

Victory Stands on the Back of Sacrifice: The Bodies and Body Politics of Lesbian and Bisexual Women on TV

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“I don’t even want to talk about the trope that’s out there about LGBT characters; that is not something that factored into the decision.”

– Jason Rothenberg, showrunner of *The 100*

“Victory stands on the back of sacrifice,”

–Lexa, season 2 episode 13

“Life is about more than just surviving.”

–Lexa, season 3 episode 7

I. **Introduction:** Bury Your Gays

Tara Maclay, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: shot in the heart by a stray bullet. Tina Greer, *Smallville*: impaled through the chest in a fight with a man. Helena Cain, *Battlestar Galactica*: shot by an ex-lover. Dahlia, *Legend of the Seeker*: executed for confessing to a crime. Sophia, *Skins*: jumped to her death. June Stahl, *Sons of Anarchy*: shot in the head. Gaia, *Spartacus*: bludgeoned to death by a man she rejected. Victoria Hand, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*: shot in the head. Tara Thornton, *True Blood*: shot by a bullet meant for her best friend. Rachel Posner, *House of Cards*: hit with a car by a man who was obsessed with her. Commander Lexa, *The 100*: shot in the stomach by a stray bullet.

What do these women have in common, outside of their violent deaths? Each was an openly gay or bisexual character on scripted American TV in the last twenty years. These are just a handful of those named on queer blogging site Autostraddle’s list of “All 153 Dead Lesbian and Bisexual Women on TV and How They Died” (Bernard). This list had 65 names when blogger Marie Lyn Bernard first posted it, but through the contributions of readers, it has doubled in size and continues to grow. Bernard began to compile the list after the death of, Commander Lexa from the post-apocalyptic sci-fi show *The 100*.

Lexa’s death has sparked new outrage from fans and damage control from showrunners because it upholds the same trope which Lexa’s entire existence seemed to defy—“Bury Your Gays.” This trope, as described by TVTropes, is the motif that “often...gay characters just aren't allowed happy endings. Even if they do end up having some kind of relationship, at least one half of the couple...has to die at the end” (“Bury Your Gays”) Fans

and critics alike had heralded Lexa as the new face of positive representation, and the creators of the show were eager to capitalize on the hype. Showrunners, writers, and actors had reached out to fans of Clarke and Lexa, many of them young women, encouraging them to be a part of the production and the process. Fans were led to believe that *The 100* would be different, that showrunner Jason Rothenberg and company were telling a groundbreaking, progressive story that moved past tropes. But as it turns out, *The 100* was no better than the rest when it came to its queer women.

In fact, *The 100* is becoming infamous for treating its queer characters poorly. There have been four queer women on *The 100*, Clarke and Lexa, who have prominent roles, and Costina and Niylah, two minor love interests. Costina was murdered for political reasons, her head delivered to Lexa's bed before the timeline of the show, but her name is brought up many times by Lexa's advisors to discourage her from involvement. Niylah shared a similar fate, beat up and left for dead by some thugs who wanted to get to Clarke. As mentioned above, Lexa too met a horrific end. And Clarke is still alive, but suffering—all her love interests, male or female, have been killed, mostly due to their involvement with her.

While fans of the show have the right to be upset, the academic community should also be concerned by Lexa's death. As I will show later, it has larger implications regarding the state of both the body politics and representation discourses taking place in the women and gender studies fields. Some queer theorist voices have begun to address other tropes, such as the sexualization and fetishization of queer women. On another front, feminist theorists such as *The New Yorker's* Jill Lepore are examining death and how it relates to the changing representation of women as they reclaim their bodies in political fiction (Lepore). However, when it comes to the lesbian death trope and what this could hold for body politics, scholarly voices are surprisingly silent.

