Her Robot Girlfriend: Queer Death and Resurrection in Science Fiction TV

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Abstract

This dissertation aims to further the academic discussion of the Buy Your Gays trope, with a particular focus on exploring the impact of character resurrection on the execution of the trope. It will draw together the existing strands of critical theory and apply them to the case studies of *The 100, Person of Interest*, and the *Black Mirror* episode 'San Junipero'.

Chapter one will examine the response of popular culture media critics to the spike in queer character deaths in 2016, acting as a proxy for the audience's response to both the media situation in general and to each of the case study texts. Chapter two will explore how the queer character deaths played out in each case study, and how specific elements cause these deaths to be aligned with or distanced from the Bury Your Gays trope. Finally, chapter three will explore how the subsequent resurrection of these characters impacted the execution of the Bury Your Gays trope, arguing that resurrection can be used to subvert the trope, but that it is not guaranteed to do so.

By cross-comparing queer character death and resurrection in these three TV shows, it is possible to demonstrate that the Bury Your Gays trope has many constituent elements other than simply the occurrence of a death. These elements can be altered to lessen its impact and subvert the trope, but ultimately whether a show is considered to have subverted Bury Your Gays depends on how the audience interprets it.

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Thanks to all the fans of these, and other, queer TV shows. This dissertation is only the most recent addition to a body of work that grew out of the disaster that was 2016. I would not be here without the campaigning and awareness-raising that fans undertook during that time. May there be many more research projects — though not many more Bury Your Gays!

Finally. thanks and congratulations to the rest of the 2020 MFCO Honours cohort. Thank you for your support and camaraderie, both in class and outside of it (and, for those of you also in Davinia's class, for letting me try and explain the history of fandom in under three hours). Best of luck in all your future endeavours — I truly think that since we can all complete a dissertation during a global pandemic, there is nothing that can stop us.

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Introduction

Film and TV have had a fraught relationship with its queer[1] characters throughout their history. Regulatory bodies have sometimes banned any queer representation; an example is how the restrictions in the 1930's Hollywood Motion Picture Production Code on "sex perversion" were interpreted to include queer characters (Noriega, 1990). Even after such regulations were eased or lifted, queer representation often had a homophobic and tragic bent due to societal attitudes. Gay film historian Vito Russo (1995) describes the state of gay representation in film after the Code's abandonment in 1962:

> "Overt, active or predatory gays — including some particularly nasty sissies who would have been harmless thirty years before — were killed off. The repressed, tormented types usually committed suicide, and scattered cases were "cured" by sufficient attention from the opposite sex. [...] Survival was an option only for nonthreatening characters, and almost all homosexuals threatened the heterosexual status quo by their very existence." (111)

Queer people have faced a struggle to be depicted in film and TV at all, and a struggle against policies and societal homophobia that leads to these depictions drawing on anti-gay stereotypes. One common narrative device — sometimes called a "trope" — is the death of a queer character, often not long after they enter a queer relationship.

[1] This dissertation uses "queer" as an umbrella term to refer to characters of any gender who are not heterosexual. I acknowledge that it is not the preferred term for every member of the LGBT+ community and has a traumatic history for some people. However, it is a succinct way of referring collectively to both lesbian and bisexual characters without erasing either of those identities (as would happen by referring to bisexual characters as lesbians, for example), as well as characters who are attracted to the same gender but do not use a specific identity label in the text. It is a long-accepted umbrella term in academia.

This trope was first named by fans, rather than academia, with the creation of the page "Bury Your Gays" on the fan-edited pop-culture wiki (encyclopaedia) TV Tropes (n.d.). The earliest recorded edits to the page suggest that the term was coined in or around August 2010. It took until 2016 for the name to gain wide usage, and the boom in both fan and scholarly discussions of the trope can be credited to a crisis in queer representation in TV that started in March 2016 and carried on into 2017. The inciting incident was the death of Lexa in teen post-apocalyptic drama *The 100*; as will be discussed in this dissertation, her death was strongly in alignment with the Bury Your Gays trope, and fans were outraged.

However, this was not the end of the matter; the months after Lexa's death saw a rapid string of queer female characters getting killed, in an event that some critics dubbed the "spring slaughter" (Ellis, 2016). By the end of the 2016 calendar year the death rate of queer female characters had spiked to 13% from its baseline average of 3.5% annually (Anastasi 2018) — a death rate of approximately one in eight queer female TV characters[2]. Queer men did not have a higher death rate than their usual average. This spike in the death rate is clearly an outlier or fluke, but it nonetheless had a serious impact on queer audiences and scholars — one outcome of which was bringing critical attention to the Bury Your Gays trope. The speed of this turn is reflected in the body of scholarly work about the trope; several students pivoted their Bachelor's thesis topics to the issue of queer media representation, and another researcher managed to capture the fan outcry about Lexa's death in *The 100* directly as it happened on social media. Research focussing this period, including this dissertation, examines on how Bury Your Gays impacts queer women

[2] Some studies (Bartley (2016), Deshler (2016), Bridges (2018), and potentially others) have found higher death rates, but these have suffered from methodological issues that cause overestimates. This usually arises from taking the deaths of all queer characters globally and comparing them to representation statistics collected by GLAAD, who only measure American TV. For more discussion of statistical methods, see Anastasi (2018).

— the trope can also apply to queer men in fiction, but that issue is outside the scope of this project.

Academic and fan discussion of the Bury Your Gays trope strongly indicates that there is more to the trope than just a queer character dying. These subtleties will be expanded upon in the literature review and first chapter, but the most important auxiliary element of the trope is that the death breaks up a budding queer relationship between two characters. This dissertation will act as an examination of how the Bury Your Gays trope works in each of three similar cases: Lexa's death in *The 100*, Root's death in *Person of Interest*, and the deaths of Kelly and Yorkie in the *Black Mirror* episode 'San Junipero'. All of these deaths occurred 2016 calendar year, and each show's plot follows the same broad strokes: at least one queer character dies, not long after her queer relationship is confirmed on-screen, and she is later resurrected through the power of artificial intelligence (AI). These resurrections pose serious challenges to the Bury Your Gays trope, as they provide a way to fix the problems that the character's death creates. In these cases, there is potential for the Bury Your Gays trope to be subverted both when the death happens and after it happens — though potential does not necessarily mean that this will be the case, of course.

Literature Review

0.1 History & Theory of the Bury Your Gays Trope

The Bury Your Gays trope has its historical roots in the censorship of queer representation in film and TV. Elizabeth Bridges (2018) outlines the history of the trope first through the medicalisation of homosexuality, then the implementation of the 1930's Motion Picture Production Code (also referred to as the Hays Code), and lastly through its evolution after the Hays Code was lifted. She draws on Vito Russo's discussion of how the deaths of queer film characters in the 1960's was a response to the loosening of production codes; while queer characters were allowed to be depicted, their representation was heavily influenced by pathologising medical and social discourses. A key result of this was that queer characters were often killed as punishment for their perversion. More recently, direct representation of queer characters has become more common. The Bury Your Gays trope has, according to Bridges, been taken up by media producers as a way of baiting queer audiences into viewership without following through on the delivery of a full queer relationship. This move allows them to reap the benefits of the queer audience, who are often looking for any representation at all, without committing enough that it would alienate the (perceived to be) homophobic straight audience.

Haley Hulan (2017) also looks at the history of the trope, but uses a different historical continuity to Bridges. Hulan tracks the use of the Bury Your Gays trope from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and early lesbian pulp fiction, through stage musicals such as *RENT*, to its eventual deployment on TV shows such as *The 100*. She contends that Bury Your Gays originated as a way of protecting queer creators from the legal ramifications of depicting queer characters, and,

when used by queer creators, as a way of portraying the real dangers of queer life (e.g. the looming spectre of AIDS in *RENT*). However, the trope has also been taken up by straight creators as a way of spectacularising queer relationships at the expense of the queer audience. One example of this exploitation of queer representation is to kill queer characters during key weeks in the TV season, in order to use the shock to boost viewership ratings. This practice is not necessarily a direct continuation of censorship like the Hays Code, but it has similar effects for the queer community; the spectacularisation of queer death, and the disposability of queer characters that it demands, end up invoking similar discourses as historic instances of the trope.

In her 2016 article, Meredith Bartley argues that Bury Your Gays works to deny the bodily autonomy of queer women. She links the concept of body politics to media representation of queer women, as these were both conversations happening separately in academia at the time that had not yet crossed paths. Drawing on Judith Butler, Bartley discusses how we interact with the public sphere through the body — since the body is a discursive object as well as a physical one — and therefore issues of representation can become issues of the (queer woman's) body itself. *The 100* becomes a site of struggle over queer women's bodily autonomy. Going into its third season, the series had a reputation for independent and powerful female characters; however, the use of the Bury Your Gays trope was an attack that inverted these discourses about queer women's bodily autonomy, once again putting the bodies of queer women under threat.

Casja Löf (2016) surveys the general field of queer media tropes in her Bachelor's thesis, including Bury Your Gays, and emphasises how it works to break up a relationship. She includes two instances of characters being shot — *The 100* and *Orphan Black* — as well as one

"metaphorical" instance of Bury Your Gays from a breakup in *Gray's Anatomy*. What is most interesting about this approach is the explicit separation between "Dead Lesbian" (a gay character dying at all) and Bury Your Gays. The latter trope is considered to require a breakup in order to be activated, rather than simply being any instance of a gay character dying. Löf also links Bury Your Gays to the threat of perversion and tropes such as the "Deviant Bisexual", where the death in Bury Your Gays serves the secondary function of punishing bisexual characters for their alleged moral corruption (notably Delphine in *Orphan Black*).

