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Jack Harris

<div align="center">The Power of Queer Representation in the Media</div>

How can a moment on screen be blindsiding, yet also completely expected?

This may seem like an impossible riddle, but the simple, sickening answer came to many fans during last year's episode of The CW show *The 100*. Set in an irradiated, savage future Earth, *The 100* centers on one young woman named Clarke who, over the course of the series, develops a relationship with the ruthless and cunning warrior queen, Lexa. The showrunner, Jason Rothenberg, previously confirmed that Clarke was queer, tweeting that "Clarke is a bisexual character. Remember that in [the world of *The 100*], no one's worried about [her sexual identity]." Fans were overjoyed at the prospect of such a high-profile queer icon. Finally, there was a character who could represent them. Rothenberg himself continued to raise hopes via his nonchalance about the character's sexuality, stating, "I understand the importance of labels in the world that we live in...so I also feel like depicting this universe where these things no longer matter is the way I wish our world was" (Li). Everything was going as well as could be expected for the two bedraggled queer women in the dangerous world of *The 100.*

...That is, until Lexa was unceremoniously shot and killed. This occurred by accident, by an unimportant background character, immediately after the warrior queen had sex with Clarke for the first time.

The fan outcry was immediate and visceral in its emotion: people cried and grieved for Lexa, one of the few explicitly gay women onscreen. They attacked the episode: "the IMDB rating for Thursday night's episode currently stands at a 4.8 out of 10," *The Daily Dot* reported, "after thousands of users flooded the site to downvote it following Lexa's death" (Romano).

They lashed out at Rothenberg for giving hope where he knew no hope was to be found, and they mourned. They mourned the loss of Lexa, one of the few queer characters who could represent a community of queer fans on the screen. They were utterly blindsided.

Yet, in some ways, Lexa's death should not have come as much of a surprise. Everything about her shooting, from the way it was written to fans' outrage, is rooted in a deeper, more complex issue: namely, the underrepresentation of the LGBTQ+ community on television and in film (the use of "television" here also includes online streaming services such as Hulu or Netflix). The effects of representation of queer characters are many and powerful, but they are undermined by a trend in media to kill off these characters, a trope otherwise known as "Bury Your Gays." By killing off already underrepresented gay characters, the validating, normalizing power of representation is destroyed and heteronormativity is maintained, even reinforced. Not only does this heteronormativity damage the LGBTQ+ community, but it is a powerful weapon used to oppress women as well; in this way, the fates of the queer and female communities, fictional and real, are inextricably bound together.

In the following pages, I analyze the meaning of underrepresentation of the queer community, why the issue is harmful, and why it happens in the first place. In deconstructing the link between queer rights and feminism, we will begin to see how heteronormativity is a tool used to create a fear of the LGBTQ+ community, and how that same heteronormativity pervasively continues to oppress women. I then discuss the ways in which underrepresentation is harmful to progress in combatting heteronormativity, and how the Bury Your Gays trope exacerbates that harm. Having presented the problem, I will identify ways in which viewers can get involved in promoting representation on screen in anticipation of the bright future of queer

cinema. In the context of this paper, the terms "LGBTQ+" and "queer" are used as synonyms for the sake of variety in language.

The LGBTQ+ community is undeniably shorthanded in representation on the screen. Sarah Kate Ellis, President and CEO of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, an institution created to monitor this very problem, reported in an annual study that LGBTQ+ characters made up about 4.8% of regular characters on TV in 2016 ("Where We Are on TV" 3). The numbers are only slightly better for movies, where non-heterosexual characters are present in 17.5% of movies released in 2016. Even then, 77% of the gay characters were male, and 72.3% were white ("Studio Responsibility Index" 6). Thus, when representation occurs, it often leaves behind women and people of color. Based on these figures, it is clear that only a handful of films and TV shows include LGBTQ+ representation of any sort, and that handful is not an acceptable number. In an ideal world, queer characters would be on equal footing with heterosexual ones, and these characters would be representative of all identities, not just the white male one.

Some feminists may dismiss the problem of underrepresentation of the LGBTQ+ community as one that is irrelevant to their goals, but this mindset is misguided and exclusionary. In reality, the feminist and queer communities constitute an overlapping Venn diagram: what is an LGBTQ+ issue is also necessarily a feminist one. A common enemy, heteronormativity, is shared by the two communities. Heteronormativity is a way of thinking that decrees heterosexuality to be the default, while any and all other identities are cast as deviations from that norm. In this way, heteronormativity is the parent of gender norms, or prescribed ways of acting based on one's gender. By dictating which expressions of self are categorized as

normatively masculine and feminine, these gender norms are also inherently sexist and homophobic. One gender role for women, for example, is that they belong solely as homemakers with little power over their husbands, while children are ridiculed as queer if they step outside the boundaries of "normal" for their gender. In the heteronormative culture, queerness is used as a threat or slur. Suzanne Pharr, author of the book *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*, writes, "The best controlling tactic at puberty is to be treated as an outsider, to be ostracized at a time when it feels most vital to be accepted" (17). These slurs, creating a deep-seated fear of any identity that is not straight, are the perfect way to enforce oppressive gender roles.

