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Fan-ning the Flame: Representations of Lesbian Romance on Cult Television, from Subtext to Main Text

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Abstract: *While promoting recent seasons of supernatural Western horror series* Wynonna Earp *(2016–), cable channel Syfy released several fan-style videos championing the show's resident lesbian couple: the protagonist's sister, Waverly, and police officer Nicole Haught (celebrated via the portmanteau "WayHaught"). In 2019, a network "shipping" its own queer characters in service of fans contrasts starkly with the televisual landscape twenty, or even ten, years prior, when viewers invested in lesbian characters and/or same-sex couples relied on subtext and fan paratexts to fuel their enthusiasm for mostly unacknowledged or thwarted relationships between female characters. In this article, I engage in a two-part interrogation of the representation of lesbian romance on cult television shows in the last twenty-five years, with a focus on* Wynonna Earp *and its historical antecedents—supernatural, sci-fi, and fantasy shows featuring women and their female companion(s) (whether close friends or lovers). This includes a historiography of the development of lesbian fan communities around certain shows from the late 1990s and early 2000s, as well as an analysis of the narrative stakes and character development in both historical and contemporary shows, like* Earp*, in order to interrogate their representations of subtext or main text romantic pairings.*

> "I swear no one ships Wayhaught more than Syfy does." (Comment by YouTube user Ariel Kreuzkamp on SyFy's video "A WayHaught Love Story")

In the opening minute and half of SyFy network's almost nine-minute tribute video to the supernatural Western series *Wynonna Earp* (created by Emily Andras, 2016–present), "A WayHaught Love Story", stylistic editing intensifies and reworks the first encounter between the characters Waverly and Nicole. The video, posted on 13 February 2019 in honour of Valentine's Day, opens with the couple's first meeting, from the show's second episode ("Keep the Home Fires Burning"). Waverly Earp (Dominique Provost-Chalkley), the sister of the show's eponymous heroine, sprays herself with a beer tap just at the moment police officer Nicole Haught (Katherine Barrell) saunters into Shorty's, the local bar where Waverly works. Nicole is immediately flirtatious, Waverly simultaneously flustered and charmed. On the show, despite the romantic overtones of their first meeting, the pair do not admit their attraction until toward the end of the season ("Bury Me with My Guns On"). However, both the shooting of the original scene and the editing of the SyFy tribute emphasise the inevitability of their romance, known by the portmanteau WayHaught.

Figure 1: "Good job you're not some guy, yeah, or this would be really, really awkward." Early in *Wynonna Earp*, the shallow focus and soft lighting of Waverly and Nicole's first meeting foreshadows their romance and signals the show's dedication to foregrounding their relationship.
Screenshot from *Wynonna Earp*, "Keep the Home Fires Burning".

In a style appropriated from fanvids, SyFy's video intercuts their initial exchange with several shots of the two women gazing at each other longingly in later episodes. As Waverly asks Nicole to turn around to preserve her modesty before pulling off her wet shirt to change, a cut matches her action to a scene late in the season where Nicole pulls off Waverly's shirt during a passionate encounter. Back to the original scene's playful climax: Waverly gets stuck while changing, forcing Nicole to free her from her shirt. A blushing Waverly sighs, "Good job you're not some guy, yeah, or this would be *really, really* awkward". Nicole ducks her head and blushes, signalling her attraction despite not being "some guy", an attraction further emphasised by the scene's gauzy focus, the soft lighting, and Waverly's stammering reply. In SyFy's edited version, the couple's awkward eye contact is punctuated by three rapid-fire cuts to split-second shots of the women kissing at different points in their relationship. As the video returns to the original scene, Waverly's embarrassed laugh and slight headshake, now coloured by SyFy's editing, imply that these moments of her and Nicole's future passion are precisely the libidinous thoughts she is trying to shake free. While the rest of the video proceeds in a more or less linear fashion, marking important moments in their "love story" and broken up by intertitle headings, these opening minutes signal an essential difference in the portrayal and promotion of WayHaught as compared to many of television's other lesbian couples, both historical and contemporary.[1]

Two aspects of this network-produced fan video highlight central features of my analysis in this article: the way SyFy "ships" these characters in its promotional material and the way the show itself visually and narratively frames Waverly and Nicole from the outset, treating them to a romantic comedy style meet-cute and emphasizing the inevitability of their romance throughout

the first season and beyond.[2] In 2019, a network "shipping" its own queer characters in service of fans contrasts starkly with the televisual landscape twenty, or even ten, years prior, when viewers invested in lesbian romantic narratives relied on subtext and fan fiction to fuel their enthusiasm for mostly unacknowledged or thwarted relationships between female characters. While queer characters are more frequently present on television in the last decade, fans have been routinely disappointed by creatives' decisions to kill off or otherwise sideline queer characters in seeming disregard for viewers' investment in fulfilling representations of LGBTQ relationships.