Writing about the 2017 TV adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* in her Bachelor's thesis, Floor Klein Hesselink (2019) takes a similar line to Löf, arguing that Bury Your Gays is also a matter of screen time, representation, and character treatment rather than strictly about character death. She argues that the increased number of queer characters in the TV adaptation is a key factor in why its queer representation can be seen as worse than the original novel. The first season had three queer characters, which ought to be good for queer representation, but they were all treated badly; this invokes homophobic aggression much more strongly than the original novel, where there was only one queer character whose ill-treatment blended in with the rest of the dystopia. This is not to say that queer characters should always be safe in a dystopia, of course, but the show's incessant use of the Bury Your Gays trope creates disproportionate hardship for its gay characters compared to its straight characters, to no good effect. She also points out that *The Handmaid's Tale* post-dates the discussion about Bury Your Gays started by the events of 2016; this therefore raises questions about whether the producers could be expected to be aware of the trope, and are therefore more culpable for its use, than producers of texts from before the 2016 outcry.

0.2 Subversion

Some scholars have already begun to explore the ways in which the Bury Your Gays trope can be subverted. Eleanor Drage (2018) offers an Afrofuturist, queer utopian analysis of *Black Mirror*'s 'San Junipero', explaining how the virtual reality (VR) elements of the narrative are integral to its happy ending and to subverting the effects of the queer characters' deaths. Drage argues that the VR town of San Junipero is a Foucauldian heterotopia, a space between the real and the virtual that is outside of conventional, linear time. This heterotopia allows the characters to reimagine the past, and in doing so live the queer lives that they were denied in the real world. Yorkie is given the chance to fall in love with a woman in a beachside party town, rather than being paralysed by injury from a car crash, and Kelly had the chance to have a lifelong relationship with a woman rather than a man — enabling her bisexuality without compromising her apparent commitment to monogamy. 'San Junipero' counters techno-sceptical arguments that VR is a limitation on human experience by highlighting the ways in which real-world oppression also limits experience, and showing how VR can be used to broaden our ways of being.

This analysis is echoed in Daniel Oudekerk's 2018 Bachelor's thesis "Dig Out Your Gays", which examines how the Bury Your Gays trope is subverted in the novels *Song of Achilles* and *More Than This*. Though he does not mobilise queer theory in the way that Drage does, Oudekerk comes to similar conclusions; he points to the reunion of Patroclus and Achilles in the underworld at the end of *Song of Achilles* as a key aspect of how the Bury Your Gays trope is subverted by the text. Much like 'San Junipero', this subversion relies on there being a space after death, unbounded by linear real-world time, in which the characters are able to reunite. However, this is troubled by the reunion occurring only after death, as it means that queer people

are still denied the possibility of being happy in life. Oudekerk also argues that *More Than This* subverts the Bury Your Gays trope more deeply, via the queer viewpoint character's multiple deaths and resurrections (aided by the science fiction setting) within the book. Similarly, these deaths explicitly have nothing to do with the lead character's queer identity; the focus of *More Than This* is the protagonist's childhood trauma, and it is that which drives him to multiple attempts at suicide. *More Than This* not only avoids permanently killing the major queer character, and therefore the Bury Your Gays trope, but manages to make death a form of character growth rather than a homophobic punishment.

0.3 Fan Responses

The response by fans of *The 100* to the use of Bury Your Gays provided an exciting new case study of fan behaviour, especially the ways in which fandom meshes with politics and activism. Much of the response occurred on social media, which also provided material to researchers investigating specific platforms (primarily Twitter and Tumblr). Erin Wagonner (2018) captured the response of *The 100* fans to Lexa's death as it happened, since her project was already studying the community when it occurred. She focusses on how the community responded to the crisis through communitarian ethics, such as the manifestation of a duty to look after each other through raising money for an LGBT+ suicide hotline and the sharing of mental health resources across fan social media. The move by fans to pressure the CW TV network, including getting advertisers to remove their advertisements from the show, can also be seen as a demonstration of communitarian ethics in that it is a rebellion against oppressive forces in TV by fans. Coordination among fans to boycott the next episode of *The 100* after Lexa's death, 'Terms and Conditions', caused the show to receive its lowest viewership ratings since it began, though the effect was not sustained enough to cause the show to be cancelled.

This same rebellion is examined by Annemarie Navar-Gill and Mel Stanfill (2018) through a retrospective analysis of the LGBT Fans Deserve Better Twitter campaign, and some other related hashtags. This project gathered tweets from some of the hashtags, though the lag on project initiation meant that it failed to capture the first three months of the campaign. Their conclusions were more ambivalent than Wagonner's. They noted the success of LGBT Fans Deserve Better, and in particular how savvy fans were to TV industry discourses. This shows that fandoms are not only capable of being political, but of tailoring their activism to the target. However, they also noted a significant disparity between the effort and energy given to the campaign around Lexa's death compared to that given to the death of Black queer characters such as Poussey in *Orange Is The New Black*.

Some aspects of this fan rebellion, particularly the anger directed at TV producers, have been decried as "toxic", but Kelsey Cameron (2018) argues that this toxicity is an effect of the homophobic history of media production rather than modern fans being particularly entitled. Cameron connects the anger at Lexa's death to both the general lack of queer representation in TV and to the historical 1951 Code of Practices for Broadcasting, which mandated the death or punishment of queer characters (similar to the aforementioned Hays Code for film). The anger of queer fans at a character's death is therefore not just an individual psychological phenomenon; it is inextricably bound to a media environment where queer identity is already tied to violence and death. The subsequent wave of queer character deaths in 2016 — all, apparently, independently decided by the shows' writers — would go on to highlight this in a grim fashion. Cameron argues that the fan anger directed at a given producer is not just about the death they were responsible for (though it is partly about that), but at the systematic patterns of poor

representation that underpin the industry to this day. Alongside this, there is greater interaction between producers and the fandom as a result of social media, and fans are cognisant of how these interactions are part of the field of production. The producers of *The 100,* for example, went out of their way to endorse and promote the relationship between Clarke and Lexa. In light of the series' use of Bury Your Gays these social media posts were recontextualised by fans as a cynical ploy, designed to bait the queer audience into emotional investment the producers knew would not be fulfilled, and became another focus of fans' anger at homophobic media production strategies. Finally, Cameron suggests that the Bury Your Gays trope functions to limit queer existence in TV, prematurely ending queer narratives and working as a "containment strategy for difference." (11)

Kira Deshler (2017) focusses her Bachelor's thesis on how *The 100* is as an example of a media text that helps form a "queer girl subjectivity" among its fans, and then explores how that subjectivity is deployed in discourses about representation. She points to the history of queer representation as a key driver of the outcry regarding Lexa's death; the particular subjectivity mobilised in the backlash against *The 100* is informed by an extensive history of other queer women's deaths in TV and film. Similar to Bartley, though taking the analysis via fan studies theorists such as Henry Jenkins rather than via body politics, Deshler argues that fan engagement with media crosses the boundaries between the real and fictional. This consequently means that the stakes of fictional queer representation are higher for queer fans, and the Bury Your Gays trope has an outsized impact on these fans compared to an audience that does not have this "queer girl subjectivity". Social media aids the transmission of affect regarding this subjectivity — for example, through the public performance of grief over queer character deaths, which

transgress societal expectations of what kinds of bodies can be grieved in public. The social media environment was also crucial to the development of the political activism that the crisis generated; fan spaces became political staging grounds where fans were able to transmit not just affects such as grief, but to help each other build understanding of the politics underlying the Bury Your Gays. Fans were quick to organise their existing communities, united by "queer girl subjectivity"), using Tumblr to coordinate their Twitter campaigns — understanding that the latter was the part of the social media ecosystem that reviewers and producers were most likely to take notice of. These processes allowed queer fans to connect the real, fictional, personal, and political in order to shift the balance of power between producers and the audience.

Chapter 1: Reviewer Responses

It would have been ideal to interview fans directly about their opinions, but the COVID-19 pandemic made this impossible. As such, I decided to examine magazine articles, opinion pieces, and blogs that were written by pop-culture critics around the time that these episodes were airing, taking their statements as a proxy for the views of the audience. Obviously, this is not a perfect approach — these reviewers may not be queer women, therefore lacking analysis from that specific standpoint, and they are professional media critics rather than lay people. To keep the project manageable, the search was date-limited to 01/01/2016-01/01/2017 for articles on *The 100* and *Person of Interest*, and 01/10/2016-01/10/2017 for articles on 'San Junipero' (the latter necessitated a slightly different time boundary as it aired too close to the end of the original time period). Authors of these works will henceforth be referred to as "reviewers". The large volume of information found for this chapter means that some of the articles I read are not directly cited in this section, with citations instead focussing on clear examples of the point being discussed; a full list is attached as an appendix.

