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Revision as Resistance: Fanfiction as an Empowering Community for Female and Queer Fans

Diana Koehm
dianalydia27@gmail.com

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University of Connecticut

Revision as Resistance:

Fanfiction as an Empowering Community for Female and Queer Fans

Diana Koehm

Advisor: Professor Margaret Breen

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This thesis considers fanfiction, a genre of writing based off of existing media, as an empowering space for women and queer fans to rework popular cultural texts. The origin of fanfiction is up for debate, with some arguing that collective storytelling based on existing stories go back to the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey* (Hellekson 6). However, fanfiction as we know it today originated in the late 1960s as a response to the TV show *Star Trek* (1966-69). Fans of the show created art, songs, and stories that they compiled in fan zines which were covertly shipped across America and sold at conventions. The advent of the internet disrupted these traditions, and fanfiction began to be shared via email in the 1990s, with fans conversing in chat rooms about their favorite ships (fictional relationships) and fan theories. Blogging sites, such as LiveJournal (1999-), and Tumblr (2007-) later became the primary sites of fannish discourse. On Tumblr, a fan can create and reblog gifsets (a collection of gif files), photos, fan art, fan discussions, and fanfiction all in relation to a specific fandom. “Fandom” refers to the community of fans for a particular media text that actively participate as fans, such as creating transformative works like videos and fanfiction, participating in online discussions about the media, attending conventions, or collecting merchandise. Fanfiction writers are specifically associated with the term media fandom, which refers to fandoms of TV shows, films, podcasts, bands, books, and other entertainment media.

While fandoms flourish on blogging sites, other important sites of fandom online are fanfiction archives, the two biggest and most influential being fanfiction.net (1998-) and the Archive of Our Own (2009-). The differences between these two archives and the audiences they draw are fascinating but beyond the scope of this project. At present, while fanfiction.net is still frequently used, Archive of Our Own (affectionately referred to as AO3 by its users) seems more popular, especially among fans of more recently produced media.

While fanfiction can have intricate plots, its primary focus is on characterization and relationships, which are often romantic or sexual. Fanfiction has received much scholarly attention because of how much of it is slash. Slash refers to fanfiction that focuses on the sexual and/or romantic relationships between same-gender characters. The name derives from the slash punctuation in between a couples' name, as in Kirk/Spock. The term slash is now used as an umbrella term to describe male/male relationships and female/female relationships (also called femslash) in addition to sometimes referring solely to m/m stories. To avoid confusion, I will refer to slash about men as "m/m slash" and only use "slash" in its more general sense.

Fanfiction is unique on several grounds. First, it is and has always been produced mostly by women, and it is also a literature that relies upon community, a community with its own conventions, infrastructure, diction, and ethics. It fascinates me that fanfiction communities have such a long and vibrant history, with writers and readers spending an enormous amount of time consuming and creating fan works, only to be ignored by most mainstream fans and content producers. Having read fanfiction since I was ten years old, I've seen fandom spaces online grow and change. I was in the thick of fandom discourse when SuperWhoLock (the triad of *Supernatural*, *Doctor Who*, and *Sherlock* fans) dominated fannish discourse, only to all but disappear a few years later. I've moved in and out of different fandoms, making the switch from LiveJournal to Tumblr and from fanfiction.net to AO3 like so many others. I've witnessed harsh debate and vicious fighting within the community, and how the outcome of those conflicts has shaped community discourse and how fans think about themselves. Above all, I've seen an enormous amount of friendship and support abound among a group of largely queer and/or female writers and readers who play out their fantasies for themselves and for each other over blogs and comment sections.

In this way, fanfiction can be an empowering space for groups that historically have not had such a space available to them. The panic over women reading and writing is centuries old. Nathaniel Hawthorne dismissed female novelists as “a damned mob of scribbling women” who “write like emasculate men” (Coates 2011), at the same time that many believed novel-reading provided women with too much privacy and escape and gave them unrealistic expectations (Flint 1995; Pearson 2005). Kristina Busse suggests that the moral crisis over female novel-reading and female masturbation may be connected: “reading offered not only a mental but a physical escape, removing the reader from social interaction and allowing her the privacy of her pleasures” (2017, 94). In erotic fanfiction these two threats are combined. And the ideas about fanfic writers “follow similar trajectories of moral panic, such as the fear of delusional overidentification as the specter of the obsessive fan” (2017, 95). It’s no coincidence that writing fanfiction is perhaps the most reviled of fan activities, and fanfic writers have reported being afraid of being perceived as “too sexual or at the very least too emotional” (Larsen and Zubernis 59). This disparagement has a long and storied history: “Female arts have traditionally been dismissed as mere craft, belittled as childish or unworthy of study, or otherwise denigrated and fanfiction is no exception to this” (Dandrow 8).

For many fans “an association with fandom brings with it a sense of shame” (Dandrow 4). But for female fans this is particularly pronounced. Henry Jenkins notes that “it is telling, of course, that sports fans (who are mostly male and who attach significance to ‘real’ events rather than fictions) enjoy very different status than media fans (who are mostly female and attach great interest in debased forms of fiction)” — “debased” here meaning not seen as worthy of emotional investment by hegemonic culture (19). Within media fandom, women are seen as eroticized and

irrational: “the feminine side of fandom is manifested in images of screaming teenage girls...these women [are] unable to maintain critical distance from the image” (Jenkins 15).

Such images of out-of-control women saturate even the media at the center of fandom. The TV show *Supernatural* often comments on its fans through an in-universe book series that mirrors the events of the show. In episode 5.09 “The Real Ghostbusters” (2009) Sam and Dean attend a convention for the book series where they meet two male fans who later become ghost-hunters and heroes of the episode. By contrast, female fandom is represented in a girl named Becky who had been introduced as a slash writer, someone who writes romantic and erotic stories about male characters, in an earlier episode. Becky has a history in the show of making inappropriate sexual advances on the male protagonists. She returns in a later episode 7.08 “Time for a Wedding!” (2011) to drug Sam and try to force him to marry her. This image of the female slash writer who takes things too far and is sexually obsessed with her subject is rampant throughout the fan community. Lore Sjöberg’s famous chart entitled “Geek Hierarchy” illustrates which types of fans “consider themselves less geeky than” other types of fans (<http://brunching.com/geekhierarchy.html>). At the top of the chart are “published science fiction/fantasy authors and artists.” Further down are “Amateur SF/ Fantasy Writers” who are above “Fanfic writers” who are above “Erotic Fanfic Writers.” At the very bottom of the chart are “People Who Write Erotic Versions of Star Trek Where All the Characters Are Furies...” While clearly intended as a joke, it’s telling that Sjöberg chose a type of erotic fanfic writers as the absolute lowest of the low. It’s no surprise that female fans are afraid of being seen as “too sexual or at the very least too emotional” and often hide their online fandom from their friends and family (Larsen & Zubernis 59).

Because of this judgmental atmosphere, or perhaps in spite of it, female fans have built dynamic and supportive online communities for each other. Larsen and Zubernis reference a 2011 online survey in which fans indicate that fandom

builds confidence and self-esteem, offers a support system, and creates a space where people can explore and grow more comfortable with their identity...Several who identified as autistic said that fandom taught the more about interacting with other people than years of groups and classes (87).

In fact, “many women describe fandom as the first place where they truly created friendship ties with other women and found levels of intimacy otherwise foreclosed to them” (Busse 2017, 165). These ties manifest themselves through comments on one another’s posts on blogging sites associated with fanfiction like LiveJournal and Tumblr, direct messages, and participation in the gift economy of fanfiction, in which writers may write a fanfiction inspired by or dedicated to another author. Much of the discourse surrounding these interactions is physical, and particularly sexual, in nature. One might talk of hugging, kissing, petting, or even groping to express fondness and appreciation for friends in the community (162). This discourse rarely indicates any genuine sexual interest, but rather “explicit forms of affection become a code used by the participants to signify their relationships, and the terms of affection also function as a form of symbolic currency to others” (Busse 2017, 164). This is a queering of what might otherwise seem to be a very heterosexual female space, although some of these fans feel marginalized and offended at the pseudo-queer discourse and performance by straight women (Busse 2017, 162). LiveJournal user Glossing writes that such discourse “ends up estranging me even farther, because at my crankiest, its feels like offensive, demeaning play of the overprivileged” (January 1, 2005 qtd. in Busse 2017, 163). A more authentic queering occurs in

the very act of female writers creating erotic stories for each other's enjoyment within the fanfiction community. While a majority of scholars report that most fanfic writers are straight, (Smol 2004) "anecdotal evidence and informal polls suggest that the number of self-identified nonstraight women is proportionally greater in fandom than in the population at large" (Busse 2017, 159). Fandom, particularly slash fiction spaces, has also become a space in which many women feel comfortable to come out. (Busse 2017, 85) In fact, more recent research indicates that the common wisdom that mostly straight women compose fanfiction communities is out of date; fanfiction communities include a large number of non-binary and queer people, which further shapes the community as a space for marginalized voices to find an outlet and an audience.

In this thesis I examine how fanfiction operates as an empowering vehicle for women and queer fans to rework popular texts in their own image and to reflect their own interests. I view this argument through the lens of Adrienne Rich's work on writing as re-vision and the lesbian continuum, and Judith Butler's concept of the performativity of gender. I have also interviewed five people who read and/or write fanfiction outside of my own personal contacts within the community. I will refer to them as Dakotah, Elisabeth, Mars, Lucas, and closetcellist (who elected to be referred to by his username). Using these interviews and a feminist and queer studies framework, I will examine traditional perspectives on slash alongside more recent attention to the practice of queerbaiting—the act of media producers suggesting a queer narrative without any intention to realize it in their story. I will also examine the treatment of common themes and gendered tropes within fanfiction, and efforts made to be racially inclusive in spite of a rather large blind spot for racial issues within the community. Fanfiction is not a utopian space of feminist and queer inclusion; rather it reflects the complicated and sometimes contradictory

feelings that female and queer fans have about sex, gender, sexuality, and identity explored in the context of their fandom.