In this way, heteronormativity, gender norms, and the sexism that draws power from both give rise to homophobia. All of these contribute to the patriarchy that feminism seeks to deconstruct, and the identity label of "gay" takes on a distinctly negative connotation. Pharr delves deeper into this homophobia by examining the ostracization of the queer. She states, "Gay men are perceived also as a threat to male dominance and control" (18). This homophobia is rooted in the idea that the queer community undermines existing social structures. Namely, by being queer, gay men are "betraying" masculinity. Queer women are "perceived as someone who has stepped out of line, who has moved out of sexual/economic dependence on a male" (18). And if queer people are, by their existence, tearing down the social structures such as traditional marriage and nuclear family units that grant men power and keep women from it, then it is only prudent that the patriarchy create fear of the queer in order to preserve these institutions and their dominance. "Homophobia," Pharr writes, "works effectively as a weapon of sexism because it is joined with a powerful arm, heterosexism" (16). Heterosexism, or heteronormativity, quickly leads to prescriptive gender roles and homophobia, which function to oppress queers and women

both. For this reason, it is beneficial for women when queer characters are represented on the screen, for these characters break down sexist gender roles. When fans begin to empathize with queer characters, homophobia begins to heal, and we advance both the rights of women and the LGBTQ+ community.

To some, what exists on the screen may seem inconsequential or insignificant. In reality, however, representation is a matter of tremendous effect that ripples to all corners of society; it both changes the way that people perceive others, and provides critical validation to those it represents. Research has confirmed the connection between seeing gay characters on screen and acceptance of gay people in real life, pointing to the power of queer representation to dissolve heteronormativity and, as a result, reduce homophobia. In a 2015 study by the Broadcast Education Association, after viewing many hours of programming featuring gay characters, it was found that "a positive relationship existed between viewing gay characters on television and endorsement of gay equality" in heterosexual participants (Bond and Compton, 727). What's more, this correlation was stronger for those participants who previously had no gay contacts in their social life; coming out of the study, they now scored the highest in acceptance of gay equality, measured by "a defining endorsement of gay equality as attitudes toward various legal and social policy issues" (Bond and Compton 722). This study was meticulous in its methods, controlling for any variables that might influence participants' stance on the issue, such as age or religion. The result is undeniable. Just by existing on the screen, queer characters have the ability to mold perceptions in real life. "The inability or lack of opportunity to understand a group of people is dangerous," Emma Venetis writes in an article for *Odyssey*. Yet, as Bond and

Compton's study shows, when we are given a chance to learn about and empathize with these groups, fear of the unknown is removed from the equation.

As gratifying as this study is, the importance of queer representation is not and should not be defined by its relation to the heterosexual, but principally by what it means to the queer community. There's an almost tangible validation in seeing people who love like you in the TV shows and movies that you watch (a validation that overrepresented groups may not recognize because they have never been without it). Whenever I see a gay character, a warm, golden, diffused happiness grows in my stomach and I find myself smiling for no discernable reason. I feel a little more accepted, as if society is telling me, "It's okay. You belong. I see you, and your existence is valid." This validation, too, is incredible: in 2014, Nickelodeon's animated television show *The Legend of Korra* featured in its finale two main female characters of color holding hands and facing each other as the final shot of the series faded into light. Later, Bryan Konietzko, one of the show's creators, confirmed that the women were, indeed, in love. "It is long overdue that our media (including children's media) stops treating non-heterosexual people as nonexistent," Konietzko writes in his online essay that expands on the finale episode. "I'm only sorry it took us so long to have this kind of representation in one of our stories." Konietzko makes it clear that this representation was important to his team. Evidently, it was important to the viewers as well: fan response was immediate and profound. Reaction videos of fans watching the finale show viewers shaking and sobbing as they witnessed the validation of a queer relationship. Some screamed with joy while others collapsed into exuberant tears ("The Legend of Korra Series Finale"). All of these people knew, as I knew when I watched the finale episode in 2014, that the moment would never be forgotten. A heroine we had spent years getting to

know and watch grow had just been confirmed as bisexual, and we had all been sent a powerful message that we were worthy and deserved to exist.