This is why I will be uniting these two conversations. Issues of identity are multifaceted and intersectionality should be the standard, especially in issues of representation. Queer women face a double invisibility, marginalized for both gender and sexuality. In this essay, I will explore the intersectionality of sexuality and gender in representation in the media and the implications of this representation in real life discussions of body politics. I will analyze how *The 100's* failure to subvert the "Bury Your

Gays” trope invalidates the steps towards the positive representation that must come hand-in-hand with LGBT characters. I will deconstruct tropes and a feminist theory called “the body imaginary,” and couple this with an analysis of the many numbers surrounding the issue such as those making up the list mentioned above. I argue that the continued killing of queer women in media perpetuates a system that tells them they do not have agency of their own bodies.

II. Context: The Dual Fall of Commander Lexa and Jason Rothenberg

Adapted from a young adult novel series, Jason Rothenberg’s *The 100* has been lauded as a cutting edge TV series, with *A.V. Club* reviewer and critic Kyle Fowle naming it the best sci-fi since *Battlestar Galactica* (Fowle). He and other critics have commended the questionable morality of its characters and challenging plots set in an elaborate and engaging post-apocalyptic wasteland. In a review of the second season’s finale, Fowle wrote that “Very few shows manage to really push the boundaries of moral compromise in a way that feels legitimately difficult. *Breaking Bad* did it. *The Sopranos* did it. *Game Of Thrones* has done it. Those shows never back down from the philosophical murkiness of their worlds, refusing to provide a tidy, happy ending if it doesn’t feel right. ...*The 100* has done the same.” At the heart of these morality issues and “philosophical murkiness” are stereotype-defying, well-written female characters. The women lead armies, grapple with dark decisions, and make mistakes. They aren’t defined by their relationships to men. Unlike similar shows, *The 100* doesn’t rely on unhealthy or unnecessary romantic plotlines. It was a positive step forward in terms of representation, especially for its target demographic of young adults.

In its third season, however, *The 100* crossed a line in the eyes of many fans, myself included. In season two, the audience is introduced to Lexa, the heavily armed and tattooed commander of the “Grounders,” or descendants of those who survived the nuclear holocaust on Earth. She’s a striking figure, with black war paint, wild hair, and an entire army willing to do her bidding. She is also a lesbian. Despite the rivalry between the groups they led, Lexa and Clarke, openly bisexual, had undeniable chemistry, and shared a kiss in late season two. In season three, they’re able to rekindle whatever was between them, leading up to a climactic scene in episode 7, “Thirteen,” in which Lexa finally opens up to Clarke and they share an intimate scene that fades to black. In the very next scene, however, Lexa is shot by

a bullet meant for Clarke—from the gun of the Commander’s right-hand man. She bleeds out in the bed she’d just shared with Clarke, and the writers decide that Clarke, a trained medic and known for quick thinking and problem solving, is unable to do anything.

The traumatic, unnecessary death came after a season and a half worth of hype for Lexa, whose romance with Clarke had become an immediate favorite—and immediate marketing tool. Behind-the-scenes photos featured moments between the two, with one going so far as to have a comment about how the actresses picked the “rainbow” candy out of a selection of food from craft services. Rothenberg used Twitter to reach out to fans, tweeting snippets like “Shooting in the streets of downtown Vancouver for the first time ever! Come say hi! #the100 #The100Season3.” In late season two, another writer tweeted that “Lexa is the representation. And not dead!” (Shumway). They were proud of the way their multifaceted, flawed, interesting character Lexa had become so popular as a symbol of representation and as a well-written character.

Then, the writers fell back on tropes, those basic building blocks of storytelling that can enhance or impair. The death checks the boxes of not one but two different tropes surrounding LGBT characters: “Bury Your Gays” and “Girl-On-Girl Is Hot,” the nickname TVTropes has given to the oversexualization and fetishization of queer women (“Girl-On-Girl Is Hot”). Killing Lexa right after her sex scene with Clarke played right into the idea that queer women exist solely for the male gaze. This, in addition to the fact that she and Clarke were finally happy before it was all taken away, puts the “Tragic” in “Tragic Lesbians,” another name for the trope. The writers destroyed the character and relationship they had worked so hard to build up in one poorly written decision, reducing her character to tropes to further an already-weak plot.