I. Critical Framework: Rich and Butler

In “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” originally published in 1972, Adrienne Rich addresses the struggle she faces as a female writer navigating the literary and cultural forces of men’s control of literary space. She asserts the need for women writers to reclaim poetry and literature through writing as “re-vision.” Rich defines re-vision as “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction,” an act which constitutes an “act of survival” for the female writer (18). Fanfiction as an artform is fundamentally rooted in this act of re-vision. Not only do writers literally rework a source text with their own ideas about plot and characterization, but the largely female writing base infuse their work with what Henry Jenkins calls attention to “feminine pleasures” (Jenkins 115). Fanfiction writers know that those writing the TV shows, movies, and books that they love show more appreciation and awareness of male fans than they do of their female fans, even in cases where female fans largely outnumber male fans. With so much of media centered on the male gaze and enforcing heteronormativity, women and queer fans do not see themselves reflected in their beloved stories. What happens when a story is so important to its fans—inspiring them to seek out an online fandom to share their passion—and the source material itself doesn’t reflect that same appreciation of its fans? Fanfiction writers have a number of ways to compensate for this. The popularity of slash is a testament to female fans rejecting the male gaze of the source text in favor of a storyline that appeals to their own sexuality. A number of tropes that play with characters’ gender also enjoy immense popularity. There is an understanding within fanfiction

communities that writing to represent one's own experiences is political. Rich explains that she realized "politics was not something: "out there" but something "in here" and of the essence of my condition" (24). In realizing that their realities—whether female or queer or in some other way marginalized—are not going to be taken up by the source material they are working from, fanfic writers create their own representation within their work. This is where the "anger" is that Rich notices has suffused so much of women's writing (25). Anger at not being seen—of being ignored or even mocked by male fans and by screenwriters—motivates a literary response. Fans channel this same anger at seeing their experiences made a joke of in queerbaiting; it is no mistake that the media that is most commonly accused of queerbaiting often have the most fanfiction.

Much of the slash that is written today is a response to queerbaiting. While femslash is growing in popularity, most fanfiction still concerns male characters. Literature has traditionally been dominated by men, who may use women as their muse. But in fanfiction we see this reversed. Rich quotes the anthropologist Jane Harrison, who asks "By the by, about "Women," it has bothered me often-why do women never want to write poetry about Man as a sex-why is Woman a dream and a terror to man and not the other way around? . . . Is it mere convention and propriety, or something deeper?" (19). Rich's answer to this is that women write of men as a "fascination and a terror" based on their social, cultural, and physical power over women (19). Although fanfiction writers focus mostly on men, these works are still very concerned with the female experience. A male character as iconic as Sherlock Holmes or Captain Kirk is reimaged from their pop culture depiction—a tough, unmoved portrait of traditional masculinity--to emotionally complex characters with strong social bonds who struggle with issues of love, identity, and often oppression. Using gendered tropes, writers have male characters confront

physical realities for cisgender women like pregnancy and childbirth. Many of these stories also incorporate the oppressive realities for women such as discrimination, abusive relationships, and a fear of rape. Whether or not a fanfiction utilizes these tropes, male characters are reimagined beyond the strict confines of their masculine portrayal into characters female fans can relate to.

Fanfiction has always been a predominantly written by women, and as such the fanfiction community is composed of women talking with each other about their writing. In this way, fanfic writers do not face the same awareness of “male judgement” that pervades female writers in other literary spaces according to Rich (20). Additionally, this space is subversive in that anyone with an internet connection can be a part of it, unlike the elite and academic world that publishers of literature and poetry often belong to. Rich acknowledges all of the women who do not belong to such a space because they are “washing the dishes and looking after the children,” and as such their talents are “buried or aborted” (20, 21). Fanfiction’s move to the internet in the 1990s has enfranchised many more people to become involved in writing and find an audience for their work. They do not have to contend with sexist publishers worried about a woman’s marketability in science fiction or fantasy; they can write a novel-length piece of fanfiction and cultivate their own fans online.

The bonds that exist between members of the fanfiction community can be incredibly strong. This is a predominantly female space in which people give a substantial amount of time to enjoying and encouraging each other’s work. This is a break from what Rich describes as “compulsory heterosexuality.” In “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Rich explores heterosexuality as a systemic and oppressive institution that controls women’s sexuality and works to isolate them from meaningful relationships with other women. Heteronormativity challenges the lesbian continuum that women exist on, which Rich defines as:

a range--through each woman's life and throughout history--of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman... We expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support... we can see ourselves as moving in and out of this continuum, whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not (648, 651).

Fanfiction is a space in which women create a complex online world with other women: discussing fan theories and interpretations, creating art and fiction for one another as gifts or based on one another's prompts, commenting on work with praise and encouragement, and forming friendships by connecting on one another's blogs. And yet for many women this is a secret life. Characteristic of Rich's lesbian continuum is that women live a "double-life:" on one hand performing a prescribed role of womanhood within relationships with men and socially in a larger male-dominated society, and on the other developing a rich inner life of connection with other women (659). Fanfiction is largely denigrated as one of the most shameful fannish efforts. For this reason, many women are not eager to share in their everyday lives that they read or write fanfiction. What follows is a creation of an open secret among women in an online space. Names are obscured with online usernames, and fans are in full control of how many personal details they give over to other fans. In a society in which women are consumed and judged, often not in control of how they are perceived by the wider world, women in online fandom can make themselves anew among likeminded women; they have full control over their image and their relationships.

Within fanfiction itself we can see fans responding to some of the ways compulsory heterosexuality asserts itself. First, Rich is highly critical of pornography, citing its "violence" as normalizing "behavior which reiteratively strips women of their autonomy, dignity, and sexual potential" (641). This view seems to posit that scenes involving rape fantasies or BDSM,

(presumably two examples of the type of “violence” Rich is alluding to) are manufactured by men and for men. But what about porn produced by women and for women? Fanfiction presents us with a unique opportunity to study female sexuality, because much of it is pornographic. Here I use the term “pornographic” to refer to sexual content deliberately designed to titillate its consumer. There is no doubt that women are aroused by fanfiction; the comments section on any PWP fic (Porn Without Plot) is testament to that. Because of the vast variety of pornographic fanfiction, involving every kind of sex and gendered pairing one could imagine, few broad generalizations can be made. However, the kind of “violence” Rich abhors is certainly present and prevalent. Search algorithms and tagging procedures on AO3 allow readers to search for any kink imaginable. I would argue that written pornography is actually far more deviant and “violent” than anything we traditionally imagine as porn based solely on its written and therefore limitless nature. Who can say how much of these scenes and stories are born from a natural sexuality in women and how much of that sexuality is influenced by the heteropatriarchal culture we live in?—Rich argues that much of the sexuality we believe is innate in women is actually socialized. There is something that distinguishes fanfiction from other kinds of pornography, though. Even in the most impersonal, explicit PWP story, readers carry a prior knowledge of the universe the story takes place in and the characters involved. Each character involved in a sex act has a backstory and personality that readers are already aware of before they consume the text. Therefore, there is an emotional, personal element to this kind of pornography that’s missing from traditional, visual pornography that Rich describes.

Rich references Susan Cavin in describing the root of patriarchal power: the first act of male domination in a woman’s life is the “rape of the mother by the son” compounded by a mother’s propensity to excuse the bad behavior of her son and continue to support him

unconditionally. This language is striking in relation to fanfiction communities; (female) fans will often refer to their favorite male characters or actors as their “son,” even those that are much older than them. Interestingly enough this maternal language is often mixed with a language indicating a sexual attraction for the character or actor. Some of the most popular characters in fandom are deeply problematic and misogynistic in their source texts: Captain Kirk in *Star Trek*, Sherlock Holmes in *BBC Sherlock*, Tony Stark in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and Dean Winchester in *Supernatural*, to name a few. However, in fanfiction these characters are often given a feminist rewrite. Suddenly they don’t harass women, they are knowledgeable of social justice issues, and they are far more considerate in their treatment of female characters. Although female characters are degraded by these characters in the source text, they are able to see past that—perhaps like a mother seeing past her son’s bad behavior. Instead, they are revised into the kinds of characters fans would like them to be.

Communities created through re-vision and the lesbian continuum in fanfiction are created and maintained through discourse. Judith Butler is very concerned with the power of language in the queer community to constrict and empower. Like the queer community, fanfiction writers have their own jargon that’s fairly incomprehensible to people who are not in the know. Some words describe concepts that would be familiar to people outside of the community; for example, ‘headcanon’ refers to an interpretation of the source text that a fan adopts. Others, like ‘slash,’ ‘PWP,’ and ‘ABO,’ only make sense within the context of the community itself. Like terms within the queer community, these words have multiple meanings—like slash—and can evolve overtime. As the community evolves, so too does the language evolve: “it will have to remain that which is...always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior use and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (19). Language is also performative—it

invokes a social power to categorize and define. Writers announce their own interpretations of the story to the world in the tags they chose to label their pieces with. This situates their pieces in certain interpretive traditions within the fandom that create communities in and of themselves. These performatives may be a pairing (John Watson/Sherlock Holmes or “Johnlock”), a warning (“graphic depictions of violence”), notice of a particular characterization (“bisexual!Dean Winchester”), or a kink. As Butler explains, performatives only get their power from repetition. This repetition creates expectations, and shared expectations and preferences creates community.

Through tags and warnings, readers select what kinds of interpretations of the source text they would like to explore. Essentially, they seek out different performances of the source text’s characters based on their own taste. So much of fanfiction is concerned with issues of gender and sexuality; as such, fanfiction explores the mutability and variation of these identities. Butler explores the performativity of gender at length, claiming that gender is not something that can be taken off or put on, but that there is no subject or self prior to gendering. Gender performativity, as Butler analyzes through the example of drag, “is a compulsory repetitions of prior and subjectivating norms...which work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject, and which are also the resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are to be forged” (22). Even when fanfiction is not directly exploring issues of gender, I would argue that it performs gender in a process very similar to drag. So much of fanfiction involves women writing stories of men in love and men having sex with each other, from the point of view of one or both of the men. These writers are inhabiting a male space, living out a fantasy in which they can live through an experience they will never know: being a man in a relationship with another man. Butler claims that “gender performance allegorizes a loss it cannot grieve” (25). I would argue that these female writers are giving notice to a certain kind of loss of a relationship they can never have.

This could be because they are women and not men, or it may be because a man treats another man differently than he treats a woman. These ideas are explored at length by scholars such as Henry Jenkins, Camille Bacon-Smith, and Constance Penley who analyze why women are so interested in m/m slash.

When viewing fanfiction through the lens of feminist and queer theory, the ties that hold the community together become part of a larger history of women and queers forging their own artistic mode of expression for themselves and supporting one another as each writer finds their voice through revision. This process would be impossible without a strong ethical concern in nurturing an empowering community.

II. Fanfiction and Community

Fanfiction has a vibrant and active community of writers and readers, and has relied upon that community to flourish. The advent of the internet has allowed for online platforms and spaces specifically devoted to fannish discourse to flourish. Today, most of fandom exists between the blogging website Tumblr and the fanfiction archive Archive of Our Own (AO3). Tumblr and AO3 interact in many ways. Writers on AO3 will often provide a link to their personal Tumblr blogs. These blogs may also contain links to their works alongside personal information. Links to fanfiction and discussions of favorite pieces often exist besides photos and gifsets of the source material (if it exists in a visual medium like a TV show) and other transformative works like fanart and fan made videos. This back and forth between blogs, where people express personal concerns alongside fannish discourse, and fanfiction naturally facilitates a sense of community and close friendships between readers and writers. One of my

interviewees, Elisabeth, says “I have also found some community online, mainly through Tumblr. It is often as simple as scrolling through the tag for a piece of media and finding other users promoting fic/fanart of their work and connecting with them over the fandom.”

