Toxic regulation: From TV's code of practices to '#Bury Your Gays'

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Abstract:
In 2016, American television killed off many of its queer female characters. The frequency and pervasiveness of these deaths prompted outcry from fans, who took to digital platforms to protest 'bury your gays,' the narrative trope wherein queer death serves as a plot device. Scholars and critics have noted the positive aspects of the #BuryYourGays fan campaign, which raised awareness of damaging representational trends and money for the Trevor Project, a suicide prevention organization focused on LGBTQ youth. There has been less attention to the ties #BuryYourGays has to toxicity, however. Protests spilled over into ad hominem attacks, as fans wished violence upon the production staff responsible for queer character deaths. Using the death of *The 100* character Lexa as a case study, this article argues that we should neither dismiss these toxic fan practices nor reduce them to a symptom of present-day fan entitlement. Rather, we must attend to the history that shapes contemporary antagonisms between producers and queer audiences – a history that dates back to television's earliest efforts at content regulation. Approaching contemporary fandom through history makes clear that toxic fan practices are not simply a question of individual agency. Longstanding industry structures predispose queer fans and producers to toxic interactions.

Keywords: queer fandom, *The 100,* television, regulation, 'bury your gays'

Introduction

In March of 2016, queer fans got angry at American television. This anger was both general and particular, grounded in long-simmering dissatisfaction with TV's treatment of queer women and catalyzed by a wave of character deaths during the 2016 television season. As queer female character after queer female character perished on screen, fans turned to social media to express grief and outrage. These initial affective outpourings solidified into protests of the trope known as 'bury your gays', the narrative arc wherein queer characters

die, often violently, in service of someone else's character development. As protests on social media using the hashtag #BuryYourGays gained traction, they garnered significant attention from media critics and producers, emerging as a watershed moment for the public recognition of queer female fandom (Ng and Russo 2017). Scholars are already beginning to unpack #BuryYourGays' significance, examining it in relation to fan-producer relations in the era of branded diversity (Kohnen 2016), histories of homosexuality's legal regulation (Bridges 2018), and changing understandings of queerbaiting (the industry practice of hinting at queer storylines without committing to them) (Ng 2017).

This article builds on existing work by approaching #BuryYourGays through the television industry's history of regulating sexuality. In the majority of popular and scholarly coverage, #BuryYourGays is positioned as a fundamentally contemporary phenomenon with the potential to change established patterns in queer representation. This narrative speaks to a number of recent shifts in the televisual landscape: from atomized individual viewing to networked digital fandom, from a handful of channels catering to an 'average' consumer to a post-cable world wherein networks court queer viewers, from a TV audience hungry for traces of queerness to one that grew up with normalized gay representation (Stein 2015). While this approach to #BuryYourGays is valuable, it does little to account for the ways in which present-day fan activism takes shape against long histories of industry practice that continue to influence when and how queer characters appear on television. This article aims to fill such a gap, placing contemporary fan-creator antagonisms in conversation with historical regulations governing small-screen sexuality.

I argue that regulatory history helps us understand the toxic relations between creators and fans that circulate around queer character deaths. It is easy to focus on the positive aspects of fan activity, but – in line with this themed section – I foreground an aspect of #BuryYourGays protests we might call toxic: anger directed at those seen as responsible for queer character deaths. When viewers connect a character's demise to widespread representational tropes, creators often claim innocence, suggesting that they are just telling a story in which a queer character happened to die. Fans often respond with anger, and #BuryYourGays protests spill over into ad hominem attacks against the writers and showrunners behind queer deaths. This article suggests that we should neither dismiss fan anger nor reduce it to a symptom of present-day audience entitlement. Rather, antagonisms between fans and creators point to the necessity of understanding the historical and industrial contexts that shape their interactions. It is not just a case of fans on one side and creators on the other, but rather of multiple agents occupying a terrain shaped by history and citation and by the accumulated weight of decades of storytelling in this medium. Understanding fan anger and toxic fan practices begins with answering the question: how did we get to a contemporary TV industry where queer women have an entrenched but unrecognized link with death?