III. Continuing the Conversation: The Body Politics of Representation?

This is not the first time this trend of tropes has been found problematic. Many other scholars in this discipline of gender studies have broached the topic, and acknowledge that while representation for LGBT people is drastically improving, it is not enough. Currently, popular media sources like *The Huffington Post* and *Buzzfeed* are particularly vocal about issues of LGBT representation and the “Bury Your Gays” trope, thanks to Commander Lexa’s death. Many critics for online magazines like Maureen Ryan of *Variety* have called out *The*

100 for not only the death, but how it was handled. In an article titled "What TV Can Learn From 'The 100' Mess," Ryan calls out Rothenberg for deliberately misleading fans by touting the appearance of the actress playing Lexa on-set while they were filming the season finale.

Despite the growing awareness in audiences and popular media, the scholarly conversation on the "Bury Your Gays" trope has not yet begun. Some scholars do tackle other tropes, such as Utrecht University student Robin Vrolijk's thesis which takes on the sexualization and fetishization of queer women through a case study of two shows, *Orange Is The New Black* and *Once Upon A Time*. Vrolijk came to the conclusion that when diverse and inclusive, "representation...can take steps towards a more informed and enlightened society in which lesbian and bisexual women will no longer be treated as inferior based on misinformation and stereotypes" (Vrolijk). The use of tropes does not allow for such informed and diverse representations; instead, it continues to perpetuate stereotypes.

Other scholarly voices focus on the show *Glee*, which is considered groundbreaking for the number and significance of LGBT characters, especially in a show aimed at young adults. There has been much research done on the impact of *Glee's* representation, as well as the impact of media in general. Sociologists Marina Levina, Craig R. Waldo, and Louise F. Fitzgerald found it logical to argue that "the media provide a very important connection between the psychological heterosexism of an individual and societal prejudice against gay, lesbian, and bisexual people" (Levina 743). Thus, shows like *Glee* play an important role in shifting the discourse towards acceptance. According to a close reading done by Frederick Dhaenens, *Glee* succeeds in presenting multifaceted depictions of homosexuality; its characters are allowed to be not only suffering and self-loathing, as per the common narrative, but also happy, self-confident, and navigating sexuality (315). However, the characters can often be just as stereotypical or heteronormative as trope-based narratives (314), shown by Vrolijk to be problematic.

When scholars discuss "Bury Your Gays," however, it becomes an issue of body politics, which is more of a concern for feminist theorists. Typically, body politics goes hand-in-hand with issues of reproduction rights, but any bodies relate to issues of agency, especially with the dead bodies of women characters stacking up. I will be extending body politics to take a close, intricate look at the bodies of queer women. This will require uniting the two conversations of body politics and representation.

IV. Theoretical Framework: The Body Imaginary

I will use three important concepts throughout my argument: tropes, intersectionality, and body politics. Defining them, then, becomes an issue of equal importance. TVTropes, the influential encyclopedia that houses a comprehensive database, defines tropes as “a storytelling device or convention, a shortcut for describing situations the storyteller can reasonably assume the audience will recognize” (“Trope”). The website notes that tropes are neither good nor bad, just instruments for creators to use to convey their ideas in a way that is communicable and understandable to audiences. I take TVTropes’ explanation a step further, and add that, when dealing with elements like plots and characters, they are literary stereotypes; while based in some reality, they can quickly become fixed and oversimplified, especially when attached to harmful discourse.

Intersectionality is a term that plays a defining role in the first half of my argument. I will be using Dutch sociologist Susanne V. Knudsen’s interpretation, as the study of overlapping identities and oppression. Knudsen holds that conceptualizations of oppression within society, such as racism, sexism, classism, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia, do not act independently of each other, but instead relate to and interact with each other to create a system of multiple forms of discrimination (Knudsen 63). While the word has become a political and social buzzword lately, the theory holds important discursive value that should be recognized, as the issues become more complex as we add layers of oppressions, subtle or outright.

