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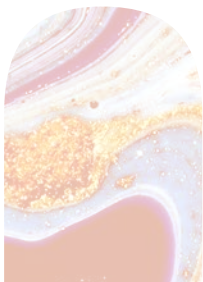
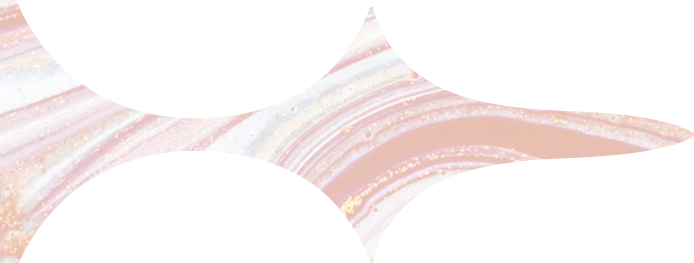
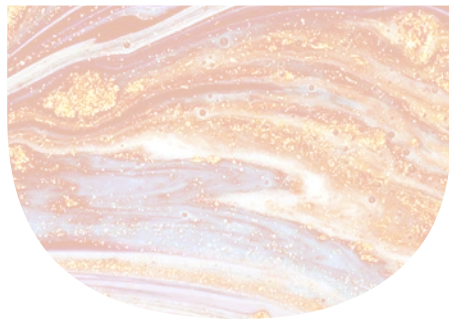
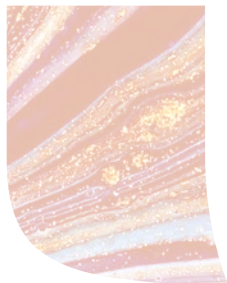
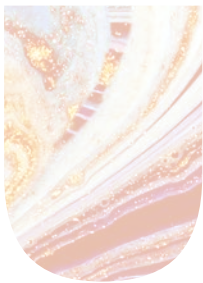
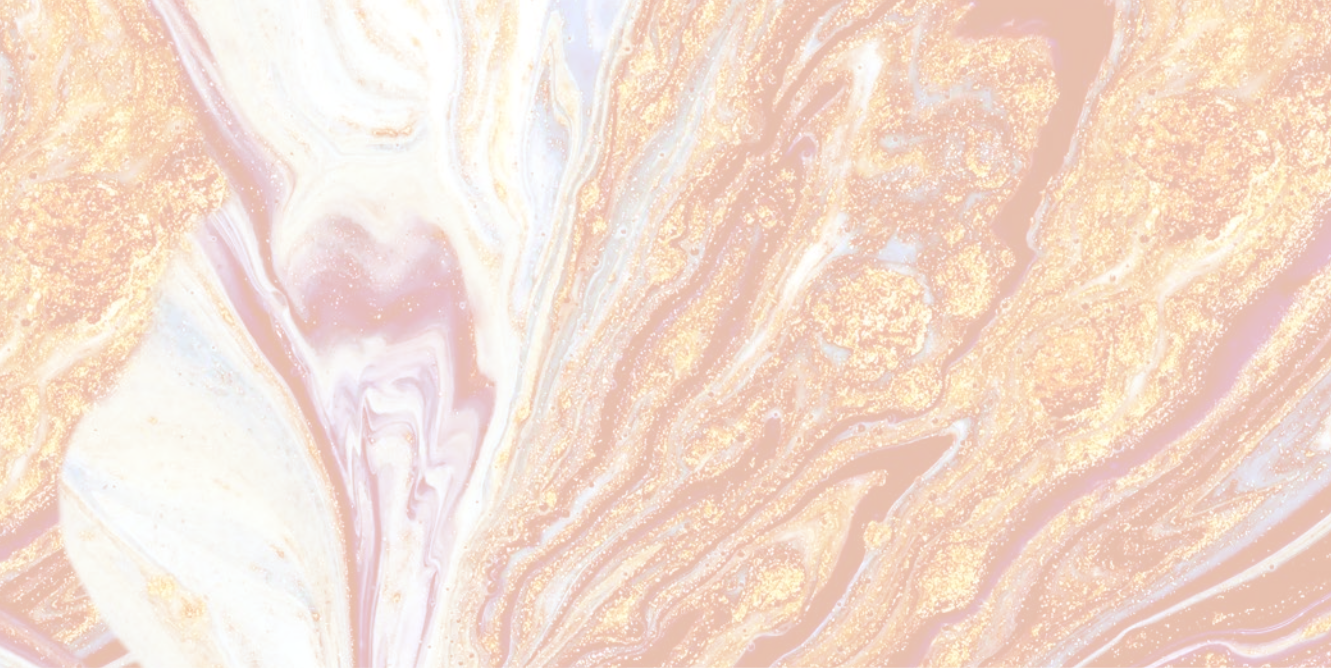
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TV in the Social Media Era as a Methodological Challenge for Historians: The Case of ‘Tarlos’ in 9-1-1: Lone Star

ABSTRACT

This article explores the methodological issues involved in studying the history of television in the digital age, emphasising the legitimacy and importance of investigating contemporary phenomena through the application of rigorous methodologies that ensure critical engagement with contemporary artefacts. By taking as a case study the popular queer couple known as ‘Tarlos’ from the Fox TV show *9-1-1: Lone Star*, it analyses interactions between fans, actors and showrunners, and highlights the ways in which social media is transforming production, reception and acting. It argues that television is not a linear narrative, but an interconnected process involving digital platforms and audience engagement, as well as being an active agent in civic discourse and a central medium for exploring identity, representation and inclusivity. It concludes that the ‘Tarlos’ phenomenon shows how digital platforms amplify the cultural and emotional dimensions of television, creating spaces in which audiences actively participate in meaning-making processes. These must be studied and preserved in the present to avoid them falling into oblivion due to the fragility of the digital dimension.

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Keywords: Historiography of recent events, Television and social media, Fandom studies, History of emotions, Forms of political engagement, LGBTQIA+ representation, Cultural identity in media, *9-1-1: Lone Star*

Methodological issues

The term television has always referred to a complex experience that encompasses the technologies that make it possible, the content that is offered, the commercial services associated with it, the ratings, and the enjoyment of the product. This is also true of our present experience with websites, apps and mobile devices, which have reorganised and multiplied traditional services, and made them more accessible.¹ For the historian observing its evolution, television is therefore not an object, but a process,² in which the convergence of media continually challenges the relationship and balance of power between networks and viewers, but also the boundaries between disciplines. This article focuses on what the current developments entail for television historians, part of whose task is to deal with recent events and trends, and argues that television is an experience that also includes digital media content. It thus considers television itself as a joint cultural artefact of content, technology and feedback, including reception through social media.

It might seem preposterous for historians to study recent events, according to the widespread preconception that it is only possible to write history if a period of time has elapsed between the subjects and the scholars, to ensure that political passions attached to a particular event have receded, and that the main archival and documentary sources are fully available. However, historians have always written under the pressure of the time they live in and this has not prevented them from laying the foundations for reliable and useful reflections, «For it is the recent past on which people draw most for historical analogies and predictions».³ The point, in fact, is not temporal distance from the events, but adherence to a specific methodology: ascertaining and critically evaluating the facts, referring to a variety of sources, comparing different versions, and being willing to constantly check one's own judgement. Presentism—meaning «the

The author would like to thank the Instagram users @itsechomusic, @t.arlos (Milena P.), @melanfin, @tarlosxx and @maddiee96_art for responding to the interview regarding their digital activities and for allowing the publication of excerpts from them. The quotation of posts and comments taken from social media, even if publicly available, has been kept to a minimum due to privacy issues and care has been taken not to make them directly traceable. The links were last accessed on 9 December 2024.

1 For the extensive debate between the first and second decade of the century see, at least, Graeme Turner, Jinna Tay (eds.), *Television Studies After TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era*. London-New York: Routledge, 2009; Michael Kackman et al., *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence*. New York: Routledge, 2011; Jostein Gripsrud, *Relocating Television: Television in the Digital Context*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012.

2 Markus Stauff, Judith Keilbach, *When old media never stopped being new: Television's history as an ongoing experiment*, in Jan Teurlings, Marijke de Valck (eds.), *After the Break: Television Theory Today*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013, 79-98.

3 John Tosh (with Séan Lang), *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*. 4th ed. Harlow: Pearson, 2006, 50.

sense that only the present exists»⁴—is then prevented by historians doing what they do best, namely stepping back and observing with their critical abilities. This means that it is necessary for historians to engage with the field of social media, to interpret their digital present, particularly with regard to artistic production and the testimonies of creators, which are of great interest but can be volatile. This article, based on a case study, argues that we must keep track of discussions and cause-and-effect relationships in the field of television between social media and production and artistic realities, regardless of the fate of the digital sources themselves (posts, GIFs, fan fiction and art), which we cannot yet predict. In brief, this goes beyond the—unquestionably important—issues of document archiving and source preservation,⁵ and concerns the way contemporary digital culture interacts with the audience's emotions and creative processes, influencing the production, reception and perception of television content, transforming them into broader cultural phenomena.

Historians may like to study technology and its effects, but they are mainly interested in the human aspect (sensitivities, emotions, tastes, morals, perceptions and political actions), that is the experience related to television, being history, ultimately, the study of human relationships, even in an era when human agency partially stems from non-human interaction (i.e., in the case of electronic devices).⁶ The focus on representation is a way of investigating how television can have a role «in the public process of constructing, contesting or maintaining the civic discourse on social cohesion».⁷ It can be argued, following Stuart Hall, that media do not simply reflect the world as it is, but shape it according to particular views or ideologies,⁸ and scholars have been exploring for some time how audiovisual media reinforce the identity of social groups and have an impact especially on ethnical identities, gender representations and sexual orientation.

4 François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, XV.

5 An updated list of Web archiving initiatives can be found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Web_archiving_initiatives. On the complex task of archiving social media, which requires an integrated and interdisciplinary perspective, see Zeynep Pehlivan, Jérôme Thièvre, Thomas Drugeon, *Archiving Social Media: The Case of Twitter*, in Daniel Gomes, Elena Demidova, Jane Winters, Thomas Risse (eds.), *The Past Web: Exploring Web Archives*. Cham: Springer, 2021; Beatrice Cannelli, Marta Musso, *Social media as part of personal digital archives: exploring users' practices and service providers' policies regarding the preservation of digital memories*, in «Archival Science», 22, 2022, 259-283, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-021-09379-8>.

6 Franck Cochoy, Joe Deville, Lix Mcfall (eds.), *Markets and the Arts of Attachment*. London: Routledge, 2017. For a recent reflection on a non-human-centred historical approach see Whitney Barlow Robles, *On Nonhuman Agency*, in «The Journal of Interdisciplinary History», 54 (3), 2024, 305-321, https://doi.org/10.1162/jinh_a_02000.

7 Elfriede Fürsich, *Media and the representation of Others*, in «International Social Science Journal», 61 (199), 2010, 113, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2451.2010.01751.x>.

8 Stuart Hall, *Introduction*, in Stuart Hall, Sean Nixon, Jessica Evans (eds.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. 3rd edition, London: Sage, 2024, 1-10.

However, it should be noted that, in public discourse, representation is restricted to media representation, i.e., the way groups and communities are portrayed. This vision is understandably inclined to push for greater inclusion and diversity through think tanks and advocacy groups and has become a crucial political and cultural junction for understanding the present day, heightened globally by the Black Lives Matter movement. Historians—even those not directly involved in research on minorities and discrimination—cannot shy away from breathing the spirit of the times, adapting their questions to the demands of their contemporaries. This is all the more true for those who deal with the history of television, since the entertainment industry refers to that form of considering representation, particularly in Hollywood. Although, in fact, there is no law concerning inclusivity, the combination of guidelines (mostly internal to studios and platforms) and societal pressure strongly encourages it.⁹

This article examines the show *9-1-1: Lone Star* to consider the ways in which historians are not only legitimised to deal with current developments in the television landscape, but are compelled to keep abreast of social trends regarding the portrayal of queer characters and minorities, to initiate reflection and propose interpretations that can be taken up in the future, and to ensure that relevant issues arising in the digital world are not erased.

The case study: *9-1-1: Lone Star*

9-1-1: Lone Star premiered in January 2020 and will conclude in the United States with the fifth season finale in February 2025.¹⁰ It airs on the US broadcast television network Fox, a channel openly aligned with the right wing, but whose entertainment content is not politically explicit (not least due to its recent relationship with Disney). The fact that *9-1-1: Lone Star* is not a conservative series is clear when one considers the names of its creators: Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk and Tim Minear, joined by executive producer and writer Rashad Raisani. Among these, the prolific Murphy stands out as creator of acclaimed shows such as *Glee* (2009-2015), praised for its positive representation of LGBTQIA+ characters, and *Pose* (2018-2021), which cast numerous transgender actors.