Methodology

This article pursues a historical approach to contemporary fandom and to toxic fan practices in particular. Recent interest in historical fan activity (Anselmo-Sequeria 2015; Fuller-Seeley 2018) suggests the need to study fandom as a phenomenon with ties to the past as well as the present. I build on this work by excavating the origins of a set of contemporary audience practices. Instead of looking to earlier iterations of media fandom, I read #BuryYourGays protests alongside the historical conditions that inflect their form and impact. My focus is regulatory history, which I approach through a critical cultural citizenship lens. I investigate 'how regulation and the law evoke registers of power across categories of class, race, gender, and nation' (McMurria 2009, 171). Through this approach, I draw out how histories of regulation establish the terrain on which present-day interactions between fans and producers take place.

This orientation means conceiving of toxicity as a feature of media environments rather than the product of individual fannish actors. In speaking of toxic fan practices, I refer to ad hominem attacks on media producers that go beyond potentially justifiable anger at misleading producer actions, the kinds of fan-producer interactions that many in fandom would like to disavow. These practices include, for example, responding to death of a queer character by wishing death on the people who wrote or directed the episode of their demise. My approach is not to castigate fandom for its toxicity but to read these fan-producer interactions for what they reveal about the television industry's relationship to queer death. If the intensity of fan anger seems out of balance with the offenses producers commit in killing queer characters, this imbalance points us to structural forces we need to understand.

In pursuing this question, I read fan anger through the television industry's earliest attempts at regulating sexual content. My analysis revolves around close reading. I consider a range of digital artifacts composed by contemporary fans and producers (tweets, blog posts, websites) and regulatory documents from the 1950s. Beginning with the 1951 Code of Practices for Broadcasting, TV regulations cast queerness as toxic: 'sexual abnormalities' had to be contained and punished, often by violent death. This foundational anti-queerness inflects television's casting and writing even after specific regulations no longer pertain, shaping the narratives queer female characters get to inhabit today. Thus, queer fans who threaten violence do so on a terrain where queerness is already associated with violent demise; they are participating in an established lineage of toxic relations between television and sexual non-normativity. In making this argument, my intervention is twofold: to center the toxic aspects of a particular fan campaign and to develop a methodology for approaching them through expansive industrial and historical context.

I begin by elaborating the details and context of #BuryYourGays protests, using one character death – that of Lexa (Alycia Debnam-Carey) on *The 100* (CW, 2014–) – as a case study. I suggest that the systematic nature of queer female death requires us to think about the industrial histories that shape fan-producer interactions. I then take up the 1951 Code of Practices, analyzing it as a window into industry-wide thinking about what should and should not be allowed on the small screen. I argue that its restrictions on sexuality serve as a

blueprint for the 'bury your gays' trope. Returning to the contemporary media landscape, a final section considers the activist initiatives that grow out of #BuryYourGays and how regulatory history can illuminate their potentials and limitations.

Lexa, *The 100*, and Fan Backlash

In a year of many queer female character deaths, the best known and most discussed was likely that of Lexa on *The 100*. She consequently provides a useful example of the texture of fan-producer interactions around queer characters and the toxic fan practices that result from their deaths. Lexa died in 'Thirteen', the seventh episode of *The 100*'s third season, which aired on March 3, 2016. This event was in many ways business as usual for the show: a post-apocalyptic drama that prides itself on a 'no one is safe' mentality, *The 100* had already killed characters whose centrality might make them death-proof on a different kind of show. Thus, the death in question was not without precedent. An ally, foil, and love interest for female series lead Clarke (Eliza Taylor), Lexa was a guest role, and Debnam-Carey was bound by a primary contract to *Fear the Walking Dead* (AMC, 2015–). As a character, Lexa was also positioned with particular proximity to death: she encountered something that could kill her in almost every episode in which she appeared. Hence, Lexa's on-screen presence was both contractually and narratively imperilled; it was less a question of if she would die than how it would happen.