Searching for "bury your gays" collected 33 relevant articles in the first five pages of Google results. Many of them focussed on *The 100*, but there was a broad range of TV shows mentioned and discussed. This search is intended to examine how the public, mediated through reviewers, understands the Bury Your Gays trope, since this may differ from how it is understood in academia. It is also useful to capture information about TV shows other than the case studies used in this project, as other instances of Bury Your Gays may have impacted how reviewers reacted to these case studies — particularly 'San Junipero', which aired late in the year. I also searched for articles on *The 100* (search terms "The 100" "lexa") and *Person of Interest* (three

searches: (“person of interest” “bury your gays”), (“person of interest” “root”), and (“person of interest” “root” “death”) to try and eliminate off-topic finale recaps) over the same time period, as well as the later articles on ‘San Junipero’ (“black mirror” “san junipero”).

1.1 Bury Your Gays

The first key theme to emerge from reviews containing the phrase “bury your gays” was that the Bury Your Gays trope is rooted in a history of homophobia and censorship. Reviewers cited regulations such as the Hays Code (McConnaughy, 2016) as reasons why, historically, gay characters were always killed off in fiction; this history is thought to have created a pattern which persists even in the absence of strict production codes. Many reviews focussed on the various reasons that queer death is not directly equivalent to straight death, i.e. why the idea that “anyone can die” is not equitable in practise (Vincenty, 2016). One suggested reason is that there is a low rate of representation for queer characters compared to straight ones; as such, a queer character getting killed off takes them from a much smaller pool of characters, and therefore has a much stronger effect on queer representation than a straight death would on straight representation (Snarker, 2016). Similarly, reviewers argued that queer characters have a disproportionately high death rate compared to straight characters, often calling back to the aforementioned history of censorship. This argument is supported by quantitative data. Queer female characters were 10% of all deaths in the 2015-16 TV season (Framke, Zarracina , & Frostenson , 2016), while such characters made up only 2% of the TV population overall (GLAAD, 2016) — put simply, queer female characters were killed at five times the rate one would expect if “anyone can die”. It is easy for these two effects to compound each other; when rates of queer representation are already low, any disproportionality in death rate becomes amplified by this original scarcity. This disproportionality is thought by some (Lang, 2016) to be

a function of the role queer characters play in media, specifically that they are secondary characters whose only purpose is their orientation. When such characters finally get into a relationship, this is the end of their character arc; with no other characteristics left to develop, it is easy to justify killing them for the sake of drama.

Reviewers placed a great deal of importance on the existence of queer representation in TV and viewed removal of that representation as consequently very damaging. Some spoke of the specific, personal need to see their own identities represented in the media and the resulting emotional impact of seeing queer characters getting killed off over and over (Dennis, 2016). These personal accounts described how this pattern of seeing queer characters killed off fostered the sense that queer lives can never be happy (Sargent, 2016) — an experience that aligns with academic understandings of the harms caused by the Bury Your Gays trope. Generalising the importance of representation from the personal to the political, other reviewers claimed that queer media representation improves public opinion of queer people, such as claiming a correlation between LGBT+ representation in TV and public support for gay marriage (Hogan, 2016). It is worth noting that this is a view supported by academic research. For example, it has been found that some audience members credit TV shows produced by Shonda Rhimes, such as *How To Get Away With Murder*, with helping them understand the Black Lives Matter movement (Banks, 2018). Even when the claims about representation are not this direct (and potentially impossible to prove), there is a theme in reviewer discussions of representation that the presence of queer characters is a social good — for example, that the presence of queer characters will normalise the presence of real queer people in the viewer's mind — and that killing them off is a social harm (Logan, 2016a).

A few reviewers put forward defences of why certain shows were not instances of the Bury Your Gays trope. *Black Mirror* is unsurprisingly mentioned, though the reviewer (Reich, 2016) is ambivalent about whether it really subverts Bury Your Gays; they point out that Yorkie becomes disabled while fleeing from her homophobic family, which is easily read as punishment for her identity. However, other reviewers (Donald, 2016) do believe it to be a subversion through bypassing the "trap" of their relationship breaking up. This will be explored in more depth later in this chapter. Another show defended from allegations of using the Bury Your Gays trope was *Orange is the New Black*. Kathryn VanArendonk (2016) discusses how the show avoided falling into the patterns of the trope despite killing a prominent Black lesbian character by making the death meaningful within the show — i.e. that it was for a greater purpose than a cheap ratings bump. She also discusses how Poussey's identity as a Black lesbian is central to the themes that her death raises within the show, and that the show does not immediately move on from the death as in most cases of Bury Your Gays:

> "Her loss dominates the season's final episode, creeping into every corner of the prison's highly segregated communities, blasting a crater into MCC's careless corporate mindset, and taking over the episode's beautiful, surrealist flashbacks. To echo her closest friends at Litchfield, the final episode essentially forces *OITNB*'s audience to sit shiva for her, remembering her past and reflecting on her life.
>
> Most movingly, and most significantly for the future of the series, the prison erupts into violence as a response to her loss. But it's vital to remember that the riots don't take place in immediate reaction to her death. Litchfield rises up when MCC tries to write a version of events that erases Poussey completely."

Finally, and surprisingly, the last show defended as not using the Bury Your Gays trope was *The 100* itself. Janey Tracey (2016) takes a similar perspective to VanArendonk, arguing that *The 100* is otherwise progressive and that Lexa's death works within the show's themes of danger and sacrifice. She points to the general lack of queer representation, and the priming effect from deaths on other shows, as being greater drivers of the fandom's response than the specifics of the

death itself. This is questionable — the description of the audience's response does not reflect the insights gained from academic study of the fandom — but it does demonstrate how the same moment in media can be read in opposing ways by different audience members, an ongoing theme I will be returning to throughout my dissertation.

1.2 The 100

Reviewer opinions of *The 100* were split on whether the plot twist of Lexa's death was thematically appropriate, and then split again on whether this absolves the show of committing Bury Your Gays. Some were of the opinion that the death was a waste, unfitting for such a heroic character; they felt that Lexa deserved a better death than accidentally walking into a bullet meant for Clarke (Roffman, 2016). Similarly, others found the death of a strong queer female character to be jarring in light of the show's generally progressive treatment of gay and female characters (Murphy, 2016). For these reviewers, there is nothing to redeem the death scene, and therefore nothing to prevent the show from having fallen into the use of the Bury Your Gays trope. However, as demonstrated above, this is not the only interpretation that reviewers had of Lexa's death. Some reviewers (Johnston, 2016) believed that the plot twist worked well to unify the disparate story strands — the subplots of the mysterious AI and the brewing civil war — and therefore Lexa's death was not a pointless waste. The question then becomes: if Lexa's death is thematically appropriate and not wasteful, does it count as Bury Your Gays? Opinions vary. After all, one element of the Bury Your Gays trope is that a queer character dies in order to further the plot or give motivation to a straight character; in the case of *The 100* the primary character affected is Clarke, who is also queer, and Lexa's death unifies a previously fragmented plot. Some reviewers consequently feel that *The 100* has not used the Bury Your Gays trope in this instance, or that it is forgivable if they have. Caroline Framke (2016) acknowledges the hurt

that queer audience members feel, but argues that Lexa's death was not related to the fact that she was a queer woman, and therefore that it plays a different role in the narrative than most uses of Bury Your Gays. Similarly, *Variety* magazine's Maureen Ryan (2016a) believes that there was no other reasonable way to tie up Lexa's storyline, given the forces at play on the production end, and while the death is painful it "did not cross that line for me; it walked right up to it." It would therefore be prudent for us to keep in mind that even in what appears to be a clear-cut instance of Bury Your Gays, there is room for a wide range of reactions and interpretations.

A number of reviewers criticised the way that the death came immediately after a sex scene (Goldman, 2016) (Roth, 2016). This appears to be a key element in why it was offensive and upsetting; even reviewers who believed that the plot twist was otherwise necessary and well executed were critical of the move. One such critic, Maureen Ryan, blamed the show's excessively fast pacing, arguing that the absurd compression of the plot caused the two elements to end up juxtaposed when they should not have been. However, this is ultimately a production-focussed explanation for a narrative decision; such explanations often overlook the emotional impact of the decision, writing it off as sad but unavoidable, which in turn works to delegitimise critique of the narrative in general.

Representation was a recurring concern for reviewers. Many pointed to the fact that Lexa was a strongly developed character, who was more than just her sexuality, as a reason that *The 100*'s use of Bury Your Gays was particularly egregious (Ryan, 2016b). Some discussed their personal histories with trying to find queer representation, and how Lexa seemed to have fulfilled this need only to be taken away again (Thomas, 2016). Others argued that queer representation like

Lexa is important for moving the needle on social issues like queer acceptance, and the destruction of such representation is particularly heinous (Logan, 2016b). When media representation is so important — with one reviewer claiming that "[f]or many viewers, it *does* reflect real-life" (Choi, 2016) (emphasis in original) — the pain of losing good queer representation is both personal and political. However, *The Mary Sue*'s Teresa Jusino (2016) questions this dominant narrative. Why is there so much focus on the removal of strongly developed queer representation via Lexa's death, when Clarke — a main character, as opposed to Lexa being a secondary character— is also a strong queer woman? She argues that there is a belief among fans that bisexual characters are more common than lesbian ones (which is incorrect, according to statistics she cites from GLAAD) and that bisexual representation is viewed as suspicious due to the character's potential to end up in an opposite-gender relationship. Further, Jusino points out that Bury Your Gays is also referred to as "Dead Lesbian Syndrome" despite it also affecting bisexual characters (and, I would also add, men). These are similar concerns to those arising from Navar-Gill and Stanfill's analysis of the fans' social media protests, which showed a significant drop in support for protest hashtags about the deaths of Black queer characters compared to Lexa, a white character. With both of these in mind, it is reasonable to be concerned that fan protests for "good representation" will not extend to these groups when they ought to, resulting in the further marginalisation of bisexual and Black media representation.