Body politics is, as the name suggests, concerned with the political nature of the body. It is most often associated with feminist theories, as it goes hand-in-hand with marginalization. Judith Butler, a principle feminist philosopher, reasons that “the body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence” (qtd. in Baer 23). The body is fragile, but it is also the most fundamental object of which we have possession. But when we begin to think of the body as our way of interacting with and exposing ourselves to others in whatever way they choose, the “body” becomes more than our heads, shoulders, knees and toes. Butler calls it “a social phenomenon in the public sphere” (qtd. in Baer 23). While our bodies might be the only thing we truly own, we can so easily lose agency over our body because of how little control we

have over the public sphere. Body politics, then, is the movement of women to reclaim their own bodies.

It is this politicized definition of the body from which “the body imaginary” rises. According to University of Stavanger gender studies professor Ingvil Hellstrand, who designed much of the theory by drawing upon philosopher Moira Gatens’ work, the body imaginary exists as a “dual conceptualization” of the body: on one hand, the physical body, and on the other, the conceptual body as it relates to discourse and identity (Hellstrand 13). The theory and its dual conceptualization bring body politics to a fictional realm—this is where “imaginary” plays a part. The imaginary is the potential effect of “encompassing the fictional universe of popular culture and possible future bodies and biologies,” (Hellstrand 14). In other words, the imaginary spans the line between real and fictional to look at the effect of fiction. In uniting both “textual and contextual,” the body imaginary allows for “analyzing visual representations in [popular culture topics] as bodily discourse in late modern culture” (Hellstrand 14). This is why I’ve chosen to apply it to *The 100*, as Hellstrand applies it to *Battlestar Galactica*. The storyline and death of Lexa in her world can be analyzed as a visual representation of the battle over agency existing in the body politics discourse in our world.

V. Methodological Framework: Deconstruction, Close Reading, Statistical Analysis

To build upon the body imaginary, I must first break it down. While I won’t be applying the method of deconstruction to *The 100* itself, I believe it provides a fundamental grounding needed to understand the issues at hand. Deconstructionism involves breaking down the binary of structuralism; because of this, it is integral to queer theory which argues that such things as natural/unnatural or male/female are based solely on society and culture. Within this, it analyzes the relationship between text and meaning. Philosopher Nancy J. Holland from Hemline University argues that it is “a double movement of simultaneous affirmation and undoing,” because of its nature of first breaking the object of its focus down to the level of basic intentions before building back up to wide-sweeping cultural consequences (Holland).

Deconstruction is built upon several key issues; I consider the most important of these to be the assertion that texts outlive their authors to become part of a set of cultural

habits, and the idea of impact versus intent. Tropes are a prime example of texts outliving their authors—these cultural building blocks have influenced stories for centuries, from Shakespeare inventing hundreds of words still used today to Biblical themes alluded to in pop culture texts. This is why the method is so relevant to Lexa’s death. “Bury Your Gays” transcends any one source, and the use of it as a plot device ties *The 100* to so many others that have gone before it. The body imaginary is also based in a deconstructionist line of thought because it works to erase the line between fiction and reality. The death and surrounding outcry have reaffirmed that nothing exists in a vacuum; while the episode “Thirteen” may have just been the words of a script brought to life by actors, it has larger implications about real queer women, implications that can’t be seen unless we first break down the binary of impact/intent.

Close reading and statistical analysis are two methods common to sociology-based gender studies work. Along the same theme of deconstruction, close reading breaks the text or topic down to explore or examine the details. I will be using this method to apply the body imaginary to *The 100*, specifically the survival narrative that is pertinent throughout. Statistical analysis is anything involving numbers, and, as my introduction should show, numbers are vital to this issue. Lexa is just one of the 153 queer women characters killed in American TV. I find it important to note that even between first finding the source and using it in my argument, 8 names were added to the list. While there are names and faces behind the numbers, when we look at queer women characters en masse, startling patterns occur.