In this article, I engage in a two-part interrogation of the representation of lesbian romance on North American cult television shows in the last twenty-five years, taking into consideration the ways earlier studies and shows have or have not approached fan responses to female pairings, whether subtextual or canonical.[3] This will include a historiography of the development of queer female fandom around certain shows from the late 1990s and early 2000s, alongside an exploration into the ways the creatives of these shows (showrunners, writers, actors) either catered to or denied the desires of fans.[4] Secondly, I will analyse the narrative stakes and character development in *Wynonna Earp*, using this contemporary show as a case study for supportive main text romance between female characters. Overall, I contend that the attention *Wynonna Earp*'s showrunner, creatives, cast, and network pay to both the fans and the historical antecedents for representing lesbian couples on television—achieved via the acknowledgement of negative tropes, the narrative treatment of WayHaught, and the show's mise en scène and visual style—allows *Wynonna Earp*, a relatively niche programme, to flourish where other shows have floundered in the eyes of fans (Butler; Franklin; Ng; Nordin).[5]

From Subtext to Queerbaiting: Definitions and Context

The discourse around how and why fans queer texts, films, and television shows that do not explicitly represent LGBTQ characters has long been a central aspect of both fan and reception studies. While I do not intend to belabour discussions that have already been well-articulated by other scholars, a few salient points bear repeating. Building on the foundational work of Stuart Hall, Henry Jenkins, and Alexander Doty, my analysis rests on the premise that networks and producers encode programmes with certain ideologies which may or may not be taken up wholesale or in part by viewers (Hall) and that viewers' relationships with television series are participatory, agentic, and often savvy to industry norms and codes, especially when it comes to fans as singularly invested in their objects of affection and focus (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*). Moreover, Doty reminds us the dominant viewing position for queer viewers, rather than an alternate or oppositional one, may be to interpret heterosexual characters or even whole series as queer (xii). This position takes on a different quality when the show asserts *itself* as queer or, at least, queer-friendly.

As the global television landscape has become more progressive, LGBTQ characters have appeared in various guises, although queer life has arguably been depicted in sometimes-coded ways for far longer than many studies acknowledge (Villarejo). In the past two decades, North American television producers and network executives, in particular, have begun to recognise both the social and financial value of marketing explicitly toward queer viewers (Himberg), as well as the cultural cache of engaging with those viewers, sometimes reciprocally, in online and offline

spaces (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*). Both niche marketing and targeted viewer engagement are made possible in part by shifts in the television landscape toward extensive proliferation of channels, on-demand platforms, and streaming services. My focus on cult television shows—including some supernatural, fantasy, and science fiction genre shows, as well as shows homing in on subcultures that fans may be drawn to—follows two parallel tendencies. Firstly, the most active fandoms are often linked to these types of shows, as further discussed by Sara Gwenllian-Jones in her essay on romantic pairings and cult television. Secondly, Gwenllian-Jones argues, the world-building, rich narrative flexibility, and refusal of the status quo underscored by cult shows means their narratives frequently eschew heteronormative domestic bliss: "Successful primary relationships in cult television series, then, are either thwarted heterosexual relationships or same-sex pairings" (127). Up until recently, these latter pairings were rarely ones encouraged or made explicit by the shows themselves, with same-sex pairings arising via fan interpretations online and through fan fiction, art, and videos.

