the protagonists face when they are in romantic relationships.

Freixas suggests that accepting a new image of oneself is challenging because the physical changes that come with seniority often clash with the self-image one has in mind. Moreover, she recognizes that the aging process in women is often subject to judgment and condemnation, with their changing bodies typically receiving attention only in the context of health issues or physiological decline (Freixas 2005, 83-84). In this respect, Susan Sontag (1979) points out that women are also subjected to a double standard in which aging is stigmatized for them, while it is often seen as distinguished or even attractive for men (464). Examining the cultural expectations that contribute to this double standard, Sontag suggests that women are pressured to maintain a youthful appearance and are often marginalized as they age; men, on the other hand, are considered more experienced and knowledgeable as they grow older (470). The show recognizes the struggles of this transition when Grace starts dating Nick, a much younger man. Under the weight of societal pressure, she experiences the need to conform to physical and sexual expectations:

GRACE: Well, it is a fair amount of work with Nick. A few hours of prep, a few hours of recovery. [...] There are 30 magic minutes in there when I feel as young as I have ever felt. [...] But, we know this has a clear expiration date. I mean, it's new and exciting for him now to be dating an older woman, but he'll move on soon enough. (4x04 – The Expiration Date)

At one point, Nick confesses he wants a deeper relationship, and Grace is scared and reluctant. Grace's fear of being judged is indicative of her insecurity regarding her role in the relationship, a feeling that arises from the age difference between her and Nick. On this account, Sontag (1979) states that "the convention that wives should be younger

than their husbands powerfully enforces the ‘minority’ status of women, since being senior in age always carries with it, in any relationship, a certain amount of power and authority” (476). Conversely, I argue that *Grace and Frankie* offers a reversal of these power dynamics: the show delves into Grace’s insecurity, which is accentuated by the sexual depiction of younger women in popular culture, while simultaneously trying to be relatable to the older audience.

Arguably, the manner in which this sitcom addresses the depiction of sex is unapologetically queer, offering innovative understandings of sexuality that break away from established narrative norms and conventions. Despite the lack of visual representations, the discourse around sex is always light, open, and spontaneous. Motivated by the dialogues above, I suggest that Grace and Frankie’s use of language when addressing matters of sex serves as a destigmatizing tool, aiming to establish an inclusive environment within the realm of the elderly’s sexual dimension.

NOT THAT KIND OF GAYS

In this section, I delve into the depiction of same-sex romance and sexuality in *Grace and Frankie*. Pugh argues that given the queer potential of family sitcoms, it is no longer acceptable to suppress queer desires within the family dynamic. Instead, he proposes transforming the family into a symbolic space where queerness can openly thrive, departing from earlier sitcom norms (Pugh 2018, 21). Therefore, *Grace and Frankie* begins with Robert and Sol embracing their queerness, and facing all the consequences, at 70 years old. As previously mentioned, the show refrained from any visual representations of sexual activity to prevent discomforting elderly viewers (Wold 2017, 35). However, it is worth reflecting on its different portrayals of heterosexual and homosexual desire.

Despite the relevance of Robert and Sol, in fact, their desire is always implied rather than explicitly depicted, as opposed to heterosexual desire, which is at least presented through passionate kisses. Similarly, Pugh (2018) recognizes the same concealment in *Roseanne* and *Modern Family*, other family sitcoms that refused to conform to traditional conventions of sexuality (125). According to Peele, popular

culture plays a crucial role in drawing boundaries between what is considered acceptable and unacceptable. However, when it comes to queer representations, Peele contends that this approach poses an issue, since it relegates queer culture to a status of acceptance rather than desirability. Consequently, within popular culture, queer desire is often tolerated but rarely presented as a desirable condition (Peele 2007, 2). In this respect, Porfido's (2007) investigation of homosexual visual exclusion from mass-mediated societies points out that heterosexual displays of desire are seen as part of the reproduction process, whereas displays of homosexual desire are perceived as a form of "visual and moral pollution" (59). As a consequence, queer desire is often underrepresented or, as in this case, misrepresented. Despite this superficial representation of same-sex desire, the first episode of season seven presents the most explicit allusion to Robert and Sol's sexual life. After a prolonged period without intimacy, while sharing the beach house with Grace and Frankie, Robert tries to tackle this issue, while Sol gets defensive and storms off:

ROBERT: It's been a while.