From a structural point of view, the show falls into the classic category of procedural dramas. This genre is based on the realistic reconstruction of the working activity of professionals—in this case first responders, mainly firefighters and paramedics—and brings psychological comfort, as if seeing the suffering of others being soothed

⁹ See for instance the *Representation and Inclusion Standards* of the the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (<https://www.oscars.org/awards/representation-and-inclusion-standards>).

¹⁰ In Italy, *9-1-1: Lone Star* aired from June 2020 on Fox (on Sky satellite platform) and on Rai 2 from February 2021.

on screen might also play a cathartic function for the viewer. However, *9-1-1: Lone Star* approaches the serial structure in terms of the characters' evolution through the seasons and is a fitting case study, although so far not considered by scholars,¹¹ since it attracted spasmodic social media attention even before its debut. Moreover, according to the thesis of this article, it is social media itself that has affirmatively influenced the development of characters and storylines. In addition, *9-1-1: Lone Star* does not stand alone, but is part of a franchise that is reshaping this hybrid genre, being a companion series (technically not a spin-off) of *9-1-1*, also conceived by Murphy, Falchuk, and Minear, which started in 2018 and is still in production, and which benefits from the presence of A-list stars (Angela Bassett, Peter Krause, Jennifer Love Hewitt) and a budget that allows for dramatic rescues.

9-1-1: Lone Star, borrowing from the successful formula already pioneered by *9-1-1*, also involves more or less dramatic emergencies in each episode and benefits from the presence of famous actors, in particular Rob Lowe, a star since the 1980s, who also serves as co-executive producer of the series, and Liv Tyler (although only for season 1). The show tells the story of the refined Manhattan firefighter 'Owen Strand' (played by Lowe), diagnosed with lung cancer 20 years after his rescue efforts following the attacks on the World Trade Center, and his son 'TK Strand' (played by Ronen Rubinstein), also a firefighter, who succumbs again to opioid addiction when he discovers that his boyfriend, whom he has proposed to, is cheating on him. After saving his son from an overdose (a probable suicide attempt), 'Owen' decides to accept an unlikely offer from the Austin Deputy Fire Chief to rebuild Fire Station 126, which was struck by a tragedy that killed all but one firefighter, and relocates to Texas (hence the 'lone star' of the title) along with 'TK' to provide him with a fresh start. The job offer has one constraint: the new Fire Station 126 must focus on diversity, given a recognised inclusivity issue in the Austin department. Firefighters belonging to different communities and underrepresented minorities are hired: 'Marjan' (played by Natacha Karam), a devout Muslim and Instagram celebrity; the willing 'Mateo' (played by Julian Works), with an immigrant background and severely dyslexic; 'Paul' (played by Brian Michael Smith), a very detail-oriented Black man whose ability to assess threat is closely linked to being trans, as he states in the pilot episode: «Growing up the way I did, there was a lot of folks who wanted to hurt me, so I guess I learned to figure out who they were before they figured out who I was». In addition to them, there is 'Judd Ryder' (played by Jim Parrack), the only Texan-born member of the group, who is in a loving interracial relationship with his wife 'Grace' (played by Sierra McClain), but is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder as the only survivor of the previous team.

'Owen' must navigate the challenges of his new working environment and finds support from the paramedic captain 'Michelle Blake' (played by Liv Tyler), who is going

¹¹ It is not studied in Brenda R. Weber, David Greven (eds.), *Ryan Murphy's Queer America*. London: Routledge, 2022.

through her own personal crisis, since her sister 'Iris' (played by Lyndsy Fonseca) has been missing for three years. Helping her in the search is 'Carlos Reyes' (played by Rafael L. Silva), a gay Tejano police officer. During the course of season 1, consisting of ten episodes, 'Owen' faces his battle with cancer, 'Michelle' finds 'Iris' but discovers that she is struggling with schizophrenia, and 'TK' manages to stay sober and enters into an initially troubled relationship with 'Carlos'. At the beginning of season 2, filmed at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, following Liv Tyler's decision not to continue in the series, 'Michelle' is replaced as Emergency Medical Services captain by 'Tommy Vega' (played by Gina Torres). When 'TK' decides to change jobs and become a paramedic, she becomes his new boss. The following seasons had no significant changes in the cast until actress Sierra McClain ('Grace Ryder') left the series before season 5.

It is clear from this brief outline that the theme of inclusiveness of ethnic, religious and sexual minorities is programmatically central. «The Hollywood Reporter», for instance, saw in the show mainly «an exploration of masculine fragility and definition-defying heroism». ¹² Of course, there was no shortage of severe voices: an evangelical Christian website accused *9-1-1: Lone Star* of promoting a “neo-Marxist” plot—meaning that the LGBTQIA+ community would be widely overrepresented¹³—and the right-wing *The Federalist* mentioned a «woke checklist». ¹⁴ However, *9-1-1: Lone Star* was the highest-rated new series aired on Fox in 2019-20.

The success of the series *before* airing: the birth of 'Tarlos'

Although ratings are literally what allow a TV series to go on and be renewed from season to season, there are other aspects to be taken into account for analysis. Indeed, what makes *9-1-1: Lone Star* noteworthy is the social media reaction to it even before the airing of the first episode, with an explosion of interest in the characters of 'TK' and 'Carlos' and their romance.

Reconstructing the emergence of this phenomenon confirms the difficulties in approaching any digital experience, due to the fragmented nature of the online content and the almost infinite possibilities of reaction, sharing and commenting. The same message can be replicated or repurposed on different platforms, and perception is also distorted by social media algorithms, which prioritise certain content on the basis

¹² Daniel Fienberg, *911: Lone Star*: TV Review, in «The Hollywood Reporter», 19 January 2020, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-reviews/9-1-1-lone-star-review-1270779/>.

¹³ Jessilyn Lancaster, *9-1-1: Lone Star takes every opportunity promote an agenda*, in «Movieguide», <https://www.movieguide.org/news-articles/popular-articles/9-1-1-lone-star-takes-every-opportunity-promote-an-agenda.html>.

¹⁴ Brad Jackson, *9-1-1: Lone Star' Is What An Idiot From NYC Thinks Of Austin Without Ever Visiting*, in «The Federalist», 24 January 2020, <https://thefederalist.com/2020/01/24/9-1-1-lone-star-is-what-an-idiot-from-nyc-thinks-of-austin-without-ever-visiting/>.

of user engagement. Finally, platforms do not always make precise tracking tools available.¹⁵ Expecting the reconstruction of a trend to be linear is therefore a frustrating illusion, which historians, working as digital archeologists, must nevertheless get used to.

Chronologically speaking, it began in the second half of November 2019, while season 1 was being filmed in Los Angeles. The Fox channel had released a few trailers (at least four), well in advance of the new series launch. The most interesting of them, retrieved from Facebook, was published on 20 November¹⁶ (although it must have been published on other platforms a day before). All the season 1 regulars are featured in the 30 second trailer. A little over halfway through, there is a clip of actors Ronen Rubinstein ('TK') and Rafael L. Silva ('Carlos') exchanging a passionate kiss as they push open a door, evidently overcome with passion, followed by an equally brief intense close-up of the two men as they are about to kiss. The two shots together last less than a second, yet FoxTV published on Twitter (today X) an animated GIF of two trailer shots of 'TK' and 'Carlos', using the hashtag #Tarlos.¹⁷

The person who coined this instance of what is referred to in jargon as a 'ship name'—'Tarlos' combines the names of 'T(K)' and '(C)arlos'—is unknown, but the tradition is widespread among TV series fans, especially among those who are fond of LGBTQIA+ couples on screen. Amongst the latter, many had come to believe (and wish) that in the TV series *9-1-1* the character of the Los Angeles firefighter 'Buck' (played by Oliver Stark) and his closest friend and colleague 'Eddie Diaz' (played by Ryan Guzman) would become a couple, so much so that they created the ship name 'Buddie'. Although the two *9-1-1* characters were not meant to date romantically, one must refer to this desire to see 'Buck' and 'Eddie' together to understand the Twitter reactions to the publication of the aforementioned GIF featuring 'TK' and 'Carlos' from *9-1-1: Lone Star*. Several dozen comments were dismissive and some accused Fox of queerbaiting. One user hinted at the possibility—probable, but never confirmed or denied—that 'Tarlos' was an in-house creation of Fox's media managers to capitalise on the 'Buddie' interest.

However, #Tarlos immediately trended on social media. The testimony of the two actors Rubinstein and Silva provides a good account of their surprise:

RUBINSTEIN: [It] started with that first trailer—I'll never forget—November.

SILVA: He ran to me! He ran to me! We were on set, remember?

RUBINSTEIN: We were at lunch. [...] And I couldn't believe my eyes and [...] all the

15 In the vast research landscape on hashtags over the last fifteen years, see the review article by Amina Saleh Omar, Kennedy O Ondimu, *The Impact of Social Media on Society: A Systematic Literature Review*, in «The International Journal of Engineering and Science», 13 (6), 2024, 96-106, DOI:[10.9790/1813-130696106](https://doi.org/10.9790/1813-130696106).

16 <https://www.facebook.com/911LoneStar/videos/1147723455434000>, 20 November 2019.

17 <https://x.com/FOXTV/status/1196903097831813120>, 19 November 2019.

notifications started exploding and Rafael's like: "What's up?", I was like: "You need to watch this trailer right now". It's us barging through the door and literally like that day Tarlos was born.

SILVA: Yeah. People already started putting Tarlos together.¹⁸

A *9-1-1 Lonestar/Tarlos* Facebook group was announced on Twitter on 3 December (perhaps the first created, well over a month before the series aired). On Instagram the first post in which Rubinstein and Silva acknowledged the existence of a social media buzz around 'Tarlos' is dated 13 December 2019: published on the official profile of the former, it is a photograph (perhaps a selfie) of the two actors taken at sunset amicably embracing and illuminated by the sunlight, accompanied by the caption 'Golden #Tarlos'—a play on words with the time of day. The comments were ecstatic, often accompanied by emoji: some already declared themselves fans of the couple, others anticipated an emotional attachment («really gonna steal my heart in 37 days»), but there were also those who expected sexually explicit content—encouraged by the trailer.

On 22 December, Rubinstein published another post with #Tarlos: a scene photograph showing him and Silva in what would later turn out to be their first dance at an Austin honky-tonk. Once again, the comments were enthusiastic, and ranged from the typical expression of a parasocial relationship («I want to dance with you») to an overlap between character and actor («Any chance of making it a reality [?]», i.e., also becoming a couple in real life), extending to objectifying Silva for his good looks.

Meanwhile, on archiveofourown.org, a nonprofit archive for transformative fan works, on 6 December a user had already published an initial fan fiction centred on the show's characters, which falls within the slash genre, i.e., fan-written stories involving a romance between same-sex characters. Entitled *New Beginnings*, it was openly pornographic and recounted the first casual sexual encounter between 'TK' and 'Carlos', which the author imagined without almost any contextual elements, except for the protagonists' professions. To accompany this work, the author declared they were already a follower of 'Buddie'—thus underlining the link that existed for fans between the two series—and that they had just created a Facebook group dedicated to 'Tarlos'. The first example of fan art dates back to 29 December (but it is likely that more have escaped investigation).

As Sheenagh Pugh has acknowledged in reference to fan fiction, people write it «because they [want] either 'more of' their source material or 'more from' it».¹⁹ It can be argued that this and similar works therefore responded both to the desire to prolong moments in the company of beloved characters, and to the realisation that desires prompted by watching the series had not (yet) been fulfilled. We are thus faced with

¹⁸ Instagram Live, 17 January 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pp8R5ec_dwY&t=5s.

¹⁹ Sheenagh Pugh, *The Democratic Genre*. Bridgend: Seren, 2005, 19.

a critical, albeit joyful, commentary by fans who use transformative works to expand a canonical representation to align it with their desires, while at the same time creating an emotional bond with anyone who enjoyed the fan fiction or fan art.

Identities and minorities

One of the most interesting features to analyse in *9-1-1: Lone Star* is the depiction of LGBTQIA+ topics and gender-related issues, to verify the significant shift the show underwent over the course of the seasons. In the pilot episode that aired on 19 January 2020, the fact that 'TK' is homosexual is revealed, with some suspense, in the short scene where he is going to ask his boyfriend to marry him. The relocation of 'Owen' and 'TK' from New York to Austin is followed by encounters with the members of the newly-reconstituted team 126, who have been selected using the principle of inclusiveness. 'Owen' is not shy about reminding 'Paul' of his alleged responsibility («somewhere in this town right now is a kid who is just like you were. Feeling scared, hopeless. I'd like you to show him, or her, or they, it's ok to be who you are») and discusses with 'Marjan' her religious affiliation («When I look at you and what you've accomplished, I don't see a Muslim or a woman. I see a kick-ass firefighter»). Towards the end of the pilot, the members of Station 126 gather at a honky-tonk to dance to typical Texan music, and among the guests is the cop 'Carlos', who approaches 'TK' and asks him to dance.²⁰ The pilot is therefore packed with references to LGBTQIA+ and religious identity issues, which are openly central to establishing the characters' story arcs.