Interacting on Tumblr is certainly a primary mode of discourse in fandom. When users reblog a Tumblr post, they can add to the original post, and their addition appears beneath it. This format often lends itself to communal writing and brainstorming. Take for instance the post that Tumblr user artemxmendacium made entitled “Scenes I Need...” This post imagines a conversation between Peter Parker and Loki, two popular characters from the Marvel Cinematic Universe who have never interacted in the films. User runnerfivestillalive reblogged this post and added to it, continuing the idea by writing a short piece of fiction about Loki and Peter from the third person. The thread continues, with a mixture of users adding to the body of fic by writing short scenes of Loki and Peter together, and other users praising this idea and adding their encouragement. The writers also build their work based off of the ideas earlier in the thread. artemxmendacium’s initial post has Peter asking Loki “So like...on a scale of one to ten, ten being the worst evil imaginable, like...killing puppies, and one being I’ll spit on your hotdog...where are you right now?” The following additions to this post build off of this idea, with Loki getting Peter’s attention by saying a number from one to ten, and Peter knowing that he needs to calm Loki down. The additions to the post continue to strengthen the emotional bond between Peter and Loki. lyricfrost13’s addition shows how close Peter and Loki have grown by Loki telling Peter that he would be at a “10” if anyone harmed him. tygermama adds to the post with a short piece in which Peter confides in Loki about the sexual harassment his aunt is facing at work, relying on Loki to calm him down from his anger in a reversal of their roles established by the previous posters. These additions are interspersed with a number of posts that encourage

the communal writing process. spidey-d00d simply writes, “I need this to happen please.” fangirlfreakingout reblogged the post and added “WE NEED LOKI AND PETER FICS.” Given the format of Tumblr, countless different versions of the thread can exist based on which blog a user reblogs the post from, which may or may not include certain additions. The version that I accessed had thirteen contributors and 134,293 notes (a mixture of likes and reblogs). Even users who did not contribute to the conversation helped the popularity of the post by reblogging and liking it, ensuring that more people would see the thread and have the option of contributing. In this way, thousands of people collaborate to promote a single idea, countless variations of which exist on different blogs.

Because Tumblr acts as a space in which writers and readers bounce ideas off of each other, brainstorm headcanons, and build off of each other’s short fictions, certain ideas will originate in Tumblr discussion that become very influential in fic. On AO3 a popular tag is “based on a Tumblr post.” Writers may be more specific by providing a link to the specific post that they are referencing, or they may choose to not to. For the fic titled “Red and Blue” by platonic_boner, the description of the fic reads “Based on a Tumblr post where your soulmate see whatever you write on yourself” and provides a link back to the post written by Tumblr user let-gavin-free which reads “Soulmate au where when you write something on your skin with pen/marker/whatever the hell you want, it will show up on your soul mates skin as well.” “Soulmate AUs” as they’re called are a perfect example of this kind of communal inspiration, and has become a genre of its own. A soulmate AU presumes an alternate universe (AU) in which everyone has a pre-ordained soulmate. The premise of a soulmate AU can take many forms. A popular variation is two soulmates with the same mark or tattoo on their bodies which allow them to identify each other. Other popular ones include a person having their soulmate’s

name or the first words their soulmate will say to them written on their skin. All of these ideas originated from discourse on Tumblr, and have become so popular that one can search for “Soulmate AU” or “Soulmate-identifying marks” on AO3 and find thousands of stories.

In general, the communal nature of these discussions is such that people don’t expect credit to be given them if someone creates a work based on their idea. However, there are some exceptions to this. AO3 user QuinnAnderson’s piece “With All My Heart” includes the following as a summary:

AU in which every time a person falls in love, a red line like a tally mark appears on their wrist...

A screen shot someone took of my summary became a huge post on tumblr that didn’t credit me for the idea. Please read the final chapter, chapter 4, for information regarding this.

QuinnAnderson’s fic, a soulmate AU involving John Watson and Sherlock Holmes, takes up the first three chapters of their work. The fourth chapter is, as promised, a long explanation of how the idea for “tally marks,” or as QuinnAnderson calls them, adorations, is an original idea. QuinnAnderson appeals to all readers not to write any fanfiction using that idea. Although the Tumblr post QuinnAnderson references already had over 172,000 notes on it, they personally contacted every person who had written that they wanted to write about this idea and told them not to. QuinnAnderson claims that they are going to write a book based on this concept, and that “the legal issues this could cause alone are enough to completely freak me out.” This is the only instance I have ever come across in my many years in fandom of someone getting upset that their idea was shared and inspired others. It doesn’t seem coincidental that the motivations behind this are tied to legal and commercial concerns about a potential book. QuinnAnderson is operating off a different set of community ethics—a set in which intellectual property belongs to the individual and not the collective. Although QuinnAnderson does say that every person they

contacted was “very nice” about the whole thing and agreed not to write based off the idea, one has to ask oneself why they would write a fanfiction in the first place about something they didn’t want others to copy. It’s commonly understood within the fanfiction community that story ideas belong to the collective—that is in fact the entire premise of fanfiction itself.

The format of AO3 enables this kind of idea sharing. Users are able to indicate whether or not their work was inspired by another fanfiction, and if they do text will pop up underneath the source piece that reads “Works inspired by this one:” with the following works listed. Sometimes a fanfiction can be popular enough to inspire an entirely new genre or fandom. For example, on January 2, 2017 astolat published the wildly popular “Misethere,” a fic that pairs together the characters of Geralt and Emhyr from the Witcher video game franchise. It was the first work published on AO3 to include this relationship. It is important to note that astolat is an incredibly popular writer involved in a myriad of fandoms. She has been active in fandom spaces since 1994, often contributing her opinions to fandom disputes and controversies and responsible for the development of fandom infrastructure, including Archive of Our Own (fanlore.org). As such, it is reasonable to assume that she has a large following. Although the fandom for the Geralt/Emhyr pairing was nonexistent on AO3 before astolat, there are now seventy-two works devoted to the pairing, and “Misethere” has almost 46,000 hits. The first work published under Geralt/Emhyr that was written by someone other than astolat was “On the Other Side” by Misaki_kaito as a gift for astolat. AO3 allows writers to indicate whether or not a piece has been written “for” someone, and if so, provides a link to that person’s profile. This formatting detail draws on the long tradition of writing as gift-giving within fandom. “Misethere” is told from Geralt’s perspective; “On the Other Side” tells parts of the events of “Misethere” from Emhyr’s perspective instead. In the author’s notes Misaki_kaito writes, “So this was inspired by

Misethere by astolat, which was like, awesome sauce, everyone should read it she made the characters come to life.” In turn, astolat has helped the Geralt/Emhyr fandom grow by promoting other writers’ stories and fanart of the pairing on her personal blog. If not for astolat’s work, the growing assumption in the Witcher fandom that Geralt and Emhyr make a good couple may not exist. This is a testament to the community surrounding astolat and the community ethics of promoting each other’s writing within fandom.

Another testament to these supportive community ethics is what seems to be a universally understood agreement not to leave negative reviews on each other’s works. This may seem surprising, given that the internet is known for facilitating vitriolic anonymous comments. But in fanfiction communities, people may complain about certain kinds of tropes and writings in a general sense on Tumblr, but they are less likely to leave negative comments on an actual work itself. Elisabeth, who has experience writing fanfiction, describes her experience with reviews: “I would not say I have necessarily received ‘negative’ criticism. A few times on a fic someone would (very kindly) correct me on something that was canon (for example, I referred to a futuristic communication device by the wrong name). However, these comments were always kind and constructive, so I would just make the correction and thank them. I never received any kind of hate or meanness...” Closetcellist has had a similar experience. He has not received any nasty comments, only a “legitimate critique of some choices I had made in a story that depicted a subculture I was not a member of.” The tagging system on AO3 makes it much easier to avoid pieces with undesired content, although it’s certainly true that not every writer contains warnings. But if a reader comes across something they don’t like, most follow closetcellist’s lead: “If I find a fic I really disagree with in terms of content or writing style, I will just pass it by” Dakotah expands on this, saying, “I know how hard it is to write, and I would never want to

take someone's effort and trash it." Users also understand the importance of promoting and praising one another's writing, like astolat has done in the *Witcher* fandom. Mars explains, "I always like/reblog and leave kudos on fics I really enjoy. It's also important to leave comments...I know it goes a long way towards making fic authors feel inspired." Writers will often ask readers for comments and kudos on AO3, and reblogs on Tumblr. Comments are a place not only where readers lavish praise on a piece, but often share their own personal connection to a work. Lucas explains an experience he had with a fan who regularly read his work:

There is one person who regularly comments on my fic. He's a military guy in his fifties or sixties. And I was like 'Oh...okay. Interesting.' So I started easing in lesbian, bisexual, and then trans characters, thinking people who had no exposure to that are going to get to learn...He wrote me this really long comment thanking me...He said one of his grandchildren's friends is trans and he's trying to understand it. Now he's trying to get the kid's parents to read it so they could understand. I thought, 'I'm helping this kid that I don't even know.' I felt so justified in everything I was doing.

Fanfiction spaces are not immune to conflicts and disagreements, but the generally supportive and encouraging norms that both readers and writers subscribe to far outweigh that negativity. What further cements ties in the community is that more and more writers and readers are identifying as queer. Traditionally, fanfic writers were thought to be mostly straight women. As recently as 2017, Kristen Busse asserted that the majority of fanfic writers were women "who tend to be...straight or bisexual" (60). More recent research and my own personal experience in fandom indicates to me that fanfiction communities are significantly queerer than traditionally thought. One of the best portraits of fanfic community demographics is an informal survey conducted by a fan on Tumblr of Archive of Our Own users. The survey found that while 90.3% of respondents were women, 17.9% chose a label indicating a trans or non-binary identity, far

more than the 4.2% of respondent who chose 'male' (centrumlumina.tumblr.com). Clearly, respondents were able to choose more than one label. Only 38% of respondents said they were heterosexual and 30.6% said they were bisexual. This data seems consistent with Busse's findings that the majority of people in the fic community are straight or bisexual women. However, 31.4% of respondents, a sizeable minority, reported neither being straight or bisexual. Overall, 55% of respondents answered 'yes' to the question "Do you identify as belonging to a gender, sexual, or romantic minority?" indicating that in fact LGBTQ+ fans are in the majority in fanfic spaces like AO3.