SOL: Are you really bringing this up now? [...]

ROBERT: But we're in a romantic place.

SOL: There is no chance for romance in our ex-wives' house.

ROBERT: Didn't stop us before. (7x01 – The Roomies)

These lines allude to the extra-marital sex that indeed occurred at the beach house before their coming out. I also recognize that their sex life is implied even through their use of the language, as they are less direct than Grace and Frankie: Robert and Sol employ euphemisms and indirect references to convey their intimacy, while Grace and Frankie's vocabulary is more straightforward about it. A few scenes later, Grace enters the bedroom and surprises Robert and Sol while they are having sex and Jane Fonda's astonished expression clearly suggests that Grace has surprised them in a revealing position. According to Pugh (2018), fictional displays of anal eroticism are shocking:

[...] because of cultural definitions of masculinity that discount the likelihood of men allowing themselves to be penetrated for a change. [...] Even today the issue of gay sex appears to perplex some straight people [...] the real question, then, is not how gay people pleasure each other sexually but which partner does what to

whom. With heterosexual intercourse, one knows who is the penetrator and who is the penetrated, but with same-sex relationships this information is occluded from view. (181)

Pugh's considerations and Grace's expression clarify that anal sexuality still represents a taboo for some. Nevertheless, I purport that such an explicit—yet not visual—allusion to homosexual intimacy and anal eroticism indicates the efforts to destigmatize sexual experiences that diverge from heterosexual practices rooted in reproductive norms.

In addition to emphasizing displays of same-sex eroticism, I examine the issue of self-acceptance in the queer dimension, considering the characters' upbringing, and how new realities of romantic relationships have come to be portrayed in the show. The first issue worth analyzing concerns labels, especially when Robert and Sol struggle to identify themselves as a same-sex couple:

SOL: What should we call each other? I like "boyfriend." It's got kick.

ROBERT: We're too old for that. "Long time companion?"

SOL: No, too retro-sad. It's from a time before famous people would play gay in movies.

ROBERT: Well, I can't just call you my "friend" without doing this. [air quotes] [...]

SOL: "Soulmate?"

ROBERT: No. I don't even like that one when straight people use it. (1x04 – The Funeral)

In this dialogue, the evident age gap between the two characters and the new generations that have been experiencing the shift toward a more welcoming society is highlighted. They are too old to use 'boyfriend' and they are more than just 'friends,' so this is the first challenge they face as a senior same-sex couple. They even consider "homosexual law and bed partners with each other in life," a label that diminishes the nature of their relationship and removes any recognition of their sexual and romantic connection. This devaluation of their relationship results in frustration and discontentment for Robert and Sol, as their bond is not accurately acknowledged and respected. To understand their dilemma, and the significance of its portrayal on screen, it is useful to take Goltz's study on gay male aging in US television into consideration. Goltz asserts that, despite the increased regularity of gay characters appearing on

television in the 1990s, these characters were primarily young, white, and middle-class, and older gay characters were still absent or marginalized (Goltz 2010 quoted in Goltz 2016, 196). However, because of the significance of time, the author contends that television shows have the power to fundamentally alter societal perceptions of aging (Goltz 2016, 189). Thus, time allows TV series to reshape the process of gay male aging and the protagonists' outlook in the future by allowing their unprecedented evolution within a temporal and narrative arc. Accordingly, by permitting Sol and Robert's evolution, the show taps into its potential to intervene in discourses of aging gay bodies and gives these two characters the opportunity not only to be, but most importantly to become. In fact, Robert and Sol decide to overlook the generational gap and opt for the term 'boyfriend,' which will eventually become 'fiancé' and then 'husband.' In so doing, *Grace and Frankie* contributes to a remodeling of the audience's perception of gay male aging into an ordinary part of life.