The second episode²¹ delves immediately into the relationship between 'TK' and 'Carlos' with their first sexual encounter. It is a particularly racy scene, though not vulgar. The sexual act is not represented, thanks to the use of narrative ellipsis, but is suggested by the half-nakedness of the two men, a dialogue rich in subtext, and the desiring gaze from 'Carlos', focusing rather on the genuineness of desire. For the viewer watching the episode live on TV, that scene came immediately after a commercial break, a positioning strategy that intensified the surprise effect (indeed, there was no lead-in during the episode to such an immediate rapprochement between the two characters prior to the scene). At the same time, being a potentially controversial scene—airing at prime time on a national network—the post-break positioning meant that some viewers may have been distracted. In this specific context, both hypotheses for the positioning (maximisation of impact and minimisation of the risk of controversy) could be true and, in any case, the producers wanted to emphasise the importance of the scene by increasing its memorability and emotional resonance. The testimony of a fan, Milena P., is also interesting in this regard:

²⁰ *Pilot - Season 1 Episode 1 (S1 E1)*, first aired in the US on 19 January 2020.

²¹ *Yee-Haw - S1 E2*, 20 January 2020.

I remember watching the second episode with my mom and how there was the hookup scene right after the commercial break. I was so shocked because you just don't see that on a network show especially not between two guys. Having that scene come so early in the season sets the bar for the audience and gives them the expectation that there will be more to come.²²

A comprehensive reconstruction of the public reaction to the first two episodes is impossible. Instead, one must rely on a limited number of elements: Milena P. (a teenager at the time), immediately created an Instagram account (@t.arlos) on 24 January, and there were undoubtedly many others who did the same. Lovers of fan fiction went wild trying to 'complete' the scarce number of scenes in which 'Carlos' and 'TK' had interacted, e.g., by imagining the viewpoint of 'Carlos' during the honky-tonk dance night, or by touching on more serious topics, such as the suffering of 'TK' over his ex-boyfriend. Memes, fanart and GIFs mushroomed on Tumblr and especially on Twitter.

But the fan base was not left to its own devices: on 26 January, Rubinstein held an Instagram live session—a simple domestic jamming session alternated with playing with two puppies and comments on 'Tarlos', followed by a couple of hundred users—which showed how he wanted, more or less consciously, to break down the barriers between the public and the actor, who did not present himself as a separate or unreachable figure, but as a member of the fandom himself. He used the first person plural for a generic political comment («We're gonna sing and we're gonna feel good because [...] we gotta feel good nowadays [...] you know [there] is a lot of shit happening out there right now»), and he relied on music (the song *Fine Line* by Harry Styles) to define the attitude of 'TK' towards 'Carlos' after the first two episodes, using the present tense, as if the story between the two of them—which had actually been filmed months earlier—was developing at that moment before his and the viewers' eyes: «we'll see what happens with them».²³ This dynamic is quite common in fandom culture circles, where collaboration between actors and admirers tends to expand the boundaries of the narrative beyond the television text. Moreover, Rubinstein anticipated that episode 3 would feature his favourite scene, thus inviting people to follow it.

The scene Rubinstein refers to takes place at a police station, where 'TK' has been taken after being involved in a brawl.²⁴ As chance would have it, 'Carlos' is on duty, who lets him go while showing him, in a very emotional scene, that he is genuinely concerned about him, regardless of the fate of their relationship. In a symbolic gesture, 'Carlos' wipes 'TK's' mouth, still stained with blood, as an act of protection and care,

²² Written interview with Milena P. (@t.arlos), 21 November 2024.

²³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qksKnVwjUp0&list=PL2xxpCSEpiZrRF5IhmxbnfcBfp8salu-VO&index=3>, 26 January 2020.

²⁴ *Texas Proud - S1 E3*, 27 January 2020.

whereupon 'TK' himself, feeling the respect from 'Carlos', relaxes his defensive attitude. The connection between the two characters is cemented and is the basis for a relationship that is not founded solely on physical attraction, but on their ability to read one another's emotions: this is what makes the scene a representation of LGBTQIA+ issues that goes beyond the traditional stereotype of the gay character's conflict with his own personality, or of the queer relationship as being driven by physical desire, and is projected instead towards the ennobling of the partnership.

The love story between 'TK' and 'Carlos' begins here: the sexual connotation is not absent, but what is clear is that there is communication between the two. Ultimately, episode 3 is the key to the entire season, and this is despite a complementary storyline, featuring 'Marjan', who loses her hijab during a call, allowing her to be vocal about the meaning of the garment («connects me to something bigger»). The themes dealt with in this second storyline—the symbolism of the hijab, the community's judgement, the choice of self-determination—offer a critical reflection on social dynamics, but are developed on a more intellectual level. The emotional highpoint of the episode undoubtedly remains the police station scene: emotions are programmatically reserved for the emerging couple, who take centre stage with a nuanced queer love story, which proved to be a statement of intent.

After the first three episodes of the series, Rubinstein and Silva aired a joint Instagram live session on 2 February 2020, in which they answered questions collected from social media. They appeared drinking from mugs stamped #Tarlos, demonstrating that there was already merchandising of the viral phenomenon. The duo, in front of a live connected audience of just under a thousand, addressed a variety of topics, including the passion for the characters they played—whose complexity they praised—but, above all, they mythicised the police station scene just aired in episode 3, which they had rehearsed for their chemistry read during casting:

SILVA: There was something about that scene, there was this one moment in the scene when [...] I think we both kinda forgot that cameras were there and we were just going back and forth, going back and forth, back and forth, until they yelled "cut", and like that type of scene is just like [he mimes with his hands the gesture of sinking].

RUBINSTEIN: The moment [...] where Carlos wipes the blood off of TK's mouth, in the chemistry read, the moment happened when he's wiping and I look over to him, and that just like... that wasn't on the page, that wasn't written, that wasn't asked of... It was just this like: oh my God, he cares for me, not many people care for TK right now, you know? And that moment happened in the chemistry read, with this at the time complete stranger, and then we brought it onto the show in real life [...].

SILVA: After our chemistry read [...] I run to the bathroom, close the stall, go to the corner and start bawling my eyes out, because I was like: "That didn't feel like an audition! That didn't feel like I worked! It was just a freaking conversation! Rafael, what are you doing?!" [...] But that was the thing, right? [...] there was no labour,

it was just us together.

RUBINSTEIN: There was no acting. The best acting is not acting.²⁵

In accordance with a frequent phenomenon in the context of contemporary fandom,²⁶ the two actors actively participated in the discourse surrounding their narrative and were no longer merely interpreters of their roles. They were aware of the social media feedback and knew how the fans had interpreted the scene, which had already become memorable for the audience. By emphasising their commitment and total immersion in the roles they were playing, they both stressed how it was the authenticity of the performance that made that scene meaningful. Authenticity was thus not limited to acting quality, but became an emotional bridge between actors and viewers. In this way, they bound the audience more closely to themselves, guaranteeing the genuineness of their feelings in front of the cameras—the story was ‘true’, at least on an emotional level—but at the same time legitimising audience emotions. Even those emotions regarded as excessive or irrational, they seemed to say, were authentic and rightful, because they were moved by real and not performed sentiments. This mechanism, typical of transformative fandom communities, meant the actors not only ‘allowed’ the audience to feel emotions, but openly validated them, creating a sense of belonging and sharing. In this model of cultural engagement, the identification mechanism can only work because the relationship is extra-textual and established mainly through social media, with the audience heavily invested in commenting and the actors, careful to read the reactions, becoming facilitators of a collective experience.

Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that we cannot speak of monocausality in the creation of the ‘Tarlos’ phenomenon, since it was born within a negotiation between the needs of the network, the enthusiasm of fans and the availability of the two protagonists, which went far beyond the requirements of contractual publicity. Also because of this triangulation a large number of viewers had been immediately hooked by ‘Tarlos’, and the series *9-1-1: Lone Star* was thus able to count on a core audience from the start.

Nonetheless, the first season of *9-1-1: Lone Star* does not focus specifically on ‘TK’ and ‘Carlos’: the latter briefly appears in episodes 5 and 7, but he only returns as a central character in episode 8. When ‘TK’ is accidentally shot and is in intensive care, all his colleagues gather around him and among them is ‘Carlos’. Though ‘Owen’ is still

²⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIAkp7syTml&list=PL2xxpCSEpiZrRF5IhmxbnfcBfp8saluVO&index=5>, 9 February 2020.

²⁶ See for instance Lucy Bennett, Bertha Chin, *Exploring fandom, social media, and producer/fan interactions: An interview with ‘Sleepy Hollow’'s Orlando Jones*, in «Transformative Works and Cultures», 17, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2014.0601> and Lucy Bennett, Paul J. Booth, *Performance and Performativity in Fandom*, in «Transformative Works and Cultures», 18, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0675>.

unaware of their relationship, 'Carlos' is thoughtfully given the seat at the bedside.²⁷ With this gesture the love story itself is legitimised in a scene of tenderness: as the cop 'Carlos' caresses 'TK's hair as a sign of unspoken affection, he is deconstructing gender norms around masculinity, which can also be tender and emotional. Once again, a scene in which few words are spoken has political significance. This new twist in the relationship also has a weight that goes beyond the narrative episode. Not only is a relationship between two men portrayed as the pivot of one of the main character's intimate life, but also, crucially, 'Tarlos' is placed in a familiar context with no emphasis on the queer aspect.

We conclude that, even within ten episodes packed with emergencies and solutions to mysteries, the emotional heart of season 1 is reserved for the homosexual couple, although the viewer may be unaware of this, because 'Carlos' has significantly fewer scenes and screentime than the other regulars in season 1. In the eyes of the historian, however, it is clear that the organisation of the scenes, their arrangement within the narrative fabric (e.g., after a commercial break) and the play between emotional highs and lows is not merely a dramatic device, but a conscious tool for representation, and the goal of provoking widespread conversation was definitely achieved.

A flow of emotions and politics: en route to season 2

The season 1 finale aired in the US on 9 March 2020, only days before President Donald Trump, who had long downplayed the seriousness of the spread of the new Covid-19 virus, declared a national emergency due to the rapid increase in infections and deaths. The pandemic had a huge impact on the entertainment industry, resulting in a major change in distribution models.²⁸ TV channels adapted, recruiting their top personalities to maintain a relationship with their audience. Rafael L. Silva, by his own admission «naturally shy and introverted»,²⁹ thus found himself catapulted into the digital world as early as March, broadcasting Instagram live sessions handcrafted in his flat, in which he cooked traditional Brazilian dishes (the actor had emigrated to the US when he was 13) and answered questions from fans. What emerged in those months was no longer the character of 'Carlos', but the public persona of Silva, who made himself available to actively participate in the creation of new meanings for the

²⁷ *Monster Inside - S1 E8*, 2 March 2020.

²⁸ For instance, Netflix gained almost 16 million new subscribers in the first quarter of 2020. See Sean Burch, *Netflix Roars to Record 16 Million New Subscribers in Q1*, in «The Wrap», 21 April 2020, <https://www.thewrap.com/netflix-first-quarter-earnings-2020/>.

²⁹ Max Gao, *9-1-1: Lone Star's Rafael Silva on 'Tarlos', season 2, and playing a queer Latino cop in 2020*, in «Digital Spy», 29 July 2020, <https://www.digitalspy.com/tv/ustv/a33441711/911-lone-star-season-2-rafael-silva-interview/>.

benefit of the audience.³⁰

It should be noted that Silva felt invested with responsibility at a key phase in US political life, as the election of a new president approached and the Black Lives Matter movement, which resonated with him not least because of his ethnicity, gained momentum after the killing in Minneapolis of George Floyd. His tweets³¹ during those months testify to significant participation in political and social life: during the election campaign he openly opposed Trump and white supremacy and praised the power of ethnic representation in films; in May 2021 he then participated as a panellist in Tamika Mallory's *State of Emergency*³² virtual book tour, discussing activism and historical representation for people of colour. At the same time, he left personal messages, mainly about the need to always be kind and respectful: by mixing universal themes with personal experience he strengthened his relationship with fans, who could see him as an approachable person.

Silva also gave several interviews, in particular a wide-ranging discussion released in July 2020, in which he touched on a large number of issues, including his experience as a kid «closeted completely and nowhere near accepting the fact that I was gay in «a very machismo country» like Brazil, and the feedback received from the audience: «Even though this show is fiction mixed with reality, I'm representing a real person. I personally wasn't aware of the importance of this character until the inevitable feedback from fans started to come in».³³ This excerpt is compelling, as Silva claimed that, although 'Carlos' is a fictional character, his portrayal is based on an authentic representation of real-world experiences and identities. The use of the term 'reality' suggests that, in Silva's perception, the series had a social impact that went far beyond entertainment. It was the feedback from the audience—obviously mostly digital—that helped him see the political and cultural value of his role, making his work as an actor not only a craft, but also a form of advocacy.

