

Spring 2015

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Recommended Citation

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“I Ship It.” Slash Writing as a Critical Tool in Media Fandom

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Defended 2 April 2015

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Abstract

This work approaches the fan practice of slash fiction, creative queer readings of certain stories and characters, from a critical literary perspective. A sometime member of participatory fan culture myself, I aim to discuss the topic with the enthusiasm of the fan, while maintaining the analytical stance of the critic. Drawing on the works of 20th-century feminist literary theorists such as Cixous and Irigaray, I contextualize slash fiction amongst its contemporary social movements, connecting its motives and trends to the issues outside fandoms it tends to address. With the help as well of several ethnographic critics of modern fan culture, most notably Jenkins, I turn focus inward to address the numerous ways fan writing itself functions as a critical reaction to mainstream media texts. By examining the slash fiction inspired by three television shows: *Star Trek*, *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, and *Sherlock*, I reveal a hint of the genre's breadth while still striving to maintain critical depth in my analysis of each. This examination will demonstrate the vastly diverse ways in which fans insert their desired narratives into television shows and, by extension, express their equally diverse sexual identities and perspectives. Finally, I will elaborate upon the way changing media in the 21st century altered slash, allowing the genre to expand from covert mailing lists and meetings to internationally accessible creations and conversations. The advent of the Internet will not prove, however, to have altered slash fiction's fundamental goals and values. Across decades, slash shows itself to be a consistent force for generating sexual representation where once there was none, offering itself as a safe space for expression and even critical discourse. I hope to leave the reader with an optimistic view of slash fiction's message, one of inclusivity and equality, and perhaps even an idea of how slash may someday come to affect mainstream media practices far outside of its niche.

Introduction

It would be fairly easy to claim that fan fiction has been alive and well for centuries. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is, after all, just an enthusiastic retelling of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*; Tolkien's Ents are the product of a radical reading of a line from *Macbeth*; George R.R. Martin's entire body of work is merely a love letter to Tolkien; the narrative unravels. But members of fandom who proudly claim the title of fan writer would say that while these technically count, they don't qualify as fan writing, not quite. Writers of fan fiction today will, instead, take pride in two things: one, that the characters in their stories are true to the outlines given by the authors of the works these characters belong to; two, that they gain basically nothing – except perhaps a subversive pleasure – from writing made-up stories about these already spoken-for people and places.

Contemporary fan writing stems from the dedication that fans feel towards select narratives and certain characters within them. In his seminal work *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins writes that “fan practices blur the distinction between reading and writing,” a distinction that is far more exacerbated in television fandom than it would be in literature, broadcast media being a hard shell to crack into (Jenkins, 155). Fan writers are not merely fans of a work, but active critics of it, using fan fiction as an outlet essentially to revise certain aspects of the show “in order to allow the completion of their presumed generic contract of the show” (Jenkins 155). In other words, when fan writers feel an episode has taken a wrong turn, a certain narrative point isn't being explored enough, or something they simply hoped might happen doesn't, the fan writers take the show into their own hands and satisfy their expectations by simply writing new stories. But fan fiction, meant to be shared between members of fandom, does more than satisfy individuals in their quest for

narrative perfection: in the eyes of the fandom, fan fiction expands the universe of the parent work as fans decide which inventions from their own numbers they choose to adopt as part of their consumer experience. Fan stories do not exist as insular narratives, but sprout like so many legs from the body of the parent work. Fan writers “poach,” as Jenkins puts it, elements or characters from a television show (or other medium) and use these as resources for their own tales spun from admiration and, some say, wishful thinking. P.J. Falzone expands upon this image of fan writer as poacher by asking, “But at what point does the poacher/producer cease to travel the lands of the master (narrative) and strike out into previously unexplored and/or unknown lands? [...] At what point does aberrancy from the parent text represent the construction of a new text?” (Falzone, 252). This question is already a puzzling and pertinent one, but borders on the provocative when we witness these “poachers” begin to prey on the more personal realm of characters’ sexualities. Such a practice not only exists, but is given its own provocative genre title: slash.