However, a number of factors primed fans to invest in her as a character – and to react to her death with anger. From the beginning of the show's run, *The 100*'s creative team set the stage for two-way interaction with its audience. Showrunner Jason Rothenberg, writers Kim Shumway and Javier Grillo-Marxuach, and members of the cast regularly engaged with viewers on digital platforms, responding to fan comments on Twitter and Tumblr from their individual accounts. When Lexa appeared on the show and revealed she had had a previous relationship with a woman, the creative team stoked fan interest in her, promoting articles that praised the show's queer representation and encouraging speculation about her future storylines. For example, when viewers began to imagine a romantic relationship between Lexa and Clarke, a pairing known as 'Clexa', Rothenberg tweeted: 'You guys know I don't ship. But, I gotta admit, #Clexa is seaworthy' (@JRothenbergTV, January 28, 2015). When Clarke and Lexa kissed for the first time, Rothenberg and Shumway tweeted extensively about the scene as it was airing, discussing the characters' connection with each other and general understandings of sexuality in *The 100*'s universe. Shumway tweeted, '[w]e finally see that Clarke affects Lexa as much as Lexa affects Clarke" (@kimshum, February 25, 2015). Rothenberg continued, '[i]n #The100, they don't label themselves. If Clarke's attracted to someone, gender isn't a factor. Some things improve post-apocalypse' (@JRothenbergTV, February 25, 2015).

As Eve Ng (2017) points out, creator interactions with fans inflect expectations about LGBTQ representations. In the case of *The 100*, the creative team's overtures toward LGBTQ viewers and Clexa fans worked as paratexts heightening viewers' hopes about Lexa's future as a character. These overtures were not just momentary promotions of a new character

but continued up until Lexa's death. When a rumor of her demise leaked, Rothenberg tweeted pictures from set in which she appeared to be alive and well and invited fans to come watch filming in downtown Vancouver (@JrothenbergTV, January 21, 2016). And, in the lead up to 'Thirteen', the creative team described the episode as 'game-changing' for Clarke and Lexa, stoking queer fans' interest and investment in the pairing (Ng 2017). When her death happened suddenly, in an episode the creative team had promoted to queer fans, viewers reacted with anger. The crew's sustained engagement had signaled to many queer viewers that *The 100* understood their investments and would treat them well, and so Lexa's sudden death read as a betrayal. The narrative execution of her death exacerbated the problem: Lexa was hit by a stray bullet just after consummating her relationship with Clarke. Both the proximity of sex and death and the echoes of previous dead lesbian characters activated pre-existing fan anger, and Lexa became the latest entry in television's long history of representational failures with queer women (Snarker 2016).

Fans reacted to Lexa's death intensely and with intense negativity, and fan anger centered on Rothenberg. Previously called 'jroth' in fan spaces, Rothenberg earned a slate of new, less affectionate nicknames on Tumblr: 'jrot', 'jrotinhell', 'jflop', 'jrat' (hedapowerclexa, March 27, 2016). On Twitter, Rothenberg lost over ten thousand followers on his individual account, the topic 'CW Stop Jason Rothenberg' trended worldwide, and many users expressed their anger at how 'Jason killed Lexa' (Jamal 2016). These reactions stem in part from the dissonance between Rothenberg's continuing promotion of Lexa and his knowledge of her impending death: he seemed to be purposefully misleading audiences so that her demise would have greater impact as a narrative twist.

The broader landscape of the television industry also matters, however. Lexa's death hit harder because there are few queer women on television and because so many of them die. That is, toxic reactions directed at Rothenberg were about him, but they also point to the way *The 100*'s fan-producer antagonisms take shape in relation to larger industry trends. Fan anger is both personal and systemic, about the structural conditions of televisual representation and about the way Rothenberg as an individual creator navigated them.

In the face of strong backlash, Rothenberg at first appeared confused and dismissive, puzzled that the audience could have such a strong reaction. He professed ignorance of the trope known as 'bury your gays' and then suggested that that was not what his show was doing. In an interview with the website TV Insider, for example, he said the following:

> We're bold here. We're trying to tell a story and we're focusing on what we think is the best story and hopefully people will go for the ride and understand…I don't even want to talk to the trope that's out there about LGBT characters; that is not something that factored into the decisions (as quoted in Holbrook 2016).

There's an individualizing thrust to his words. In this narrative, *The 100* is product of a single creative unit telling a single story, insulated from any relationship to the larger world.

After weeks of criticism from fans and coverage by mainstream entertainment outlets, Rothenberg wrote a letter apologizing to his queer audience. He explained the reasoning behind Lexa's death and then wrote of its insufficiency:

> Despite my reasons, I still write and produce television for the real world where negative and hurtful tropes exist. And I am very sorry for not recognizing this as fully as I should have. Knowing everything I know now, Lexa's death would have played out differently (Rothenberg 2016).