The mixing of levels—public and private, political and personal, fiction and reality— noted in his tweets and confirmed in the interview was not coincidental. It not only reflected an increasingly common dynamic for celebrities today,³⁴ but also made the personal dimension a universal tool: public persona and character were integrated into public communication, making strategic but genuine use of the digital platform to amplify messages that resonated with different communities. Silva agreed to become

30 On how celebrity culture has had an increasing identification function in the 20th century, see Richard Schickel, *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity in America*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000; James Bennett, *Television Personalities: Stardom and the Small Screen*. London: Routledge, 2011.

31 <https://rafaelsilvasource.com/tagged/twitter>.

32 Tamika D. Mallory, *State of Emergency: How We Win in the Country We Built*. New York: Black Privilege Publishing-Atria Books, 2021.

33 Gao, "9-1-1: Lone Star's Rafael Silva on 'Tarlos'".

34 For an overview, see Liza Tsaliki, Christos A. Frangonikolopoulos, Asteris Huliaras (eds.), *Transnational Celebrity Activism in Global Politics: Changing the World? Bristol: Intellect, 2011.*

a cultural symbol for these communities. It is for this reason that we can say, from a methodological perspective, that the relationship between the actor's public persona and the fans is an integral part of television as a process.

Meanwhile, Rubinstein followed a similar path of politicising his profile, emphasising his activism against climate change and supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. One of the outcomes of the evolution of the 'Tarlos' phenomenon, indeed, was that it became a political tool, as is evident when considering one of the trailers aired by Fox ahead of season 2, posted on Instagram on 12 January 2021. In this, Silva, in his brief statements to the camera, delivered an inherently political message, describing 'TK' and 'Carlos' as «Two first responders being there for each other [...]. Portraying LGBTQIA+ characters in that light is imperative».³⁵ The emphasis on «in that light» is crucial: the point was not the portrayal *per se*, but the context in which the LGBTQIA+ characters were presented, as heroic and complex figures, whose stories were not centred on their homosexual dimension, but on their being competent and selfless human beings. Even the use of the adjective «imperative» suggested that, in his view, the representation was not only desirable, but necessary. This was especially true for a mainstream television audience, diversified in experience and background, at a time in history when LGBTQIA+ rights in the US were a matter of heated dispute (e.g., with the cancellation of the anti-discrimination rule against transgender people in healthcare). At that stage, the narrative of the evolution of the 'Tarlos' love story was no longer left to personal statements, but assumed the relevance of a campaign. As Silva shared with «Forbes» magazine, «I'm not only speaking for 'Carlos' but it's also the voice of millions that will identify with 'Carlos'. His story, his background, being Texan, being Tejano, being gay».³⁶

Season 2 and beyond: the age of awareness

Season 2 brings about a shift in the representation of the two characters: from the first episode 'TK' and 'Carlos' are a well-established couple who tease each other in public, thus stating their acceptance in a team active in a line of work traditionally associated with heteronormative masculinity.³⁷ In the subsequent episodes, there are several occasions when the couple's intimacy, understood as tenderness and domesticity, is highlighted: a kiss from 'Carlos' on 'TK's head to comfort him over the

³⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CJ9LRmQMdt3/>, 12 January 2021.

³⁶ Jeff Conway, Ronen Rubinstein & Rafael Silva *On The Importance Of Their LGBTQIA+ Characters On FOX's '9-1-1: Lone Star'*, in «Forbes», 18 January 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffconway/2021/01/18/ronen-rubinstein--rafael-silva-on-the-importance-of-their-lgbtqia-characters-on-foxs-9-1-1-lone-star/?sh=478e8061478c>.

³⁷ *Back in the Saddle - S2 E1*, 18 January 2021.

death of a colleague,³⁸ the first (for the audience) «I love you» from 'TK' to 'Carlos' delivered over the phone in a long-awaited cross-over episode with *9-1-1*,³⁹ an intense dialogue in which 'TK' acknowledges the complicated relationship 'Carlos' has with his parents due to his homosexuality,⁴⁰ and so on. For many episodes there are, however, no scenes involving sex, only some subtle flirtation. What might appear as toning down is actually consistent with the writing path in the series, i.e., with the intention of portraying a relationship based on reciprocity rather than purely on instincts. To achieve this, it was necessary for the 'Carlos' character to take up more space: in episode 8, in particular, he confronts his Texas Ranger father, who had always considered him too "soft" because of his homosexuality, finally gaining his much sought-after approval.⁴¹ We should notice the positioning of this episode as the winter finale, giving 'Carlos' more resonance in the whole narrative.

The second part of the season maintains the same approach, in between fire and medical emergencies. There is only one scene in which 'TK' and 'Carlos' embark on sexual intercourse, and for this reason it is filmed with attention to every detail, including the use as background music of the seductive song *Fever* in the 'male' version by Elvis Presley (not the 'female' version by Peggy Lee). Their intimate moment is interrupted by the outbreak of a fire set by an arsonist, but love and (near) death also mean that, faced with the danger of losing their lives, the two recognise how they really feel about each other, without the need for words. This seems to illustrate that the understanding between them exists not only on a physical level, but also in communication, and this confirms that the absence or presence of sexual scenes was calibrated to coincide with emotional peaks, to emphasise the completeness of the love relationship.

The decision of the writers and showrunners to focus on pure affection was not shared within the entire LGBTQIA+ fan community. Firstly, the apparent cut from the final version of the show of a kiss between 'TK' and 'Carlos' that had been shown in the trailer to season 2 triggered considerable controversy («We got so much Carlos content in the promos and now they already cut two scenes out»),⁴² The accusation of queerbaiting re-emerged, although the trailers had always used scene shots and not simply pieces of the final cut. Secondly, an article in the popular lifestyle magazine «Out» complained that, at least until the aforementioned sequence in episode 12, «While there have been plenty of scenes of them talking, and small glimpses of [their] relationship, love scenes have been few and far between».⁴³ We should not forget that

38 *2100°* - *S2 E2*, 25 January 2021.

39 *Hold the Line* - *S2 E3*, 1 February 2021.

40 *Friends with Benefits* - *S2 E4*, 8 February 2021.

41 *Bad call* - *S2 E8*, 8 March 2021.

42 Taylor Henderson, *9-1-1: Lone Star Apparently Edited Out a Gay Kiss & Fans Are Pissed*, in «Pride», 19 January 2021, <https://www.pride.com/tv/2021/1/19/9-1-1-lone-star-apparently-edited-out-gay-kiss-fans-are-pissed>.

43 May Rude, *'9-1-1: Lone Star' Finally Gave T.K. and Carlos the Episode We Deserve*, in «Out», 11

the desire to see sexually explicit scenes in television dramas responds to various psychological needs, such as exploring intimate relationships in a safe context and confronting one's desires 'at a distance'.⁴⁴

In season 2, nevertheless, 'Carlos' increases in importance, not only from the point of view of screen time, but especially in the depiction of the character. This was a deliberate choice: among the series regulars who represent LGBTQIA+ and minority issues in some way, the decision was made to give more weight to the couple 'Tarlos', necessarily breaking the balance. An overview of season 2, in fact, suggests that the same upgrade does not take place for 'Marjan' or 'Paul'. Episode 4 presents a storyline strongly centred on 'Marjan' and deals with the theme of arranged engagement,⁴⁵ while in episode 6, 'Paul' reconciles with his younger sister, who had not overcome the trauma of his gender transition.⁴⁶ However, other references to internal conflicts or obstacles to surmount due to characters' condition or life choices are not proposed in the course of the season, although these characters are constantly active responding to emergencies and generally have a good portion of screen time.

The overall balance of the series, by season 2, was already beginning to shift in favour of 'Tarlos', with the couple having now become deuteragonists of the firefighter captain 'Owen'. On the one hand, the choice was political: the series' approach was towards normalisation, and the intention was to highlight the competence of 'Marjan' and 'Paul' and their high level of social integration within the group of friends among firefighters in the middle of Texas, as a narrative device. On the other hand, it cannot be ignored that television, as discussed before, is much more than content: producers and writers had certainly realised that 'Tarlos' was the goose that laid the golden egg. They recognised this, in fact, explicitly and jokingly in episode 11, when 'Paul', amicably annoyed by the fact that 'TK' and 'Carlos' together kept beating everyone at a board game, delivers the line: «how about we start an alliance to take down this whole Tarlos juggernaut or whatever's going on over here?». ⁴⁷ The metanarrative joke consciously winks at the audience, directly recalling the fandom phenomenon that had developed around the couple, the writers declaring themselves fully aware of the cultural impact of their characters, thus endorsing the fans' experiences.

Meanwhile, in April 2021, just past the halfway point of the second season, a new surge in attention had occurred: Rubinstein, in an interview with Marc Malkin for

May 2021, <https://www.out.com/television/2021/5/11/9-1-1-lone-star-finally-gave-tk-and-carlos-episode-we-deserve>.

44 Some basic research findings may be found in Feona Attwood, *What do people do with porn? Qualitative research into the consumption, use, and experience of pornography and other sexually explicit media*, in «Sexuality & Culture», 9, 2005, 65-86, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-005-1008-7>.

45 *Friends with Benefits - S2 E4*, 8 February 2021.

46 *Everyone and Their Brother - S2 E6*, 22 February 2021.

47 *Slow Burn - S2 E11*, 3 May 2021.

«Variety»,⁴⁸ publicly came out as bisexual, recounting his personal journey, and his commitment to social change and the advocacy of civil rights: «You know, I sort of feel like the parallel to my career is always going to be activism, because, you know, we have a massive platform, we have a massive influence, we can actually truly help people and change people's lives». Recounting his experience as a bisexual man in a relationship with a woman (who became his wife the following year), Rubinstein showed that he felt a deep desire for authenticity, which had been stirred by the massive response and feedback caused by the series:

This past year I've had thousands, probably tens of thousands of people reach out to me about what TK has meant to them and, you know, I have people coming out to their conservative parents [...] and, you know, I feel like me being finally true to myself and letting people in, it can only change more people's lives and it can only help more people, because they've been so vocal and honest with me and they don't know me except for a character on the TV screen, so the least I could do is be honest and vocal with them [...].

These words suggest a reciprocity between actor and fan base made possible by social media, which clearly has a tangible impact on the personal lives of performers. By claiming, «I'm here for them», Rubinstein was showing that he felt himself to be an emotional and symbolic reference point for those who saw hope in him and in his character. After all, one of the first friends he had opened up to about his sexuality was his co-star Silva because of the “comfort level” they had developed on set.⁴⁹ Finding connections between different levels—that of acting and performance, that of life on set, that of public presence—was a specific aspect of Rubinstein's celebrity status and accounted for a particular vision of the actor's role, which, by blurring the lines between fiction and reality, legitimised not only the fiction by giving it the consistency of verifiable feelings, but also the emotions developed by fans towards the figures on screen.

If for Rubinstein *9-1-1: Lone Star* and the success of 'Tarlos' had entailed personal growth, the same was true for Silva, who had less acting experience than his co-star and needed to acquaint himself with the public dimension into which he had been quickly thrust. Indeed, as Silva recounted in an interview on Fox's social channels, the show had provided him with «a bigger platform than before, so I think for me the experience of arriving at this industry has been rather a learning experience [...] and just trying to understand where I am and how people see me and how people

48 Marc Malkin, '9-1-1: Lone Star' Actor Ronen Rubinstein Comes Out as Bisexual, Inspired by His Work on Fox Series (EXCLUSIVE), in «Variety», 7 April 2021, <https://variety.com/2021/tv/news/9-1-1-lone-star-ronen-rubinstein-bisexual-ryan-murphy-1234945646/>.

49 Brianna Tracy, *Ronen Rubinstein's Coming Out as Bisexual Created a 'Beautiful Next Chapter' in Relationship with Girlfriend*, in «People», 2 June 2021, <https://people.com/tv/ronen-rubinstein-coming-out-as-bisexual-created-beautiful-next-chapter-relationship-girlfriend/>.

understand me».⁵⁰ Declaring that he paid close attention to the way his identity and his public role were perceived, Silva indicated a willingness to maintain a balance between introspection and public action. He considered his contribution to be not just as representation, but as responsible conduct. Furthermore, he was aware of the nature of the political discourse circulating in the LGBTQIA+ community and the difficulties of true inclusivity, which is not limited to visible representation, but requires constant dialogue that considers diverse experiences and perspectives. In an interview with «Gay Times», in particular, the theme of intersectionality emerged: although the term was not used by Silva, he referred to it when he stated, «The diversity and inclusivity of [9-1-1: Lone Star] resonates with people because that's what the world has always looked like [...] We've always looked Indigenous, we've always looked Muslim, we've always looked Black, we've always looked trans—we've always looked all these things».