1.3 Person of Interest

Analysis of *Person of Interest* was very thin compared to the other two shows. Even with three different searches, only 14 articles turned up that discussed Root's death in any kind of detail, compared to 28 for *The 100* and 25 for 'San Junipero'. A greater proportion of these articles

were actor and director interviews than for other shows, and these articles do not give any useful information about the audience's interpretation of the death.

Some reviews only mentioned *Person of Interest* in passing, characterising Root's death only in relation to what happened in *The 100* earlier in the year (Cox, 2016) (Cloudnoodle, 2016). These reviews framed the death as another stray bullet kill, unfitting of such a complex and heroic queer character, and that the only purpose is to further the plot of a straight character. Even for reviewers who accepted that Root was likely to die, the circumstances were in alignment with the Bury Your Gays trope enough for the death to be hurtful — particularly in a TV landscape with dwindling rates of queer representation (Rae, 2016). However, other reviewers interpreted Root's death differently. As with *The 100*, there were reviewers who believed that the death did not fall into the Bury Your Gays trope, either because it fit well with the show's themes or because it was missing key elements that the trope uses. These reviewers pointed to how Root's long-established loyalty to the protagonist's AI, referred to as "The Machine", acted as an antidote to her death. They argue that the integration of her voice and personality into the AI is more of an evolution or apotheosis than an ending, and that it is a fitting conclusion to her character arc that does not hinge on her sexuality (Surette, 2016) (Ferguson, 2016). This is the argument put forward by the actors and directors in their interviews; producer Jonah Nolan and director Greg Plageman told the media that Root's integration into The Machine was set up as far back as her introduction into the show, in which her goal was to free the AI from its government shackles (Mitovich, 2016). Reviewers also position Root's death as more agentic and deliberately sacrificial than reviewers who consider it to strictly be an example of Bury Your Gays — for example, Kenny Ukpona (2016) frames it as her deciding to take a bullet for her friend, rather

than it being a stray shot she stumbled into. The idea that "anyone can die" also seems to be more accepted by reviewers of *Person of Interest* than *The 100*, possibly due to the deaths of other prominent straight characters (a secondary character in the same episode as Root, and a straight lead character would go on to die in the series finale).

1.4 Black Mirror

As discussed earlier, 'San Junipero' was widely considered to have subverted the Bury Your Gays trope. A minority of reviewers said that the show did not use the Bury Your Gays trope (Crenshaw, 2017), but failed to explain why. Reviewers who believed it was an instance of Bury Your Gays were not in denial about the deaths of the main characters; some even mentioned that these deaths were worrying and resembled the trope, until the resolution of the episode subverted their expectations (Johnson, n.d.). The difference is small, but interesting, compared to the arguments that a show (such as *Orange is the New Black*) did not use the Bury Your Gays trope. Instead of arguing why certain elements transmuted an episode from Bury Your Gays to not, reviewers of 'San Junipero' instead interpreted the conclusion of the narrative as a way of undoing the harm of the Bury Your Gays trope; it is not that the worry or harm never happened, but rather that there is something about the episode that made it okay in the end. Part of this is obviously that it gave a gay couple a happy ending in what had been a terrible year for queer characters in TV (Strapagiel, 2016), but the reception of 'San Junipero' was also influenced by the broader political conditions. Teo Bugbee (2016) was originally somewhat frustrated with the episode, particularly the way that marriage was part of the conditions for happiness in the queer afterlife. However, the election of President Trump less than a month after the episode aired turned it into an emotional lifeline in a turbulent and homophobic world, despite its flaws.

The key to the subversion of the Bury Your Gays trope appears to be that Kelly and Yorkie stayed together in the simulated heaven of San Junipero. Part of the conflict late in the episode is the revelation that Kelly had never intended to be permanently uploaded to San Junipero, since her deceased husband never got the chance; there was therefore the very real possibility that the couple would not get to be together after death (Butler, 2016). Reviewers pointed to the happy ending — the pair are allowed to continue being together in AI heaven for as long as they wish — as the key reason that the use of Bury Your Gays was not socially harmful or personally upsetting in 'San Junipero' (Sheets, 2016). This is the aforementioned 'trap' that *Black Mirror* avoids; the underlying threat of the characters' deaths does not come to pass. Another part of this sidestep is that the afterlife is known to exist in advance. The only uncertainty about whether the couple are going to remain together is generated by Kelly's wavering on whether to pass over to San Junipero or die permanently; as such, reviewers found that the presence of death was less bothersome than in other instances of Bury Your Gays, because its subversion was signalled before the deaths were even on the table.

Another important aspect of 'San Junipero's subversion is the characters' ability to live in a homophobia-free analogue of the 1980's, or whichever time period they choose (Bedi, 2016) (Welch, 2017). This was also discussed in academia, but it is important that it is also recognised by reviewers who may not be as strongly familiar with the queer theory used in academic analysis, since it shows that this element translates well to the understanding of the average viewer. Kelly and Yorkie's reunion is not marred by the homophobia of the actual time period; there is no gritty drag back to the reality of the 1980's to bring the hopeful tone back down. Similarly, this lack of homophobia gives the characters the chance to live the kinds of lives that

were denied to them the first time around. For example, Kelly's bisexuality can be realised without sacrificing her (apparent) monogamy; this time she can marry a woman in the 1980's, rather than the man she did the first time. In the words of reviewer Laura Tisdall (2017), "because of San Junipero, she can have a second life as a young woman, in love with another young woman. She can be 'normal' and 'transgressive' at the same time. She can have it all, but only after she's dead." The AI heaven of 'San Junipero' is queer and transformative in ways that help to subvert the Bury Your Gays trope.

1.5 Conclusions

Reviewer opinions on the Bury Your Gays trope, and each of the shows selected for this dissertation, show a sophisticated understanding of how the trope works in TV. *The 100* was thoroughly criticised for its use of the Bury Your Gays trope, with a number of key elements named by reviewers as contributing to the upset and harm. First is the proximity of the death to the couple's sex scene, with the murder happening right after it; many reviewers felt that this was a nasty juxtaposition, that the couple had no time to enjoy being in a happy relationship, and that it cheapened the death and gave it an air of being for "shock value". The second line of criticism was that the death was unfitting for Lexa's character. Being shot by accident was seen as being unheroic, unagentic, and not befitting a character of her status within the narrative. Reviews of other shows, such as *Orange Is The New Black*, suggest that a thematically fitting death may be spared the label of Bury Your Gays; however, all but one of the reviewers sampled here did not agree that *The 100* achieved this. The last major charge is on a discursive level beyond the text itself. Reviewers argued that Lexa was such good representation (i.e. a queer character with more depth than her orientation, a powerful woman, etc) that her death was problematic on a social level; her death both removed representation that might help straight viewers see queer people as

three-dimensional rather than caricatures, and struck a blow to the queer viewers who identified strongly with the character. This strong reaction, and equally strong analysis, paints a clear picture of why audiences were so badly affected by *The 100*. In turn, this gives this project a clear benchmark for what the Bury Your Gays trope is, the exact elements of it that are bad, and a show that failed to recover despite resurrecting the dead character.

Discussions of *Person of Interest* were fewer and less in-depth. The show was often mentioned as an example of Bury Your Gays with little discussion as to why. As mentioned, several of the reviews were simply interviews with the cast or directors. While these are illuminating in their own right, they are not a good overview of what the audience thought of the queer death in the show. What discussion was offered linked *Person of Interest* very strongly to *The 100*; while highlighting the similarities is fair, the differences between the shows were not given much time in the press — something that this dissertation may help rectify, albeit in a different sphere.

Finally, though reviewers were positive about 'San Junipero' and its place in popular discourse, they did not necessarily think that this was because it avoided the Bury Your Gays trope. Instead, they gestured to the same concepts as were used by academics who research subversion of the trope: the characters' death was less harsh because there was an established afterlife, that this afterlife gave them a chance at a homophobia-free life they had been denied, and death brought their relationship together rather than breaking it apart. This bodes well for this dissertation in a number of ways. First, it is clear that audiences responded very differently to *The 100* and 'San Junipero', which lends credibility to claims that the differences between these texts are socially important. Second, it shows that there are ways around and through the Bury Your Gays trope; it

is possible, particularly within the Science Fiction and Fantasy genres, to use resurrection or the afterlife as a way of undoing the harmful and upsetting elements of the trope — at least enough for it to be appreciated by the audience.

Chapter 2: Death

The Bury Your Gays trope is clearly more than just a death — it has many secondary elements that intensify the tragedy and upset it causes. Consequently, this chapter focusses on the question of whether it is possible to subvert the trope even before the character is resurrected. Avoiding the trope entirely is unlikely — not even ‘San Junipero’ was thought to have done so, by most reviewers — but subversion is a different process; it depends on setting up the trope and then changing key elements, thereby altering the execution and result.