A 2018 study of sexual and gender minority youth (aged 14 to 29) compared SGMY who engaged actively in online fandom with those who did not (Craig and McInroy). Of those surveyed, 79.1% said they read fanfiction. 72.3% of respondents reported that participation in online fandom had "contributed to" their identity. One fan reported "I met the person who introduced me to the concept of being transgender which was a real turning point in my life. If I hadn't been involved in fandom, I never would have met him and I would never have found myself" (Age 23). Another said, "when I was very young I met a girl [through fandom]... She told me that she discovered she was pansexual instead of bisexual and I looked up the definition and I nearly cried because of how well it fit me" (Age 17). Fandom participants also had come out to their parents earlier than non-fandom participants, and had become aware of their identities at a younger age than non-fandom participants. Fandom participants also spent less time than non-fandom participants between being sure of their identities and telling family members. Researchers also noted that SGMY were significantly more likely to use "non-traditional" terms to define their identities beyond the male/female, straight/gay binaries. For example, 33.4% of fandom-participating respondents identified as pansexual. Both the Tumblr

survey and Craig and McInroy's studies indicate that there is a sizeable queer fanbase within fanfiction communities and that these communities are a space in which fans feel comfortable being out and exploring their identities.

Despite not sourcing from a queer space or a space devoted to fanfiction, all five of my interviewees reported being LGBTQ+. Some of the terms my interviewees identified as included bisexual, bigender, lesbian, trans, non-binary, asexual, and aromantic. Closetcellist, who elected to be referred to by his username, explained his relationship to fanfiction by saying, "I use fic to explore those ideas...that I'm fairly certain will never appear in the canon...For example, I will sometimes headcanon a character as trans, and use fic to explore their universe focusing on that aspect of their identity, how things might change or not change." Closetcellist also explains that "in exploring characters as trans or gender nonconforming long before I found my own gender, I was able to express feeling I didn't know how to put into words for myself." This desire for representation—both in reading works and writing them—is a unifying theme among my respondents. Lucas, a trans man, explained that he first got into fanfiction when he identified as a lesbian in high school: "Number one: I grew up as a lesbian. For all of high school, I identified as a lesbian. I found the RWBY fandom, which is entirely, basically femslash. It was like the holy grail...It became a place where I was finally able to find that representation." Now, as a trans man, Lucas seeks out works with trans male characters, and writes trans characters into his stories. Dakotah expressed a similar experience: "Fanfiction was the first place I got to see characters like me. Women who got to have relationships with women, who overcame their depression, who worked and attained success despite struggles. It was the kind of thing that taught me I get to write my own story." Fanfiction is not just a hobby for my participants, but as Rich said, and "act of survival" (18). For many, it is a site for self-discovery. This explains why

so much of fanfiction incorporates characters with identities Craig and McInroy would call “non-traditional.”

While fanfiction is known for slash, I have found that many pieces incorporate other minority sexualities and a variety of gender identities. In fact, there is a certain genre of fanfiction that I have come across quite often that focuses specifically on the experiences of queered characters. Below I will analyze two of these such pieces, “as if not spoken to in the act of love” by coloredink and “what is love? (no really)” by serenfire. “Act of love” is a Sherlock Holmes/John Watson fanfiction that explores their relationship through Sherlock’s asexuality. “What is love” is a Star Trek fanfiction about Captain Kirk realizing that he’s aromantic.

In *BBC Sherlock* (2010--), Sherlock is never seen as having a romantic or sexual interest except for the purposes of using someone for a case. When he believes John is expressing interest in him, he replies that he’s “married to my work” (“A Study in Pink” 2010). In another episode, his brother Mycroft implies that Sherlock is a virgin when Sherlock claims “sex doesn’t alarm me” and Mycroft replies with “How would you know?” (“A Scandal in Belgravia” 2012). A number of fanfictions have used these hints as a jumping off point to explore Sherlock’s asexuality. “As if not spoken to in the act of love” follows Sherlock as he falls into a sexual relationship with John, going along with the sex although he’s uncomfortable out of a fear of losing John. As the work progresses, their sexual relationship becomes more and involved, incorporating a number of kinks. When John asks Sherlock if he’s okay or if he likes what’s happening, he says “ ‘Yes,’ ...because that’s the answer he’s supposed to give.” He goes to a number of lengths to appear interested in sex, including injecting himself with an aphrodisiac to stimulate an erection when he finds he cannot produce one naturally and initiating sex himself. John eventually finds out that Sherlock is not interested in what’s happening when he has

something of a breakdown during sex. Sherlock explains to John “I’m not normal...This isn’t really my area. As you know. I was never really interested before. Then you came along, and you wanted to, and I wanted to...want to” (second ellipses included in original text). The piece ends with John insisting that Sherlock be honest in their relationship about what he does and does not like. Sherlock echoes conversations I have seen between fans on Tumblr discussing their own asexuality: fears of not being “normal” and pressure to conform to perceived expectations in a “normal” sexual relationship.

A potential criticism of “act of love” is that it associates asexuality with trauma, but I argue that it attempts to address a collective trauma that the community faces. Although Sherlock says he is “not normal” the focus on his experience in the text normalizes him. The term “asexual” is not used anywhere in the story or in the paratextual material. However, readers were quick to fill in the gaps. Slightofhand commented, “This struck me particularly hard because I identify as an asexual...The fear that I have of romantic relationships is of having to compromise like your Sherlock does out of a fear of being left. I wanted to cry with [every] sentence I read...Thank you for the read.” Another reader, Mila, writes “I just wanted to say that this makes me cry and hurt in the best possible way. I’m asexual and I really identify with Sherlock’s feelings in this and I think you’ve really captured this story in a beautiful way. Thank you.” These readers have experienced the same complicated emotions that Sherlock has, and his story validates their own struggle.

Unlike coloredink’s piece, “what is love? (no really)” identifies exactly what the story will be about up front. The summary for the piece reads “In which Jim lacks every single interpersonal communication skill, so it takes him a while to figure out he's aromantic.” The story follows Jim while he attends Starfleet Academy and enters a sexual relationship with

another student, Gary Mitchell. As their relationship progresses, Jim worries about his “lack of feelings.” At first, his friend Bones dismisses it as “you’re not into commitment.” Jim continues to worry that “everyone else will think I’m shallow.” Jim begins to feel isolated from other people; even when he attends his school’s LGBT club, he feels out of place as everyone discusses their romantic plans for Valentine’s Day. Throughout the piece, Jim expresses feelings that he thinks there’s something wrong with him; after he sleeps with Gary, he tells him “I can’t be what you want me to be...I’m not cut out for commitment with you, or with anyone else here. This isn’t your fault, it’s mine.” Later, when Jim expresses that he’s not interested in “love poems or heart-numbing sonnets or gooey professions of love” he gets a text from someone from the LGBT club asking him “so you’re aro?” When Jim asks what that means, he is told to google it. While researching the term ‘aro,’ there is “something new and profound blossoming beneath his chest bone, right next to his heart.” He is so excited about his newfound knowledge that he “can’t stop talking about it” when his roommate comes back. In this story, Jim goes through a very common experience of knowing that he’s different in some way and feeling immense relief when, through the internet, he discovers that there’s a word for it. Like the respondents in Craig and McInroy’s study, Jim found his identity and validation online. “What is love” captures the feelings of validation and belonging that come with finding one’s identity and realizing that there is a whole community of people who have the same experiences and feelings.

As with coloredink’s piece, a number of readers came forward to thank the writer for the representation. Make_the_World_Spin writes “As someone who is aro thank you so so so much for this extraordinary fic <3.” Serenfire replies with “you’re welcome, from someone who is also aro :)” and in other comments reveals how they have drawn from their own experience to portray Jim.

What's interesting about "act of love" and "what is love" is that neither of them engage with much of any plot or characterization outside of the exploration of a specific aspect of identity. It begs the question, if these fans want increased visibility and representation for minority identities, why not write an original story with characters that share their identities? These writers chose instead to rewrite beloved cultural texts. The characters of Sherlock Holmes and Captain Kirk have held important positions in pop culture for decades. They are icons of genius and exploration. By rewriting these stories, fans are saying that they deserve a spot in that culturally important space—that beloved characters would still be as fascinating and endearing if they were asexual or aromantic.

These pieces were written within the context of a queer community; these writers would have known that their audience would not only be receptive of these narratives, but that they would be able to relate themselves. This sense of community empowers writers to tell their stories, and without it, they may not exist at all.

III. Traditional Perspectives on Slash

A number of scholars have written on why a community of women chooses to write about men. Kristina Busse notes that male fans "do not feel the need to transform the fictional worlds they are offered because they are their prime target: the point-of-view characters are more often than not straight white men, the sexually objectified characters tend to be young women, and men tend to have more lines and more agency in general" (2017, 189). One of the reasons women are more transformative in their fandom than men is because they want to mold their media into something that exists for them. Fanfiction is an effort by women to rework media so

that it satisfies their interests. The vast majority of fanfiction is concerned with interpersonal relationships, and of those, very many are m/m slash stories.

M/m slash dominates fanfiction and its surrounding fandoms, so the question remains: why do women, mostly straight and bisexual women, want to write and read stories about the romantic and/or sexual relationships between men? Some fans claim that it's a matter of "what's out there" (Penley 178)—that the most well-developed and interesting characters in media just happen to be men. Most fanfiction is adapted from science fiction, fantasy, and action adventure media, and these stories often have male main characters and more male characters than female characters (Lindgren Leavenworth 40). Two of the most popular media fandoms in recent years, *BBC Sherlock* and *Supernatural*, are dominated by male characters and both have received criticism for their treatment of female characters. It follows that the most dynamic and compelling characters to pick from are often male for many fans.

Some fans may find it easier to conceive of fantastic stories happening to male characters rather than female. Constance Penley asks "Why are the women fans so alienated from their own bodies that they can write erotic fantasies only in relation to a nonfemale body?" (1997, 177). It may be that "the problem is [women who] don't like their bodies enough, they can't see themselves saving the universe once a week, they can't let their own sexuality out without becoming dependents or victims. So Kirk and Spock do it for them" (Russ 86). I think Russ's question is still important today, although perhaps less so than it was when Kirk/Spock was the most popular pairing in all of fanfiction. Today, heterosexual pairings are quite popular in erotic fanfiction, although they are less popular than m/m slash.