The terms *subtext* and *queerbaiting* bear parsing out, as they make explicit the transition between networks' unwillingness or inability to overtly represent LGBTQ characters and their eventual marketing of queer narratives. Subtext generally refers to the practice of either encoding or decoding interpretative clues that gesture toward a romantic relationship between a canonically platonic pair of characters, whereas queerbaiting speaks to a more recent phenomenon in which programmes pander to viewers through the often-unmet promise of incorporating queer characters or romantic couplings. Joseph Brennan emphasises the difference as one of intention, "an intent to capture (queerbaiting) over an intent to code (subtext)" (12). Emma Nordin delineates this distinction further, expanding on uses of the term queerbaiting in contemporary fandom and scholarship to also apply to shows in which queer characters have initial representation before being sidelined or even killed. This broadening of the term is particularly instructive when analysing shows that *do* include queer characters, but perhaps do not treat them with the respect, attention, or care fans crave.

To wit, in a well-documented example, the producers of the cult historical fantasy series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001)—discussed further below—were well aware of the show's lesbian following. While frequently catering to these fans' desire to see companions Xena (Lucy Lawless) and Gabrielle (Renee O'Connor) as a romantic couple, the writers and actors were limited by what executives, advertisers, and the distributor (NBC Universal) would allow them to broadcast (Abrams). *Xena* functions as a prime example of subtext willingly embedded in the narrative on the part of its creatives to be then eagerly received by fans. Alternatively, The CW's post-apocalyptic show *The 100* (2014–20) has become a lightning rod for discussions around both queerbaiting and the oft-cited "bury your gays" trope (Butler; Waggoner). While the show does depict queer characters, in 2016, fans of a much-beloved same-sex couple on the show, Clarke (Eliza Taylor) and Lexa (Alycia Debnam-Carey), were devastated by the unexpected, and seemingly unnecessary, death of the latter woman. Social media protests about *The 100* prompted an article by popular queer women's website Autostraddle decrying the then 65 deaths of lesbian and bisexual characters on television. Shockingly, in the four years since its publication, the number of character deaths in the periodically updated post has risen to 212 (Riese).

LGBTQ characters are not only at risk of dying or being written out of their narratives, but also fall victim to the same gender and race imbalance plaguing much of the film and television

industry. 2019–20 is the first television season in the fifteen years LGBTQ advocacy organization GLAAD has been publishing its "Where We Are on TV" report of LGBTQ characters on American television, in which female and non-binary LGBTQ characters outnumber male characters on current shows (14). According to GLAAD, LGBTQ characters of colour are also beginning to see a strong uptick, representing over half of all LGBTQ characters last year (16). Historically, lesbian and bisexual women have received far less airtime and, arguably, less attention even in fan scholarship. Eve Ng and Julie Levin Russo offer the term "'queer female fandom' as an aspirational frame for new scholarship" (1.4), contending that "fans (many of them youth) are engaging with the genre's history and collectively extending a critical awareness of its imbrication with the history of queer female representation". (1.16) In this article, I utilise their term queer female fandom to clarify my focus—on representations of lesbian and bisexual characters and the fans who seek them out—but also to acknowledge that not everyone within these fan communities identifies as LGBTQ, or as a woman, even though they are invested in the development of a romantic relationship between two female characters on a given show.

Fans, Followers, and Femslash: Resurrecting the Author

Fans' individual reasons for seeking out representations of lesbian romance vary widely and may be deeply personal, but the depth of investment in queer female fandom stems from one overarching source: the desire for representation. What constitutes representation, what counts as good, positive, or successful representation, and, crucially, the divergent ways fans and creatives imagine how queer female representation should look remains the central sticking point of most, if not all, debates around the depiction of lesbian romance on television, from subtext to main text. As Ng elaborates, "Queer contextuality, then, informs how viewers assess (1) the validity of reading queerness in a text, (2) the political and economic feasibility (particularly in regard to studio and network financial considerations) of having a canonical LGBT narrative, and (3) the quality of the canonical LGBT narratives that are produced" (2.7). In other words, context—social, political, financial, industrial—becomes an essential marker for whether queer representations are considered successful by fans (making shows worthy of attention) and by networks (making shows worthy of renewal).

Xena is often touted as the example *par excellence* of reciprocal subtext, in which the producers, writers, and cast purposely embedded wink-wink-nod suggestions of Xena and Gabrielle's lesbian bona fides when network executives barred creatives from explicitly outing the characters. In recent interviews, Lawless, O'Connor, co-creator Robert Tapert, and others frequently assert that Xena and Gabrielle were a romantic couple, despite their inability to include an explicit main text acknowledgement of the characters' sexuality (Abrams; Yeo). Openly lesbian producer Liz Friedman maintains that inserting subtext was "one of the best parts of the job, getting to throw in references that I know the fans who are interested in that will pick up on, but don't necessarily flash any irrevocable red lights" (qtd. in Solebello).