Rothenberg highlights his ignorance about the representational history he played into. His failure stemmed from a lack of knowledge, and he will do better now that it has been brought to his attention, now that he is educated in the systemic nature of queer female death on television.

One might question Rothenburg's sincerity, but his apology points toward a different line of inquiry: how did we get to a contemporary TV industry where queer women have a common-sense but invisible link with death? While the intensity of reaction to Lexa's death was exceptional, her story arc was not. A wave of deaths swept through American television in 2016, taking away many queer female characters. Consider the list: Zora on *The Shannara Chronicles* (MTV, 2016–); Carla on *Code Black* (CBS, 2015–); Julie on *The Expanse* (SyFy, 2015–); Kira on *The Magicians* (SyFy, 2015–); Denise on *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–); Nora and Mary Louise on *The Vampire Diaries* (CW, 2009–17), Mimi and Camilla on *Empire* (Fox, 2015–); Pamela on *Saints and Sinners* (Bounce TV, 2016–); Mayfair on *Blindspot* (NBC, 2015–); Karen on *Mistresses* (ABC, 2013–16); Root on *Person of Interest* (CBS, 2011–16); Poussey on *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013–); Molly and Roz on *Guilt* (Freeform, 2016); Sarah on *Pretty Little Liars* (Freeform, 2010–17); Julia on *The Exorcist* (Fox, 2016–); Helen on *Masters of Sex* (Showtime, 2013–16); Kelly and Yorkie on *Black Mirror* (Netflix and Channel 4, 2011–); Gina on *Shut Eye* (Hulu, 2016–); Zoe on *Scream* (MTV, 2015–); Sarah on *Van Helsing* (SyFy, 2016–); Monica on *Shameless* (Showtime, 2011–).

All of these are female characters who expressed interest in other women, and all of them died on television in 2016. (There are several others who seemed to die but reappeared, including Rose on *Jane the Virgin* [CW, 2014–] and Felicity on *The Catch* [ABC, 2016–17].) Most died in sudden, violent ways: queer women were shot, stabbed, and poisoned, hit by crossbows, and killed in car crashes. As the list makes clear, this is a trend that moves across the usual divisions we use to describe television. The pattern repeats on streaming platforms and broadcast television, on network and cable, in soapy dramas and medical shows and teen-oriented fantasy. In other words, the narrative coupling of queer women and death is so pervasive that it is hard to find any kind of scripted television where it is not present. The aggregate nature of queer female death is apparent. This is not a question of one writer, showrunner, or network deciding to kill a character who happens to

be queer, but rather a systemic, structural association between queer women and death that runs through contemporary American television.

The trend holds true historically as well. While 2016 was an especially violent year for queer women on television, 'bury your gays' is not a new invention. When this most recent wave of queer female death on television crested, queer-oriented website Autostraddle launched an investigation into the history of lesbian and bisexual TV representation (Riese 2016). As they documented, TV overwhelmingly sentences queer women to unhappy endings. Of the queer female characters on completed shows since 1970, 31% of them are dead; 10% got a happy ending (Hogan 2016). Of the 383 lesbian and bisexual women who have appeared on American television, only thirty have found their way to a happy ending (ibid). Clearly, something about the architecture of television produces queer female death as an aggregate phenomenon, both historically and in the present. There is an important continuity over time that resists celebratory narratives of increasing lesbian and bisexual visibility. There may be more queer women on TV now than ever before, but 2016 also saw more of them die than ever before. This wave of deaths suggests that, despite the increase in numbers, the structures shaping queer women's narrative usage have not necessarily changed.

This systematicity tends to be invisible to people inside the television industry. When faced with criticism, writers and showrunners tend to fall into the pattern of Rothenberg's reaction, proclaiming that they are not part of a trend or that they are just telling a story that demanded the death of this particular person. For instance, *Empire* showrunner Ilene Chaiken denied any connection between 'bury your gays' and the deaths of two queer female characters on her show. She said: 'If anything, the lesbians should wish for a character like Camilla to be killed off since she just preyed on a powerful lesbian in order to fulfill her heterosexual ambitions' (quoted in Wagmeister 2016). Chaiken uses the particulars of her storyline to distance it from a trend it nevertheless participates in. There is thus a profound disconnect between the rhetoric of individual creative freedom and the frequency of 'bury your gays' narrative deployment. Rothenberg, Chaiken, and other showrunners don't see themselves as making the decision to kill characters because they are queer; nevertheless, an astounding percentage of queer women on television die. The intensity of fan anger reminds us that the repeated deaths of queer characters is not happenstance, that something somewhere produces them. I turn to regulatory constraints on sexuality as one way of understanding the binding of queer women to death, as they introduced into television formative prohibitions against queerness.