2.1 The 100

Lexa’s death in *The 100* matches every expected element of the Bury Your Gays trope. The death scene follows immediately after a sex scene and the confirmation of their relationship. There are only a couple of minutes between Lexa falling into bed with Clarke and her death by a stray bullet, and their relationship is over almost as soon as it began (half a season of romantic pining notwithstanding). She is not the intended victim of the attack and does not even throw herself in front of her girlfriend to take the bullet; she is shot as she steps into the room to investigate the commotion, dying by sheer, unheroic accident. *The 100* manages to lean even further into the Bury Your Gays trope by having the killer — Titus, Lexa’s adviser and father figure — announce to Clarke that he is specifically trying to kill her in order to break up their relationship. Although he kills the wrong person, he succeeds in his goal and fulfils the central purpose of the trope. As if to compound the injury, the death scene is dragged out, with Clarke — previously established as a quick-thinking medic — watching Lexa bleed to death and helpless to prevent it. The Bury Your Gays trope obliterates anything that stands in its way, including the characterisation of one of the protagonists.

Destruction of the relationship is foregrounded in *The 100* to a very strong degree. Not only is it a core aspect of the Bury Your Gays trope in general, but it is included directly in the text; it is the explicit goal of her killer, even if he murders the wrong person. This serves to close down possible alternate interpretations of the scene, including ones that could reduce the shock and impact of the death, since there is very little leeway given by the text to create other readings of its meaning. The immediate death of one of the pair creates a sense of whiplash and instability, undercutting the joy of them finally getting together with the tragedy of death and the end of the relationship. At the broader level of discourse this plays on an existing association between joy and tragedy for queer characters, since it is very rare for queer characters to get happy endings unmarred by tragedy. This is particularly emphasised by the way the death scene drags on in the episode; Lexa's death takes so long that there is even a cut away to a short secondary-plot scene before the episode cuts back to complete it. *The 100* wallows in the tragedy of Lexa's death in a way that may have been meant to be moving, but can easily be seen as exploitative.

The 100 is most useful as the yardstick by which to consider other instances of queer death, since it shows that the trope can work at both explicit and sub-textual levels. Comparing other examples to how the trope played out in *The 100* makes it easier to tell whether a text is using the trope textually, sub-textually, or fully subverting it. It also serves to explain the outrage from reviewers and fans over the episode 'Thirteen' in particular, since reviewers made note of all of these various elements in their discussions of why they were upset by it.

2.2 Person of Interest

Root's death in *Person of Interest* aligns with many of the elements of the Bury Your Gays trope, though not as strongly as *The 100*. Root and Shaw's lengthy and mostly sub-textual courtship is

interrupted by Shaw's self-sacrifice in the middle of the fourth season, allowing herself to be kidnapped by the villains (minions of the malevolent artificial intelligence Samaritan). Root finally reunites with her in 'Sotto Voce', the ninth episode of season five, after Shaw escapes her imprisonment. In the very next episode, Root both confesses her love to Shaw and is killed. The confession is accompanied by hand-holding rather than sex, but this is largely due to the characterisations involved — Shaw describes herself as uninterested in long-term romance (as exemplified by dialogue in 'Lady Killer'), so her acceptance of a small romantic gesture is more impactful than a sex scene in this instance. However, the two episodes are less similar than this brief summary makes them sound. Root's confession is not immediately followed by her death, as happens in *The 100*. The handholding and confession of love happens at 15:20, Root is shot at the 31:30 mark, and revealed to be dead at 40:50 (out of a total episode length of 43:33 from the blu-ray edition). While the scenes happen in the same episode, and this may be too close together to be palatable for some viewers, they are not immediately juxtaposed with one another; the gaps between the events create an emotional buffer not present in extreme cases of Bury Your Gays, such as *The 100*.

Person of Interest foreshadows its resurrection a little, which may soften the shock of Root's death. Between holding hands with Shaw and getting shot, Root spends several scenes waxing poetic — first to Shaw and then to Finch — about The Machine's predictions being based in its ability to simulate the behaviour of those it watches, and about how she thinks it doesn't matter whether their world is real or simulated. These are concepts that had been raised in earlier episodes; The Machine's simulation-based decision making is shown in the season four episode 'If-Then-Else', and Samaritan uses realistic simulation of Shaw's friends to torture her and

damage her sense of reality in ‘6741’. Thus, while Root’s resurrection is not set up to quite the same extent as the one in ‘San Junipero’, discussed below, the building blocks for it are present; it is not a complete surprise like the resurrection in *The 100*. There was not enough reviewer commentary to know what effect this had on the audience, though it does align with the director’s commentary that apotheosis was the natural conclusion of Root’s character arc. However, it would have been reasonable, based on the text, for fans to expect Root’s death to be undone, and for this to influence their opinion on how much her death was an instance of Bury Your Gays.

Root is killed by a bullet meant for someone else, but this is where the similarity begins to break down again. She is alerted to the presence of a sniper who is aiming to kill her passenger, Harold Finch, the leader of their faction. She shoots at the attacker as she drives and, when that misses, deliberately steers the car to put herself in the path of the shot. This sequence of events gives her death a more heroic and agentic flare than *The 100*, since she chooses to take the bullet rather than literally walking into it by accident. This death is also different to Lexa’s because Root dies in place of a male mentor and friend rather than her girlfriend, and her death is a result of the conflict between the rival artificial intelligences — not an attack on her relationship specifically. The attacker is a sniper working for Samaritan, not a friend or ally, and his original target is Harold Finch, the leader of the protagonists’ faction and creator of the benevolent AI referred to as “The Machine”. By extension, this means that the textual purpose of Root’s death was not to break up the gay relationship. *Person of Interest* does not use the Bury Your Gays trope directly in the text, meaning that, for all its apparent similarities, it does have a different position in the discourse to *The 100*.

Person of Interest also spends less time lingering on the death scene than *The 100*. Root is briefly shown being aided by police medics, and it is later mentioned that she is in critical condition in the hospital. Her death is not confirmed until the last few minutes of the episode, and it is revealed first by The Machine calling Harold Finch through a payphone and addressing him with Root's voice; when he asks if it is Root calling, The Machine tells him no, and the camera cuts to Detective Fusco looking at Root's corpse on a hospital morgue table. While this series of events may be upsetting, it is a far cry from her bleeding out on screen as her medically trained girlfriend fails to save her.

It is, however, important to note that explicit textual reasoning is not the only level at which discourse works. It is possible for Root's death to align with Bury Your Gays without her death explicitly being about breaking up her relationship; it can link into the trope through associations and similarities, rather than an outright statement of intent like that used in *The 100*. Indeed, many of the elements of Root's death align with the way that Bury Your Gays works as a breakup tool. Much like in *The 100*, the death occurs in the same episode as the most pivotal scene in the development of the relationship. The newly acknowledged relationship is also juxtaposed with the tragedy of death and ending; this is similar to the discourses that are mobilised in *The 100*, although they are not made textually explicit. As such, despite the ways in which the narrative opposes the strictest version of the trope, it would be reasonable to consider Root's death in *Person of Interest* as being moderately in alignment with the Bury Your Gays trope, albeit not to the same extensive degree as *The 100*.

2.3 Black Mirror

Black Mirror's 'San Junipero' is very different to the other two texts. This is partly structural; it is a one-hour, self-contained story in the same style as other *Black Mirror* episodes, which puts greater constraints on the pacing and relationship development than the 16- or 22-episode seasons of *The 100* and *Person of Interest* respectively. One outcome of this is that it is impossible to fully separate the death scenes from the scenes of intimacy, as they must occur in the same episode. Despite this, 'San Junipero' achieves the best separation as it can under the circumstances; the death scenes are not directly juxtaposed with sex scenes or other key scenes of intimacy, and both deaths occur late in the episode (one at 46:30, and the other at 58:15, the latter intermingled with the credits).

'San Junipero' is simultaneously a long meditation on death, and hardly about death at all. The first half of the episode revolves around the attempted romantic adventures of the protagonist, Yorkie, as she develops feelings for a woman she meets at a nightclub in the 1980's party town of San Junipero. Kelly takes her to bed, then vanishes; Yorkie is left to traverse the decades of the (simulated) town until she finds Kelly dancing with a man in 2002. The switch to overt discussion of death happens here, at 32:30 — just over halfway through. Yorkie asks Kelly, "How many of them are dead? Like, what percentage?" and the truth of the town starts to become apparent. The coded language of "locals" "full-timers" and "tourists" used up until this point is stripped away to show the underlying meaning: living "tourists", whose access is limited to five hours a week, and dead "locals" who are in the simulation "full-time". The pair return to Kelly's beach house and discuss their own impending real-world deaths; Kelly has a terminal cancer diagnosis, with an estimated three months to live, and Yorkie has been on life support in a hospital for the 40 years since a paralysing car accident at age 21. The remainder of the episode

is, functionally, about the pair preparing for these deaths. Kelly visits Yorkie in the hospital and finds out that one of her carers is going to marry her; she wishes to be euthanised, and it is the only way to override the refusal of her religious family. A quick jaunt into San Junipero lets Kelly convince Yorkie to marry her instead. They marry the next morning, and Yorkie is euthanised that afternoon. The death is not a source of conflict, or an interruption to their relationship at all. It is not a shock or surprise, but raised in advance and planned for in a way totally opposite to *The 100*, and more overtly foreshadowed than in *Person of Interest*.