Moreover, fans were all the more able to pick up on and discuss these references because *Xena's* run was perfectly timed for a burgeoning community to find space together online for the first time. Elena Maris argues that this early online fan activity and connections between *Xena* creatives and fans may have allowed LGBTQ fans greater input into shaping the show than they

would have had in a pre-internet age. Maris points to specific examples of fan intervention and response, further contending that fans, aware that *Xena* creatives often visited fan spaces incognito, used "relationships with showrunners to fulfill their desires on-screen" (130). Hence, the final season of *Xena,* while still never quite overt in its depiction of lesbian romance, nevertheless comes across as a season-long tribute to Xena and Gabrielle's love story, with the characters frequently declaring their affection and referring to each other as soulmates.

Some fans and scholars argue that *Xena,* for all its celebratory subtext, nevertheless falls victim to the "bury your gays" trope. In the series finale, Xena intentionally subjects herself to a brutal slaughter at the hands of her enemy, subsequently rejecting the option of resurrection offered to her by Gabrielle in order to protect thousands of innocent souls whose salvation depends on her remaining dead. Xena's death was decried by many fans and critics as the television network's attempt to undermine her feminist viability and power (Crosby). However, without belabouring what would amount to a tangential discussion, I contend that Xena's death occurring at the end of the series makes all the difference contextually. In this final episode ("A Friend in Need, Part 2"), Xena chooses death willingly and engages in the ultimate act of transference—bestowing, symbolically and otherwise, her strength and power to Gabrielle. The two share a kiss, their only one on the show, making their relationship overtly physical for the first time. While Xena's death is permanent, the episode emphasises that she will forever remain by Gabrielle's side, literally, as a spirit. The entire series, in fact, takes great pains to assert that Xena and Gabrielle are soulmates and that they will reunite in later reincarnations, a mysticism upon which the show insists, and which fits seamlessly into its anachronous, fantastical version of ancient Greece.

Another cult show from this era, supernatural action series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), also inspired both adulation and ire from its queer female fandom when supporting character Willow (Alyson Hannigan) fell in love with fellow witch Tara (Amber Benson) only to have her lover killed two seasons later. While creator Joss Whedon assured cast and crew that Tara's death was narratively necessary, he and showrunner at the time Marti Noxon were shocked by the level of fan vitriol at the decision to kill Tara (Bacon). In many ways, Tara's death functions in a similar way to Lexa's death on *The 100,* with fans shocked, dismayed, and left in a double bind (Waggoner 1886). The dearth of queer female pairings on television meant two seemingly oppositional things simultaneously. One, Tara's death, whether narratively necessary or even a crucial catalyst of Willow's continuing queer journey (Keegan), represented a substantial blow to the queer female fans looking for positive representations that were otherwise difficult to come by (Collier, et. al; Waggoner). Two, the absence of other queer female characters on television meant that completely abandoning *Buffy* in its final season also meant abandoning the character of Willow, who went on to date another woman after recovering from her loss. In this conflict we can see how changes in fan culture and its articulation online come up against industry creatives' authorial ownership of their characters and narratives.

In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins articulates how the rise of the internet and social media shifted fan culture from marginal to mainstream, with early fan scholars at first "drawn toward the idea of 'fan culture' as operating in the shadows of, in response to, as well as an alternative to commercial culture". However, "across the past decade, the Web has brought these consumers from the margins of the media industry into the spotlight" (246). It is through this spotlight that we can see how fans can form extensive communities around certain pairings, as well as rapidly

mobilise, "to agitate for their interests as lovers of queer women […using] both brash guerrilla tactics like rapid-response Twitter storms and sophisticated forms of critique, which increasingly generate enough impact to gain mainstream attention" (Ng and Russo, 2.3). Louisa Ellen Stein interrogates how media producers identify fans as both valuable consumers and a potential threat, constantly seeking ways to "redefine their media production as something that incorporates the tastes and tendencies of the millennial generation while still maintaining television's cultural and aesthetic norms and hegemonic centrality" (153). This desire for "hegemonic centrality" seems antithetical to the ethos of *Wynonna Earp*, an analysis of which forms the remainder of this article.