Slash fiction is fan fiction solely devoted to same-sex romantic pairings between characters, real or imagined. (The name “slash” come from the typographical slash mark writers would use to indicate the characters involved in a pairing, for example, Romeo/Juliet.) To demonstrate the significance of slash fiction in fan culture – and, perhaps, outside of it – I will commence by outlining its history, beginning in the 1970s with the most prominent example of *Star Trek* fandom. This initial era of slash writing will provide a context from which I will address slash fiction as it exists today, a genre that has grown since the 70s immensely in diversity, inclusion, subject matter, and even purpose. An examination of the cult-favorite television shows *Sherlock* (BBC) and *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* (The WB) provides a breadth of time and genre. I will demonstrate how this change is a result of shifting priorities in slash

writers, evolving values of television studios and creators, and even the varying media upon which slash is written and distributed. In so doing I will reveal the complicated relationship slash fiction enjoys with the works it poaches, and with the society it is nestled within. Slash fiction, as it will become clear, challenges Western values, subverting patriarchal and economic constructions by means not only of its subject matter but also of its organization: its awkward proximity to powerful capitalist entertainment machines. And while, as I hope to show, the message behind the practice of slashing is an optimistic one, its power to effect change is severely limited by the very same qualities that make it a prime instrument for social progress.

Slash fiction displays one of the greatest consumer frustrations of all: underrepresentation of non-male, non-straight sexual perspectives on screen. A rather younger subset of fan writing, the exact origins of slash are debated, though indisputably it gained massive ground in the 1970s, fueled by the slashing of *Star Trek's* Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock.

While *Star Trek* is widely accepted as the starting point for slash writing in media, it hardly marked the beginning of fandom, or even fan writing. "Fandom," a neologism derived from the combination of the words "fanatic" and "kingdom, is "a collective term for fans and their activities" (Verba, 1), a blanket concept encapsulating the ever-growing culture of communal media adoration. The term first appeared in the nineteenth century to describe certain enthusiastic theater-goers, but fandom as we encounter it today began to form in the 1920s. A popular science fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*, famously included a column publishing fans' addresses with their comments and stories, a feature that allowed fans to begin conversations

with each other directly. In “A Brief History of Media Fandom” (2006) by Francesca Coppa, she writes, “It was this interactive element that allowed for the development of modern fandom” (Coppa, 42). Members of this community would eventually meet in the first-ever World Science Fiction Convention in New York City in 1930. This convention, “now called Worldcon... has been held annually ever since” (43). In the 1960s, sci-fi fandom abruptly changed course when some members of fan culture focused their attention away from written science fiction and towards the still relatively new phenomenon of television. While fans of *Star Trek* and its contemporaries faced criticism from the more “traditional” fans (that is, fans of professional sci-fi magazines and other written works) who called *Star Trek* “science fiction for nonreaders” (Coppa, 45), media fandom soon established itself as a legitimate presence within the general science fiction fandom culture .

Though science fiction fandom and fan writing existed long before Captain Kirk was ever beamed anywhere, few will argue against the notion that *Star Trek* sparked the genesis of slash writing. Some fans believe the show’s content and themes were responsible for the phenomenon, saying that *Star Trek* “did not keep its distance from emotion; did not deny close, warm human relationships even among males” (Coppa, 46). Others attribute the dramatic increase in fans’ homoerotic readings simply to the time in which it was aired. As *Trek* drew to a close, several other programs sprung up which also contained strong and personal homosocial relationships similar to that of Kirk and Spock. *Starsky and Hutch*, *Blake’s 7*, and *Miami Vice*, all loosely classified as “buddy” shows, received similar attention from fan writers as *Trek*. Coppa points out that all of these “were set in an era of tight jeans and unbuttoned shirts, and of the loosening of formerly strict standards of acceptable male behavior” (49).

On top of this stylistic trend, the 70s were an era of extraordinary developments in sexual equality and awareness – they saw the passing of *Roe v Wade*, the election of the first openly gay man to public office, and revolutionary shifts in thought towards gender equality. The dynamic of social politics of the time, coupled with the wellspring of sci-fi material made available to the growing population of media fandom, allowed for an almost unprecedented growth in women’s contribution to fan writing. While it is estimated that women had already accounted for the majority of sci-fi fan writing before *Star Trek*, by 1973 over 90 percent of fan writing contribution was female (Coppa, 47). The subcategory of slash “remains an even more exclusively feminine genre” (Jenkins, 191). This was of course an easy estimate to make in the 90s, but with the current prevalence of fan writing on the Internet, with so many contributors writing under anonymous online identities, it is much harder to give conclusive demographic numbers. But it remains safe to assume that slash is still dominated by female writers, as it “explores the possibility of existing outside [masculine and feminine] categories, of combining elements of masculinity and femininity into a satisfactorily whole yet constantly fluid identity” (193). Women who constantly seek and fail to find representation in media are given a mechanism to create it themselves within the androgynous, liberated sexualities that slash puts forth.