VI. Application and Argument: The Body Imaginary in *The 100*

In *The 100*, an emphasis on survival guides many of the characters’ decisions. Life becomes the ultimate goal, and one’s body becomes a way to show how well that goal is being met. An example of this is Raven. She’s still alive against many odds, but in the second season, her right leg is paralyzed. Her only hope of survival is to get her body moving again, so she builds a brace, thus regaining control over her body. The brace is referred to frequently, and Raven herself feels as though she is “broken.”

In an environment of sacrifice, then, Lexa is an outlier. She frequently places her own life, body, or best interest in danger, from fighting needlessly as her own champion when her leadership is challenged to extending an alliance to Clarke based on her own feelings. Her body imaginary, as a young queer woman in a position of immense power, disregarding the

survival-based rules of much of her world in exchange for pursuing her own, appealed to much of the audience. She represents a multifaceted, interesting, powerful woman in touch with her own emotions, a far cry from what is typically the “strong female character” archetype that Lexa fulfills. And on top of everything, she is gay and not defined by her sexuality within the context of her story. Before her death, her body imaginary inspired hope for the future, for a world where gender and sexuality didn’t hold us back. Regardless of the post-apocalyptic themes of the show, the success of Lexa as a character demonstrates an agency to her body and life that queer women deserve.

Lexa’s positive body imaginary is all stripped away from her in death. Because Lexa dies after finally consummating her relationship with Clarke, this agency is removed and she becomes a pawn for the male gaze. She is boiled down to tropes—“Bury Your Gays” and “Girl-On-Girl Is Hot”—in order to further the plot. Her body no longer belongs to her, but to the plot and fetishization.

Clarke’s body imaginary is also important, as Lexa’s pre-death body imaginary actually contrasts much of Clarke’s. Clarke feels intensely, and often solely, responsible for the welfare of the “Skypeople,” those who were sent to the Earth in the very first episode of the show, after becoming their accidental leader. In fact, “her people” became the sole reason she didn’t let herself be with Lexa, as the conflict between the Grounders and the Skypeople escalated quickly into a violent affair.

Because of this devotion her body does not belong to her, but to her people. In the same theme of survival, she is willing to put her life on the line for someone other than herself to the point of endangering herself. Yet she is alive, and Lexa is not. Clarke’s body imaginary in outliving Lexa encourages a narrative that donating one’s life and body to a larger cause is more worthy than reclaiming one’s body for selfish, personal advantages. This commodification of Clarke’s body keeps her alive. Clarke, too, is a multifaceted, interesting, powerful woman, but she is not allowed to experience emotions, especially selfishness, because this endangers her people. This is driven home by Lexa dying immediately after Clarke allowed herself to open up. Clarke now has to struggle with one more death caused by her own choices and becomes even more reluctant to being sensitive.

Let us now extend Lexa’s body imaginary, both pre- and post-death, into the realm of representation. As sociologists Marina Levina, Craig R. Waldo, and Louise F. Fitzgerald found,

the impact of media is not simply a matter of adding LGBT characters, but ensuring that those characters will be portrayed as unique, diverse, and multifaceted as straight characters, because positive visual media images of homosexuality can strongly affect the attitudes of the straight population (Levina 755). Therefore, the fact that Lexa exists is not enough. Whatever positive effects her body imaginary could have had were taken from her, just like her life. What will remain is the image of Lexa brutally shot and bleeding out on the bed she just shared with Clarke, stripped of her agency in one over-done plot device. “Bury Your Gays” and other tropes have become the defining narrative of queer women, and this only serves to further the hatred of LGBT people and the commodification of women that so often exists in our culture.