Representation in Purgatory: The WayHaught Phenomenon

Referencing her interview with *Wynonna Earp*'s social media manager, Natalie Zina Walschots, who describes Earpers (fans of the show) as "incredibly passionate, engaged fans who created a community that they wanted to see in the world", Jacinta Yanders argues that members of what showrunner Emily Andras calls the "best fandom ever" are savvy to "a perceived gap to be filled as well as the fact that though they may not technically be 'in charge', fans put in significant work to construct this community" (5.5). A show epitomising cult television, *Wynonna Earp* has an incredibly loyal fan base, due in large part to the extensive interaction Andras and her cast have with fans online, via fan podcasts and other semi-professional fan outputs, and in person at fan conventions such as ComicCon, ClexaCon, Earp-a-palooza, and the Canadian Earper Homestead Convention. When the show faced financial difficulties before the shooting of its fourth season, fans rallied under the #FightForWynonna hashtag (Goldberg). Their overwhelming support for the show involved extensive social media campaigning and the purchase of hundreds of billboards around the world ("*Wynonna Earp* Fans"). Andras freely admits that "it's an underdog and it's been a big fight the whole time", crediting the fans, cast and crew with the show's survival ("HomeCon 2nd Edition").

Based on comic books by Beau Smith, the series, which Andras initially pitched as "*Frozen* meets *Buffy*" (Dickens), borrows elements familiar to viewers of other cult genre shows, including *Xena'*s merging of myth and history and *Buffy*'s reliance on an ensemble cast-*qua*-team, all working to support the chosen one, a woman destined to fight evil with a power only she possesses. In the series, Wynonna, a conflicted rebel outcast, returns home to Purgatory, a small town in the fictional Ghost River Triangle, which rests in the vicinity of the border between Northern Montana and Southern Alberta (the show is shot on location in Calgary and co-distributed by the American SyFy and the Canadian CTW Sci-Fi networks) only to find herself embroiled in the curse she had left home to escape. Legend has it that her ancestor Wyatt Earp, a real-life gunslinger, killed seventy-seven men, all of whom will rise from the dead as demonic Revenants each time an Earp heir dies. To break the curse, Wynonna must send each of these Revenants back to Hell by shooting them with Wyatt's enchanted gun, Peacemaker, without dying herself. Wynonna is a deeply flawed yet sympathetic character, whose relationship with her sister, Waverly, is arguably the central love story of the show, coming to the fore even amidst the show's revelry in its campy drama, punchy one-liners, thrilling shoot-outs, sex and alcohol, and demon hunting.

It is all the more remarkable then that the series also engages Waverly in a significant romantic narrative with Nicole. While Wynonna has her share of sex partners, her complicated

love triangle with the show's two main male characters, the immortal Doc Holliday and the supernatural Agent Dolls, is rife with drama and shows few signs of ending happily ever after, even after Dolls dies in season 3. On the contrary, in a rare occurrence for lesbian couples on television, Waverly and Nicole's relationship has lasted through three and half seasons so far.[6] Canadian actor Barrell (Nicole) and the British Provost-Chalkley (Waverly) frequently discuss in interviews and at fan conventions the tremendous responsibility they feel toward fans in terms of representing their characters both positively and realistically.[7] At a "WayHaught Panel" during ClexaCon 2018 (a fan convention founded as a celebration of lesbian and bisexual women on television in response to *The 100*'s Clarke/Lexa debacle), Barrell remarked how grateful she felt to be embraced by the Earpers: "I feel like we're all part of a change." Provost-Chalkley similarly explained throughout the conversation how she hoped WayHaught could be about the "representation that you guys deserve". Both women, who have come out publicly themselves as members of the LGBTQ community ("Officer Haught"; Provost-Chalkley), further asserted how horrified they were when they first realised how problematic or absent LGBTQ representation had been before they became part of the WayHaught phenomenon.