Despite slash’s significant rise in popularity in the 70s, it was no less a divisive issue among media fandom. While the very first issues of *Star Trek* fanzines (sans slash) enjoyed interactions with – even contributions from – the cast and crew of the show, creators of slash-specific zines have always been careful to keep their products separate (perhaps even secret) from more mainstream fandom. The first-ever *Star Trek* fanzine, ebulliently entitled *Spockanalia*, was published in September 1967, just as the show began its second season. The

first page of the zine “included a letter from Leonard Nimoy, wishing them luck” (Verba, 1). *Spockanalia* at some point gained an impressive degree of agency in the *Star Trek* world when, by the third issue, Roddenberry wrote a letter to the zine saying that it was “‘required reading’ for everyone in our offices... anyone who makes decisions on show policy have read your fanzine” (2). In sharp contrast, slash zines such as *The Sensuous Vulcan* and *Obsc'zine* were kept largely underground, slash carrying with it an unspoken taboo still acknowledged today, “with some cons still refusing to allow the public distribution of homoerotic publications for fear of offending actor guests” (Jenkins, 188).

It is not just the actors that organizing authorities and general members of fandom are afraid of offending. Many fans, both today and at slash’s inception, are “violently offended by the very idea” of the genre (Jenkins, 188). As slash emerged in more and more zines, most of mainstream fandom’s objections had to do with their belief that interpolating imagined or perceived sexuality into fan writing “violated the original characterizations,” with one writer in 1977 going so far as to call slash “character rape” (187). Reassigning a character’s sexuality, often in explicit ways, does seem a violently intrusive practice, especially when television characters are so closely connected to the flesh-and-blood actors who portray them, and the nuances of this discourse will be explored later. Mainstream fandom’s negative reaction to slash mirrors the resistance with which media fandom was initially met by the more textual, more professional sci-fi writing tradition. Evidence appears across nearly a century, now, of fans constantly attempting to create in-groups within an already highly specific demographic. But the animosity toward slash rings slightly more of a disagreement between critical perspectives, fans clamoring to establish more “legitimate” holds over interpretative agency than others. Such a

discourse renders narratives not only open to interpretation and “adjustment,” but also makes even these adjustments the topics for legitimate critical discussion.

If fan writing is based upon “a recognition that the program is open to intervention and active appropriation” (Jenkins, 155), then it only makes sense that fan writers should grapple with each other for ownership of a more authoritative reading of their favorite television show, just as scholars have grappled for centuries over Chaucer, Shakespeare, the Bible, and so on. But despite slash’s controversial presence in fan culture, the majority of fan writing fosters a sense of community and collaboration. Though an isolated fan’s short story may have little effect on the direction of a show, fandom, like any subculture, is prone to trends. Jenkins aptly notes that “the ongoing process of fan rereading results in a progressive elaboration of the series ‘universe’ through inferences and speculations that push well beyond its explicit information” (155). Trends (or “expansions,” as Jenkins would call them) are often expressed in fandom through “ships” that are commonly accepted by a fan community and incorporated into fan writing. The word “ship” (from “relationship”) denotes a romantic pairing, canonical or imagined, within a show. These amplified interpretations of shows can actually shift a program’s priorities (155), as happened quite recently with the BBC television program *Sherlock*. The third season, following a storm of slash written about the show’s two leads, gifted fans not only with more conspicuous homoerotic tension between the show’s leads, but covert little symbols and clues scattered throughout the season like Easter eggs. While the conspicuous queerness may have shocked or put off viewers of the show outside the fandom loop, it delighted those who felt as though they were responsible for its happening. And let us not forget how the ending of *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982) set off a story arc for the next film which had Kirk single-mindedly searching for Spock with all the determination of an archetypical romantic hero.

Kirk/Spock (commonly abbreviated as K/S) slash was such a widespread phenomenon that it served as a powerful presentation of the way fan narratives do not just transgress upon an original text, but augment it, gently prying the world open until it includes, whether it is aware or not, the imagined relationships and vignettes of its viewers. Slash poses a special kind of queering, one that does not only turn a previously straight man into a more sexually flexible one (“Welcome to bisexuality, Captain Kirk, where gender has nothing to do with who you want,” reflects Kirk in “Beyond Setarcos,” by Gayle F.), but one that essentially queers the entire universe in which the original text is set. If fan writing “blur[s] the distinction between reading and writing” (Jenkins, 155) and augments the parent narrative in the eyes of a massive fan base, then a universe in which Kirk and Spock can be gay essentially becomes a universe in which no character’s assigned sexual preference must be set in stone.