Even these short-lived moments of queerness on screen, however, are besieged by those viewers who feel the LGBTQ+ community is overstepping its bounds in seeking greater representation. One example is Courtney Kirchoff, an editor of the website *Lowder with Crowder*. Kirchoff, utilizing data from a 2012 Gallup poll, writes that "homosexuals make up about 3.4 percent of the population, but make up 14 percent of films released in 2014. Yet they still complain about being under-represented." Herein lies the problem with Kirchoff's attack: having 3.4% of characters identify as queer is simply not enough. A quota of one queer character per show or movie forces that character to shoulder the representation of a vastly diverse community (it goes without saying that this community extends beyond homosexuality). That character must act as a beacon for every letter of LGBTQ+, and will inevitably fail under the sheer weight of responsibility, of being pulled in too many directions at once. Of course, this is exacerbated by the killing off of queer characters in such high numbers; these characters can hardly provide validation when they're chilling in a morgue. Emma Venetis illustrates the very real effect this dearth of representation has on viewers, claiming, "children who are unable to see representations of themselves, or people like them on TV may feel insignificant, weird or isolated." *That* is why creating a pantheon of queer, non-white and non-male and any other combination of minority characters is important: because they hold an incredible power to bring acceptance and validation to viewers. A diverse cast allows room for characters to grow. It allows them to have meaningful and well-written death, and for others to reach a happy ending. One queer character is not enough. Why not write multiple characters that look and act more like

their viewers? Distilling the identities of the queer community into a tiny percentage of characters for the sake of honoring census percentages is inexcusable and underhanded, especially in light of what the alternative means to the people and children who are watching.

While writing diverse characters is important, the manner and multitude of their deaths may hold equal weight. Queer characters have a history of dying in great numbers and in gruesome or nonsensical ways (see above for Lexa's death). As stated, this phenomenon is so pervasive that it has its own name: the Bury Your Gays trope. GLAAD reports that in the most recent year of study, "more than 25 queer female characters have died on scripted television and streaming series" (Ellis, "Where We Are on TV" 3). These deaths have a twofold effect: not only do they obviously lower the diversity of the respective show or movie the deaths occur on, but they put viewers through very real grief as well. "You're exposed to different aspects of the characters' lives," psychiatrist Robert Rowney says in an interview for *The Huffington Post*. "You eventually begin to empathize with them and form an attachment." Later, when a fictional character dies and that attachment is severed, the impact of that loss is anything but fictional. According to Rowney, "If you're invested enough, the death of a character is going to be very real to you" (qtd. in Holmes). Not only do fans go into mourning, but a study at American University found that the collapse of social networks following a character's death is detrimental too. For example, if a viewer formed online and real-life friendships based on a shared interest in Lexa and Clarke's relationship on *The 100*, Lexa's death might lead to their social group drifting apart, a group which might be providing critical support for some of its members. What's more, "consumer reactions to the death of their favorite shows...depended heavily on...whether or not their show had a 'good death'" the study reports (American University). If characters are killed

savagely or for reasons that do little to further the plot in a meaningful way—as many queer

characters are—viewers can feel as though a loved one died in vain, thus fanning the flames of

their grief. View this death through the lens of a viewer who has found validation in a rare queer

character, and the Bury Your Gays trope takes on an almost insidious tint.

If this problem has such far-reaching consequences, why is it perpetuated? The core issue

lies with the heart of any show or movie: in the writer's room. A report by Aisha Harris for *Slate*

detailing the dearth of gender and racial diversity on TV writers' staff is shocking. She reports

that in 2014, 13.7% of writers were writers of color, and that number fell for executive producers

of color, who occupied 5.5% of those positions. A study by the USC Annenberg School for

Communication and Journalism found that, "Across the 100 top films of 2014, only 15.8% of

content creators working as directors, writers, and producers were women" (Smith et al. 2).

Harris goes on to detail the problems women and people of color face in rising through the ranks

of TV writers, and explains how only diverse writers can truly write three-dimensional diverse

characters. In the report, film producer Lee Daniels exclaims, "I hate white people writing for

black people; it's so offensive. So we go out and look specifically for African-American voices"

(Harris). It does not take a great stretch of the imagination to graft this experience onto LGBTQ+

writers, for which there are fewer statistics. If white writers have trouble stepping into the shoes

of people of color, how well can straight writers truly imagine what it's like to be queer? How

can they understand how a queer person's entire life has been warped by society because of their

sexual orientation? These writers must grasp that queer identities, as do the identities based on

race or sex, permeate every part of a queer character's being. And the challenges do not stop at

the construction of the character. It's imperative that writers consider the meta, or the effect their

characters have on the queer audience. These writers must measure the impact of every word a queer character says, because for those who know no queer people in their lives, fictional characters become the source of their perceptions of the entire community. It is a large responsibility, so it is not difficult to understand why queer characters are so often absent. Straight writers simply do not wish to undertake that enormous challenge. Some may find, after introducing a queer character, that they are not equipped to write that character fairly and see killing them as the path of least resistance. It's something of a catch-22: exclude queer characters from the project, or risk writing them in a potentially damaging way. Many writers choose the former, and when they choose the latter, the result, as Jason Rothenberg discovered, can be devastating.