Other theories on this popularity include Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith's suggestion that m/m slash represents an ideal love between equals that is hard to conceive of or

portray in a heterosexual relationship. She points to *Star Trek* fanfiction to illustrate this. In fic, Kirk and Spock work together, advise each other, follow each other into battle and often have a telepathic bond that makes lying or cheating on one another impossible. There are power dynamics in Kirk and Spock's relationship: Kirk is Spock's superior officer and Spock is Vulcan, a race often portrayed as intellectually superior to humans. However, fanfiction surrounding the two has removed any potential power differential and often portrays them as complimentary equals. Although gender roles are still at play in homosexual relationships, Kirk and Spock are removed from the traditional gendered script of a heterosexual relationship. In fanfiction with heterosexual pairs, the gender roles of the protective man and the dependent woman who get married and have children is still quite prevalent; this is not so in Kirk/Spock fanfiction.

This reflects "women's current aspirations...for true equality with men and reciprocity in their intimate relationships" (Lamb & Veith 101). The widely popular term "t'hy'la" in the Star Trek fandom reflects this desire for true equality. The term first appeared in a footnote of Gene Roddenberry's novelization of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* in 1979 (fanlore.org). The footnote states that Spock thinks of Kirk as his "t'hy'la" a word in Vulcan (Spock's native language) that can mean "friend," "brother," or "lover" (fanlore.org) Ever since, the *Star Trek* fandom has largely taken the word to mean friend, brother, and lover all within one relationship. Thereby, the term "t'hy'la" has come to be interchanged with the terms soulmate or bondmate within Star Trek fanfiction. The fandom is enamored with the idea that Kirk and Spock are not just lovers but also true friends and brothers-in-arms. This represents a fully realized and truly equal relationship that Lamb and Veith believe may be difficult to find in media between a man and a woman.

Fans will often say that their pairing makes the most sense given the subtext of the source material. Sara Gwenllian Jones has argued that slash may in fact be the logical conclusion of these narratives. Heterosexuality is a social as well as personal practice with many goalposts that make up the typical relationship: moving in together, marriage, buying a home, children, etc. Heterosexual fanfiction pairings overwhelmingly follow this path. The social script associated with a typical heterosexual relationship leads to domesticity and family life. However, action and adventure characters cannot come to the same end if the story is going to continue. Or as Hellekson and Busse write, “white picket fences have no place on space stations” (80). This is why Jones argues that heterosexual relationships in media fandom are often frustrated, fail to come to fruition, or end so that the story may continue.

A notable exception to this is *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*. While early episodes of the show focus on the slow progression of Lois and Clark’s relationship alongside exciting fights and adventures against evil foes, the marriage of Lois and Clark later in the series “spelled the beginning of the end of a once interesting program” (Hough qtd. in Jones 125). Lois and Clark proceed to do things like buy a house and argue about who is the best cook (Jones). This may be a reason why heterosexual couples in action-adventure/ fantasy program often exist in a limbo of will-they-won’t-they and avoid marriage altogether or until the end of the series. In *Smallville*, Lois and Clark do not get married until the final episode of the series. Slash readings of the text are consistent with its narrative because the protagonist and their same-sex companion (who they are often paired with in fandom) are able to continue their life of adventure without such expectations or constraints. This is certainly true in fantasy realms set in the past in which same-sex marriage is an impossibility, such as BBC’s *Merlin*, but the growing

acceptance of same-sex marriage in Western culture may make this reading defunct for visions of the future such as *Star Trek*.

Of course, many women write about two men together because they find it erotic. (Lamb and Veith). PWP stories, which stands for Porn Without Plot, or Plot? What Plot? are very popular in fandom. The m/m slash piece with the most “kudos” (over 13,600) on Archive of Our Own that is tagged with PWP is “Dean Doesn’t Listen to Eurythmics,” a Supernatural fic. Typical comments include: “Whoa! That was mind-blowingly hot! I got shivers (the v. v. good kind)...” (Amber 2010) or simply “OH MY GOD. THAT WAS HOT.” (Schelly 2011). It’s important to note that even with PWP stories, in which very little characterization often takes place, the story has a deeper meaning to readers because of their prior connection to the pairing involved. So even the most purely sexual story can often read as romantic. In this way “many fanfiction writers write about sex in conjunction with beloved texts not because they think those texts are incomplete, but because they’re looking for stories where sex is profound and meaningful” (Coppa 95). So for many, fanfiction is not about friendship that needs to be eroticized, but rather about erotica that needs to be made meaningful through friendship.

IV. Queerbaiting and Slash

More recent research suggests that m/m slash fiction is not only an effort of straight women exploring their sexuality, but also largely written by LGBT+ fans, many of them female, responding to queerbaiting. Queerbaiting is a term fans use to describe a pattern of suggestions incorporated throughout a text that two characters of the same gender may have romantic feelings for each other. Producers incorporate these suggestions in order to woo a queer

audience, without any intention of ever making that romance come to fruition in the canon of the show. It's widely speculated among fans that producers do this in order to maintain plausible deniability of heteronormativity among the non-queer fans who may not pick up on the gay romantic tropes, or simply dismiss them as a joke. As closetcellist explains, "It can be incredibly frustrating when characters you love and who you see a certain way don't behave that way in the source—but that's part of why fanfiction exists." There is a direct correlation between shows accused of queerbaiting by fans and shows that produce a high quantity of slash fiction, suggesting that the sheer amount of fanfiction is a response to representation being denied through queerbaiting.

The show *Supernatural*, which premiered in 2005 and is currently set to release its fourteenth season this fall, is one of the most highly criticized shows for engaging in this practice. The show follows brothers Sam and Dean, who road-trip across the United States fighting various supernatural monsters. Destiel, the ship name for Dean and the angel Castiel, has remained one of the most popular slash ships online and in fanfiction since Castiel joined the cast of characters in *Supernatural* in 2008. Destiel is by far the most popular ship in a show that is composed of multiple male characters that one could ship together. The show is composed of primarily male characters, including a vast array of angel and demon allies and foes. However, the relationship between Castiel (or Cas) and Dean is markedly different than other male-male relationships in the show. Their dynamic is marked by emotionally intimate and sexually suggestive dialogue, prolonged close-ups of intense eye contact, and repeated assertions that they are more important to each other than other characters in the show. Dean makes sexual jokes with Cas such as "Cas, not for nothing, but the last time someone looked at me like that...I got laid" (3). On more than one occasion Dean has told Cas "I need you." The original script for at

least one of these declarations was “I love you.” Similarly, Cas explains that he and Dean have a “more profound bond” than other characters in the show. These other characters are also in on the apparent relationship between Dean and Cas. The demon Meg calls Cas Dean’s “boyfriend” and the angel Balthazar jokes that Cas is “in love” with Dean (3).

Despite the overwhelming amount of not-so-subtle subtext, writers and producers of the show have vacillated between teasing the relationship between Dean and Cas and being outright hostile to fans who suggest that the relationship might ever become explicitly romantic. In other words, “it becomes acceptable to joke or make light of the queer subtext presented in *Supernatural*, almost an inside joke of acknowledgement between fans and staff; however, any actual advocating for or serious discussion of the Dean and Castiel pairing is met with coy statements or silence” (3). Misha Collins, the actor who plays Cas, has described the relationship with his character and Dean by saying “I think the love there is made pretty clear... You know, we know what it is, what’s going on... We don’t talk about it... It may be unspoken but that doesn’t mean it’s not there or not true” (3). If Collins were referring to platonic or familial love, it would be unclear as to why it would be such an open secret that “we don’t talk about it.” Jensen Ackles, the actor who plays Dean, similarly responded to the fandom’s love for Dean and Cas. On a blooper reel while both actors were dressed in-character, Ackles mimed giving a blowjob and then pointed to Collins while winking at the camera, clearly aware of the sexual tension that fans interpret between his character and Collins’. And yet actors and producers refuse to engage in the possibility of this relationship ever becoming canon on the show. In 2013, Jensen Ackles’ hostility towards Destiel shippers at *Supernatural* New JerseyCon caused a “fandom-wide meltdown” (4). Ackles reportedly disallowed any questions from fans about “homoerotic subtext” (4). One fan began to ask a question by introducing herself as bisexual, and

before she could ask the question she was interrupted by Ackles who said “Don’t ruin it for everybody now.” When she clarified that she didn’t intend to be disrespectful, Ackles continued “I still don’t know what the question was—I’m going to pretend like I don’t know what the question was. I’m going to take a cue a move on.” Another fan was apparently turned away for wanting to ask a question about It Gets Better—a LGBTQ+ charity (4). These responses follow in the tradition of writers and producers making teasing comments about the two characters on Twitter, but then issuing statements like executive producer Chad Kennedy’s that it was never their plan to make Dean or Cas LGBTQ characters. The emotional whiplash and disrespect that queer fans deal with from actors and producers gaslighting them about the subtext between Dean and Cas has led to feelings of betrayal and invalidation. Tumblr user *theashesofthefirststar* explains why queerbaiting is especially cruel to queer fans:

In fact, subtext is an integral part of the queer experience. Out of fear of being ostracized or even killed, queer people have adopted subtext to communicate that we’re gay or to find out if someone else is gay without accidentally outing ourselves or someone else to the wrong person. Said subtext can be seen in language, clothing, and mannerisms...By putting romantic subtext between two same sex characters without any intention of bringing that relationship to fruition...you’re taking advantage of the queer experience. You get to draw in a queer audience while simultaneously belittling them. (5)

LGBT+ people have a history of their existence being shoved into the shadows of society—unacknowledged and unclaimed while heteronormative media narratives erase their very existence. Producers and actors like Collins who admit that they know what they’re doing but consciously “don’t talk about it” add to the culture of silence, presenting queer identities as less legitimate and less worthy of representation.

Supernatural is certainly not the only show to treat fans in such a manner. Many of the most popular slash ships of recent years are also closely associated with very similar tactics of queerbaiting in their respective shows, including John and Sherlock in BBC’s *Sherlock*, Merlin

and Arthur in BBC's *Merlin*. Many of the fanfictions that address these pairings frame the development of romance as something that has been building for a very long time, often addressing much of the romantic and sexual tension between the characters over the course of the show.