Over time, Silva also increasingly embraced the terms and ideas of queer theory, with a theoretical framing that probably stemmed from the increased responsibility he felt charged with. He stated to «Gay Times» that, «this is a moment for us to educate the public. [...] I think the dream role would be if I'm speaking for somebody, if I'm helping somebody, if there's an educational essence to the project itself».⁵¹ If Rubinstein's vision was imbued with feelings of solidarity and empathy, without venturing into theoretical reflections, Silva's had a more critical approach. In his opinion, the point was conscious artistic representation, capable of conveying messages without being prescriptive, and facilitating social transformations. These same social transformations, in Silva's understanding, were also closely linked to the way LGBTQIA+ characters are portrayed on screen. Indeed, what is known in television studies as the 'Bury Your Gays' trope—where, in a narrative, non-heteronormative characters would always be doomed to suffering and death⁵²—would justify parents, relatives and friends of LGBTQIA+ people who refuse to be supportive not because of homophobia, but out of a sense of protection. On the contrary, «When you're presented with the opportunity where you're able to create a storyline where these characters exist in a light of exuberance, brilliance and power [...] You also allow their allies to do the same».⁵³ It was from such statements that the audience could draw certainty that 'TK' and 'Carlos' were meant to be forever.

⁵⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HsNUe9kg2k&t=1s>, 16 June 2021.

⁵¹ Sam Damshenas, *9-1-1: Lone Star's Rafael Silva is bringing intersectional LGBTQ+ representation to the masses*, in «Gay Times», <https://www.gaytimes.com/culture/9-1-1-lone-stars-rafael-silva-is-bringing-intersectional-lgbtq-representation-to-the-masses/>, 16 June 2021. For the paper version, *Rafael Silva*, June 2021, 92-99.

⁵² Haley Hulan, *Bury Your Gays: History, Usage, and Context*, in «McNair Scholars Journal», 21 (1), 2017, <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mcnair/vol21/iss1/6>.

⁵³ Damshenas, "9-1-1: Lone Star's Rafael Silva".

How ‘Carlos Reyes’/Rafael L. Silva took central stage: seasons 3 to 5

What has been described above helps explain why fans took to social media following the viewing of the first episode of season 3,⁵⁴ when it was revealed that the couple had broken up in an off-screen development. Numerous comments on Twitter, accompanied by memes and GIFs, conveyed a range of emotions, from nostalgia and longing («We need them happy again») to loss and grief («I wanna cry in a dark corner now»), indicating how social media had transformed an individual experience into a collective one. The concern was such that even showrunner Tim Minear had to jump in to reassure the fans.⁵⁵ But why had this happened? Of course in part because it is through hardships that an interesting story is built, but also because the showrunners wanted to test the character of ‘Carlos’. Minear had previously admitted, in connection with episode 8 of season 2 in which ‘Carlos’ was a major player, that that storyline had «elevated Carlos’ character to exactly where we wanted him to be, which is front and center», and admitted to being “very excited to do more with Rafael» [Silva].⁵⁶ No sooner said than done.

Analysis conducted into season 3 effectively proves that ‘Carlos’, along with ‘TK’, has become the backbone of the show. It is true that firefighter captain ‘Owen Strand’ and paramedic captain ‘Tommy Vega’ are offered rich storylines, ‘Marjan’ is effectively given the honour of saving Fire Station 126 from destruction and the other regulars are always involved in emergencies or experience major caesuras in their lives, such as ‘Judd’ and ‘Grace’ becoming parents, but, in comparison, none of them have as much character development and emotional space as ‘Carlos’ and ‘TK’.

It has already been pointed out how, in the course of season 2, the storylines of ‘Marjan’, ‘Paul’ and ‘Mateo’ had ended up being somewhat marginalised. In season 3 this is even more evident, as some major turning points in the stories of these characters (‘Paul’ falling ill with heart disease and breaking his friendship with ‘Marjan’; ‘Mateo’ temporarily leaving Fire Station 126 or going out with paramedic ‘Nancy’, played by Brianna Baker) occur in the handful of episodes in which ‘Carlos’, for contractual reasons on Silva’s part, does not appear: the couple formed by ‘TK’ and ‘Carlos’ has now become so paramount that the latter has to literally disappear for the storylines of the other series regulars to be foregrounded. Minear himself admitted that he would

⁵⁴ *The Big Chill - S3 E1*, 3 January 2022.

⁵⁵ Meredith Jacobs, ‘9-1-1: Lone Star’ Boss to Tarlos Fans After the Season 3 Premiere: ‘Do not Despair’, in «TV Insider», 3 January 2022, <https://www.tvinsider.com/1027422/911-lone-star-season-3-premiere-tk-carlos-breakup/>.

⁵⁶ Meredith Jacobs, ‘9-1-1: Lone Star’ Showrunner on That Cliffhanger, the Future of Tarlos and Chemistry on the Set, in «TV Insider», 8 March 2021, <https://www.tvinsider.com/990373/911-lone-star-season-2-judd-grace-accident-tk-carlos-proposal/>.

have liked to see 'Mateo' and 'Nancy' get together as early as the hiatus between seasons 2 and 3, only to unfold their story towards the end of season 3 because, «We kept running out of real estate in the episodes as we went forward».⁵⁷ Complaining that there was not enough space for 'Mateo' and 'Nancy', Minear made it clear that other storylines had taken precedence.

The 'Tarlos' story was the main cause for this. First of all, the drama in the early episodes (which serves to re-engage a loyal audience) is all on the shoulders of 'Carlos': when 'TK', after a bold rescue, falls into a coma, 'Carlos' is at his bedside, despite the fact that the two were no longer together. The scenes in which 'Carlos' assists 'TK' in hospital allow Silva to show his acting versatility through a wide range of feelings: self-pity and vulnerability («I'm holding vigil for a man who doesn't even want me in his life»); despair and frustration («If he loves me so much, then why did he break my heart?»); shame and remorse for not telling his parents about the break-up with 'TK' («it was so amazing how you and Dad supported us. I just didn't want to let you down»); rage, but also caution and self-discipline towards his ex-boyfriend («If I told him what's [in] my heart, it wouldn't be very nice»), defiance tempered by sarcasm («I guess you're not in any position to walk out this time»), yearning nostalgia and a sense of helplessness («I can't even hold your hand. Or run my fingers through your hair»...), respect and emotional maturity (...«not without it feeling like it's some kind of violation»). The relief felt when 'TK' wakes is then expressed by a simple inhalation that is a symbolic and charged moment, a sudden and liberating release of tension and resumption of hope: a minimalist masterpiece, which is followed by a quiet, self-conscious joy when he accompanies 'TK'—with whom he is now back together, after a narrative ellipsis—to their new loft, all in the space of one episode.⁵⁸

That loft, which turns out to have been the cause of the break-up because the purchase of a house together had given 'TK' cold feet, becomes the centre of the action and serves as a counterbalance to the fire station. It is here that the numerous scenes in which 'TK' and 'Carlos' interact during the course of season 3 are filmed. The wide living space is ideal for sociability: the new house is a symbol of hospitality and warmth, as well as of shared purpose; the bedroom door is always open because there is nothing to hide in the relationship; at the same time, on numerous occasions in season 3 it is 'Carlos' who opens the front door to guests (dispatcher friend 'Grace', 'Sadie' the season's psychopath villain, and 'Cooper', Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor to 'TK'): he controls access to the house, physically imposing himself on the scene, guardian of the relationship—an attitude that changes over time, leaving room for greater sharing and reciprocity.

⁵⁷ Andy Swift, *9-1-1: Lone Star Boss on Season 3 Finale Twists, Including That Long-Awaited Moment: 'It Felt Like the Right Time'*, in «TVLine», 16 May 2022, <https://tvline.com/lists/911-lone-star-recap-season-3-finale-tarlos-proposal-explained/>.

⁵⁸ *Push - S3 E4*, 31 January 2022.

'Carlos' begins to gain his autonomy as a character, too, as producer Tim Minear had announced: especially in episode 11, when he is suspended for accidentally causing the death of a drug dealer, he enjoys a peculiar directorial device (the use of the tilted camera for its inner focus) and he appears in the second crossover with sister series *9-1-1*, where no less than Sergeant 'Athena Grant' (played by Angela Bassett, a star in the entertainment business) legitimises him as a detective in the making ('Carlos': «I'm not a detective, actually»; 'Athena': «You're kiddin'? You could have fooled me»).^59

'Carlos' is now also given an emotional backstory. The audience discovers that he tends to feel guilty about situations he does not control («I just kept thinking, 'I'm the one who put him on the plane'», he tells his boyfriend who survived an emergency landing).^60 In addition, he reveals himself jealous of 'Cooper': episode 13—still set in the loft—allows Silva to again display his range as a performer, showing tenderness and an almost maternal concern for his boyfriend, but also irony verging on caricature («You guys have fun. But not too much fun»), passive-aggression and vulnerability, only to redeem his character in the finale. Responding with a smiling «I know» instead of echoing 'TK' in saying «I love you», 'Carlos' displays emotional maturity and a calm, unshakable confidence,⁶¹ demonstrating that he has realised that, «Love, at its core, is to love someone not the way that *you* see it best, but the way that they need it best».⁶² In episode 15 Silva, perfectly supported by Rubinstein, even shows his comic acting skills when 'Carlos' looks for a pet lizard in the house, in a storyline suited to a sitcom.⁶³ One thing is certain: no other character is offered such a variety of emotional nuances, from crying to farce, on such a massive scale, and this high regard for his acting talent was confirmed by Minear, when he stated that, «What I don't want to do is, for instance, take somebody like Rafael and put him in a scene where he's directing traffic»:⁶⁴ an actor like Silva had to be challenged, because, evidently, his professionalism was good for the show.

The fans, of course, couldn't help but appreciate this. Although it is impossible to reconstruct audience reaction to every single episode, hashtags related to 'Tarlos' went viral on Twitter weekly and there was ample opportunity for fans to anticipate the long-awaited marriage proposal, which finally arrives in the season 3 finale, obviously

59 *Prince Albert in a Can* - S3 E11, 21 March 2022.

60 *In the Unlikely Event of an Emergency* - S3 E4, 28 February 2022.

61 *Riddle of the Sphinx* - S3 E13, 11 April 2022.

62 Max Gao, *9-1-1: Lone Star's Rafael Silva on Tarlos' Breakup, Makeup, and Future*, in «Observer», 11 April 2022, <https://observer.com/2022/04/9-1-1-lone-stars-rafael-silva-on-tarlos-breakup-makeup-and-future/>.

63 *Down To Clown* - S3 E15, 25 April 2022.

64 Jennifer Maas, *State of More Emergencies: '9-1-1'/'Lone Star' Creative Chiefs on the Power of Scheduling, the Franchise's Future and a Potential Third Series*, in «Variety», 21 March 2022, <https://variety.com/2022/tv/features/911-lone-star-schedule-new-spinoff-renewals-future-fox-1235205485/>.

in an impromptu and unconventional manner.⁶⁵ The proposal is left with 'TK'. In fact, it was he who had been heartbroken at the beginning of the show and had been afraid of commitment, whereas now he could iconically express his feelings: «For the first time in my life the love that I feel is infinitely more powerful than the fear of losing it». Not only did that phrase drive the fans who identified with it wild («Tattoo this on my body. Write it on my grave», tweeted a user), but reflected a profound emotional change in the character of 'TK', who showed he had overcome the fear of abandonment or failure, typical of addicts, by deciding not to escape the pain, but to rediscover positive feelings.

With this enthusiastic finale, the series went on hiatus until the following TV season, while the actors who had brought 'Tarlos' to life were confirmed as leading figures in the LGBTQIA+ community. At the GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) Media Awards 2022 ceremony in April, Rubinstein and Silva were the centre of attention and referred to their fans in their statements: while the former insisted on the globality of fandom («People, like, from tiny villages to tiny countries to tiny cities [...] are so proud to see it and to celebrate it»), the latter took every opportunity to send political messages to the big networks («The traction that Tarlos has gotten, it's a clear proof that it's about time we have that type of representation on network TV») and personal messages especially to trans children («You are deserving of your space on this earth, you were not a mistake, you are a blessing, and you are not alone»)⁶⁶ Silva's concern was reiterated on other occasions during those months, even making direct reference to the hundreds of anti-LGBTQIA+ bills, especially those targeting trans people, filed in the United States in 2022 alone: according to him, queer representation had to be «Right where it is convenient for people to see», because «the point, is to get you talking». In his opinion, «what our show also does really well is redefine what traditional values are», going so far as to say that «family has no definition, has no shape, has no size, has no cultural binding to any one person or any sort of culture».⁶⁷ Unsurprisingly, Silva, who had become so vocal and had a large following, was honoured in September 2022 with the Vanguard Award at the Texan charity Black Tie Dinner as a trailblazer in the LGBTQIA+ community.⁶⁸

Rubinstein and Silva's approaches to LGBTQIA+ issues are, therefore, different. Rubinstein tended to focus on the emotional and community aspect of his activism, celebrating membership of queer fandom and spreading hope; Silva positioned himself in a more explicitly pedagogical and political manner, using his strategic role

65 *A Bright and Cloudless Morning* - S3 E18, 16 May 2022.