Another relevant challenge Robert and Sol face concerns the generational difference in the acceptance of homosexuality. Arguably, the negative depiction of homosexuality in the media during their upbringing might explain their struggle when they decide to come out at 70. Robert and Sol's age in the 2010s suggests that they were born around the 1940s and were impressionable teenagers in 1950s America, a period that Andrea Carosso (2012) defines as an "age of anxiety" (10). In his study on Cold War narratives, Carosso considers how an aspiring idea of America was spread through television during those years. He recognizes the sitcom as the most popular TV subgenres in the 1950s and suggests that it appeared at a time when "the television set became a central figure in the representation and in the re-shaping of family relationships in America" (91-92). Carosso (2012) also specifies that TV in the 1950s was thoroughly monitored to conform to definite gender roles and social functions for every family member (93). Although the changing dynamics of male members of postwar families in 1950s sitcoms were beginning to emerge, it can be assumed that Robert and Sol were raised in a time that identified the American man with a strong, able, and masculine individual. This construct proves to be harmful especially for homosexual men, whose masculinity is attacked because of their sexual orientation. The following

scenes, which highlight the shame Robert and Sol experienced as a result of their sexuality, aim to illustrate just how harmful this construct can be. The first scene takes place at Robert and Sol's bachelor party when Nelson, a conservative guest, witnesses the other invitees riding a mechanical penis while commenting "I don't have a problem with you being a homosexual, but when did you become such a *faggot*?" (1x12 – The Bachelor Party; emphasis mine). This statement exemplifies the refusal of homosexuality that was advocated in strict patriarchal systems of past decades, a behavior that Robert and Sol no longer condone. Similarly, they struggle with openness again when they receive an invitation to a show of drag queen bingo, to which Sol replies "We're not that kind of gays" (2x03 – The Negotiation). Although they want to live their sexuality unreservedly, the couple struggles due to their generation's view of homosexuality. An analogous moment of tension occurs after Sol tells Robert's gay younger friends that the latter was married to Grace:

ROBERT: You inned me. Inned me! As in reverse outed. You told all my gay friends I used to be straight [...] I just wanted to be part of a group of gay friends where I was gay like they were gay.

SOL: They were very understanding. They know our generation was different. [...]

ROBERT: I just know that I feel shitty about all the years I pretended I wasn't gay and what that did to all the people that I love. And now they know that that's the kind of coward that I am. [...]

SOL: Personally, I'm done with being in any kind of closet. (3x04 – The Burglary)

Here it is interesting to note Robert's language: his shame and inadequacy reverse the idea of 'outing' into 'inning' someone, as the pressure for social acceptance into a queer, younger group, alienates him and recluses him into another closet. While desiring to live their sexuality unreservedly, and with contemporary representations of queer culture exerting an influence on reshaping traditional values, these scenes highlight Robert and Sol's enduring struggle with openness due to their generation's view of homosexuality.

Additionally, I recognize *Grace and Frankie*'s significance in its portrayal of evolving notions of relationships and alternative concepts of intimacy, such as non-monogamous intimate relationships, thus aligning with contemporary values. One

example is provided in the first season, when Robert and Sol's gay friends question the purpose of being gay if they decide to embrace monogamy. They imply that adhering to heteronormative notions of relationship norms contradicts their queerness, and that Robert and Sol should consider polygamy and an open relationship (1x11 – The Secrets). Later on in the show, the idea of an open relationship is presented again when Robert and Sol go to marriage counseling, and the counselor suggests a modern and queer solution to a couple whose concept of marriage is traditional and monogamist:

I've had patients, gay men in particular, who have had some success venturing outside the social norms to find an arrangement that works best for them. [...] it might take the pressure off of both of you, and your marriage. If a 'Roy' pops up again, perhaps you could explore that without any guilt. [...] You have complex biological impulses, and monogamy may run contrary to those impulses. [...] All I'm saying is that you may want to redefine intimacy to find what works for both of you as a couple. [...] in order to fix this relationship, you may need to...break it wide open. (4x10 – The Death Stick)