Regulating Televisual Sexuality

Television was a rigorously planned industry from its inception. As William Boddy (1993) has documented, broadcasting companies hoped to learn from their failures with radio and more fully control this new medium as it emerged (16-17). Their commitment to pre-planning manifested in the relatively early appearance of regulations. Unlike film, American television had no substantive 'pre-code' period (a period before the establishment of

institutional oversight) in which representations of non-normative sexuality could flourish. From the beginning, a number of institutional bodies participated in television's regulation. The broadcast spectrum was considered a limited public resource, so the Federal Communications Commission – a government-sponsored agency – oversaw the licensing of new stations and the periodic renewal of those already in existence. The FCC consequently had legal sanction to set technical and thematic standards for broadcast images and to suspend any station that deviated from them. As Cole and Oettinger (1978) have shown, however, the FCC was a notoriously reluctant regulator. It did not revoke a license to broadcast because of content violations until 1969, and even then it did so because the Court of Appeals ordered it to. Although the FCC had prohibitions against obscenity and indecency, it did little to enforce a particular vision of what obscenity might mean.

The specter of government interference remained, however, and broadcasters developed their own code of standards in the hope that an articulated set of rules would appease those concerned by the new medium's ability to beam images directly into the home. The National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters took up the task of elaborating this set of rules, which was titled the Code of Practices for Television Broadcasters. First adopted in 1951 and periodically updated until a 1982 court decision declared it illegal, the Code was more a description of best practices than a legally binding statute. Compliance was voluntary, and scholarly discussions of it tend to dismiss it as ineffective and unenforceable. Sterling and Kittross describe the Code as 'an unoriginal, proscriptive recitation of things licensees should *not* do' (2015, 334; italics in original). Eric Barnouw writes that most of 'its edicts had built-in escape hatches, and the few clear rules – such as those dealing with the time to be devoted to commercials – were widely ignored' (1990, 356).

These dismissals seem too quick. The fact that a rule cannot be enforced does not strip all significance from it. Despite its lack of legal standing, the Code of Practices still represents an attempt at articulating a shared, collective vision of how television should work, one that operates above the level of an individual station or studio. For this reason, it is the focus of my analysis. Other archives might provide insight into the philosophies and practices of a given individual or network, but the Code aspires to industry-wide consensus. And, while its sanctions on the duration of advertisements were ignored, its restrictions on sexuality have in large part held true. It consequently provides valuable insight into how norms of sexual representation become instantiated through overarching industrial structures and how patterns come to persist outside the conscious awareness of individual writers and creators.

My focus on the Code of Practices and queerness is a relatively novel one. There is a rich body of work on the Motion Picture Production Code (or Hays Code) and sexuality, as scholars like Vito Russo (1987), Patricia White (1999), and Richard Maltby (1996) document the ways that queerness on film works through connotation when overt reference to homosexuality is banned. There has been little analogous attention to television's Code, for even in scholarship focusing on television and queerness, the Motion Picture Production

Code is the default reference. Lynne Joyrich (2001) anchors her discussion of television's sexual epistemologies through an analogy to cinema's Code. In work that considers visibility across American media (Kohnen 2015; Walters 2003), the specifically televisual history of regulation disappears under its better-known filmic counterpart. When the Code of Practices does earn a mention – as in Elizabeth Bridges' forthcoming genealogy of queerbaiting – it emerges as part of a larger, transmedia trend toward unhappy endings for queer characters on screen. Discussions of queer televisual appearance thus tend to be routed through cinema with the Code of Practices and other TV regulations falling into the background or out of the analytic frame entirely.