66 <https://www.out.com/television/2022/4/04/rafael-l-silva-ronen-rubinstein-love-tarlos-fans-glaad-awards-red-carpet-2022>, 4 April 2022.

67 Mey Rude, *Rafael L. Silva Talks Carlos's Growth & the Importance of Tarlos*, in «Out», 18 May 2022, <https://www.out.com/celebs/2022/5/18/rafael-l-silva-911-lone-star-season-3-finale-tarlos-engagement-interview>.

68 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhqsoOaKcxl>.

to express a critique of the cultural and political system to redefine cultural parameters. The two approaches, however, complemented each other in a balance of affective and political action, in which the key was the visibility guaranteed by the 'Tarlos' couple beyond the context of the series.

When the show resumed for its fourth season, it confirmed the narrative transformation that had centred the storyline of the couple composed of 'TK' and 'Carlos', despite the fact that Brian Michael Smith was called to the stage, along with Rubinstein and Silva, and gave the acceptance speech when *9-1-1: Lone Star* won the GLAAD Media Awards in the 'Outstanding Drama Series' category on 30 March 2023. From the first episode, in fact, the matrimonial and family plot of the fiancés prevails: there are equally significant storylines,⁶⁹ but the couple are the backbone of several episodes, with twists and turns concerning the past of 'Carlos', who reveals himself to be an increasingly layered character, and situations in which, for the first time, it is not the life of 'TK' that is put at risk, but that of 'Carlos'. At this point Silva, from whom the writers had increasingly demanded the display of a wide range of emotions, was offered a variety of challenges, including physical tests. Previously, Silva's acting was still within the most widespread interpretative canons, as was evident in season 2 in a dialogue between 'Carlos' and 'Owen', when a breath to break the sentence was intended to highlight in a somewhat textbook way the sense of his worry («I may have made a... bad call today»);⁷⁰ now, after an undeniable flowering, Silva's acting had also drastically evolved.

Consider episode 4, when 'Carlos' is kidnapped by a serial killer:⁷¹ particularly the close-ups in Silva's scattered dialogues with the serial killer's mother cannot be defined as mere 'acting'. His facial expressions, his whispers and shouts, are too dense, primal, fervent. They are authentic. He is not only a captive man, a good cop overwhelmed by an excess of evil and perversion: these scenes carry with them and embrace the unsettling possibility that it has all been for nothing, that the years of working on yourself, of inner quest, of being a straight-A guy who always wears his heart on his sleeve, who is willing to give up parts of himself for those he loves, can in an instant be exposed as an illusion. It is not the probable loss of his life that is the fear in the eyes of the bound and helpless 'Carlos': it is the harrowing realisation that it is all a tragic blunder, the realisation of deceit. Any of us would have those eyes, that quivering eyebrow, but probably without the same eloquence, intensity, and—for lack of a more fitting word—truth.

On top of this, not only was *9-1-1: Lone Star* trending every week on social media due to the anticipation of episodes involving the 'Tarlos' couple, but also the

69 For instance the involvement of the firefighter captain 'Owen' in an FBI investigation into a neo-Nazi terrorist group or 'Marjan' rescuing a woman from her abusive partner and getting harassed by the man.
70 *Bad call* - S2 E8, 8 March 2021.

71 *Abandoned* - S4 E4, 14 February 2023.

production again consciously interacted with the fan base: the picture that 'TK' shows while looking for his missing boyfriend, in fact, is the now famous 'Golden #Tarlos' picture, the first evidence, dating back to 2019, of media attention. Moreover, that dramatic episode ending with a new, poignant expression of love aired in the US on Valentine's Day—a clear statement of intent to no longer just integrate queer themes into the main plot (as US television had done, with ups and downs, for decades),⁷² but to show the relationship as an archetype of true love, regardless of whether it was a male-only romance.

Paradoxically, one can speak of a process of normalisation and exceptionalism at the same time: normalisation because it was the result of a broader cultural movement that, believing in the power of media representation, aimed at demonstrating that queer storylines can be central and not marginal or 'different'; exceptionalism, because love is between two characters who are heroes (a firefighter-turned-paramedic and a police officer), not exempt from personal failings and flaws, but with an uncommon emotional and physical strength, so that theirs is a relational utopia, perhaps too good to be true, and therefore healing. The two concepts—normalisation and exceptionalism—can coexist here without contradicting one another, precisely because mainstream television can both reflect social reality and act as a space of aspiration at the same time, thanks to the digital and social media that amplify this dual role. For those experiencing discrimination or marginalisation, seeing a queer couple being loved, respected and at the centre of attention offers safe spaces in which to imagine possibilities and overcome trauma.

Season 4 is, of course, full of twists and turns right up to the finale and there are numerous bumps in the road, especially for 'Carlos', who confronts his difficult relationship with his father and his tragic death, while 'TK' supports his fiancé, in a significant change of roles compared with the beginning of the show. Asked about the increase in his screentime in season 4, Silva was careful to shift the focus away from himself to address more general problems in the entertainment industry, stating that it was, «just a blessing to be employed as an actor because there are a lot of talented actors out there that do not get a chance to get into the room to audition because they don't even have the representation». His concern for underrepresented groups deprived of access due to the logic of the system echoed previous statements of his, always attentive to the plural aspect of inequality, especially for LGBTQIA+ and Latinx performers.⁷³

72 On the development of queer representation on US TV, the bibliography is extensive. Here reference is made, in addition to the annual GLAAD reports, at least to Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006; James R. Keller, Leslie Stratyner, *The New Queer Aesthetic on Television: Essays on Recent Programming*. Jefferson, N.C., McFarland, 2006; Lynne Joyrich, *Queer Television Studies: Currents, Flows, and (Main)streams*, in «Cinema Journal», 53, 2014, 133-139.

73 Rebecca Lewis, *Exclusive: 9-1-1: Lone Star's Rafael Silva breaks down the shocking death before*

In episode 18 the long-awaited wedding takes place in a two-hour, full-night event,⁷⁴ responding to the huge media attention. The ceremony has enormous symbolic significance, since two men of different race and religion ('TK' wears the traditional yarmulke for male Jews) are united in marriage, and the wedding is presided over by the Black trans man 'Paul'. This is a circumstance that Rubinstein and Silva mentioned in several interviews. The former stated that it was «a beautiful way to inspire people»,⁷⁵ and therefore an instrument of social change, while the latter insisted on the sense of community in shooting those scenes, showing how fiction actually drew on real dynamics: «It was truth in every single moment», he said,⁷⁶ declaring an experience of queer love that aired on primetime network television to be legitimate, and not forced or artificial. There was an enormous number of articles and user-generated content with #TarlosWedding, characterising the episode as a true cultural event, transformed by social media into a symbol of inclusivity, but also into a celebrated real-life moment, in which fans were fully involved.

After filming season 4, the two actors went to Paris for the second year in a row to attend the First Responders Reunion convention in June 2023, harvesting the international success of *9-1-1: Lone Star*, but they had to wait to film season 5 due to major production reorganisation: Fox's two highest-rated blockbuster shows, *9-1-1* and *9-1-1: Lone Star*, were decoupled, with the former moving to a different network, ABC. In addition, the Hollywood strikes postponed production, so that *9-1-1: Lone Star* did not air during the 2023-24 season. The narrative, therefore, had to consider that important hiatus, because 15 months had passed between the marriage of 'TK' and 'Carlos' and the debut of season 5—soon announced as the last, not due to plot exhaustion, but to economic and logistical problems. During this time, 'Carlos' has become a Texas Ranger, following in the footsteps of his father, whose violent death he wants to investigate, becoming obsessed with it and jeopardising his marriage, while 'TK' is grappling with the adoption of his little step-brother, which also takes a toll on his relationship with his emotionally distant new husband. In season 5—which has begun to be seen in Europe as this article is being written—we notice a further evolution of the 'Tarlos' couple, centred on a very different 'Carlos Reyes' from the character the public knew, forced to change by the heavy burden of investigating his father's death; at the same time, a further strategic evolution of the character is underway. 'Carlos', in fact, gains full autonomy in the plot and his interactions with the other series regulars diminish. For the sake of internal consistency it was necessary to

Tarlos wedding, in «Hello!», 17 May 2023, <https://www.hellomagazine.com/film/492785/9-1-1-lone-stars-rafael-silva-breaks-down-the-shocking-death-before-tarlos-wedding/>.

74 *In Sickness and In Health - S4 E18*, 16 May 2023.

75 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbasPxnNFvc&t=3s>.

76 Andy Swift, *9-1-1: Lone Star Couple on the Tragedy and Triumph of the #TarlosWedding, Including What Viewers Didn't See*, in «TV Line», 16 May 2023, <https://tvline.com/lists/911-lone-star-recap-season-4-finale-tarlos-wedding-explained/>.

justify his becoming a Texas Ranger in a series about firefighters, but it cannot be ruled out that the writers, aware that this could be the last season, wanted to test the ground for future developments of a beloved character in a possible spin-off, reinforcing the identity of 'Carlos' as a key figure, although separated from the romantic storyline.

There is an episode that can be defined as 'Carlos'-centred—the eighth out of the 12 in season 5—that attracted the attention of fans, from whose comments (particularly stories on Instagram) an interesting shift in reception can be noted. Now that the storyline of 'Tarlos' has peaked with the wedding and secured a long-awaited emotional resolution, the focus is on Silva's acting performance. Fans no longer simply 'believe' in this fiction, but appreciate the construction of the story as an artistic process, they feel an active part in the creation of television as a consciously broader experience. The fans are not delusional. On the contrary, they display a rare sophistication; they are always well aware that there is a boundary between reality and fiction, but they cross it constantly, just like the two actors; they transform reality, imagine it and reinterpret it, but they also know that *all this* is television. After all, fans have been such for years: they have grown up with the series, many have gone from their teens or early twenties to adulthood in the company of 'TK' and 'Carlos', so they have a mature and relational, not just emotional and immersive, view of the duo, which leads them to see *9-1-1: Lone Star* not only as a story, but also as an artistic product that has a social impact and requires talent and commitment.

Reception and the role of fans

The series' relationship with the fan base, a non-quantifiable but powerful subject, was not without friction. There were cases where social media was the venue for protests when, at the beginning of season 3, the break-up between 'TK' and 'Carlos' was discovered or when, also in season 3, the character of 'Carlos', due to contractual reasons for Silva, did not appear in a few episodes.⁷⁷ It is no coincidence that these objections almost exclusively concerned the 'Tarlos' couple. At some point, the pressure must have become stressful, as a «Variety» article suggests. Executive producer Rashad Raisani explained that there was a part of the fan base «intensely devoted to one tiny segment of the show»—of course the reference was to the fans of 'Tarlos'—but, «for us, it is truly an ensemble». Minear was more blunt and claimed decision-making autonomy, explaining that he could not follow everything the fans on social media proposed he write, nor could he indulge their ideas of character development, hinting that he did not want to sacrifice narrative balance to please one

⁷⁷ Emmy Griffiths, *911: Lone star fans have major complaint following latest episode*, in «Hello!», 20 April 2022, <https://www.hellomagazine.com/film/20220420138322/911-lone-star-major-complaint-latest-episode/>.

part of the audience.⁷⁸

This may be true, but at the same time there was a strategic focus on audience reactions, as always with big TV productions, and the high level of involvement and loyalty influenced production decisions. This is confirmed by the expansion of the role of ‘Carlos’, who went from a simple love interest to a well-rounded character capable of supporting the whole set-up of the show alongside ‘Owen’, ‘Tommy’ and ‘TK’, as happens in season 5. The fans of the ‘Tarlos’ couple may therefore have had the greatest influence on this aspect, not only gaining more space for the romantic storyline, but also for the evolution of ‘Carlos’ as a character, compelling exploration of his emotional universe and family and professional life.

The impact of the fans’ reaction is evident, therefore, but it is not deterministic, given the complexity of the interaction between content creators and the public, the artistic autonomy of the former, and the role of other factors, including the gradual recognition of Silva’s acting talent. In general, however, the audience was more than supportive, indeed one can even speak of an alliance between the show and the public and users of social platforms, according to a phenomenon of cultural convergence⁷⁹ where fans are not mere consumers, but actively participate in circulating and signifying content, expanding the boundaries of the diegetic area and thus also of television, transforming the series into a shared cultural phenomenon.