This scene, which spreads a positive message about therapy, provides the audience with a scientific explanation for polygamy with the intent of removing the stigma from different expressions of sexuality. To learn these new structures of modern relationships highlights the differences between their experiences with heterosexual relationships, and also the contrast between their traditional ideas and the sentimental bonds that are recognized nowadays. Regarding the choices of gay men between non-monogamous and monogamous relationships, Scott Wirth acknowledges that following the Stonewall rebellion in 1969, the model of non-monogamous relationships among gay men has predominantly shaped subcultural norms and media representation. However, a recent shift has been observed in the emergence of gay male monogamy as a more visible and distinct identity, even though many contemporary gay men continue to engage in diverse and non-traditional relationship arrangements (Wirth 2010, 51). The author further delineates that gay monogamy should not be viewed as an attempt to mimic the heterosexual model and affirms that there is a pressing need for the presence of role models promoting gay male monogamy, as this path often lacks recognition and support (53). Even though the concept of an open relationship does not entirely work

for Robert and Sol, their consideration of it suggests the show's efforts to recognize new notions of intimacy, thereby destigmatizing the audience's preconceptions about non-monogamous relationships.

THE VIBRATOR

The needs and desires of women have a central role in the universe of *Grace and Frankie* to such a degree that the protagonists' interest in autoeroticism and the accessibility of the sexual experience for the elderly overshadow secondary plotlines. Since Pugh (2018) believes that a queer understanding of the potential of women's sexuality, within the US family sitcom, allows women to openly declare their desires (20), in this last section I delve into how *Grace and Frankie* aims to erase misinterpretation and misconception on masturbation and the use of sexual devices, by focusing on non-visual displays of autoeroticism. My argument is rooted in the analysis of selected scenes of the show depicting the production and usage of a vibrator designed for senior women, aimed at destigmatizing the practice of autoeroticism.

A vibrator appears for the first time in the season two finale when Grace receives it as a gift. After she uses the vibrator for the first time in her life, Grace's arthritis flares up, so that she and Frankie come to the conclusion that vibrators are not designed for older people. Later, after a heated family fight, both Grace and Frankie feel belittled, humored, and dismissed as elderly women. As a result, they announce they will start a business manufacturing vibrators for women with arthritis, because "old women masturbate too. And [they] have vaginas" (2x13 – The Coup). This quote aligns with Gomes Barbosa's analysis of the use of the female aging body in *Grace and Frankie*, who argues that the show incorporates the body into the system of representation of older women and uses it to express and define this period of life. Consequently, the show attempts to affirm and normalize female aging as a natural part of life, while challenging the "scopophilic gaze of men" (Gomes Barbosa 2017, 1444). By doing so, older women are no longer reduced as characters subordinated by a judgmental male gaze and acquire narrative centrality and agency (Mulvey 1975, 19-20). When Grace's daughter questions the need for a vibrator for older women, Grace raises her bandaged arm

proving that, in fact, the need exists. At this point, to the entire family's discomfort, Grace explains they want to pursue this project because "Our blood doesn't flow as easily and our genital tissue is more delicate. [...] The more effort it takes to orgasm, the more you irritate it, and the more it inflames your arthritis. And I mean shouldn't older women have it better than that? [...] We're doing things for people like us" (2x13 – The Coup). This long scene represents an empowering moment for the two protagonists because they both decide to ignore the patronizing discourses that their family reserves for them, finding comfort and confidence in their unexpected friendship. Drawing on Mulvey's argument on the potential of feminist filmmaking mentioned earlier, I posit that this scene presents alternative viewpoints and storylines with the intention of empowering female characters, while dismantling the traditional cinematic objectification of women. Once the easy-grip vibrator with large-print instructions is manufactured, Grace and Frankie both run a test:

FRANKIE: Just between you and me, that thing could give Jacob a run for his money. He can't change angles as quickly. And mama's got angles.

GRACE: Look! It didn't aggravate my arthritis one bit! [...]

FRANKIE: Orgasms and pancakes with all the fixings! (3x03 – The Focus Group)

This exchange between the protagonists, designed to normalize the needs for sexuality and autoeroticism of the elderly, also evolves in an examination of the religious viewpoint of sexual practices in the United States. In fact, to advertise their product, Grace and Frankie run a focus group with their friend Arlene and a group of friends, only to discover that it is actually a prayer group. Despite this setback, the protagonists continue with their marketing strategy:

GRACE: I'm curious, do any of you have hand or wrist issues?