While *Sherlock*, *Supernatural*, and *Merlin* were all at the height of their popularity a few years ago, queerbaiting is alive and stronger than ever in the most popular current fandoms. Tumblr tracks the most popular topics users post about and makes data available to fans at the end of every week and every year. At the end of 2017 the most popular animated show according to its algorithm was *Voltron: Legendary Defender* which first premiered on June 10, 2016 and has since amassed an enormous slash following. The most popular ship for 2017 was Klance, a pairing for the characters Keith and Lance in *Voltron* (<https://fandom.tumblr.com/>). *Voltron* and Klance have continued to rank at the top of ship and show rankings throughout 2018. Despite only having aired for little over two years, there are over 22,000 Klance fics on AO3. A quick search on Tumblr reveals that much of the conversation revolves around queerbaiting. The most recent season of the show aired on August 10, 2018, and has garnered a very negative response from fans on Tumblr regarding what they claim to be queerbaiting in the most recent season. Many long-form posts read like this one from maybemochas: "it's not about the ships. it's not about the fandom. its not about the show. it's about homophobia in the media industry...it's about promising diversity and representation only to show character death, trauma, lies, and disappointment down our throats. this is damaging to all of all of us...but we as an lgbt+ community have been wronged the most..." (1). From a survey of profiles on AO3 and Tumblr, it's clear that the majority of fans who are invested in the Klance storyline and produce fanfiction for the show are non-binary or female LGBT+ fans. This follows in the tradition of the heavily

female and queer fanbase of *Sherlock* and *Supernatural*. It seems evident that television producers know there is a heavily invested demographic of young women and LGBT+ fans that are easy to capture with queerbaiting tactics. Thereby slash fiction is a natural response to what fans see as lies and betrayal. As dovelydraws explains in their response to *Voltron* season 7: “But as an lgbt+ artist...I feel that now, more than ever, it is my responsibility to create what these showrunners are too afraid to give us” (2) Fans take it upon themselves to fix what they see as a failing of queerbaiting shows: to fulfill the fantasy of their ship coming together and seeing queer representation in very popular and beloved shows.

I would argue that queerbaiting is one of the most important factors behind the rise of femslash within the last few decades. Most scholars agree that m/m slash fandoms as we know them today were born the Kirk/Spock fandom from *Star Trek*, which ran from 1966-1969 (Jenkins 187). If *Star Trek* was the birth of slash, then *Xena: Warrior Princess* was the birth of femslash. *Xena*, which aired from 1995-2001, follows the titular female warrior as she adventures throughout a fantasy version of ancient Greece with her female companion, Gabrielle. Fans immediately seized on the emotionally intimate relationship between the two main characters. The writers and producers did little to discourage this; in fact they engaged in behavior that were it to happen today, would most certainly be labeled queerbaiting. Executive producer Liz Friedman talked about the second season before it came out as having “some nice moments for our queer fans” and Lucy Lawless, who played Xena, described her character’s ideal vacation as a “sailing trip to Lesbos” (Ng). While both fans and producers were aware of the lesbian subtext between Xena and Gabrielle, there was no outcry for explicit representation. Television was unkind to portrayals of lesbians; it was during *Xena*’s third season that Ellen DeGeneres came out on her sitcom *Ellen*, a decision that ultimately led to the show’s

cancellation the next year. Fans seemed content at the time for the level of subtext that ran through *Xena*. In regards to this subtext, *Xena* was very much like shows with slash fandoms today. The main characters had short liaisons with relatively unimportant characters that paled in comparison to their own emotional intimacy. Since *Xena*, there have been a number of popular femslash fandoms that have taken femslash out of obscurity and into the mainstream of fandom. Tumblr has an algorithm that calculates its most popular ships, or character relationships that fans promote. At the end of 2017, three of the top ten ships were femslash couples (fandom.tumblr.com). This also translates to a growing amount of femslash fanfiction. There are currently 333,000 works tagged as f/f on AO3. While this accounts for only 8% of the total number of pieces, (while m/m slash accounts for 50%), the numbers are growing as more and more femslash ships become mainstream. It is worth noting that all major femslash ships come from stories like *Xena* where female characters are the protagonists. People who ship background female characters together from texts where male characters are at the front and center are by far in the minority. This would seem to support Constance Penley's assertion that fans engage in ships based on "what's out there" in terms of complex characters (178). And so, as more television and film casts more women and creates richer female relationships, more and more fans are reading romantic and sexual intimacy between female characters.

By far one of the most popular f/f ships of all time is Clexa, Clarke Griffin and Lexa from the TV show *The 100*. Clarke and Lexa do share an on-screen romance, but directly after they consummate their relationship, Lexa is shot and dies. Although the two are briefly together on-screen, many fans still accused the show's writers of queerbaiting by dangling the promise of a true relationship between the two characters without ever fulfilling it (Serafini). Many have also criticized the writers for drawing a direct parallel between lesbian love and death, and

contributing to the ‘bury your gays’ trope in which queer characters are often killed off across all media types. “Lexa deserved better” is a common phrase traded among femslash fans. Lexa’s death was part of the “Disposable Spring:” in the spring of 2016 a startling number of queer female characters were killed off on television. According to Vox, while queer women accounted for less than 4% of characters that year, they accounted for 10% of deaths (Serafini). Femslash fans are desperate for the characters they love to receive better treatment. One femslash reader explains “I couldn't find enough lesbians in the media who actually got the girl and came out on top and didn't kill themselves, but on the Internet, femslash was giving me more than just a queer character who made it to the end of the story. Femslash characters got to thrive and survive and have messy beautiful love” (Russo).

In terms of content, femslash is very similar to slash. Stories are character-focused with an emphasis on falling in love. Stories can be long-form or PWPs (Porn Without Plot), although as previously stated, PWPs are much more than just porn given the audience’s knowledge of the characters and their history with each other. However, Ria Narai has identified a way in which femslash is unique through a genre she’s coined ‘homoaffection’ fic. These are stories in which “nothing happens...The traditional plot—of set up, conflict, resolution—is not present. Instead, there is an emphasis on the female characters offering each other emotional support, with their relationship being profoundly positive” (Narai). These relationships can be romantic, platonic, or familial in nature, but the ultimate focus of these pieces is domesticity and positivity. Narai gives the example of a *Star Trek: Voyager* fanfiction called “Ice Cream, Coffee and Strawberry Tart” in which the character Seven of Nine has three separate conversations with three different female characters: a child who lives on the ship, her captain, and her aunt. During these conversations she talks about her romantic relationship with another female character—Sarina Douglas, but the

focus is on her relationships with these 3 female characters and the emotional support she receives from them. Narai maintains that this genre of ‘homoaffection’ is unique to femslash and female characters. In these stories, the small, every-day events of life are re-evaluated as important and meaningful, which constitutes a “political act of resistance to traditional (masculine) narrative values” (Narai). These stories make the main focus narratives that might not otherwise be seen as interesting; they maintain “that in our world, the things women do exist, and that these things are not only valuable and worthy of being written about but are crucial to maintaining a livable world” (Narai) The women in these stories exist on Rich’s lesbian continuum. These women share a rich inner life with each other, sharing traditionally female activities with each other and making them meaningful through the force of their bonds. This genre of fanfiction presents a direct challenge to the queerbaiting and death that await so many female characters on television and in film. Fanfiction provides an outlet for writers to correct the mistreatment of their own within media.

V. Tropes and Gender

Fanfiction writers are mostly female and their source material is rife with images of men and masculinity at the forefront while tertiary female characters languish in the background. Some of the most popular media fandoms adapted for fanfiction are *Sherlock*, *Merlin*, *Supernatural*, *Star Trek*, and *Teen Wolf*. All of these are action adventure stories that revolve around a cast of predominantly white male characters. How is a female writer supposed to see herself in these works and bring her concerns to the forefront of the text? A number of tropes have cropped up in the world fanfiction to address issues of gender that may not be handled in the source material.

Through these tropes, fanfic writers are “entering an old text from a new critical direction,” one which illustrates a consciousness of gender identity and the issues women struggle with.

Genderswap, or genderbending is a trope in which a character, usually male, is transformed into a female body. Genderswap is a cisnormative trope. That is, it is invested in a gender binary, a system that only distinguishes between two genders, male and female. Unsurprisingly, genderswap relies on cisnormative language. This switching from one body to another is typically used to challenge the relationship between two male characters or as a heterosexual conduit for them to get together. These stories also ask male characters to confront the ramifications of having womanhood forced on them: “By forcing male characters to experience the social and cultural, physical and emotional realities of life in a female body, genderfuck stories ask whether and how much these sociobiological facts--objectification, sexual vulnerability, the possibility of becoming pregnant--constitute womanhood” (Busse 2017, 61). To a lesser extent the term “genderswap” also refers to stories in which a character has always been a different gender, but these stories function in a very different way since the character is not suddenly confronted with the issues that accompany a new body and the way that body is perceived by the world.

In stories where traditionally male characters have always been women, they do not suddenly confront issues of misogyny and womanhood the way transformed characters do. It is through these transformed characters that the “merging the gender identity of the writer with the body of the desired male subject produces a paradigm in which the twice-removed body offers an identification that actual female media representations cannot” (Busse 2017, 63). In this way, gender performativity as defined by Butler suggests a deeper reckoning with one’s own gender. Faced with female characters who are poorly written, stereotyped, restricted, and embodying a

standard of beauty many viewers would find impossible to attain, the male character transformed into a female body represents a blank canvas for complex and beloved characters to experience the writer's own version of womanhood, all the while providing a distance from a genuine female experience. Female writers are able to play with and manipulate gender in a way they may not feel that they can in real life. These genderswap stories "become an ironic playground to explore exaggerated stereotypes and feminine roles, projecting onto these fictional men the fictional constructs of what womanhood should look like" (Busse 2017, 62) In this way, writers show that they understand gender is a performance, one that they struggle with every day and want their beloved characters to struggle with too.

Fanfic writers continue to play with notion of gender through the alpha/ beta/ omega trope, or ABO. ABO is wildly popular in m/m slash fiction and like genderswap is used to explore issues of gender. The trope is so widespread that Archive of Our Own user norabombay wrote a piece called "Alphas, Betas, Omegas: A Primer" to explain the trope and the work has over 286,000 hits. Fanlore claims that the trope originated in 2010 when a reader put forward a prompt that was later answered:

AU - Their world is just like ours...except...in their world there are two types of men. One is the alpha male, the other is the bitch male. Alpha males are like any ordinary guy with the exception of their cocks, they work just like dog cocks (the knot, tons of cum etc) The bitch male, is just an ordinary guy without the special cock." [ellipses included in text]

This trope has since evolved so that alphas are typically coded as traditionally masculine with a predisposition towards possessiveness and aggression. Omegas are coded as feminine, passive, physically weaker, and with a desire to be possessed. Omegas are further feminized by their ability to self-lubricate and have children. Betas are a neutral standard, often not influenced by the biological urges of alphas and omegas. The personality traits associated with alphas and omegas are explained as either biological or socialized based on the decision of the author, and

discussions as to the extent of socialization in determining these traits are another way that writers play with culturally normative ideas about gender.