There are a few other elements of 'San Junipero' that are worth mentioning for the way that they distance the episode from hard-line uses of the Bury Your Gays trope, such as *The 100*. The first is the method of death; the method of euthanasia depicted is nonviolent (lethal injection, in both cases, along with Yorkie's life support being switched off), and planned ahead of time. It has already been discussed how this prevents the deaths from having "shock value", but it is also worth appreciating the simple fact that queer characters in TV were allowed a nonviolent death — a rarity, in a year where so many queer character deaths were violent. The death scenes are also quite short. Yorkie's death scene is approximately 30 seconds; Kelly's is barely shown beyond an IV of liquid being administered (the lethal injection, established by Yorkie's death) and a shot of her coffin being lowered into her grave. This treats the deaths themselves with a much lighter touch than either of the other texts, especially *The 100*, minimising their impact and reducing their importance as narrative moments. Crucially, neither of these deaths are the result of in-text homophobia. There is legitimate criticism to be made of the way that they may be motivated by ableism and ageism, and these criticisms were raised by reviewers. However, the

deaths in ‘San Junipero’ are a far cry from *The 100* and the in-text statement of the murderer’s intention to break up the gay couple.

‘San Junipero’ does not entirely avoid the Bury Your Gays trope, but it does make key moves to subvert it even before the resurrection elements are considered. It separates the deaths from scenes of intimacy (as much as is possible within its constraints), the deaths are nonviolent, and the episode foreshadows the death from the very beginning. These are worth highlighting because they demonstrate clear ways in which producers can soften the impact of the Bury Your Gays trope if its use is truly unavoidable.

2.4 Conclusions

Textual and discourse analysis shows that these texts operate quite differently within the discourse of the Bury Your Gays trope. This is because there is more to the mobilisation of Bury Your Gays than simply a gay character dying; as both academics and reviewers have noted, other factors such as the violence of the death, proximity to a sex scene or relationship confession, and function as a queerbaiting break-up are also important constituent parts of the trope in media. These extra elements mean that it is, however, possible for a text to partially subvert or distance itself from the trope by leaving them out or otherwise working around them. Having a clear sense of these elements will help make it possible for creators to find ways of killing queer characters (which may be legitimately necessary at times) without having such a death play quite so hard into the traumatic history of queer media representation.

It is also possible to consider these three texts as comprising a spectrum of engagement with the Bury Your Gays trope. At one end sits *The 100*, which goes so far as to state in the text that the purpose of the death is to break up the relationship between Clarke and Lexa. It fully mobilises the Bury Your gays trope, including elements like shock, violence, and even the cliché of the stray bullet. *Black Mirror* is situated at the other end, having subverted the Bury Your Gays trope as much as possible, while still carrying out on-screen queer death. Kelly and Yorkie's deaths are nonviolent, foreshadowed, and expected. The presence of the afterlife-world of San Junipero in the narrative means that there is no point at which their relationship is broken up by Yorkie's death. *Person of Interest* occupies the ground between these two. It is arguably more agentic than *The 100*, with Root choosing to take the bullet rather than it hitting her by accident, and she dies to save a mentor rather than explicitly to break up her relationship. On the other hand, many of the sub-textual elements of the Bury Your Gays trope are preserved. The relationship is split up by her death, Root is killed in the same episode as an important scene of relationship development, and she is shot. *Person of Interest* therefore neither conforms to the Bury Your Gays trope as much as *The 100*, nor subverts it to the extent that *Black Mirror* does, but this is not necessarily a bad thing; it shows that media is complicated and contingent, and often resists a single interpretation.

Chapter 3: Resurrection

A key component of speculative fiction genres is their ability to explore the impossible — in this case, the ability to be resurrected from death. This has great potential to subvert the Bury Your Gays trope, as it means that death is not the hard, inflexible boundary that it is in the real world or in stories that adhere to real-world logics. The Bury Your Gays trope relies, in part, on the fact that death is the one way to break up a relationship that it is impossible to come back from; this is weakened when the boundary of death can be transcended in one way or another. However, it is obvious from reviewer responses that resurrection does not undo the effects of the Bury Your Gays trope entirely. 'San Junipero' was mostly understood as a subversion of the trope, rather than having avoided using it, and *The 100* was not lauded for how it resurrected Lexa. There is clearly more to the relationship between Bury Your Gays and resurrection than there seems at first glance. This chapter focuses on how resurrection is used in each text, and what effects this has on the discourses invoked by the Bury Your Gays trope.

In each of these texts, resurrection is achieved through the electronic copying of the subject's mind into a computer (with minor variations in the specifics). *Person of Interest* is the outlier in this regard; therefore, it will be left for last in this chapter. This approach to resurrection raises metaphysical questions about whether a digital copy of a person is the same as the original, but the texts used in this analysis largely refuse to entertain these debates. These narrative elements are referred to herein as "posthuman", referring to the collection of critical philosophies of technological advancement of humanity beyond its current state. The meaning used in this dissertation is most in keeping with N. Katherine Hayles' (1999) definition of the posthuman: "In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily

existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals." (3). Regardless of whether one personally agrees with this philosophy, it is sensible to accept that it is an important basis for understanding these case studies. Questions of whether a simulation is the same as the original character will therefore be set aside in this chapter unless directly relevant to the text (as they are in *Person of Interest*).

3.1 Black Mirror

'San Junipero' is straightforwardly posthuman, and this is a core aspect of its ability to subvert the Bury Your Gays trope. The existence of a posthuman life after death is established right from the beginning, before the prospect of death is even raised — this means that there is no point at which the characters are in jeopardy of being totally lost. 'San Junipero' goes out of its way to show this continuation. Yorkie's death scene ends in a fade to white as the sheet is pulled over her head, and the fade resolves into a shot of her at the beach in San Junipero. The time limit on Kelly's use of San Junipero while she is alive means that there is still a barrier between her and Yorkie, but it is weak; it is a limit on time, not on their ability to physically interact, and they are not kept completely apart by Yorkie's death. This takes away the power of the Bury Your Gays trope to queerbait, as the posthuman elements are able to contain the damage that the inflicts upon the relationship. Furthermore, the posthuman goes so far as to actively enable their relationship. This is most strongly covered by Drage's chapter in *Black Mirror and Critical Theory*, discussed in the literature review, but it is worth mentioning again as a point of comparison for the other texts. The simulation of San Junipero exists outside of the linear time of the real world; the couple are able to travel back in time and live the lives they were previously prevented from, safe and happy in the endless 1980's. This timelessness also means that their relationship only ends when they choose for it to. Since, by the end of the episode, they are both

on the same side of the divide created by death, the end of their lives does not hang over them as a final threat to their relationship.

The threat of queerbaiting nonetheless rears its head near the end of the episode. The conflict occurs after Yorkie's death, when she finds out that Kelly is not intending to join her in San Junipero. Kelly's daughter died before the technology was invented, and her late husband refused to use it; as such, she feels like it would be wrong to pass over to San Junipero when her family did not. They argue, Kelly flees the scene and runs her car off the road (mirroring Yorkie's accident fleeing her homophobic family in her youth), and her access time runs out just before Yorkie can help her up from the crash. This conflict is not so much about Kelly's impending death as it is about the overarching risk of queerbaiting. 'San Junipero' buries one of its gay characters and then threatens to end with their relationship broken up; however, its saving grace is that it does not let this come to pass. The episode ends by revealing that Kelly has decided to be euthanised and join Yorkie in San Junipero, turning a threat of a breakup into a promise of an endless happy future. This is the "trap" that worried reviewers, and the resolution that soothed them; despite following the patterns of the Bury Your Gays trope, 'San Junipero' rescues the relationship in the end — in other words, subverting the trope.

3.2 The 100

Despite its incorporation of speculative and posthuman elements, *The 100* does not significantly use these elements to subvert the Bury Your Gays trope. In the scene after her death, it is revealed that Lexa had a computer chip embedded in her neck. This chip is "the Flame", a self-contained AI that contains copies of the consciousness of each commander to have had it implanted. However, Clarke cannot access the Flame to talk to Lexa; its integration requires the

subject to have black, nanobot-filled blood, which Clarke does not. The rest of the season is taken up with an extended search by the protagonists for an ally with the required blood who will take the chip, which is thwarted at every turn. All of Lexa's potential successors are murdered by an enemy, the black-blooded head of the reclusive Floukru clan refuses to take the chip, and the capital city where Lexa rules is taken over by the mind-controlled servants of Allie, the AI that caused the first nuclear apocalypse and is determined to usher in a second one. Due to this, Lexa's immediate un-death is rendered useless by the technological barrier between her and Clarke. Lexa may as well be dead all season as far as her relationship with Clarke is concerned, and this means that the effects of their break-up are able to become entrenched. In much the same way as it is difficult to believe a character is really dead without seeing their corpse, it is also hard to believe that Lexa is alive without seeing her until the finale. This plot structure also creates the situation that Klein Hesselink criticised in *The Handmaid's Tale* — namely, Bury Your Gays acts to cut the screen time of queer characters and diminish their ability to act as representation.