This is an unfortunate trend because, as Russo (1987) points out, there are notable distinctions between cinematic and televisual regulatory mechanisms. For instance, television's fairness doctrine required portrayal of both sides of any contentious issue and so established a legal right to contest bigoted views that never existed in film (222-223). Until its dissolution in 1987, the fairness doctrine formed the basis of much gay media advocacy work; though it is no longer active, its importance to the history of queer appearance on television suggests the need to consider how regulation and representation intertwine. Following Russo, I suggest that cinema's production code cannot be the only place we look when thinking about television. There are undoubtedly overlaps between the two media forms, but there are also important divergences. Medium-specific histories and conditions inflect possibilities for queer appearance. Part of this article's contribution consists in bringing together a specifically televisual history of industry self-regulation with attention to non-normative sexuality.

One significant distinction between television and film derives from television's location in domestic space. Many of the anxieties surrounding television's adoption derived from its potential to restructure family life (Spigel 1992), and the Code of Practices emphasizes the medium's danger to children in particular. Its preamble begins as follows:

> Television is seen and heard in every type of American home. These homes include children and adults of all ages… It is the responsibility of television to bear constantly in mind that the audience is primarily a home audience, and consequently that television's relationship to the viewers is that between guest and host (NATRB 1951, 362).

Note the language of guest and host and the corresponding implication that television could always be disinvited from American homes. The medium must always be on its best behavior, for it is prone to being seen and heard by impressionable young audiences. Consequently, it should not broadcast anything that might lead children astray – that might, in other words, lead them into unacceptable lives.

This pedagogic concern is even more apparent in the two Code guidelines dealing directly with sexuality: '(e) Illicit sex relations are not treated as commendable; (f) Sex crimes and abnormalities are generally unacceptable as program material' (NATRB 1951,

page 363). Importantly, there is no actual ban on 'illicit sex relations' or 'sex abnormalities'. There are avenues for them to reach the screen, but only if certain conditions are met – if, perhaps, such sexuality were shown to be wrong or punished by death or destruction. A subsequent section on 'Responsibility toward Children' makes this implication explicit:

> violence and illicit sex shall not be presented in an attractive manner, nor to an extent such as will lead a child to believe they play a greater part in life than they do. They should not be presented without indications of the resultant retribution and punishment (NATRB 1951, 363).

Consider this language, which sets up three interlocking limits on the appearance of non-normative sexuality on television. First, illicit sex 'shall not be presented in an attractive manner'. This is a restriction on the character of representations and the affective response they provoke in off-screen viewers. Any queerness we see must not inspire desire or encourage children to reproduce it in their own lives. Second, illicit sex must not be shown to 'play a greater part in life than it does'. This is a limit on the duration of sexual non-normativity. For it to appear, it has to come into being as a demarcated exception, something with a built-in expiration date. Finally, illicit sex 'should not be presented without indications of the resultant retribution and punishment'. This is a restriction on the kind of narrative that can surround sexual non-normativity. It belongs only in tragic stories, for queerness must not be associated with happy endings.

The language of this code takes its cues from cinema's earlier one but with important variations: as long as retribution is swift, clear, and devastating, non-normative sexuality has potential routes onto the small screen. In effect, then, TV's Code functions as a blueprint for 'bury your gays'. The narrative coupling of sexual non-normativity and premature, unhappy endings is built into this early articulation of television's standard operating procedures; it is part of the foundational habits of TV-making, the imaginative horizon of what television could and should be. The association between queer characters and violent demise has its roots in proscriptions that shape the texture of television's engagement with queerness.

Because TV's code was not antagonistically imposed from the outside but made by the broadcasters' trade organization, its effects lingered in industry practices after its 1982 dissolution. We can see its legacy in the way that Lexa and other dead queer female characters make it onto the small screen, even before they actually die. Most are conceived as supporting characters with roles of limited duration; most are played by actors who inhabit guest roles instead of getting full contracts; most are written as additive rather than essential to ongoing plotlines. There is a structuring televisual imaginary that ensures queer female characters are comparatively easy to kill off, leading to the repetition of stories in which they are expendable. When queer fans get angry, they pick up on these legacies, recognizing that television has long held queerness itself to be toxic.