It is worth noting that WayHaught, while remarkable in its thoughtful depiction of lesbian romance, is still centred around two white women. The show includes a number of characters of colour, but the majority of them, with the exception of Agent Dolls and, later, a scientist named Jeremy Chetri (Varun Saranga), who is incidentally also gay, are one-offs or only occasionally recurring (such as revenant-ally Rosita Bustillos (Tamara Duarte) and vampire Kate (Chantel Riley)). On her Twitter feed (@emtothea) and, more recently, at virtual conventions, Andras frequently engages with Black, Indigenous, and Latinx fans who take issue with the show's depiction of these characters and its inclusion of characters of colour more broadly. While she expresses a desire to increase the show's racial and ethnic inclusivity, Andras often cites the structural issues in Canadian television that have held her and others back (Liszewski). Nevertheless, the fact that she is willing to have these conversations with fans in a public forum is noteworthy. This further speaks to the well-established investment in fan's needs and desires for representation writ large as evinced by Andras and *Wynonna Earp*'s other creatives.

"WayHaught Is Endgame": Narrative, Mise en scène, and Challenging Tropes

SyFy's WayHaught tribute video has, as of August 2020, over ten million views on YouTube, signalling its potential as a promotional and representational vehicle for the show. While, in an essay on LGBTQ fan-vidding, Elisa Kreisinger states that "New media tools and technologies enable creators to deconstruct appropriated pop culture texts and […recreate] more diverse and affirming narratives of representation", this understanding of vidding practices shifts when romance is itself part of the main text of the show (1.1). Similarly, Russo argues that "femslash vids" are "part of a conversation about the ways lesbian romance is visible (or invisible) in the media, one which offers critical analysis of representation but still looks for our culture's dominant language of love" (1.7). SyFy's video tribute illustrates the extent to which not only the network but also the show itself is savvy to the many ways lesbian romance has been made invisible, downplayed, or rendered inert via a character's death or exclusion. Its final two intertitles even assert key aspects of fans' investment in lesbian romance narratives. While the tribute's final intertitle, "They Live Happily Ever After?" toys with fans' anticipation about things to come in

season 4, the video's penultimate statement, "WayHaught is Endgame" affirms fan desires and the show's own framing of Waverly and Nicole as lovers destined to be and stay together. In this final section, I will briefly analyse moments from key episodes of the couple's love story in order to examine the ways the show's mise en scène and narrative emphasise creatives' knowledge of the history of queer female fandom, its tropes, and fans' response to them.[8]

While Nicole and Waverly's relationship has its ups and downs through the run of the show, including a bout of demon possession and a brief split, perhaps no trope better illustrates the enduring potential of a relationship than that of the alternate universe. In "Gone as a Girl Can Get", a misguided witch makes a deal with a demon to erase Wynonna from the timeline. With Wynonna gone, her allies find themselves with no memory of her presence and with substantially altered lives: Doc Holliday is the leader of an evil Revenant gang rather than part of Wynonna's team; Nicole is still a police officer, but one who's only suspicious of Purgatory's supernatural elements rather than working as an active force against them; and Waverly is engaged to be married, to a man. And yet, in Waverly and Nicole's first encounter on-screen in this new reality, viewers are reminded about the inexorable nature of their love. An at-first unremarkable shot of Nicole at her desk in the police station suddenly shifts into slow motion, the lighting haloed and the focus soft, as Waverly walks into the room, delivering Nicole's lunch. A pop love song plays on the soundtrack as the two women grin goofily at each other during Waverly's approach. The scene reverts to normal speed and lighting as the two speak, but Nicole remains visibly affected by Waverly's presence; even in this alternative timeline, their intimate connection lingers.

In a later scene in Nicole's police cruiser, Waverly asks "Have you ever met someone and instantly known in your heart that they meant something to you?" The question and Nicole's shy response—"I might kind of get that"—again emphasise the "true" nature of their love, reinforced when the Iron Witch briefly lifts the glamour governing the alternate reality and Waverly and Nicole remember that they had been a couple. At the end of the episode, the two women willingly sacrifice themselves by blowing up a barn, themselves in it, and the enchanted trophy linked to Wynonna's disappearance in order to get both their love and Wynonna back. It is notable that this episode mirrors a similar *Xena* episode in which Xena and Gabrielle find themselves trapped in an alternate reality where they are strangers ("When Fates Collide"). When they meet, Gabrielle, as a travelling playwright, and Xena, as Roman empress and wife of Julius Caesar, are immediately drawn to each other. When Xena dies on the cross, accused of treason after trying to protect Gabrielle from a jealous Caesar and his witch minion Alti, Gabrielle, grief-stricken, sets fire to The Fates' loom in order to restore their original timeline. In both episodes, the shows emphasise the immediate magnetism between the respective couples, even though their relationships and memories have been altered. Both couples are willing to die together or even risk world destruction in order to be together again (although Waverly's response is split by her desire for Nicole and the promise of Wynonna's return).