Despite the various, violently negative reactions slash fiction has faced, the motives driving the practice are clearly not malicious. Slash, in fact, has little to do with the fan’s favorite television show or characters at all, but is instead borne from a desire to “fix” what is missing from televised narratives: storylines that include the erotics and sexual identities of every perspective and identity, not just the Kirk archetype. In “The Final Frontier Is Queer: Aberrancy, Archetype and Audience Generated Folklore in K/S Slashfiction” (2005), P.J. Falzone points out that in its (now over) 40 years of airtime, *Star Trek* has yet to feature an openly queer character. With that in mind, slash is to him “a clear and conscious break from the status quo—from embedded assumptions that result in oppressive identities” (Falzone, 249). In a show that imagines war and inequality as things of the past, that famously featured one of the first (and most controversial) interracial kisses on American television, it may come off as especially dismissive that queer representation in the show’s universe is literally nonexistent. The practice

of slash, then, can be viewed as “an opportunity to rethink established patterns of social relationships and to more fully... realize the utopian ideology of the original *Star Trek* universe” (Falzone, 249). This view, however, does not account for the fact that writers of K/S slash at its inception were overwhelmingly heterosexual women. If indeed one of the driving forces behind slash is to generate representation where at first there was none, there would be no more reason for such women to write about same-sex male pairings than there would for them to write heterosexual pairings, even to invent female characters and insert them into a fan narrative (a slightly less popular tradition in fan fiction known as the “Mary Sue” story). Neither should there be any reason for female heterosexual fans to want to generate this “fully-realized utopia” more than any other demographic.

The slash of the 70s and 80s, focusing so obsessively as it did on male/male pairings, concerned itself much more with the subversion of traditional masculinity as perpetuated through media, through commerce, and even through fans’ own beloved Kirk and Spock. Henry Jenkins, writing in 1992, posited that slash “represents a reaction against the construction of male sexuality on television and in pornography; slash invites us to imagine something akin to the liberating transgression of gender hierarchy... a refusal of predetermined gender characteristics in favor of a play with androgynous possibility” (Jenkins, 189). Due perhaps to this focus on undermining masculinity, most fan culture critics for the last 40 years have tended to classify slash as a “woman’s genre.” In her pivotal collection of feminist essays, *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans, and Perverts*, Joanna Russ calls slash “pornography by women, for women” (Russ, 79). Russ and her fan-writing contemporaries were not alone in their aggressively feminized practices; they found harmonious, if somewhat coincidental and unrelated bedfellows in their more elite, second-wave feminist contemporaries. In 1975, H el ene

Cixous published “The Laugh of the Medusa,” in which she proclaimed, “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing” (242). The slash that followed in the next two decades more than achieved that end, if our estimate that over 90 percent of slash writers were women is indeed true. But the question of whether the slash of the late 20th century boasts the sort of feminized writing espoused by Cixous and her counterparts has not been thoroughly examined; slash writing is not known to provoke deep literary analytic responses in its readers. But slash, especially those stories written at around the same time as Cixous and her peers were writing, functions often as a true-to-form embodiment of the theoretical movements occurring simultaneously.

“Desert Heat,” (1976), the first installment of the pivotal K/S series, *The Cosmic Fuck*, by Gayle F, remains one of the best examples of feminist literary criticism put to work. The fic (a word commonly used in fandom to denote a work of fan writing) finds Captain Kirk and his Mr. Spock stranded on a desert planet, the *Enterprise* far away and unreachable. The particular setting of “Desert Heat” is not canon, but does not far surpass the average off-ship scenario viewers could actually have encountered in the show. Spock is in the middle of pon farr, the mating frenzy male and female Vulcans undergo every seven years, which results in their death if they do not achieve sexual release (“Amok Time”). Spock is resigned to his death, but Kirk is determined to save his friend. “He’d suggested beating off as tactfully as he could. Spock had just cringed and mumbled something about energy fields... the body differentiating. Clearly he knew it wouldn’t work. The partner was necessary” (Gayle F, np). Kirk’s earliest admission of defeat necessarily involves the failing of the traditional male monosexuality. With Kirk “we encounter the inevitable man-with-rock, standing erect in his old Freudian realm” (Cixous, 249), certain that the phallus must suffice in sexual gratification. Female sexuality in the Western