The animalistic characteristics of alphas and omegas continue beyond the “knot” on the base of an alpha’s penis referenced in the original prompt. Omegas go into heat, at which time they lose all control of themselves and feel an urge to mate, which triggers a similar state in any surrounding alphas. As norabombay explains, “this is also the point at which things tend to get rapey.” ABO fics are often rife with consent issues. Sometimes, however, writers use the ABO structure to affirm the importance of consent despite the ease with which it could be violated. Many ABO fics express the anger women feel about the prevalence of rape. As Rich writes, “today, much poetry by women—and prose for that matter—is charged with anger. I think we need to go through that anger” (25). Women writers are going through that anger in ABO. In “Not Just a Knot,” a work based on the BBC show *Merlin*, alpha Arthur encounters his omega servant, Merlin, while he is in heat. Rather than give into the triggered pheromonal urge to take him on the spot, Arthur holds Merlin until he comes to his senses. When Merlin asks Arthur why he didn’t act, Arthur responds “Merlin, I can’t just take advantage of you like that!” and “Your whole body was telling you that you needed a knot, you weren’t in control.” The two then proceed to affirm their feelings for each other and have sex. In this story and stories like it, enthusiastic consent is part of the sexual fantasy.

It’s important to note that even when the sex is consensual in ABO fic, the threat of rape is around every corner for omegas. In novemberlite’s “Lupercalia,” a BBC *Merlin* fanfic, Merlin, who is an omega, comes across Arthur, an alpha, in the wilderness and the two promptly start having sex. Although the sex is consensual, Arthur lectures Merlin ““Don’t you know what men do to tarts like you?...They’d pass you around like a flask of wine, get drunk off you...and they

wouldn't stop" It's made clear that although Arthur would not rape Merlin, the majority of "men," in this case alphas, would. This is common in ABO: Most alphas are "rapey," but the alpha the protagonist meets and falls in love/sleeps with is an exception to the misogynistic rule. Two very popular Supernatural fanfictions, "Into Your Hideaway" and "A Hole in the World" illustrate this perfectly. In both stories Dean is an omega who has suffered from sex slavery at the hands of alphas, escapes, meets Castiel, an alpha who actually respects his boundaries, and the two fall in love. In these narratives, the largely female writing base are exploring their consciousness of vulnerability to sexual assault as women, their understanding of the misogynistic world they live in, and a romantic fantasy in which respectful men will honor physical boundaries. This is further compounded by the fact that the many ABO stories construct omegas as being socially and politically disenfranchised in their world. In this way, female writers are using male bodies to explore oppression that otherwise would be foreign to them as men. Male characters become more relatable to their female audience as they perform a fantasy of an ideal and safe romantic landscape.

ABO stories may occasionally get "rapey" but they are certainly not the only stories in the fanfic community that deal with consent issues. Rape in fanfiction has gotten very little attention from scholars, with a notable exception in Kristina Busse, who claims that "an erotic rape scene often occurs against the will of the character, but it is not against the will of the fantasizer" (2017, 200). This is true in cases in which rape is used as a pornographic device for specific reader/writer fantasies, such as Astolat's piece "Gagging." This piece has 31 comments on Archive of Our Own, all of which more or less follow along the lines of CyberScythe's comment: "wow, gosh, that was the hottest thing ever. *swoons*" (2012). But this is not the only way rape is used in fanfiction. I've identified three distinct kinds of rape in fanfic: the

aforementioned rape-as-porn, a second kind of rape that is not erotic and is coded as morally wrong--as when an antagonist attacks the main character--and a third category which may be the most common: a rape scene between two protagonists that is not coded as morally wrong.

This third type of rape is usually treated as a sweet or sexy scene between two characters who are supposed to care about each other. This seems to indicate that the writers of these scenes do not understand that the scene they wrote is nonconsensual or do not care about providing warnings. This complicates Busse's claim that a content warning at the beginning of a fanfic "promises that these are the features that the story will contain, and furthermore that it does not contain others that collectively are considered noteworthy" (2017, 208). A writer cannot warn for rape if they don't know they're writing a rape scene; furthermore, many writers choose not to include warnings at all. In "Lantern in the Dark," a Merlin fanfic, Gwaine and Merlin begin to have sex when Merlin shouts "Oh my God that hurts...oh fuck! Stop stop stop." Gwaine does not stop, but the fanfic does not include a warning for rape/non-con, which is one of the standard warnings writers have to choose from when publishing their work on AO3. The scene is certainly not treated as rape: Merlin indicates afterwards that he enjoyed it and the two continue an amicable relationship. The notion that if a character ultimately enjoys themselves then it isn't rape is extremely common in fanfiction. In astolat's "Failure" Thor is raped by Loki but ends up deriving pleasure from the attack. Instead of tagging the work as "rape/non-con," Astolat included the tag "Failed Noncon?" as if Thor's enjoyment erases Loki's intentions and execution of rape. Ultimately, either most fanfiction writers do not fully understand consent, or they aim to present rape in a way that is more palatable to themselves and their readers. If fanfiction is so often a tool for women and queer writers to express their own experiences with gender, then the preponderance of stories in which someone is raped but ends up enjoying it could suggest an

effort to make rape not that bad—perhaps to revise experiences from writers’ own lives or that of their loved ones. The fanfiction community certainly projects the idea that there is a gray area to consent; the tag “dubious consent” is very popular for stories where the presence of consent may be debated among readers. While this term is obviously problematic in that it presents a world in which there is a middle ground to whether or not consent is present, closetcellist makes a case for why this term is necessary. He writes “I also think it is possible to an author [sic] to explore issues of consent in a fic” and that the term “dubious consent” allows writers to “explore” these ideas about what truly qualifies as consent without the pressure to include such a harsh label with “rape.”

Rape scenes and gendered tropes provide a space in which writers explore the possibilities and fears associated with their own genders and present the possibilities of going beyond the limits presented by their gender. In this way, writers blend Butler’s gender performativity with Rich’s re-vision. The products are stories that may seem bizarre to an outside reader, but are important to a community that seeks to assert the importance of their own identities.

VI. Fanfiction and Race

There is very little scholarship concerning race and media fandom. While scholars seem perennially concerned with the gender and the sexuality of fans, little attention has been given to the race of fans, except to claim that most of them are white (Jenkins 1192, Busse 2017). The five fans I interviewed, who were diverse across gender and sexuality lines, all reported being white. And none seemed too sure as to how much of media fandom is composed of fans of color.

Some didn't answer the question, while others echoed Elizabeth's sentiment that "fanfic writers span pretty much all spectrums of demographics." Dakotah claims that

There are certainly a variety of races represented, but I think overwhelmingly it is white. Mostly because, from what I have seen, anytime a non-white person tries to share their experiences, or write a non-white character having experiences that portray white people in a negative light, that POC is generally ran out of the fandom.

This supports Mel Stanfill's (2018) claim that media fandom engages in "*structural whiteness* through participation in mainstream American culture's default to whiteness and through engagement with default-white media." While media fandom often has a self-critical eye in community discussions, conversations about race prior to the last few years have been noticeably absent in the discourse, with two notable exceptions. Dakotah's description of white fans getting defensive and running POC out of the fandom certainly describes the infamous RaceFail'09. This is the name given to a series of blog posts on LiveJournal that erupted in response to white science fiction author Elizabeth Bear's essay "Writing the other" which she published on LiveJournal in January 2009 (fanlore.org). Initial responses to the essay criticized the way Bear had portrayed people of color in her own works and criticized the way people of color are portrayed (or not portrayed at all) in the science fiction genre itself (Stanfill 306). This soon spiraled into discussions of race in fandom more generally. Jamaican writer Nalo Hopkinson described her experiences in RaceFail while speaking at the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts in 2010:

In the course of RaceFail 2009, I have heard white people in the community who are angry at the anger displayed by people of color in the community; people who say that we don't deserve to be listened to if we can't be polite...Discussions of race in this community have been happening, politely, for decades. And though there has been change, it has been minimal. When we people of color stated to blow up, suddenly there were more of you paying attention. (fanlore.org)

Hopkinson describes the pent-up frustration fans of color experience when they are talked over or their stories are invalidated in fandom spaces. This pent-up frustration was released during RaceFail, and more recently after the publication of a controversial essay posted on AO3 in May of 2016. (The title and author of the essay are not available to the public as it was published only for those with an AO3 account.) The essay defends m/m slash fiction’s disproportionate focus on white men by claiming that men of color are simply absent from the source texts which fanfiction authors work from and that white authors are “bullied” if they write people of color in an insensitive way (qtd. in Stanfill 310). While there was an enormous backlash to this piece, the justification that there just aren’t enough characters of color in media to begin with is a common excuse in fandom as to why they are not the subject of transformative works like fanfiction.

Could it be that this reasoning—fans simply write on “what’s out there”—hold true? (Penley 178). *BBC Sherlock* has over 110,000 works on AO3. *Sherlock*’s main cast of characters is completely white with the exception of one female police officer who is portrayed as hostile and petty throughout the series. In contrast, another popular crime TV show, *How to Get Away With Murder* (2014--), has a racially diverse cast and a black female lead. This character, Annaliese Keating played by Viola Davis, is similar to Sherlock Holmes in many ways: like him she’s brilliant, manipulative, and emotionally controlled. And yet HTGAWM has little over 2100 works on AO3. The show’s fanbase is miniscule compared to *Sherlock*’s at the height of its popularity, and the fans that are active in the show’s fandom don’t seem as inclined to create transformative works. Similarly, *The West Wing* (1999-2006), a drama about the goings-on of a fictional presidential administration, has over 8,000 works on the Archive, despite the fact that it ended three years before the Archive was even created. On the other hand, *Scandal* (2012-2018), is a much more recent and drama about the White House that like *The West Wing*, had a sizeable

audience. However, *Scandal* is also lead by a black woman, played by Kerry Washington. The show has roughly 340 works on AO3 compared to *The West Wing*'s 8,000.

Even when fandoms are dealt an influx of racially diverse characters, they seem unable or unwilling to incorporate those characters and their concerns into fanfiction. The series of interconnected superhero movies put out by Marvel Studios and referred to in fandom as the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) put out *Black Panther* in January 2018. The movie takes place in the fictional African country of Wakanda, and almost the entire cast is black. The concerns of the movie are explicitly racial. Wakanda is rich in a powerful element called vibranium, but isolates itself from the rest of the world. As one character, Killmonger explains, "There are about two billion people all over the world that look like us. But their lives are a lot harder. Wakanda has the tools to liberate them." *Black Panther* seems to have been readily accepted by Marvel fanfic writers. In less than a year of the movie being out there are over 2,600 works on AO3. However, the majority of these works are concerned with having *Black Panther* characters interact and form relationships with other, more popular (and white) Marvel characters like Tony Stark and Peter Parker. A good number of them are concerned with slashing two male characters from *Black Panther*—T'Challa and Killmonger. On the one hand, these pieces show that m/m slash writers are willing to write stories about men of color, as was contested in the 2016 AO3 essay. However, these pieces are, like other slash stories, focused on love and sex and totally oblivious to the racial concerns of the source material.

