

# Where are the Lesbian Rom-Coms? Building Reparative Narratives Through Fan Creativity

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The announcement of the release date for the holiday romantic comedy *Happiest Season* in December 2020 caused a colorful response from audiences, fans, and even media professionals. *Happiest Season* is a holiday-themed lesbian romantic comedy starring Kristen Stewart and Mackenzie Davis. While there have been similar movies recently (e.g., *Lez Bomb*, 2018 or *Season of Love*, 2019), they did not have such a popular ensemble (including Aubrey Plaza, Dan Levy, and Clea DuVall in the director's chair).<sup>1</sup> Although the holidays always bring with them many new seasonal romantic comedies, LGBTQIA+ stories remain mainly in the background of these or are entirely absent in holiday-related content.

Even if non-heteronormative storylines (such as the lesbian storylines mentioned above<sup>2</sup>) concern the media, no matter the season, people yearn for light, positive, feel-good stories, especially during cheerful holiday times, as well as in sad and scary times, as the COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly is. However, if our identity does not conform to the mainstream in some aspects (e.g., race or sexuality), we might not find "our" content as much as we would like. This is precisely the reason why we need to question the whereabouts of lesbian romantic

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- 1 Not including the movie *Carol* (2015) or *Ammonite* (2020) is intentional here, as they are period pieces and fall into different genre categories (with strong dramatic features commonly portrayed by "more popular" ensembles).
- 2 Due to the essay's narrow scope, I primarily pay attention to the exemplary category of lesbian narratives.

comedies or “light-hearted” narratives (and of course those depicting other identities), even more so, since existing productions reveal very repetitive tendencies in the portrayal of lesbian and queer stories.

A brief survey of the existing “lesbian movie library”<sup>3</sup> shows that a variety of movies does exist, a substantial number of which are period pieces (e.g., *Tipping the Velvet*, 2002; *Fingersmith*, 2005 or *The Favorite*, 2018 and *The Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, 2019), tragic narratives (e.g., *Gia*, 1998; *Aimée & Jaguar*, 1999; *Lost and Delirious*, 2001; *Freeheld*, 2015), or coming out (and coming of age) stories. And, there are also some comedies (e.g., *But I’m a Cheerleader*, 1999; *Saving Face*, 2004; *Imagine Me & You*, 2005). However, these pale in comparison to the overwhelming number of raw, heartbreaking, and very often unrelatable narratives.<sup>4</sup> Such tiring repetitiveness of similar (if not identical) depictions can become frustrating, thus prompting some audience members to retaliate. Thereby, the current state of lesbian identity media portrayals can become a source of critique, inspiration, and even reparation for its audiences, particularly fans. By creating their own narratives and endeavors that have been more or less derived from mainstream production (movies, TV series, comics, music, etc.), fans offer new venues for portraying marginalized identities that differ from the recurring storylines to which we have become so accustomed. Such derivative creative work can be seen as a manifestation of the theoretical concepts of polysemic decoding of media texts, as conceptualized by Stuart Hall (1973), and reparative reading strategies introduced by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2020), both suggesting the existence of a countless number of possible

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3 Such a term is obvious hyperbole. However, there are numerous movies and TV series that are considered to be a sort of “lesbian canon.” Movies and series originating between the 1980s to the early 2000s (e.g., *Desert Hearts*, 1985; *Heavenly Creatures*, 1994; *The L Word*, 2004; *I can’t think straight*, 2008, etc.) served as one of the first possibilities for many lesbian and queer women internationally to identify with media characters and are thus considered to be a “canon.”

4 We often see one-dimensional characters, poor character development, ridiculous narrative changes unrelated to the previous storyline, etc.

readings (i.e., interpretation), stemming from individual (here mostly marginalized) experiences of audiences.<sup>5</sup>

Media fans have played an essential role in discussions about the meanings of media content and in how far the needs of particular marginalized communities were met (or more often not met) in media representation for decades. This essay takes these “conversations” between audiences and producers into closer consideration, while introducing an original perspective on media communication. This particular point of view, which reflects the highly interactive and creative contribution from the audience itself, sheds light on their perception and reworking of the (state of) contemporary lesbian storylines in media.