The solution to the many problems created by underrepresentation is to hire more diverse writers. They are, after all, the ones who are directly responsible for putting words in the characters' mouths. And even if the sexual orientation or gender identity of writers cannot be marked down in a job interview, increasing diversity of any kind is a step in the right direction. The fact remains, however, that fans are not responsible for hiring the writing staff, which may leave some feeling powerless. To this, I would reply that the key lies in remembering that writers are rather like government: they draw their power from the people. Movies and television shows live and die on the whims of the viewers. If viewers don't like the direction a show is taking and stop watching, or don't want to pay for a movie ticket, writers may very well lose their jobs. Hence, it behooves writers to listen, to some degree, to fan response. In reference to revealing that two female characters were in love on the *The Legend of Korra*, writer Bryan Konietzko acknowledges, "We did it for all our queer friends, family, and colleagues." He is quick to assure

readers that Korra and Asami were not made queer simply because he was caving to fans, yet Konietzko was also aware of the positive impact the reveal could have on desperate viewers. The relentless clamoring for representation is what many consider to be the most powerful factor in the creation of a lesbian relationship on Fox's *Glee*. "Every milestone of Brittany and Santana's relationship happened because of lesbian fandom," writes Mary Riese Bernard for the lesbian feminist website *Autostraddle*. We are able to see through these examples that fans truly do have a voice. The trick is in yelling loud enough to be heard.

Finally, when demanding representation, it is also imperative that fans implore writers to create fleshed out, three-dimensional characters. Sexuality is an integral feature of a queer person's identity, and brushing that aside is hardly representation. When movies such as *Beauty and the Beast* tout including a gay character, yet only allude to his sexuality through a fleeting glimpse of two men dancing, or when Saban's *Power Rangers* implies a character's' bisexuality in a throwaway line, or when viewers are granted a small glimpse of Sulu's husband in *Star Trek Beyond*, studios claim to be diverse and inclusive. However, this marginal representation is not enough. Not anymore. "They [queer characters] must be crafted," Sarah Kate Ellis writes in the "Where Are We on TV '16-'17" report, "with thought, attention, and depth" (2). Pharr further analyzes this dangerous compression of queer identity, asserting that, "We are asked to pass. Because of our deep belief in women's liberation and because of our self-blame from internalized homophobia, we often agree to this trade-off" (34). That trade-off is marginal representation. It is the hint of a gay character meant to appease the LGBTQ+ viewers without creating ripples among conservative audiences. True representation, however, is found when

queer characters are allowed to express their sexuality freely and complexly, not when they act as boxes to be checked off.

This leads us back to my opening question: how can a moment on screen be blindsiding, yet also completely expected? One day, the answer to this seemingly impossible riddle will not be a queer character's brutal murder. One day, it will be their inclusion. Both queer rights and feminism will be advanced when this inclusion is finally normalized. The more diversity the public sees normalized on television and the more heteronormativity is dissolved, the freer women, LGBTQ+, and all intersectional combinations of these identities become. If "gay" loses its negative connotation as a slur, if women and queer youth are no longer taught to fear stepping outside their gender roles, it will be in part thanks to the lessons media has taught. This is due to the vast power of representation; it provides validation and it changes the very way viewers perceive others. And though the death of queer characters continues to be an issue, it will also continue to get better, so long as writers' rooms grow more diverse and fans refuse to be ignored.

As progress is made on representation, what, then, does the future hold? It begins with writers learning from their mistakes. "I am very sorry for not recognizing this [the impact of Lexa's death] as fully as I should have," Jason Rothenberg wrote in a blog post following the fan outrage over Lexa's death. "Knowing everything I know now," he continues, "Lexa's death would have played out differently" ("The Life and Death of Lexa"). It was impossible for Rothenberg to avoid the repercussions of his writing, and, instead of fighting fans, he did what any great writer should; he allowed himself to learn from the voices of the community he had injured. Looking ahead, representation may come in ways more wonderful and visible than the community may dare dream. When asked about the possibility of gay characters in the Star Wars

films, director of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* J.J. Abrams replied, "When I talk about

inclusivity it's not excluding gay characters. It's about inclusivity. So of course…. it seems

insanely narrow-minded and counterintuitive to say that there wouldn't be a homosexual

character in that world" (qtd. in Yamato). It goes without saying that the impact of a gay

character in a blockbuster Star Wars film would be groundbreaking. And if we are in a position

to casually consider the possibility of queer characters with the franchise's directors, then

representation may have its best days ahead.

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