In defiance of the "bury your gays" trope, two episodes highlight the longevity and centrality of WayHaught to the show's narrative so far, while also illuminating how the show's creatives acknowledge fan concerns. WayHaught moments punctuate each season, with both a strong emphasis on the couple in the show's most recent fourth season and a dedication to developing their relationship notable from its first season onward. To wit, in the season 1 finale, "I Walk the Line", the eldest Earp sister, Willa, having recently returned after two decades during

which Waverly and Wynonna presumed her dead, threatens Nicole in order to coerce Wynonna into giving her Peacemaker. Waverly tearfully begs Wynonna to give Willa the gun to save Nicole, eventually outing herself by whispering, "I love her." Wynonna's immediate acquiescence to her sister's plea not only signals the deep bond of their devotion and trust, but also Waverly's refusal to back down from acknowledging her love. When Willa shoots Nicole anyway, the show does not prolong viewers' fear surrounding Nicole's possible death, instead revealing (after the commercial break) that she was wearing a bullet-proof vest. Waverly and Nicole kiss gratefully and, rather than comment on her sister's newly revealed interest in women, Wynonna merely quips, "finally picked the smart one", signalling her unconditional acceptance.

Strikingly, it is the other characters who frequently safeguard Nicole and Waverly for each other, speaking to the way the series itself protects and highlights the primacy of WayHaught alongside its dramatic and supernatural plots. The episode "Jolene" exemplifies this investment in WayHaught as central to the show and its characters. In it, Waverly, who has discovered by now that she is only Wynonna's half-sister, and is on her way to discovering that she is also half-angel, meets her counterpart, a demonic twin bound to Waverly since she was a baby. The demon Jolene turns Waverly's friends and family against her in order to get Waverly to kill herself so Jolene can be free. While Nicole at first falls under the demon's spell like everyone else, she eventually manages to resist Jolene's mind control when the demon tries to seduce her. During their final confrontation, Jolene attempts to convince Waverly that no one loves her, that she is alone, but Waverly tearfully realises that Wynonna and Nicole will always love her, leading her to remember the love and loyalty of all her friends and family. The setting, décor, and lighting of the dire, grey greenhouse where Jolene brings Waverly to encourage the latter's suicide serves as a visualisation of Waverly's despair, with dead plant life and stunted sunlight barely filtering through the walls. Waverly's resistance, and Wynonna's eventual rescue of her sister, draws the youngest Earp back into the light both figuratively and literally. At the end of the episode, she and Nicole comfort each other, now in the soft, warm natural lighting of Waverly's bedroom. Notably, after the original airing of the episode, Andras posted a supportive message to fans struggling with anxiety or depression along with the number of a suicide prevention hotline, garnering many retweets by her followers.

Lastly, in the season 3 finale, "War Paint", Nicole and Waverly spend much of the episode separated but constantly searching for each other. When Doc rescues Nicole from the side of the road after she has suffered a mortal wound at the hands of a demon, Waverly's recently returned angel father, Julian, sacrifices his divine power in order to save her. When he briefly hesitates, Wynonna's insistence that Nicole is "the love of your daughter's life", emboldens him. In the final moments of the episode, as Waverly is drawn against her will into the Garden of Eden, Doc offers himself up as Waverly's weapon, entering the Garden to retrieve her on behalf of both Wynonna and Nicole. Rather than sacrifice story for romance or subjugate romance in favour of conflict, *Wynonna Earp* frames Waverly's relationships with both Wynonna and Nicole as essential to its structure as a series.