If media fandoms are not engaging in source material that is already racially diverse, then how do they engage with race. Over the last decade, racebending has become an increasingly popular method to increase race representation in fandom. The term racebending, although it sounds similar to genderbending, has an entirely different origin in fandom spaces. The term is a

reference to *bending*, a form of magic in the *Avatar: The Last Airbender* cartoon (Gilliland). When casting for the 2010 live-action adaptation of *Avatar* was announced, many fans were upset that a story populated by Asian characters was being represented by an all-white cast, with the exception of one British-Indian actor. Racebending became another word that fans used to talk about the white-washing of those characters (Gilliland). Over the years, the term has actually come to mean the opposite in fandom discourse: Racebending now mostly refers to the process of re-imagining traditionally white characters as people of color.

When asking my interviewees about racebending, several immediately brought up Hermione and Harry from the Harry Potter universe. The re-casting of Hermione as black and Harry as South Asian is a well-known phenomenon in the Harry Potter fandom. Tumblr user ron-is-awesome-sauce writes “I think one of my favorite things about the Harry Potter fandom is how someone casually mentioned Hermione could be black and Harry could be mixed and the fan artists were like ‘okay’ and now nearly every fanart I see has a black Hermione and mixed Harry and it’s, it’s just so glorious” in a post that has over five thousand notes (ron-is-awesome-sauce.tumblr.com) .

Although the actors who play Harry and Hermione in the movie adaptations are white, and the illustrations of Harry and Hermione on the cover art of the multiple different editions of the books portray them as white, fans have noted that their races are not specified within the text. With Hermione in particular, fans read a blackness into her experience. Hermione is described as having frizzy, curly hair that she constantly tries to keep straight and is ridiculed for, something that fans have tagged as an experience a black girl might be familiar with. Hermione is also one of the only people in the Harry Potter universe who opposes the treatment of the House Elves, a sentient race of people who are enslaved by witches and wizards—both ‘bad’ and ‘good’

characters. As Tumblr user ginnyweeslxy writes “if hermione is also dark, it adds an interesting factor to...her freaking out about the slavery thing” (qtd in Seymour). Fans also read brownness in Harry’s experiences growing up with his abusive aunt and uncle who call him a freak. Tumblr user spritzeal writes (if harry is dark-skinned well kind of explains why the super-white middle class world of privet drive so easily accepted that this scrawny child in too-big clothes was a ‘criminal’ and ‘disturbed’” (qtd in Seymour). Furthermore, Harry and Hermione’s existence in the story is implicitly racialized. The central conflict in the *Harry Potter* series revolves around the idea of blood purity. Witches and wizards are either pure blood (descended from only magical people), Muggleborn (born to two non-magical parents) or half-blood (having mixed ancestry). Muggles, or non-magical people, are at the bottom of the social ladder. The central thrust of the novels involves pure blood extremists called Death Eaters led by a despotic Lord Voldemort who aim to subdue and exterminate all non-pure blood characters. Harry is a half-blood, and the most prominent enemy for Voldemort and the Death Eaters in the series. Hermione is a Muggleborn, something that pure blood characters deride her for by calling her a “mudblood”—a term which is treated within the text as offensive as a racial slur. J. K. Rowling, the series’ author, drew clear parallels between her story and Nazi Germany when addressing fan questions about the blood terminology (jkrowling.com). Because the experience of racial oppression is so thoroughly worked into Harry and Hermione’s experiences, it follows for fans that they would be characters of color, and that in fact, their whiteness would undermine that experience of oppression.

The vast majority of racebending involving Harry and Hermione involves fanart and photo sets on Tumblr, probably as Jessica Seymour (2018) writes, because “due to the visual clues which fanfiction cannot provide—fanfiction, being read and interpreted by readers, can

occasionally leave a space for racial diversity to be overlooked or assumed depending on the reader's interests." While it is rare, black Hermione and brown Harry have emerged within fanfiction as well. Fanfiction writer waspabi integrates the race of these characters into her two popular works "Stately Homes of Wiltshire" and "Hermione Granger's Hogwarts Crammer for Delinquents on the Run." "Stately Homes" is told from the perspective of Draco Malfoy who describes Harry early in the piece as "all flawless brown skin and sharp jawline." Later, a character informs Harry that he's unlikely to be related to the 'Potter' inscribed in an antique book to which he responds "What, because I'm not white?" Shortly after this exchange, Harry feels the need to remind Draco that "my dad was a pure blood, you know." Harry is reminding Draco and the audience that just because his father's side of the family was brown did not mean they lacked the social importance and wealth characteristic of pure blood families. Harry takes pride in his father's side of the family, something which Harry does in the original text. Here, that pride is given another layer of meaning with his racial ties to his father.

In "Hogwarts Crammer" waspabi begins similarly by signaling her choice to recast Harry and Hermione as people of color in subtle physical descriptions: Harry's "scar stood out reddish and irritated amidst clear brown skin" and Hermione's "brown cheeks flushed dark red." Later however, waspabi establishes the same pride Harry exhibited in "Stately Homes." The characters are about to take Polyjuice potion—a concoction which can transform one's body into someone else's. Before taking his turn, Harry asks Hermione "You're not going to make me white or something, are you?" to which Hermione responds "Did I make *me* white?" The two scoff at the idea of ever transforming themselves into white people, a clear commentary on their portrayal as white in the movies and book cover art.

Both of waspabi's pieces were published recently, "Stately Homes" in 2016 and "Hogwarts Crammer" in 2017. Despite the fact that the last book in the *Harry Potter* series was published in 2007, the fandom has remained active and these two pieces have quickly become two of the most popular *Harry Potter* works on A03. While the source material demonstrates the possibility of writing characters without explicitly signaling their race, paratextual materials like cover art and the movie adaptations are a testament that white is the default in our collective imagination. However, even in *Harry Potter*, where race is being actively interrogated in the mainstream of fandom discourse, many questions are going unasked which undermine the strength of the discussion. The terms 'pureblood' and 'half-blood' are used even by the protagonists in the *Harry Potter* series. Additionally, although Death Eaters are clearly portrayed as in the wrong with their hatred of Muggleborns and Muggles, the series gives mixed messages that go unchecked in the fandom. Muggles are treated as inferior, even by the protagonists of series, as when McGonagall says "even the Muggles have noticed what's going on" (qtd. in Berltsky). Most of the fanfiction written for *Harry Potter* takes place after the events of the series—after a war is fought and won against a fascist movement championing blood purity—"pureblood" and "half-blood" are still the terms characters in fanfiction use to describe each other. During my many years interacting with people in the *Harry Potter* fandom, I have never heard anyone question whether these terms or way of thinking is problematic. Even in *Stately Homes*, where waspabi attempts to address race by racebending Harry, Harry is still defending his father by calling him pureblood—why is it still an accomplishment to be pureblood if the premise of *Harry Potter* is that everyone is equal regardless of their blood status?

There is a rather popular *Black Panther/ Harry Potter* fanfiction that deals with race from the perspective of both fanfictions which acts as a perfect showcase of the racial illiteracy of

media fans that's been demonstrated in the past. "like the rain chooses the grass" by Tsume_Yuki is a soulmate AU that pairs Killmonger from *Black Panther* with a genderswaped female Harry Potter as soulmates. In the opening of the story, Killmonger realizes Harrie, who in this story is white, is his soulmates and reacts negatively: "Not once had he ever considered his soulmate would be anything other than a black woman. His opinions on that are already far too solidified to allow for anything else." Throughout the story, Killmonger continues to act thoroughly opposed to white people in general, calling white characters "whitey" and "cracker." In *Black Panther*, Killmonger is certainly concerned with racial justice, but does not show this cartoonish level of hatred of white people that Tsume_Yuki demonstrates. If anything, Tsume_Yuki is portraying Killmonger as racist. The story itself is tagged with "racist language" but no slurs against black people are used. This would seem to imply that Tsume_Yuki considers terms like "whitey" and "cracker" to be racist. Harrie also states that she feels like she's being judged "for the color of her skin." Killmonger's struggle as a black man is also diminished by Harrie describing his experience as a black man in a school run by white administrators as him being a "muggleborn in his own Hogwarts."

Conflating racism in the real world as equal to anti-Muggle sentiment in *Harry Potter* is problematic given the mixed messages in the text, and also the fact that there is not a clear history of Muggles being oppressed by wizards in the past. In fact, the text describes that anti-Muggle sentiment originally rose from witches and wizards being persecuted and burned at the stake by Muggles (Berlatsky). However, there has never been a historical moment in which black people had the institutional and systemic power to persecute white people that would justify white anti-black sentiment. These nuances in *Harry Potter*'s racial politics, and the complexities of Killmonger's (totally justified) anger in *Black Panther* are completely lost on the author of

this fanfiction. And yet “like the rain” is extremely popular; it was completed only a month ago and has received over 25,000 hits and over 2,500 kudos. Clearly, many fanfic readers support this characterization. (Look at the comments)

Gone are the days when no one in fandom talked about race at all, only for tensions to bubble to the surface in community meltdowns. With popular media like *Black Panther* getting fandom attention, and *Harry Potter* being looked at anew through the gaze of racebending, fandom is beginning to interact with race in a more thoughtful way. Clearly there need to be several more conversations in the discourse and some deeper reflections on the values of source texts for the level of criticism to reach the nuances of sexuality and gender, but it’s a definite start.

Conclusion

While fanfiction communities may have a blind spot on issues of race, they have begun to address it through racebending. Their efforts reflect a larger trend in fanfiction to rework popular texts from a focus on white, cisgender, heterosexual males and shift the focus onto characterization that more fully represents the fanbase. In doing so, female and queer fans have created a community that empowers and supports them as they find their own voices as writers and consumers.

A great deal more work needs to be done in this field; femslash and issues of race deserve much more attention from scholars, as does the preponderance of rape fiction within the culture. This community is growing and evolving rapidly and changes are happening every day. Just recently Tumblr announced that it will ban all adult content on December 17, 2018 (Liao). This announcement has huge ramifications for the fanfiction community. Fanfiction is inextricably

tied to fanart, which often features characters in explicit sexual situations. When this content is banned, media fandom may have to migrate to a different platform altogether. If this project were extended, I would certainly have to focus on this change.

Whatever happens with fandom infrastructure, fanfiction will persist. It saw the birth of the internet and has evolved to the growing needs of the community by switching platform and distribution styles again and again. Fanfiction is the lifeblood of fan resistance and empowerment, and the community is only getting stronger.

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