On Endings

To conclude, I want to return to the question of happiness and endings, one raised by reporting on 'bury your gays'. Writing about literature, Sara Ahmed argues that the unhappy ending can serve as a 'political gift' for queer representation because 'it provides a means through which queer fiction could be published. If the unhappy ending was an effect of censorship, it also provided a means for overcoming censorship' (2010, 88). Since the morality codes governing public culture demand unhappiness as the price for queer appearance, the unhappy ending does useful work even as it feels bad. Since unhappy endings allow queerness to enter the world, to circulate and be seen, they cannot be reduced to the inverse of good, positive representation. Ahmed argues we should stop looking at unhappy endings as moral censure and ask instead what they allow us to do (2010, 89).

Lexa's end was certainly an unhappy one, as were the other deaths that drove fans to anger in 2016. Can we read them as similarly valuable? These unhappy endings have had a significant impact in that activist communities and initiatives developed around them. Despite the fact that some #BuryYourGays protests resulted in toxic fan behaviors, the protests spawned the Lexa Pledge, a promise for better LGBTQ representation written by TV creators in consultation with fans ('A Pledge' 2017). They also led to the founding of media advocacy nonprofit LGBT Fans Deserve Better and raised over $170,000 for LGBTQ crisis intervention organization the Trevor Project. The intensity and impact of fan response drew attention from mainstream media critics and the television industry as well. #BuryYourGays protests have received coverage in *Variety* (Ryan 2016), *The AVClub* (McNutt 2016), the *Washington Post* (Butler 2016), *BBC News* (Wendling 2016), *io9* (Cranz 2016), and *Wired* (Watercutter 2016) – all publications that do not often report on the feelings of queer fans. We might say then that the anger attending 2016's slate of queer character deaths is the kind of toxicity that does work in the world. It has the potential to improve both the lived and mediated experiences of queer people.

However, there is an important, medium-specific function of queer televisual death, one that complicates Ahmed's reading: it removes a character from the ongoing narrative, awarding them not just an unhappy ending but also a premature one. Amy Villarejo (2014) suggests that the story of queers on television is less a question of TV getting better than of it getting longer; as time goes on, '[q]ueer characters acquire density and, more significant, history' (23). I see 'bury your gays' as a capping of the duration of queer life, a way of excising queerness from narrative unfolding that works as a potent (if unintentional) containment strategy for difference. To be clear, I am not arguing for only positive, affirmative representations; I do not think queer characters should always have shiny, happy lives on television. I do see value in duration, though, and the death of queer characters on television means that LGBTQ storylines do not get to have it. Characters are simply not present to provide ongoing queer representation.

Censorship works on queerness through specific technological and industrial contexts, and attending to them can help us better understand the terms by which media

forms produce and constrain sexuality. Attending to context can also illuminate where activist interventions fall short. Consider the Lexa Pledge, a document that promises meaningful change in the treatment of LGBTQ characters. Drafted in the wake of #BuryYourGays protests, by members of the creative team of *Saving Hope* (NBC, 2012–), it is a promise from television producers to queer fans that queer characters will be better treated in the future. Several of its enumerated points respond directly to fan anger, stating, 'We refuse to kill a queer character solely to further the plot of a straight one' and 'We promise never to bait or mislead fans via social media or any other outlet' ('A Pledge' 2017). The pledge was designed to spread and gather signatures; as of September 2017, more than a year after its release, there are only seventeen names attached to it. Those in the television industry who have spoken about not signing it point to a perceived infringement on creative freedom; they do not want to be told what kind of stories they can and cannot tell (Abrams 2017).

The reception the Lexa Pledge has received suggests ambivalence about the impact of #BuryYourGays. Showrunners are now more aware of television's tendency to kill queer characters, but they are wary of a blanket commitment to avoiding the trope. Their reluctance indicates that remedying the 'bury your gays' trope is not a question of simply asking creators to consciously choose to avoid it. We need to credit the forces history and context exert on creators as well. In the context of queer televisual death, critiques of individual creative choices should also contest the industry structures that make queer demise the path of least resistance.

In studying fan cultures, there is often a tendency to imagine one media object's fandom as the default unit of study. Phenomena like #BuryYourGays make clear the necessity of opening up other ways of imagining audiences and fan-creator relations. We need work that examines the practices within a given show's fandom, but we also need to develop approaches that consider scale and history, approaches that interrogate how practices grow out of engagement with a range of media texts over time. Connecting contemporary fandom to history makes clear that that toxic fan practices are not simply a question of individual agency. Longstanding industry structures predispose queer fans and producers to toxic interactions.

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