GUEST: My hands are so stiff in the morning, I can't even open them. I have to run hot water over them just to get them going. [...]

GRACE: And how do they feel after they masturbate?

[silence]

GRACE: Does it aggravate the condition? You know, swelling or pain after you...

FRANKIE: After you masturbate, she's saying. Praise His name. (3x03 – The Focus Group)

The group is left speechless and uncomfortable, and once Grace and Frankie present their vibrator, everyone leaves. In a fit of frustration, Grace shouts: “I want the entire Midwest to know [about] it. I want the South to know [about] it. But how do we get them to listen?” This statement alludes to studies on how regional variations affect religiosity in the United States, suggesting that the South and Midwest remain the most religious regions of the nation (Chalfant and Heller 1991, 83); the reaction of the prayer group also aligns with Freixas’ assertion that institutions like religion have unjustly stigmatized autoeroticism for older women. In the context of this article it is noteworthy that Freixas (2005) defends autoeroticism, confirming that it could be an asset if performed alone or with company to achieve pleasure and counteract the challenges of seniority (126). As a matter of fact, following this social and political comment on religion’s view of sexuality, Grace and Frankie realize that Arlene secretly took one vibrator, promoting the destigmatization and consequent normalization of autoeroticism for older women.

In conclusion, it is important to note that Grace and Frankie also face the ageist notion that sex is a privilege reserved for the younger generation. In order to gain more visibility for their product, they try to collaborate with Mimi, one of Grace’s old acquaintances in the beauty business. Soon, it is revealed that the publicity campaign for the vibrator intends to use photoshopped pictures of Grace and Frankie to make them look 30 years younger, and both are reluctant to proceed with the collaboration. Mimi’s insistent assertion that “sex is ... young” (3x08 – The Alert) serves as evidence of the stigmatization of the sexuality of seniors, in contrast to the protagonists’ witty promotion of the normalization of sexual desire, especially for older women. Claims like Mimi’s have an impact on the societal assessment of women, as Susan Sontag (1979) notes, especially as they grow older, leading to increasingly critical judgments (464-65). Nonetheless, Gomes Barbosa contends that incorporating the body into the representation of older women underscores the idea that “in addition to mothers, grandmothers, patients, old women are still women. They have sex, they fall in love, they are friends. They have vanity and careers, they lie and cry” (Gomes Barbosa 2017,

1445). Eventually, Grace and Frankie opt against pursuing the collaboration and instead forge ahead with their own business, ultimately achieving success.

The towering presence of a contentious item like an easy-grip vibrator in a US family sitcom suggests that television producers have been responsive to the changing dynamics of society. This responsiveness is evident through their adaptation of storylines to reflect these evolving norms, which starkly contrast with the conventional and tightly regulated content that was prevalent on network television during the family hour of the 1970s (Pugh 2018, 10). In conclusion, I acknowledge and recognize the show's intent to destigmatize autoeroticism as a successful empowerment strategy for its older female audience, enabling these women to identify with the portrayed "successful agers" (Sako and Oró-Piqueras 2023, 1).

CONCLUSION

In a collection of essays exploring the quest to shape a better world for the LGBTQ+ community, Juno Roche examines the irony of LGBTQ+ inclusiveness when it comes to the elderly, a group facing the inevitability of aging.⁴ Roche (2021) highlights how the aging process renders individuals invisible and marginalized precisely at a time that should be about safety and comfort (225); this issue stands at the core of *Grace and Frankie*. As Peele (2007) suggests, an appropriate portrayal of queer intergenerational reality is imperative for reassuring queer identities' place in society (2). Consequently, *Grace and Frankie* proves to be informative and inclusive, beyond its entertaining aspects, shedding light on the invisibility and marginalization that accompany aging, while also destigmatizing the sexuality of older queer identities.

In this article, I have focused on the role of a sitcom as a powerful medium for sharing messages and opinions, as the majority of queer representations in US television has been affected by a stereotypical and caricatured portrayal of queer reality (Pugh 2018, 170). I have argued that queers of all ages need to be properly recognized and

⁴ Juno Roche is a British writer dedicated to the education of trans rights and HIV awareness.

represented in the media system, without being ridiculed or sexualized. While humor can be a powerful tool to broach sensitive subjects, its misapplication may inadvertently cast the queer community as a fictional entity, undermining the recognition of its genuine and evolving presence. Thus, to deal with societal change, it is essential to cease relying solely on traditional ideas and formats.