The problems with *The 100*'s resurrection are compounded by the season finale, where Clarke and Lexa's face-to-face reunion is only fleeting. Unlike other texts that use resurrection or an afterlife reunion to subvert Bury Your Gays, such as *Song of Achilles*, *The 100* cuts out a crucial aspect: the characters are not allowed to stay together. Clarke has the chip implanted into herself, along with an IV transfusion of the black blood so that her body will accept it, as a last-ditch attempt to stop Allie. This allows her to enter Allie's virtual world — the only place where the AI can be killed — without having her mind controlled. Her journey is interrupted by the villain's army of enslaved minds, who attack her in the virtual world as their bodies assault her

friends' defences in the real world. At the last moment, Lexa sweeps in and saves her from the virtual army; they hug before setting off for the control room that Clarke is seeking, and kiss in a later scene along the way. However, this reunion does not last. Another wave of the villain's army attacks them as they reach the control hub, and Lexa sacrifices herself to hold them off. Further, Clarke's body ejects the Flame, once more severing her connection to Lexa and returning her to her earlier predicament. This connection is not re-established later in the series; the Flame is deactivated in the season six finale 'The Blood of Sanctum' and physically destroyed in the season seven episode 'Blood Giant'. Though it happens in a more roundabout way than traditional uses of the trope, ultimately Lexa's death does result in their relationship being broken up forever; Bury Your Gays wins in the final instance.

In fact, a fleeting reunion like this may have been even more offensive to the audience than if Lexa had simply remained dead. As was noted by Deshler, some fans interpreted social media posts featuring the couple in the finale as a promise that the reunion would provide a happy ending, and in hindsight viewed these posts as deliberate bait to keep fans watching through the whole season. The most negative interpretation of *The 100*'s ending for Lexa is not just that it provided false hope, but that, on a production level, Lexa's resurrection was only a cynical ploy to maintain the participation of the queer audience. Instead of *The 100* subverting the Bury Your Gays trope, the audience is queerbaited twice; first with Lexa's death in 'Thirteen', and then again with the short reunion and final destruction of the AI copy of her consciousness in the season finale, 'Perverse Instantiation: Part Two'. Overall, it is reasonable to say that *The 100* maintains the core elements of the Bury Your Gays trope and fails to subvert it, and arguably that its attempt at posthumanism worsened the outcome.

3.3 Person of Interest

Whether *Person of Interest* subverts the Bury Your Gays trope is more contingent on the audience's reading than it is in the other texts. This is not to say that the other texts only have one possible interpretation, but that the audience's response did not notably deviate from the expected reading. *Person of Interest* questions the posthuman elements in the text itself, which opens up more room for alternate readings. It is worth bringing in one last piece of critical theory here, in order to clarify this discussion of interpretation. Stuart Hall (2001) suggests three positions that the audience can take in response to a text, based on their own knowledge and interpretation: the dominant, negotiated, and oppositional. The dominant reading is when the audience takes up the meaning that was encoded into the text and decodes it as the producers intended, accepting the terms on which it is presented. The negotiated reading accepts some elements of what is encoded, but rejects others; the dominant reading is seen, but cannot be wholly accepted by the audience. Negotiated readings often depend on the context of the specific audience member in question, though they may at times be picked up by whole groups — an example of this could be Deshler's analysis of the "queer girl subjectivity" that drove the campaign by fans of *The 100*. Lastly, the oppositional reading is one in which the audience decodes the text as having a different meaning to the one that was encoded by producers, and consequently end up in opposition to the dominant reading. This would describe *Black Mirror* fans who insisted that Kelly did not pass over to San Junipero, and the version Yorkie sees is a simulation generated by San Junipero rather than the "real" her — a reading rejected by the episode's writer, Charlie Brooker (Alexander, 2016).

The posthuman resurrection in *Person of Interest* is not as straightforward as in either other text. The Machine takes on Root's voice and personality after she dies, having observed her mannerisms (rather than directly downloading her brain); this leads to a conversation in the next episode ('Synechdoche') about the limits and nature of The Machine's simulation capabilities. The AI swaps to the voice of Finch's childhood science teacher for a little while, lamenting that this simulation is only 63% accurate, before changing back and telling him that its simulation of Root is 99.6% accurate — "virtually indistinguishable". As such, *Person of Interest* questions the conclusions of posthumanism a little within the text, opening room for readings of Root's resurrection as false or incomplete. The resurrection is also different in that while The Machine considers Root to be a part of it, it also considers itself to be a separate entity — an example of this is how it refers to Root in the third person in 'Synecdoche', rather than the first person. However, there is also significant textual evidence that this simulation is supposed to be interpreted as a resurrection; I consider this to be the dominant reading, as it is what was put forward by the producers (those who did the encoding) in their interviews. The series finale, 'Return 0', includes several shorts of Amy Acker (Root's actress) standing in for The Machine and delivering its lines. This indicates visually that The Machine has integrated Root into its sense of self, using her voice and image to speak to the characters in a similar way to how Root spoke on its behalf when she was alive. Shaw captures the sniper that shot Root and asks The Machine "is this the one who killed you? Killed her, I mean?", suggesting that she views the AI as a real resurrection of her partner — or has at least briefly confused the two of them[3]. Finally, near the end of the episode, The Machine tells Finch, "[…] if even a single person remembers you, then maybe you never really die." This is repeated in the closing voice-over monologue

[3] Confusion is a possible alternate reading here, since Shaw's earlier capture by Samaritan is shown to involve torture that damages her grip on reality ('6741', 'Sotto Voce').

from The Machine, followed by "And maybe this isn't the end at all," as Shaw looks up into a CCTV camera. This is a thematic continuation of Root's sentiments in 'The Day The World Went Away' about The Machine's simulation's functioning as a form of immortality. It is reasonable to conclude that *Person of Interest* uses posthumanism to achieve resurrection, though in a complicated way that does not match the other texts.

Even if Root really is resurrected by The Machine simulating her, it is unclear whether the relationship is rescued. The series does not give a definitive answer as to Shaw's opinion of the resurrection, or whether she goes on to have a relationship with Root as she is simulated by The Machine (since The Machine is both Root and more than her, complicating the matter). The relationship is not fully confirmed to be safe, but neither is it confirmed to be destroyed; this is a state of uncertainty not left open by the other texts, and the best approach to honour this uncertainty rather than trying to rule the case one way or the other. Should the relationship continue, it runs into the same issue as *The 100* faced; the ending leaves one of the pair on each side of the divide of death, unlike 'San Junipero' where they ultimately end up on the same side. This means that the relationship will still end eventually when Shaw dies, which is a threat that is eliminated in 'San Junipero'[4]. It also does not offer the repeatability that 'San Junipero' does; for Root and Shaw, there is no going back to have another shot at a better life. This separation across the divide of death also means that Root and Shaw's relationship is not able to carry on in full. The Machine can communicate through audio and hack other computer systems, but it does not have a physical body to interact with Shaw; their relationship is limited by this, compared to *The 100* and 'San Junipero' where both characters are taken into the virtual world and are able to

[4] While it is possible that The Machine will run a little simulation of the two of them happy together forever, this is thoroughly into the realm of self-serving fannish speculation.

physically interact. On the other hand, the relationship being prevented from carrying on in full is not the same as it being prevented from continuing at all. Perhaps *Person of Interest*'s outcome is more similar to a long-distance relationship than anything else. While *Person of Interest* can therefore be interpreted as a subversion of the Bury Your Gays trope, it lacks some of the elements that would strengthen its subversion.

Returning once more to the issue of the audience and the field of possible interpretation, I ultimately consider *Person of Interest* ambiguous enough in the text that whether it counts as subversion or not is dependent on the individual viewer. There is sufficient evidence behind the dominant position to say that it does; however, because the text goes out of its way to question the posthuman elements and create room for other readings, I am hesitant to make strong claims about how it ought to be interpreted, especially since reviews of the series did not give much insight into the audience's response to it. This is useful in its own way, however, as it is a clear example of why we should resist categorising media as simply good or bad (or as conforming to a trope or not). While there are instances in which it is clear-cut, there will also be instances where it is not, and it is worth acknowledging complex cases when they arise.

3.4 Conclusions

Adapting our previous spectrum of adherence vs subversion, we find that the positions of these texts are solidified by the way in which they incorporate posthuman resurrection. *The 100* not only textually aligns itself with the Bury Your Gays trope, but it also fails to use its science fiction elements to continue the relationship into the future. Lexa's death breaks up her relationship with Clarke and the relationship remains broken up for the rest of the season. The season finale gives them a brief reunion, but the AI version of Lexa is destroyed; their

relationship is not given a future through AI resurrection, and the Bury Your Gays trope is therefore not meaningfully challenged by *The 100*. On the other hand, *Black Mirror* does the opposite; 'San Junipero' does not avoid the Bury Your Gays trope but, as was noted by viewers, makes key moves that subvert it. Throughout 'San Junipero', the boundary between life and the afterlife is shown to be flexible, porous, and a minor hindrance at best. This allows 'San Junipero' to undermine the breakup usually central to the Bury Your Gays trope and render the deaths harmless — arguably even making death a crucial portal to the happy queer afterlife. *Person of Interest* once again is a complicated centre case, aligning neither with full use of Bury Your Gays or full subversion. It is the only text of this group to problematise the technology of resurrection, explicitly questioning whether the AI simulation of a person is the same as the original person themselves. Unlike *Black Mirror*, there is no clear position in *Person of Interest* on whether the relationship continues or not, or in what form if so. On the other hand, the relationship is not completely shut down as it is in *The 100*; it is just as likely that it did continue in some form, and the text encourages the interpretation that The Machine's resurrection of Root is a real copy. *Person of Interest* is overall much more ambiguous than either of the other cases, and this makes it difficult to declare one way or the other. However, there is value in this ambiguity. We do not necessarily need to be able to categorise texts into "does or does not subvert the Bury Your Gays trope", and ought to resist the impulse to do so. The presence of a complicated case helps us understand the layers of meaning that make the Bury Your Gays trope succeed or fail.