Indeed, the continuous transition between the lines of reality and fiction has been mentioned several times, with the production teasing its audience on multiple occasions. The relationship with fandom is a continuous game of cross-references. One of these, in particular, seems noteworthy. Starting in season 3, ‘Carlos’ wears a cross around his neck, a wardrobe accessory that takes on a symbolic and narrative function, providing depth to the character thanks to its connection to a universal theme that fans were quick to pick up on. For example, one stated on Tumblr in February 2022 that he wanted to know more about the relationship ‘Carlos’ had with the Catholic Church, having himself grown up in the Church as a gay person, thus projecting his own feelings onto the show. Fan interest around the necklace was such that journalist Max Gao questioned Silva on the subject. The actor took responsibility for the choice, justifying it on the grounds that, «in order for [Carlos] to get through the things that he gets through [...] I think it was very native to him to believe in the higher power [...] And I think that came through a moment of the symbol of a cross—not necessarily meaning religious ties».⁸⁰ Silva’s explanation was clever: by emphasising the actor’s choice using psychological rather than theological motives, he made the matter accessible regardless of identification with a specific creed. The fact that the actor

78 Maas, “State of More Emergencies”.

79 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press, 2008.

80 Max Gao on Twitter, 9 April 2022, now in <https://rafaelsilvasource.com/post/681091546248101888/rafael-silva-discusses-carloss-cross-necklace>.

was often photographed in his daily life wearing a cross necklace afterwards (possibly the same wardrobe item as 'Carlos') was seen by attentive fans as a link between actor and character: it broke the fourth wall between narration and reality (which Silva had always seemed more reluctant to do than Rubinstein) and was a message that only loyal viewers could interpret, each in their own way, but which appeared as a gesture of authenticity that strengthened the bond between the performer and his audience. It must be emphasised that this is part of a long history of transfictional and transmedia storytelling and typical fandom practices that date back at least to the Victorian age. In the digital context, the audience has already been 'trained' and is led to perceive characters and plots as possible real-life ramifications, thus 'authentic' in all their facets.⁸¹

This example is important because, while the fan base may not directly enter into the writing, it certainly enters into the mode of interpretation and the intention that actors feel in their performance. The acting style, in particular, is an aspect that the historian cannot ignore, because it is an integral part of analysis of the context and has direct reference to the role of the digital. In this regard, it is interesting to refer again to Silva, who, from the earliest seasons, showed a balanced approach between awareness of the socio-cultural context (the movements for fairer representation in Hollywood, the struggle for civil rights) on the one hand, and concentration on the creative craft of acting on the other:

I would say that Carlos represents people that I couldn't imagine [he] would represent. I think a lot of people gravitate towards Carlos and towards his heart independently of what he looks like. [...] I think the biggest takeaway is that as long as I focus on actually bringing his truth and bringing in detail and actually, as an actor, focusing on my artistry and focusing on my intention and my integrity, I think people will also see that through Carlos. [...] It's a person you're representing but you're also representing your artistry and the love you have for it and then at the end of the day when you put your work out it doesn't belong to you anymore, it belongs to all that identify with it.⁸²

By ascertaining the public's reaction, Silva believed that authenticity derives from the way in which the actor devotes himself with intentionality to the creative process, in the awareness that the artistic product transcends the actor's performance. His interpretation was therefore loaded: since 'Carlos' represents minority communities, Silva had to ensure that his stories were treated with respect, avoiding the perpetuation

81 Besides of course the classic study by Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture. Updated Twentieth Anniversary Edition*. New York-London: Routledge, 2012, see Erica Christine Haugtvedt, *Transfictional Character and Transmedia Storyworlds in the British Nineteenth Century*. Cham: Palgrave, 2022.

82 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_HsNUe9kg2k&t=1s, 16 June 2021.

of stereotypes. This goes beyond personal dedication to the work and stems from the realisation that a performance, once on screen, is no longer in the actor's hands. In this way, Silva emphasised the circular relationship between actor, character and audience, corroborating the idea that the fan base is actively involved in the creation of meaning.

Rubinstein and Silva were, in fact, the fans' key to the narrative—and they could only be so because of their online presence. Rubinstein had claimed to have gotten to know «especially the Tarlos fan base [...] on a very personal level» because of «how deep and personal they get».⁸³ Silva also declared that, «you never know what someone is going through and how your job can assist someone in becoming themselves».⁸⁴ This responsibility was articulated in the divide between public and private, as when Silva responded with affection to a Twitter user who recounted how their recent coming out to their family, which had fallen on deaf ears, had echoed 'Carlos' coming out to his parents, which had made the Twitter user feel heard. With a simple comment to the post, Silva validated the feelings of an unknown person in need of approval, and showed that he used the platform as a space for dialogue and communal awareness. In fact, while admitting that he found himself «not subscribing to the necessity of posting all the time», he felt that «more often than not there are so many things that need to be talked about», without being too assertive: «If you happen to have an audience, people [...] that adore you for you simply being who you are, you have the responsibility, and you need [...] to be honest about why you do, what you want, and how you can help other people, because at the end of the day it's about other people, right? It's not about you».⁸⁵

The 'Tarlos' phenomenon was made possible not only by skillful storytelling and excellent acting talent, but by the central role that social media and digital platforms played in globally amplifying the success of the romantic storyline. This was ensured during the early years by massive direct interaction, especially with the live shows during the pandemic. Moreover, thanks to the digital, both Rubinstein and Silva better defined their public persona, merging it with private (the former's coming out as bisexual) and political (the latter's activism) elements. In a second phase, when the pandemic began to ease, the two actors were also able to participate in conventions in Paris and Chicago, strengthening the bond with the fans, since it was a two-way relationship.

83 Tracy, "Ronen Rubinstein's Coming Out as Bisexual".

84 <https://www.foxla.com/video/1219476>, 11 May 2023.

85 Tamika Mallory's *State of Emergency* virtual book tour, 19 May 2021, <https://rafaelsilvasource.com/tagged/state-of-emergency-conversation>.

Fandom yesterday and today: a first field survey for historians

All these aspects can be confirmed by an investigation into 'Tarlos' fandom today, five years from the day of its birth. Analysing the evolution of fandom over the long term is not an easy task, as studies by digital ethnographers demonstrate.⁸⁶ On the one hand, the volume of data is overwhelming; on the other hand, each social media platform has different rules on content sharing and their algorithms prioritise different topics. Such work would preferably have to be done at the same time as events, due to the existence of ephemeral content and posts that are deleted or made private over time. Historians approaching the question must also take into account the co-presence of online and offline encounters, such as conventions; they can therefore provide mere indications, presenting some qualitative results. In spite of these issues, from a methodological point of view, historians cannot be satisfied with reconstructing the debate according to a traditional approach (i.e. through the press and official statements), but can and should also engage in fieldwork. Testimonies from fans and social media users provide insights not only into the political scope of a TV series, but also into the emotional landscape related to it. Moreover, this helps to preserve digital memory, regardless of the fate of accounts, posts and platforms.

With an awareness of ethical concerns regarding the relationship between academia and fan communities,⁸⁷ several Instagram users⁸⁸ have been contacted who have explicitly either dedicated their content to 'Tarlos' or paid much attention to the subject in text posts, creatively with GIFs, and even musical commentary covers or spec scripts for how a specific storyline could unfold. The result is not exhaustive, because it is a snapshot taken in November 2024 without historical depth, and does not necessarily involve the profiles with the most followers; indeed, many of the users contacted preferred not to answer and some only partially answered, given the necessarily private and personal quality of some of the questions. The written interviews involved five anonymous Instagram users who responded between 20 and 27 November 2024 and agreed to share their comments: @itsechomusic (female, 25 years old, New York); @t.arlos (female, 21 years old, Oklahoma); @melanfin (female, 22 years old, not American); @tarlosxx (male, 27 years old, Germany); @maddiee96_art (27 years old, Texas). Among them, the most followed accounts on 2 December 2024 are @melanfin (27,800 followers) and @tarlosxx (14,600 followers).

A clarification is necessary: for the sake of this article, I have focused explicitly on Instagram profiles employing the English language (regardless of the nationality

86 For an overview of the literature and methodology in this field, see Angela Delli Paoli, Valentina D'Auria, *Digital Ethnography: A Systematic Literature Review*, in «Italian Sociological Review», 11 (4S), 2021, 243-267, <http://dx.doi.org/10.13136/isr.v11i4S.434>.

87 Brittany Kelley, *Toward a goodwill ethics of online research methods*, in «Transformative Works and Cultures», 22, 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2016.0891>.

88 Other platforms were excluded as unfeasible, due to the high amount of data.

of their users, which cannot always be inferred), as it was my intention to give an account of the phenomenon globally. There are specific pages and profiles in other languages, which would have made the study too dispersive. What is clear is that the ‘Tarlos’ movement was transnational from its very beginning: for instance, one of the first comments to the ‘Golden #Tarlos’ picture was by a user writing from the Philippines. On the web, especially on YouTube, in fact, excerpts and video clips created over time by fans and specific to the ‘Tarlos’ storyline have always circulated, even independently of the actual airing of the series. One can thus enjoy a clip of ‘Tarlos’ as well as many other same-sex couples whose stories are removed from the main narrative of a series: for LGBTQIA+ viewers, what counts is the relatable or desirable quality of a storyline, which has a visibility all its own. Although it is therefore not possible to quantify the international character of the trend, thanks to the web and social media, it can be said to be transnational from the outset.

If we take into account the users who provided their answers to the survey, all of them declare that they are between 21 and 27 years old, and all have been watching the series since season 1; this means that they first saw the show between their mid-teens and early twenties, hence they are all digital natives who encountered ‘Tarlos’ at a formative stage, yet they respond to different television audience profiles: there are those who enjoy watching procedural and emergency dramas and were already fans of *9-1-1*, those who watch the sister series, but don’t feel “as connected to the characters/plot lines” (@maddiee96_art), but there are also those who almost exclusively follow *9-1-1: Lone Star* among procedural TV shows (@tarlosxx; @t.arlos). The predominance of female profiles in this restricted corpus could be a coincidence, but it was confirmed by the recent First Responders Convention in Paris (7-8 December 2024), where many of the paying attendees—as I can personally testify—were young women aged approximately between 20 and 25. This is also seen in slash fiction studies, which respond to needs in women that include security and affective fulfillment without sexual pressure, the reconfiguration of ideals of romance purified by power dynamics or gender stereotypes, but also support for the LGBTQIA+ community.⁸⁹ Some statements mention a deeper understanding. For example, @itsechomusic appreciates the relationship between ‘TK’ and ‘Carlos’ because, «Their dynamic is based on understanding, emotional connection, and deep trust», so much so that, «When I see them on screen, I feel warmth and comfort». It is also interesting to note that many fans demand more intimacy and affection than the series is allegedly offering. The reference is to the current season 5, in which, «the fans (myself included) expected a lot of cute tarlos married couple moments and the show isn’t delivering». This provokes a «sense of disappointment» that fans discuss among themselves (@t.arlos).

⁸⁹ It is useful to compare the English and Japanese contexts, where male/male manga romances are wide-spread. See Kumiko Saito, *Desire in Subtext: Gender, Fandom, and Women’s Male-Male Homoerotic Parodies in Contemporary Japan*, in «Mechademia: Second Arc», 6, 2011, 171-191.

The profile @tarlosxx, owned by a man, is deserving of note. The user states that he was immediately attracted to the series because of an advertisement featuring 'TK' and 'Carlos' and he has «a thing for cop uniforms». He thus seems to represent a component of the *9-1-1: Lone Star* fan base drawn to 'Tarlos' by a visual (rather than emotional) aspect. Despite appearances, this is a layered approach, because he claims to love the fact that 'TK' and 'Carlos' «represent a relationship between two guys without focusing too much on the 'gay' part». Moreover, their dynamic is «very relatable to me and something I wish I had in real life for myself». In fact, @tarlosxx demonstrates not only that he has a deep interest in the accessibility of a love story without an overemphasis on the sexual identity of the characters, but also that he appreciates the construction of spaces for identification and desire, which goes far beyond the aesthetic aspect, and that he finds in fandom an opportunity to explore personal aspirations.

As much as they are all obviously smitten with the 'Tarlos' couple, specific attention is paid to the character of 'Carlos': @maddiee96_art even goes so far as to say that, «In the beginning we got a decent amount of glimpses of Carlos' personality and that really interested people so much that the show creators have expanded his character», not only agreeing with the thesis of this article, but even establishing a direct link between fan base approval and the increase in the character's screen time.

An interesting aspect concerns the duration and consistency of the fans' relationship with the show. Some immediately created Instagram accounts (@t.arlos; @tarlosxx), but in three out of five cases the viewer did not become a die-hard fan overnight: for instance, @maddiee96_art «did not start being a part of the 'fandom' side of the show until around episode 8 of season 3. That episode was so intense and mind blowing that I needed to talk about it with people».⁹⁰ All of them, in any case, have formed strong bonds with fellow fans and even a kind of community, and openly speak of friendship ties. Many of them (at least those based in Europe) met at the Paris convention in December 2024, testifying to their loyalty, as did Instagram posts recalling the weekend spent together.