Because of the continued use of tropes, the state of queer women on TV is dismal. A statistical analysis of the information gathered by Autostraddle makes this apparent. According to Heather Hogan, only 11% of American scripted TV shows from 1976 to 2016 had lesbian or bisexual characters. Of those 11%, 84% had no happy endings for those characters, and 35% killed them off. There have been 18,000+ straight characters in the past 40 years. There have only been 383 lesbian or bisexual characters in the same time span, which makes them around 2% of the characters. And, as seen by Autostraddle’s list first mentioned in the introduction of this essay, 153 of those 383 were killed, a whopping 40%. Not to mention that of those 383 characters, 209 appear in less than 50% of the episodes of the show, and over half of those in every episode are only in plots related to their sexuality.

Rothenberg and other defenders of the decision to kill Lexa, including many fans, have argued that on *The 100*, anyone can die, so Lexa’s death is not out of place. While it is true that it is set in a world where death is common and unavoidable, certain characters have been immune to this. We’ve seen that the “Skypeople” survive against impeccable odds. Characters like Murphy, Raven, and Jasper were written off in earlier drafts of episodes, but all three remain alive and even play a role in the current plot.

Additionally, there should be a difference between an atmosphere of “anyone can die” that heightens the significance of survival, and randomly killing off characters for the shock value as has become the norm for *The 100* with the deaths of Lexa, Lincoln, Titus, Gina, and all the Nightbloods. Indeed, next to the dramatic numbers of dead queer characters, perhaps

it would be better to argue that *not* killing Lexa would have been more shocking a plot device. In an interview with *TVInsider's* Damien Holbrook, Rothenberg made it clear that the existing tropes had nothing to do with his decision to kill off Lexa (Holbrook). While this may be true, because these tropes exist and have been the foundation of so many of the storylines involving queer women, the impact overtakes intent.

VII. Conclusion: Bury Tropes, Not Us

In this essay, I have explored how the use of tropes as the defining narrative regarding queer women is problematic. Even if shows and showrunners introduce more queer characters to their casts, if they are not actively working to subvert tropes, they continue to uphold the same principles. Through the use of Ingrid Hellstrand's theory, "the body imaginary," I examined the bodies of Clarke and Lexa in the context of the show and of the discourse of agency in body politics, and what their agency or lack thereof means for representation.

My exploration of this topic has only scratched the surface, and I would like to see other scholarly voices add to the conversation I have started; intersectionality is vital to the field, and the intersection of body politics and representation has only begun to be explored. Additionally, Lexa is just the latest in a long list of similar offenses, yet her death has sparked a new frustration. What has changed in the societal and environmental circumstances that has allowed for the movement to gain momentum now? Would the deaths of Camilla from *Empire* or Denise from *The Walking Dead* alone have had the same effect? What made Lexa different?

In the end, however, we must learn from this as scholars and consumers of media. In the words of Jason Rothenberg himself, "no series, no episode of television, exists in a vacuum." As he writes in his open letter, "[a]s an audience, we bring with us our life experience, the events of the time, and the collective memory of all the stories we have been entertained by" (Rothenberg). Audiences of queer women, caught in a marginalization double blind, bring with them a desire to see more than the characters whom are like them dying for plot or shock value. And these women are getting somewhere, even if Lexa and countless others had to be written off to get there – after all, victory stands on the back of sacrifice. *The 100's* weekly viewership has dropped from 1.88 million to 1.15 million viewers

per week from the time of the premiere of season three to the latest episode (Porter), with the largest drop coming the week after “Thirteen” aired. And the outcry is making waves among popular media sources, including the Huffington Post, Variety, and BuzzFeed. It’s time for the academic community and consumers of media to take note of the revolution that is beginning to take place.

This is more than audiences being sad that their favorite character was killed. This is a larger movement that has finally gained enough momentum to leave the margins of conversation and stage a coup. Lexa has become their symbol, which is fitting; there is also an element of reclaiming Lexa from Rothenberg and others who have wronged her. I believe that just as Lexa sought to reclaim her body from a system that placed survival over agency, these audiences of queer women seek to reclaim their bodies from a system that only allows them to exist for sexualization, fetishization, or death.

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