Grace and Frankie manages to give visibility to common issues in contemporary society, such as bigotry, homophobia, and ageism with a provocative sense of humor. The choice of portraying the everyday life of queer and older people in the form of a sitcom highlights both the ordinariness and variety of today's familiar and intimate dynamics, and the notion that the sitcom is traditionally about "wholesome American families" (Carosso 2012, 91) reinforces the idea that contemporary US families are evolving, allowing sitcoms to be reorganized for greater inclusivity.

To some extent, Tyler (2020) suggests that media, culture, and popular narratives contribute to the perpetuation of stigma and reinforce harmful stereotypes, thus shaping public perceptions of stigmatized groups (34). However, it is important to consider the potential role of popular culture as a vehicle for educating the public (Peele 2007, 2). Based on the evidence presented above, I propose that the intersectionality between age and sexuality, as exemplified by *Grace and Frankie*, can act as an effective countermeasure against the ageist stigma unjustly associated with older male and female bodies.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bechdel, Alison. 1986. *Dykes to Watch Out For*. Ithaca: Firebrand Books.

Bowen, Sesali. 2019. "Why Millennials Love Grace & Frankie." *NYLON*. Accessed March 7, 2023. <https://www.nylon.com/grace-and-frankie-guest-appearances>.

Brusa Francesco, Bernini Lorenzo, Gainsforth Emma Catherine. 2022. *The Queer Nation Manifesto*. Sesto San Giovanni: Asterisco Edizioni.

Carosso, Andrea. 2012. *Cold War Narratives: American Culture in the 1950s*. Bern: Peter Lang AG.

- Chalfant H. Paul, Heller Peter L. 1991. "Rural/Urban Versus Regional Differences in Religiosity." *Review of Religious Research* 33 (1): 76-86.
- Freixas, Anna. 2005. "La edad escrita en el cuerpo y en el carné de identidad." In *Los cambios en la vida de una mujer: Temores, mitos y estrategias*, 71-129. Buenos Aires: Editorial Paidós.
- Goldberg, Jonathan. 2018. "The Bechdel Test." In *Sappho: Jfragments*, 107-13. United States: Punctum Books.
- Goltz, Dustin Bradley. 2010. *Queer Temporalities in Gay Male Representation: Tragedy, Normativity, and Futurity*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2016. "Still 'Looking.' Temporality and Gay Aging in US Television." In *Serializing Age: Aging and Old Age in TV Series*, edited by Maricel Oró-Piqueras and Anita Wohlmann, 187-206. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.
- Gomes Barbosa, Karina. 2017. "Affects and Female Age in 'Grace and Frankie.'" *Estudos Feministas* 25 (3): 1437-446.
- Jerslev, Anne. 2018. "A Real Show for Mature Women' Ageing along with Ageing Stars: 'Grace and Frankie' fandom on Facebook." *Celebrity Studies* 9 (2): 186-201.
- Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mulvey, Laura. 2009. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Laura Mulvey, 14-26. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nussbaum Jon F., Pitts Margaret J., Huber Frances N., Raup Krieger Janice L., Ohs Jennifer E. 2005. "Ageism and Ageist Language Across the Life Span: Intimate Relationships and Non-intimate Interactions." *Journal of Social Issues* 61 (2): 287-305.
- Peele, Thomas. 2007. "Introduction: Popular Culture, Queer Culture." In *Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film, and Television*, edited by Thomas Peele, 1-8. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pereira Ana Catarina, Gutiérrez San Miguel Begoña. 2019. "'Grace and Frankie': Who's Afraid and Who Laughs with These Two Not-poor-and-even-less-old-ladies." *Studies in Visual Arts and Communication* 6 (2): 1-12.
- Porfido, Giovanni. 2007. "'Queer as Folk' and the Spectacularization of Gay Identity." In *Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film, and Television*, edited by Thomas Peele, 57-69. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pugh, Tison. 2018. *The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP.