### **(Transformative) Creativity of Fans**

By the term *media fans*, I mean those audiences interested mainly in TV series and movies, excluding sport, music, or other kinds of fans. In the field of fan studies, media fans are understood as being somewhat different from “ordinary audiences,”<sup>6</sup> mostly in their practices related to engaging with media content. The previous studies often imagined them to be active, loyal, and creative individuals following particular media texts and having an interactive relationship with them (cf. Jenkins; Hills; Busse and Hellekson; etc.).<sup>7</sup> Not only are such fans fond of

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- 5 Both terms suggest that audiences can interpret (not only media) content differently and highlight the crucial role of individual identity in those varying interpretations.
- 6 Of course, the notion of ordinary audiences is problematic in the current “digitized time.” Here, it serves only as an illustrative term, labeling those who do not consider themselves to be fans and who exhibit a more “passive” approach to media consumption/reception.
- 7 The perception of fans as being exclusively (inter)active is somewhat simplistic. The question of fan identity (mainly related to fan practices) and its proclivities have been discussed in the field of fan studies from its beginning in the 1990s (Jenkins; Hills; Gray et al.). Fans can be very interactive, but they can also stay

certain content, but they can also get creative about it and produce their own texts (e.g., songs, stories, costumes, videos, etc.) in reaction to the original. Such responses vary from pieces celebrating particular content (but also performers, authors, etc.) to a relatively sophisticated critique, both of them in various forms. However, the principle stays the same—there is an original text (e.g., movie/TV series, etc.), and it serves as a starting point for the follow-up creative work of fans.<sup>8</sup> Whatever the motivation,<sup>9</sup> fans borrow their favorite characters or universe to build new stories and worlds within the borders indicated in the original.<sup>10</sup> Fan creativity is, therefore, somewhat apocryphal.

As I have already pointed out, it would be incorrect to think that all fans are creative, active, activist, loyal, and connected (to each other and the original subject/object). However, I will use this premise to explain *transformative creativity* similarities. As previously stated, different kinds of fan creativity stem from the personal relationship towards the particular media text. In general, the central dialectic of such invention is quickly drawn with the help of the terms *affirmative* and *transformative fans/creativity* or *fandom*—i.e., a group of fans with the same/similar interests (Jenkins et al.). Some fans feel the need to simply reproduce

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away from common fan practices and be more consumerist. It is hard to imagine some typical fan identity, as it is a deeply individual notion (cf. Jansová).

- 8 In the context of this text, José Esteban Muñoz's concept of *disidentification* comes to mind. Fans searching for representation (i.e., their marginalized identity) in the media and not finding it can decide to create their own stories in which they negotiate their individuality among the mainstream production that often erases them. With the help of disidentification, queer fans can rework and alter dominant cultural codes in ways that help them "write themselves" into the stories they are so often absent from.
- 9 Fan creativity is motivated by various reasons—love for the object/subject, critique of the content, coming back to a favorite (yet) finished story, revisiting stories or characters, righting the wrong of media representation, etc. (cf. Jenkins).
- 10 Circulation of creative work of fans is based on the so-called gift economy, sharing with others without payment but with an expectation of some participation (sharing, liking commenting, etc., cf. Jansová 103–106; Gray et al.).

something/someone in their original work as a sign of their appreciation (e.g., draw a picture of the leading characters). Others return to a story/character they miss (e.g., in case their favorite show ended) or have different motivations that nevertheless resonate (in the final creative product) with the intentions and meanings postulated in the original content. This colorful palate of work can be described as affirmative. However, fan creativity can also stem from different motivations, making room for transformative interpretations.