tradition is frequently secondarized under male desire, an accessory to his gratification. This slashed Kirk learns immediately, however, of the insufficiency of this model in regards to Spock's needs. In this imagined *Star Trek* universe, the traditional, self-sufficient, domineering male sexuality is out. Spock is necessarily reduced from the role of sexual conqueror to sexual participant. But the story complicates the notion of the female sexuality being equally important to the male when, of course, it is Kirk who ultimately gratifies Spock. How can we legitimately prolong claims of slash being "pornography by and for women" when its most famous pairing seems to be a mere doubling of the phalluses feminists of the time were so keen to bypass?¹

But slash storytelling goes beyond the physical characteristics of the characters involved – it "explores the possibility of... combining elements of masculinity and femininity into a satisfactorily whole yet constantly fluid identity" (Jenkins, 191). In "Desert Heat," as in most slash, we find the author not just "slashing" masculinity, but combining it with femininity, within characters and between characters, to generate a sort of equalizing androgyny. In traditional male/female sex narratives, the male will play the part of initiator, the active participant; the female plays the converse role of obliging and passive recipient, an enforced role refined through centuries of female sexual oppression. As Irigaray aptly criticizes in her essay "This Sex Which Is Not One," "the vagina is valued for the 'lodging' it offers the male organ" (258), so that the female is valued only for her ability to complement male sexuality, stripped of subjectivity in her

¹ This is not to say slash writers did not subordinate the phallus at every opportunity. In "Beyond Setarcos," the sequel to "Desert Heat," Kirk and Spock engage nervously in a second conjugal visit, having been permanently affected by their mind-meld in the previous story. As they become more aggressive with each other, Kirk and Spock are "Covering each other's mouths with sweet wet sucking, like two vaginas hungering on each other...strange that thought didn't frighten, only moved [Kirk]" (Gayle F, np). Earlier, Kirk had remarked upon Spock's foreplay technique, as it were, observing, "How female this Vulcan love of delicacy, of touches that barely touched" (Gayle F, np). Here we find overt and explicit contradictions to the fact that two men are involved in a sexual encounter: Kirk curiously genders their interactions, feeding in fact off of the less explicit gendering fans had long ago accepted of the Vulcan/human dichotomy.

duty to gratify. So when the two key players in a sexual drama are biologically male (and therefore usually expected to express masculine identities), observers more accustomed to heterosexual narratives will inevitably ask the question of who plays the “man” and who plays the “woman.”

With Kirk and Spock, attributes of traditional masculinity and femininity already make themselves apparent in the show. Spock, cool, logical, calculating, counteracts Kirk, the impetuous and womanizing hothead. The first suggestive actions in “Desert Heat” seem to promise the same obedient binary. Spock, recognizing that his blood fever may endanger Kirk, suggests that he bind him with ropes to a bed and leave, only to return, presumably, when Spock has died. Spock removes his clothes (which have become irritating due to his fever), and asks Kirk to assist in tying him down. Kirk, per Spock’s request, assumes a masculine and empowered role as he binds his naked and vulnerable friend down. But the line between the dominant and submissive is soon blurred, flipped, curved. Once Kirk resolves to save his friend by helping him achieve sexual release, he battles with himself briefly, thinking, “I’ve never touched a man, never wanted to. Have actively Not wanted to. Completely irrelevant. No one is asking you to enjoy yourself” (Gayle F). Here, Kirk accepts what the cynic would call the traditional female role in sex, aware that his gratification is not the object of sexual union, but rather that his participation is merely his duty. But while the subject experiencing sexual pleasure is meant to be Spock, Kirk finds himself necessarily the instigator, initiating sexual acts while Spock is still tied down. When Spock awakes to Kirk’s touch, he reacts, understandably, with anger. Kirk and Spock find themselves equally unwilling but, respectively, determined and yielding participants of a desperate attempt to keep the Vulcan alive. This unwillingness, transforming eventually to enjoyment, equalizes them. Both characters take equal part in

traditionally masculine and feminine roles during the episode: Kirk, while the instigator, is also the sexual receiver, the male replacement for the “lodging” normally offered by women that Irigaray describes; and Spock, while finding himself in a state of physical submission, is also the “male” player in this puzzle, the primary subject of sexual gratification. Between both men we find a constant, fluid exchange of object and subject, a series of gender-role quick-changes lining up nicely with Cixous’ outline of what her ideal, bisexual writing would look like, “infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another” (249).