Roche, Juno. 2021. "As We Grow Older." In *We Can Do Better Than This: 35 Voices on the Future of LGBTQ+ Rights*, edited by Amelia Abraham, 222-30. Great Britain: Penguin Random House.

Sako, Katsura, and Oró-Piqueras Maricel. 2023. "Successful Ageing and the Spectre of the Fourth Age in the Netflix TV Series 'Grace and Frankie'." *Journal of Aging Studies* 65: 1-7. Accessed October 25, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2023.101113>.

Selisker, Scott. 2015. "The Bechdel Test and the Social Form of Character Networks." In *New Literary History* 46 (3): 505-23.

Sontag, Susan. 1979. "The Double Standard of Aging." In *Psychology of Women. Selected Readings*, edited by J. Williams, 462-78. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Tyler, Imogen. 2020. *Stigma: The Machinery of Inequality*. London: Zed Books Ltd.

Willett, Cynthia and Willett, Julie. 2019. "Fumerism: Feminist Anger and Joy from Roseanne Barr to Margaret Cho and Wanda Sykes." In *Uproarious: How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth*, edited by Cynthia Willett and Julie Willett, 21-46. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Wirth, Scott. 2010. "Affirming Gay Men's Monogamous Marriages: Toward 'The Elegant Dialectic of Counterpoint.'" *Jung Journal: Culture & Psyche* 4 (3): 47-64.

Wold, Hannah. 2017. "Up Next: Representations of the Underrepresented in Streaming Film and Television." BA diss., University of Colorado Boulder.

Woodward, Kathleen. 2006. "Performing Age, Performing Gender." *NWSA Journal* 18 (1): 162-89.

OTHER SOURCES

"The End." *Grace and Frankie*, Season 1, Episode 1, Netflix, May 8, 2015.

"The Dinner." *Grace and Frankie*, Season 1, Episode 3, Netflix, May 8, 2015.

"The Funeral." *Grace and Frankie*, Season 1, Episode 4, Netflix, May 8, 2015.

"The Earthquake." *Grace and Frankie*, Season 1, Episode 6, Netflix, May 8, 2015.

"The Sex." *Grace and Frankie*, Season 1, Episode 8, Netflix, May 8, 2015.

"The Secrets." *Grace and Frankie*, Season 1, Episode 11, Netflix, May 8, 2015.

"The Bachelor Party." *Grace and Frankie*, Season 1, Episode 12, Netflix, May 8, 2015.

"The Negotiation." *Grace and Frankie*, Season 2, Episode 3, Netflix, May 6, 2016.

“The Anchor.” *Grace and Frankie*, Season 2, Episode 8, Netflix, May 6, 2016.

“The Coup.” *Grace and Frankie*, Season 2, Episode 13, Netflix, May 6, 2016.

“The Incubator.” *Grace and Frankie*, Season 3, Episode 2, Netflix, March 24, 2017.

“The Focus Group.” *Grace and Frankie*, Season 3, Episode 3, Netflix, March 24, 2017.

“The Burglary.” *Grace and Frankie*, Season 3, Episode 4, Netflix, March 24, 2017.

“The Alert.” *Grace and Frankie*, Season 3, Episode 8, Netflix, March 24, 2017.

“The Expiration Date.” *Grace and Frankie*, Season 4, Episode 4, Netflix, January 19, 2018.

“The Death Stick.” *Grace and Frankie*, Season 4, Episode 10, Netflix, January 19, 2018.

“The Roomies.” *Grace and Frankie*, Season 7, Episode 1, Netflix, August 13, 2021.

Daniele Atza recently graduated in English and American Studies from the University of Turin. His Master’s dissertation analyzes the cultural ambivalence and hybridity between Puerto Rico and the United States, proposing the *self-made jíbara* as a hybrid literary model of Puerto Rican female identity. His recent academic experiences include a 100-hour collaboration as a tutor for Bachelor’s dissertations on English Language and English or Anglo-American Literature at the University of Turin, and a traineeship at the Institute of Italian Studies at Universidad Pablo de Olavide in Seville. E-mail address: daniele.atza@edu.unito.it