Just as some content is unreservedly popular among fandoms and fans, other works (or parts of popular works) can have problematic aspects that serve as an impulse for various creative works—starting with simple tweets and discussions, ending with sophisticated videos, stories, costumes and many other manifestations of fan creativity. Activist efforts and campaigns, or even educational efforts, aimed at the favorite content (movie/TV series) can also be considered to be manifestations of this phenomenon. All of the original work, activism, and educational efforts are a form of reaction. Once again, we can encounter countless motivations for such (inherently active) relations towards media content. Most common (in the context of the representation of marginalized identities) are shallow and unrelated representations (i.e., diversity check<sup>11</sup>), recurring tragic narratives (e.g., *Bury Your Gays* trope, BYG<sup>12</sup>), repetitive storylines, *queerbaiting*,<sup>13</sup> and many others. All of them spark transformative reactions that (in one way or another) try to repair the perceived damage caused by

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<sup>11</sup> Characters are present only to fulfill some invisible “diversity quota.”

<sup>12</sup> The so-called *Bury Your Gays* trope is a term that fans (and later academics) began to use to describe repeated deaths of non-heteronormative characters on screen (movies or TV series).

<sup>13</sup> Queerbaiting is a strategy for attracting as diverse an audience as possible by suggesting a potential romantic relationship between same-sex characters without a plan to realize such a pairing. By hinting at this possibility, it can attract people interested in non-heteronormative pairings, but it will also maintain the interest of conservative audience members because there is no obvious proof of non-heteronormative relations (Jansová 121–125).

media content.<sup>14</sup> The following section shows some examples of how this reparation can be realized.

## Fans and Reparative Narratives: A Case of Femslash Fandoms

I started this essay with the example of a lesbian holiday comedy and its meaning within contemporary lesbian narratives. I will stay with the notion of lesbian representation and discuss so-called *femslash* fan's interpretations. The term *femslash* describes a variety of (inherently transformative) creative works by fans that center around lesbian interpretations. It is considered a particular genre of fan creativity defined by the character's romantic pairing.<sup>15</sup> Such interpretations usually rework the original media text (e.g., TV series) and reimagine or reinterpret some of its characters as lesbian, even though they were not presented as such in the original. One example is the popular teen TV series *Glee*, where two of the leading female characters (Rachel Berry and Quinn Fabray) were first introduced as enemies and later became tentative friends. Some fans interpreted their interactions and storylines as an indication of a blossoming romance and created stories that reflected their readings (e.g., written stories, videos, drawings, etc.). The most common motivation in this context is the low number of existing "lesbian representations" in the media and the state of such representation.<sup>16</sup>

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14 As can be observed in recent years, some reactions or relations towards the original that negate its dominant meanings can cross a symbolic line and become even antagonistic, in so much that terms such as toxic fandom or anti-fans exist to designate similar relations and practices (cf. Garcia Hernandez; Pinkowitz).

15 Other categories are *slash* (gay interpretation of male characters' relationship), *het* (heterosexual interpretation of relationship), or *gen* (general and non-romantic description of relationships).

16 It needs to be pointed out that the number of non-heteronormative characters' representation increases every year. The most rapid changes can be seen since 2016 (cf. GLAAD). Consequently, femslash interpretations also "re-consider" already non-heterosexual storylines, resulting in the creation of *canonical femslash*, as I coined it (Jansová 92).

However, it is impossible to list all the potential motivations that can fuel any kind of “fanish” creativity.

Notwithstanding the rich quantity of different texts, videos, costumes, drawings, pictures, and many others around the world, I can only focus closely on a small number of examples here. As there are countless artworks that would be very hard to choose from and explain in detail, I mainly use examples of fan activism fighting for reparation in the original text. Yet, it cannot be ignored that such activism is very closely connected to all fan stories and interpretations that tirelessly try to repair and reclaim media representations.