The findings here are similar to those of other scholars studying the Bury Your Gays trope, in that the trope is defined by more than just a queer character dying. This analysis shows, through

case studies, that the emphasis by Bridges, Löf, Klein Hesselink, and others on the relationship breaking up was correct. ‘San Junipero’ successfully subverts the Bury Your Gays trope by ending with the characters in a happy long-term relationship, and *The 100* fails to do so precisely because the resurrection elements do not overcome the breakup. *Person of Interest* is too contingent on the audience’s reading to make a clear decision on, but this still aligns with conclusions from critical theory; it simply becomes a question of whether the audience member has a background that primes them to decode the events as queerbaiting or not. This chapter also supports Drage’s analysis that one of ‘San Junipero’s strengths is in how it uses the virtual world to take the characters outside of normal, linear time. Neither *The 100* nor *Person of Interest* did this and both struggled to fully subvert the Bury Your Gays trope as a result, since the threat of the relationship breaking up again continued to hang over them (and came to pass, in the case of *The 100*).

Conclusions

This dissertation uses three similar case studies to demonstrate that popular-cultural and academic understandings of the Bury Your Gays trope are accurate. Each TV show is similar on a surface level — at least one queer character dies and is resurrected through the use of AI simulation — but the reactions to them played out very differently. Textual analysis shows that each case engaged with the underlying mechanics of the Bury Your Gays trope in contrasting ways.

Tracking reviewer opinions provided a non-academic basis for understanding the Bury Your Gays trope and a wealth of information about how each text was interpreted in the context of the 2016 queer character death spike. *The 100* was the focal point of the trend, and reviewers made clear that their unease was due to more than simply killing a gay character; they objected to the method of death, its proximity to a sex scene, and how Lexa's resurrection worked more as baiting than as subversion. These points mirrored academic analysis of the Bury Your Gays trope. 'San Junipero' was a sharp contrast to the furore over *The 100*; while it was mostly still seen as using the trope, it was also seen as having subverted it in significant ways. Reviewers found solace in this subversion, both from the deadly year in queer TV and the subsequent election of Donald Trump in November 2016. 'San Junipero' was lauded not for avoiding the Bury Your Gays trope, but for providing a happy ending despite it. The text undercuts the auxiliary elements that tie Bury Your Gays to problems like queerbaiting, which saves it from falling into the same trap as *The 100*. This paralleled Drage's academic understanding of the episode; 'San Junipero' provided an open ending and a future for its queer characters, therefore following through on the promised relationship and representation set up by the episode. *Person*

of Interest was bypassed in the initial media response, which was disappointing but unsurprising in such a busy year for queer death. Interviews with the cast and directors suggested there was more to the series than a straightforward use of Bury Your Gays, and this dissertation took the opportunity to dig into the text in a way that had not yet been attempted.

The first finding this dissertation offers to critical theory is demonstration of the concept posed separately by both Elizabeth Bridges and Casja Löf that an underlying element of the Bury Your Gays trope is its tendency to split up queer relationships. Bridges takes Bury Your Gays as being an extension of queerbaiting, i.e. a way of promising representation to a queer audience and then failing to follow through on it properly. Löf sees it as being an extension of the "Dead Lesbian" trope, though one that kills the relationship between two characters — even metaphorically — rather than just being about queer death in general. The texts examined in this dissertation support both framings of this analysis. *The 100* kills one of the queer leading couple, then crucially fails to undo the death long-term. While they are briefly reunited, after half a season of Lexa being trapped in an inaccessible computer chip, they do not get to stay together after Clarke destroys the chip. Ultimately this is a failure to rescue the text from the threat that it created by killing Lexa; the queerbaiting and breakup both stand, by the end of the season, in spite of the small gesture at reunion. Conversely, *Black Mirror* specifically subverted the queerbaiting elements, and this therefore made the deaths more acceptable. While *Person of Interest* was largely passed over at the time, it is particularly useful for showing that interpretation of any given text is dependent on the viewer. The question of whether it avoided queerbaiting can be answered either way depending on how the viewer feels about the relationship (e.g. whether the hints at the relationship in earlier seasons were a valid part of its development) and the

resurrection (whether the relationship adequately continues). A cynical reading, or one by someone acutely harmed by other instances of Bury Your Gays, may be unwilling to give *Person of Interest* any leeway for its small differences, since they do not achieve the same level of subversion as 'San Junipero'. Yet those differences are still present, and a more charitable reading might be inclined to take them into account.

This dissertation also adds to the body of work on subversion of the Bury Your Gays trope in general, and backs up some of the arguments made therein. For example, Oudekerk's claim that Bury Your Gays is subverted when the death is not linked to the character's queer identity is supported by the analysis here. *The 100* stated directly in the text that the purpose of the death was to break up the gay relationship; this means that even if it were able to subvert the death with a resurrection, there was still an instance of textually explicit homophobia that is not subverted in any way by resurrection. However, both other texts managed to avoid this issue. 'San Junipero' located its deaths in the characters' age, illness, and disability rather than in their identities as queer; while this has been raised by reviewers as being significantly problematic in other ways (Rosen, 2017), it is not specifically homophobic. It therefore mirrors the effect Oudekerk found in the novel *More Than This*, where death becomes transformative and a mechanism for character growth rather than a punishment for the character's queer identity. *Person of Interest* arguably did this more successfully than 'San Junipero'; Root's death was explicitly tied to the war narrative, and her resurrection was arguably the final step of both her and The Machine's character development. This is very much in line with Oudekerk's concept of "digging out your gays" and how it keeps death from being a threat to queer identity.

Both of these findings are assisted by the active cross-comparison of how these texts used the Bury Your Gays trope. Rather than focussing on a text in isolation, cross-comparison makes it easy to juxtapose specific moments in each text and examine how the same elements were used to different ends. This is not the first use of multiple examples in a dissertation on Bury Your Gays — Löf also draws from multiple texts — but it shows that the method is as suited to thorough textual and discourse analysis as it is to the kind of broad survey that Lof conducted in her research. There is a minor sacrifice, in that this approach does not achieve the same depth as single-text analysis (an example being Drage's analysis of 'San Junipero'), but this can be managed by choosing appropriate texts and focussing clearly on the elements that are relevant to the analysis.

An important aspect of this dissertation that unfortunately became impossible due to the COVID-19 pandemic was the intention to interview audience members in order to directly understand their views on the Bury Your Gays trope. I consider my analysis of popular-culture criticism to be an acceptable proxy under the circumstances, but there is potential for a very strong future project implicit in the idea of interviewing audiences directly about the differences between similar instances of the Bury Your Gays trope. This would also be likely to fill in the gaps in the project that arose from focussing on professional reviews — for example, interviewing *Person of Interest* fans would easily fix the issue of the show being skipped over in popular-cultural criticism at the time. Making an explicit commitment to interviewing the audience will also help prevent researchers and popular-culture critics from relying on fixed ideas about what constitutes good or bad representation, that the Bury Your Gays trope is always going to have a predictable effect on the audience, etc. Direct interviews give fans the ability to explain their personal

relationship to the text and the reasons behind the readings they make, which may not be intuitive to observers or align with the apparent trends of analysis within the fandom.

Science fiction is not the only genre that falls under the umbrella of speculative fiction, and this dissertation will lend itself to further inquiry into how the Bury Your Gays trope operates in genres such as fantasy and horror. In some ways, these genres are likely to be more straightforward; a ghost, for example, is not subject to the science fiction-based questions about the validity of simulation for resurrection. However, some issues are likely to persist, particularly that of one character being alive and the other being dead. This is possible regardless of genre, and the issues outlined in this dissertation — such as how this situation prevented *Person of Interest* from fully subverting the Bury Your Gays trope — are almost certain to occur elsewhere.

The Bury Your Gays trope is, unfortunately, persistent in the TV landscape. The final weeks of writing this dissertation (most of November, in fact) were coloured by yet another instance of the trope: the death of Castiel in *Supernatural* after confessing his love for Dean. We are not yet free of the trope, and TV still has few enough queer characters that every death hurts. Yet there is also hope; every time fans rebel against these deaths, the Bury Your Gays trope is brought back into the public conversation. The body of academic research on the trope is small, but growing every year. Ultimately, my hope is that this dissertation is useful to both fans and researchers in their fights for better queer representation.

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Appendix

This appendix gives a full list of articles sampled for chapter 1. Some of them are cited in the dissertation itself. In some cases, the categorisation of articles from the same author (2016a, 2016b etc) is different in this appendix to in the dissertation references; in the dissertation references they are in order of appearance in the main text, whereas here they are in order of appearance in this list. This reference is sorted alphabetically by author by subsection, with subsections indicated by italicised subheadings.

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