Conclusion

As I was writing this article, SyFy announced a promotional partnership with GLAAD in honour of June 2020's Pride month, including a temporary shift from SyFy's "It's a Fan Thing" tagline to the newly-coined, "It's a Pride Thing" (Ramos). As part of this celebration, "#WayHaught Wednesdays" offered morning marathons of episodes from seasons 1 and 2 featuring Waverly and Nicole moments (notably, the network's Pride celebration also included *Xena* marathons). Here again, SyFy recognises the queer and representational potential of *Wynonna Earp*, both capitalising on and supporting WayHaught fans in its Pride content. In an age in which the television market is increasingly saturated and dispersed, meaningful and responsive engagement with fans and their desire for inclusive representation may prove more significant for a show's success and enduring resonance than bowing to the more conservative demands of networks catering to larger, mainstream audiences.

Andras, too, merges promotion of the show alongside her support of fans, illustrated in myriad examples from her Twitter account (@emtothea), but, notably, in a long thread near the outset of the 2020 pandemic:

> I love cons, maybe more than anyone. The chance to meet fans, to watch you meet and celebrate the cast, to meet each other […] to meet older LGBTQ partners who wish they'd had a show like this when they were growing up — they're the ones who always make me cry, wistful but happy for this new generation who can #WayHaught to their hearts content, publicly, if they want to [...] the cons WILL happen again, as long as you want us to do them! But now we need to stay safe. All of us. I do not want to lose a single Earper to this thing. That's a godamn [*sic*] order. Stay inside. Use #EarperSupport if feeling overwhelmed. And wait for season four. We <3 you.

Leveraging her position as showrunner, her connection to fans, the power and appeal of WayHaught, and her social media acumen, Andras's tweet signals a new understanding of both historical underpinnings of queer female fandom and its future potential. Moreover, Andras's tweet, the show itself, and SyFy's promotion of WayHaught speak to a broader recognition of the influence of *Wynonna Earp,* for its fans, in general, and its queer fans, in particular, over a wider political, social, and cultural network of support and representation beyond the screen.

Notes

[1] The intertitle headings read, in order: "They Meet", "They Fall in Love", "They Share Trauma", "They Get It On", "There's Dancing", "There's Drama", "But Then They Make Up", "Relationship Goals", "WayHaught is Endgame", and "They Live Happily Ever After?". While I use the shorthand terms "lesbian couple" and "lesbian romance" throughout my article, I only do so to note that the relationships I discuss are between women, although in some cases individual characters may be bisexual or may not have explicitly labelled their sexuality. In the case of WayHaught, Nicole identifies as a lesbian and Waverly as bisexual.

[2] Shipping is a term central to fan discourse, particularly relevant to the writing of fan fiction, as well as the creation of fan art and fan videos. Short for "relationship", to "ship" means to invest emotional energy in a particular on-screen couple, whether they are canonically in a relationship or not.

[3] For further discussion of what constitutes a cult television show see Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta E. Pearson's *Cult Television*.

[4] As I discuss further below, I borrow the term "queer female fandom" from Eve Ng and Julie Levin Russo's 2017 article.

[5] Nielsen ratings for *Wynonna Earp* average around a half-million viewers for seasons 1–3, whereas the season 4 premiere, after a two-year hiatus, did comparatively well with an estimated 1.2 million multiplatform viewers ("*Wynonna Earp*: Season Three"; Jacobs). Despite its dedicated fanbase and decent ratings in the US and Canada, some of the show's financial difficulties had to do with the finances of its production company, IDW Entertainment, and issues securing international sales (Goldberg).

[6] The show's fourth season was finally given the green light in the summer of 2019, and shooting began in January 2020, only to be interrupted due to the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time of writing this article, filming has resumed and the first half of season four has aired on both Canadian and American networks after a two-year hiatus, with the remainder set to air in early 2021.

[7] I mention their nationalities here because both women have remarked on how US television and society specifically treats LGBTQ individuals in contrast to their experiences in Canada and the UK. In addition, the actors are speaking from their personal experiences and interactions with fans, so their idea of what is "realistic" or "positive" may vary widely from academic understandings of those terms.

[8] While Andras and other members of her creative team have spoken in interviews and on social media about the importance of LGBTQ representation, I cannot presume to know exactly who knows what in terms of the history of subtext, queerbaiting, and/or queer female fandom. Rather, I propose that the show itself indicates an understanding of these concepts, with the acknowledgment that television productions include dozens of individuals, many of whom could have contributed to this knowledge, in addition to fan/viewer feedback.

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