One of the most hurtful media tropes regarding the representation of lesbian characters and storylines is the aforementioned *Bury Your Gays* trope. BYG is a term describing sudden, unexpected, and usually unnecessary deaths of LGBTQIA+ characters that are often mindlessly used to move the story along (for the primarily heterosexual characters), as can be seen in a variety of media content (e.g., *Last Tango in Halifax*, 2012; *Pretty Little Liars*, 2010; *The 100*, 2014; and many others). In 2016 and 2017, there were several protests against such (frequent) depictions that resulted in many “fanish” activist campaigns. Not only were there thousands of Twitter discussions and challenges towards media creators,<sup>17</sup> but several educational and supportive campaigns were established as well. Two examples are the internet site *LGBT fans deserve better*<sup>18</sup> and the fan convention *ClexaCon*. These efforts reflect the state of LGBTQIA+ characters in the media. At the same time, *ClexaCon* “brings together thousands of diverse LGBTQ+ fans and content creators worldwide to celebrate positive representation for LGBTQ+ women, trans and non-binary communities in the media” (*ClexaCon*).

The launch of this initiative was primarily prompted by the death of the character Lexa in the TV series *The 100*, which is why it carries

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<sup>17</sup> One of the most discussed examples happened in the context of *The 100* TV series. The show's producer, Jason Rothenberg, apologized to fans for using the BYG trope, but only after he lost more than 14 000 of his previous followers on Twitter (cf. McNutt, 2017; Bourdaa, 2018)

<sup>18</sup> Available from: <https://lgbtfansdeservebetter.com/>.

the name of the central lesbian pairing Clexa (i.e., a portmanteau of their names: Clarke and Lexa). The death of Lexa also brought about many cases of reparative narratives aimed at soothing the hurt caused by the TV series' original storyline. Looking through the main archives of written fan fiction (e.g., FanFiction.net or Archiveofourown.org), we see hundreds of stories that imagine carefree and—staying on the topic of “rom-coms”—humorous adventures of the favorite pair. Thanks to such re-workings, we get to see Lexa either as a standoffish millionaire, falling in love with the struggling student Clarke, or as a star soccer player, hilariously (and romantically) colliding with the new team doctor, Clarke. Simply put, the favorite duo is offered an entirely different ending but also a life on the pages of those fan stories.

These practices of writing extensive and complex stories, thereby initiating protest and activist campaigns, are not just indicative of the scale of emotional, financial, and other investments in media content. They also reflect another specific characteristic of fan-driven identity practice—namely, community building. With *femslash* interpretation, we see quite a unique phenomenon. Particular fans around the world create a symbolic community that we can label as lesbian fandom. Even if such a notion can feel simplifying, we genuinely see international connections with a common goal—to produce and share quality “lesbian media content” that resonates with different experiences and identity manifestations.

## Conclusion

Consequently, certain types of fan creativity (here *femslash*) can be considered reparative and even as counter-narratives. Fans substitute undesirable content/stories with their own creative works, repairing the (perceived) damage caused by media representation of different identities (mainly marginalized) or reworking them in new (counter) narratives, showing that the topic can be dealt with in entirely different ways. Thanks to those “grassroots narratives,” we can see/read/perceive a variety of experiences, desires, and possibilities of narrating marginalized

stories that remain underrepresented in mainstream media, even while mainstream movies such as *Happiest Season* or *The Prom* (both released in December 2020), featuring canonical lesbian relationships, are becoming more common.

However, as audiences seem to take things into their own hands, we no longer have to count on mainstream representation. In the maze of different TikTokers, YouTubers, and other creators who share their personal (but of course fictional, e.g., web-series) stories through the social network sites, we become privy to countless narratives resonating with varying types of identities. But does this really mean that we do not need (and want) to be included in mainstream popular culture (i.e., movies and TV series) anymore? Additionally, the (slowly) rising number of LGBTQIA+ representation in mainstream and alternative media brings to mind the question of (homo)normativity. Might we be witnessing a further spread of post-gay representation (cf. Monaghan), normalizing “nice and shiny” non-heteronormative identities and silencing their counter/reparative/activist voices?

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