When asked about the reasons for the creative and profile management effort, users touched on different issues, and @t.arlos' response is worth exploring. She says that, «If I didn't have this fan account I feel, in a way, that I wouldn't have as strong of a connection to the show». Being part of the fandom is anything but a form of passive expression of admiration, since it is an active way of building a deep and meaningful relationship with the content of a show, and to be part of fandom is a practice of identity («I really can't think of NOT posting»).

The perceived connection with the cast, which is based on a clearly asymmetrical and screen-mediated relationship, is one of the qualifying aspects of the movement. This connection is ubiquitous, because it concerns both the diegetic reality (@t.arlos:

⁹⁰ The reference is to the episode *In the Unlikely Event of an Emergency* - S3 E4, 28 February 2022.

«my favorite character in the show is Carlos so having Carlos centered episodes is very important to me») and the extra-diegetic world (@tarlosxx: «I admire the actors, since they're also part of the LGBT community in real life»). For some of them, it was possible to meet the actors in person, or they used other tools such as the Cameo service, which allows them to receive personalised messages from celebrities, but a bond perceived as palpable develops on another level: even those who have never met Rubinstein and Silva in person, such as @t.arlos, write that they have repeatedly sought contact by tagging on their posts and have received a like from both of them. The point is that for the admirer, «It makes me delighted knowing that the cast knows I'm one of the MANY Lone Star fans that support them», showing how mutual recognition is essential for fuelling the relationship and strengthening the emotional bond, because the fan feels like an individual worthy of attention.

A final aspect, which should also be further investigated, concerns the linguistic analysis that can be made of both fan messages and interviews. It is evident that the sentimental register is always prevalent, with users frequently expressing deeply felt emotions. This emotional engagement, however, is neither superficial nor saccharine, but is inherently political. The 'Tarlos' story, being a romance between two men, indeed, cannot be reduced to conventional romantic narrative, although the authors aim at normalisation. That is why the fans follow it not only for its emotional resonance, but also for what it represents from the civic point of view. The intertwining of the emotional and the political is evident in both the testimonies and the broader fan discourse, where these dimensions coexist rather than operating in isolation. Whether consciously or subconsciously, for a younger audience engaging with 'Tarlos', the emotional connection becomes a vehicle for a political statement.

Final remarks

Paris, 7-8 December 2024, Hilton Hotel at Charles de Gaulle airport

Hundreds of young women queuing patiently over two days wait for entry to panels or access to reserved meetings and photoshoots with their favourite actors from the series *Station 19*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Private Practice* and *9-1-1: Lone Star*. At this fourth First Responders Reunion, organised by the French company DreamIt Conventions, many were drawn to actresses Danielle Savre and Stefania Spampinato (respectively 'Maya' and 'Carina' in *Station 19*, ship name 'Marina'), queer protagonists of a procedural drama in Shonda Rhimes' fictional universe, but others eagerly await Ronen Rubinstein, for once separated from his co-star Rafael L. Silva, who is filming a new series overseas. Fans come not only from France, but from the UK, Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere.

Rubinstein is perfectly at ease: he answers the audience's questions, recounting how he himself looks up to 'TK' as if he were his brother; he emphasises his character's evolution, when 'TK' for the first time in season 5, while being selfless, imposes his will to obtain his brother's adoption; he feels that he is fulfilled and that nothing is missing from his character, «except for more seasons»; he assures that all characters will get what they want («We all deserve it»), while regretting the fact that because of Covid-19 and the strikes as many storylines as possible have been squeezed in. However, he declares nothing has been cut from 'Tarlos', because, «They [the creators] know what people want», confirming the thesis of this article.⁹¹ He also has words of appreciation for Silva, claiming that he only began to grow as a character from season 3 (whereas my analysis anticipated this in season 2), and then to fully «shine» in season 5, as a Texas Ranger.⁹² Rubinstein allows himself to be hugged and photographed, he gets emotional talking about his newborn son, he shares private aspects of his life with people he considers to be friends ("Most of us know each other by now", he says). He receives trinkets and scrapbooks as gifts, shares smiles and words of affection and encouragement, collects confessions. Many fans will later write on social media about how that meeting changed and improved their lives, giving them hope in difficult times or fostering connections with people who have become important for them.

In a one-to-one meeting, I asked Rubinstein about his views on the fine line between reality and fiction, and he spoke of the parallels between his personal life and the arc of 'TK', confirming my impressions: he merges personal and fictional experiences to infuse the character with authenticity, coming to see 'TK' simultaneously as "himself" and as an aspirational figure, allowing him to explore his own weaknesses and wounds, but also to enjoy his personal growth, believing in the transformative power of storytelling.

This is, in fact, the point: to Stefania Spampinato, who asked *me* what I learnt during the convention as a researcher, I answered that, unlike my preconceptions, the emotions that fans feel are real, and all this paradoxically starts from an abstraction (scripted narratives, performances on TV, online interactions). These same interactions give fans a sense of inclusion and agency, making their emotional investment worthwhile. Compared to film, television, through long-form storytelling, provides a long-term emotional engagement that becomes a relationship similar to those in the real world (Rubinstein's «Most of us know each other *by now*»). Studying television in the age of social media therefore means considering the convergence of content, technology and audience synergy in a nuanced way, because television is a participatory and multiplatform experience that therefore also includes its digital extensions.

This is something that historians are uniquely positioned to analyse. The 'Tarlos' phenomenon is not just a matter of script or production or acting or reception, but is *all*

⁹¹ Panel Ronen, First Responders Reunion Part IV, 7 December 2024.

⁹² Panel Ronen, First Responders Reunion Part IV, 8 December 2024.

of *this* together, something historians know how to investigate in a comprehensive way because they are used to embracing interdisciplinarity, to combining textual, visual and performative analysis to capture a cultural process in its fullness. This article has shown that the virtuous circle between creators and audiences has probably shifted the show's storyline in favour of 'Tarlos', but above all, it has shown how fandom can influence actors' intentionality in the interplay between fiction (the narrated story) and reality (the emotional experience of actors and fans): for fans, the actors' authenticity translates into active consumption and the perception of real characters, capable of conveying universal emotions; for actors, it means ethical responsibility. Indeed, for minority characters, authenticity becomes a moral issue, and technical quality goes hand-in-hand with emotional truth. Authenticity is celebrated because it responds to deep needs: for fans, it is a bridge connecting the emotional reality of the narrative with their desire to participate, identify and feel represented; for actors, it is a guide in their professionalism and ethical integrity.

The fan base may not directly enter into the writing, but it certainly enters into the mode of interpretation and the intention the actors feel in their performance. It was the building of the digital fan community that gave Rubinstein, by his own admission, the incentive to share his personal queer experience and gave Silva the space and authority for his activism. We are faced with an emotional partnership, in which both parties feel valued, and a cultural convergence⁹³ in which fans are not mere consumers, but actively participate in the circulation and signification of content, pushing the limits of the narrative universe and, by extension, the medium of television itself. It was a form of reciprocity from the very beginning: as fans invested time and emotions in the characters, so the actors recognised and legitimised those same emotions, creating a relationship of trust and co-construction. This interaction also reflects a broader pattern of how personal and political identities merge in the digital age, especially for a younger audience. The validation of emotional experiences is, at the same time, an affirmation of political identities. The way fans express their sentiments—through language, advocacy, and creative output—demonstrates that the emotional and political aspects are deeply interwoven threads, maturing into a shared dimension of identity-building and activism. If the impact of the fans' reaction is evident, it is, however, not preordained, given the complexity of the interaction between content creators and the public and the artistic autonomy of the former, and being at stake, as seen, other factors, including the discovery of Silva's performative skillset.

Historical analysis allows us to state that the centrality of 'Tarlos' is the result of a cultural change, in which the digital plays a crucial role and has an impact that goes far beyond the writing of the series and the talent or likability of actors Rubinstein and Silva. Without the digital, there would not have been the amplification of their stories, nor would they have had the same direct connection with the audience, nor

93 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*.

would such global sharing of fan fiction, fan art, video edits, etc., have been possible. Moreover, social media not only act as a sounding board for the message, but turn stories like that of ‘Tarlos’ into symbols of a broader movement that aims to spread inclusivity and equality at all levels, becoming a true tool of activism. In fact, Rubinstein and Silva used social media not only to celebrate ‘Tarlos’, but to advance specific and complementary causes: Rubinstein gave visibility to bisexuality as a legitimate part of the queer spectrum, helping to break internal stereotypes even within the LGBTQIA+ community, while Silva denounced discriminatory policies and shared messages of support, especially for trans children. ‘Tarlos’ is therefore not merely a story, but it is a lived and felt experience that challenges the boundaries between sentiment and protest, personal connection, and political commitment.

What happened was indeed a change in the real world, confirmed by the honour of being on the cover of the 100th issue of the magazine «Out» in October 2022, which celebrated the ‘Tarlos’ couple as trailblazers;⁹⁴ at the same time they had gone far beyond LGBTQIA+ circles: a question about ‘Carlos’—not by chance!—appeared on the popular TV quiz show *Jeopardy!* in March 2023,⁹⁵ proving how mainstream that character had become. However, Silva declined to attribute the widespread popularity of ‘Tarlos’ entirely to his own efforts:

This love and the representation that comes with being able to be fully out in the industry, playing an LGBTQIA+ character and being loved for your work and who you are, is one of those things that you can’t really claim to be yours [...] It’s been a very long road to achieve this sort of acceptance, not only on screen but off screen. All of the work happened off screen. It was from forever to up until this point. I feel extremely lucky.⁹⁶

What we find in the ‘Tarlos’ phenomenon should be placed in the wider context of the development of the theme of representation: not a linear narrative, but a continuous renegotiation of values, not least because of the constant oscillation between progress and setbacks in the cultural battles for LGBTQIA+ representation and rights. In analysing the show *9-1-1: Lone Star*, we have seen how normalisation and exceptionalism can coexist and not contradict each other, precisely because mainstream television can reflect social reality and at the same time act as a space of aspiration, a dual role amplified by the digital and social media.

One has to wonder, of course, whether the writing of the ‘Tarlos’ couple also falls

⁹⁴ Raffy Ermac, *Out100 Cover Stars Ronen Rubinstein & Rafael Silva Televisé Queer Love*, in «Out», <https://www.out.com/print/2022/10/25/out100-cover-stars-ronen-rubinstein-rafael-silva-televisé-queer-love>.

⁹⁵ Mey Rude, *9-1-1: Lone Star’s Fave Couple Tarlos Just Became a Jeopardy! Question*, in «Out», 30 March 2023, <https://www.out.com/gay-tv-shows/911-lone-star-jeopardy>.

⁹⁶ Damshenas, “9-1-1: Lone Star’s Rafael Silva”.

under “post-gay representation”, i.e., whether “queer desire” has been transformed «into depoliticised, sanitised, and safe images for mainstream consumption».⁹⁷ In this regard, there are contradictory indications that require further investigation. What can be stated, however, is that the ‘Tarlos’ movement generated a disproportionate amount of attention towards a same-sex relationship, however multi-racial, almost relegating actor Brian Michael Smith and his character ‘Paul’ to a less visible position, regardless of his significant role in the series as a Black transgender man. This leads to the sense that the US entertainment industry, despite its efforts, implicitly favours certain narratives or dynamics that guarantee an immediate emotional and commercial return, leaving other aspects of LGBTQIA+ representation in the background. This impression, coupled with the criticism from the LGBTQIA+ community mentioned above regarding the alleged lack of physical dimension of the relationship between ‘TK’ and ‘Carlos’, sheds light on an undeniable fact: although considerable attention is paid to audience and fan feedback, the experience of queerness is so complex and personal and tends to be so unique that it can never find a proper unitary representation, and social media increases this fragmentation. Since every narrative choice means excluding other modes of presentation and other storylines, resources are insufficient, as the show’s progression proved.

Historians cannot refrain from talking about this. On the contrary, they are legitimised in examining recent events and phenomena by employing rigorous methodologies that allow them to critically analyse and compare contemporary digital sources and artefacts. On the one hand, addressing representations and sensitivities is a pivotal aspect of this scrutiny. Television, particularly in Hollywood, is a key arena for debates over inclusion and visibility, actively reflecting and engaging with societal discourses on identity and diversity, which are relevant not just in the US, but across the global north. On the other hand, such an approach is both justified and essential, as the ephemeral nature of digital content poses the risk of losing valuable insights into societal trends and media practices. This loss could hinder efforts to preserve culturally significant moments that embody the emotions of an entire generation. One of the historians’ tasks, therefore, is to document and explore these processes with both methodological precision and cultural awareness, ensuring that the rapidly changing media landscape is recorded for future reflection and understanding. By addressing these intricate dynamics, this research sheds light on television’s dual role as a reflection of and driver of societal change in the digital age.

97 Whitney Monaghan, *Post-gay television: LGBTQ representation and the negotiation of ‘normal’ in MTV’s Faking It*, in «Media, Culture & Society», 43 (3), 2020, <https://doi.org/pros1.lib.unimi.it/10.1177/0163443720957553>.