But no physical act in the story calls subjectivity into question so much as the stream-of-consciousness section that ensues after Spock connects his thoughts to Kirk’s with the famous Vulcan mind meld. In the final moment, their consciousnesses and sensations become confused, entwined, indistinguishable:

... but he was Spock’s cock swelling swelling a flame swelling a pillar of fire
 filling his own body belly chest head and he was the universe that opened
 squeezed opened melted flowing pouring flame bright seeds of fire scattering in
 slow motion infinite atoms of jimspock exploding dying dead and dead reborn
 becoming reforming centering one trembling new thing....

(Gayle F.)

In Gayle F’s imagining, Kirk and Spock at their most unified follow almost exactly Cixous’ expansion upon her notion of bisexual writing: “A process of different subjects knowing one another and beginning one another anew only from the living boundaries of the other” (Cixous, 249). It is no longer possible to distinguish the more masculine participant from the more

feminine because it is no longer possible to distinguish them at all – male and female coexist, co-create, co-fulfill. Their final climactic mind-meld highlights the equality and duality inherent in Kirk and Spock’s relationship – as equals, they can, and must, operate outside the traditional subject/object dichotomy.

One might stretch so far as to say that if female sexuality, “always at least double, goes even further: it is *plural*” (Irigaray, 260), then perhaps the united Kirk and Spock embodies this multiple sexuality, an almost Platonic ideal of two compatible souls finally united. But a far more viable, indeed tried-and-tested interpretation is that the story succeeds in turning the tradition of the male fantasy on its head. Traditionally, “woman... is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man’s fantasies” (Irigaray, 259). Slash stories, “Desert Heat” being no exception, achieve the exact reverse setup, with existing male characters enacting female (or at least, “feminine”) sexual fantasies.² And this particular fantasy is so very feminine: gentle, careful, even romantic in the last few moments when to Kirk “one thing seemed to be very important. He bent down and gently touched his lips to Spock’s. Soft” (Gayle F, np).

A sense of feminine wish-fulfillment is self-evident within slash; but though more symbolic evidence of femininity as literary theorists understand it must be teased from select works, it can be teased. And while placing countless³ stories and authors into the seemingly narrow category of “women’s writing” seems at best reductive, at worst dismissive, fan fiction and its creators are hard at work proving their diversity, the “infinite richness of their individual

² But as Jenkins so crucially points out, “characterization is not suspended during sex but rather sex becomes a vehicle by which character emerges in particularly sharp detail” (p. 192). Slash is most obviously different from the more traditional, more masculine pornographic enactment of sexual fantasy in that its writers use sex as a tool for character exploration rather than character obliteration. It is crucial to slash fics that the character exists wholly and actively outside the inner workings of the ship, canon or not, and that their identity is not threatened by sex.

³ But, just to count: the *Harry Potter* category on FanFiction.net alone boasts over 700 thousand fics, a number that has increased by over 15 thousand since I began gathering stories from the site less than a year ago.

constitutions” (Cixous, 143). The female self is, as Cixous puts it, as diverse as the human unconscious. Slash fiction stories (not necessarily written by women, I allow), being today unfiltered and unmonitored on the Internet, serve as little beacons for under-expressed identities, expressions that come in as many forms as their expressers. Slash fics today feature characters imagined as bisexual, asexual, transgender – even, on the rare occasion, heterosexual (Snape/Hermione, for example, can be categorized as slash).

Varying as they are in representative value, slash stories across fandoms and continents will often follow the same basic thematic trends. “Desert Heat” was among the first slash fics to popularize the “Hurt/Comfort” trope: one character is injured or otherwise damaged, and another will come to his or her aid. Narratives like this often result in sexual, or at least physically romantic, scenes, but they don’t have to. More important to the trope is the communication of nurturing love from one character, and the acceptance of vulnerability from the other. Another trope of slash first popularized in the K/S fandom is the “Shore Leave” narrative: two characters, whose relationship is at this point platonic, find themselves in a situation or location removed from the sphere of their normal lives, the newness and slight lawlessness of which allows them to finally realize and act upon their romantic feelings for each other. Most prominent and peppering almost every other subcategory of slash fiction, though, is the “First Time” narrative. While there exist plenty of stories that assume their ship already exists, a sort of alternate-universe suspension of disbelief on the part of the fan, these are outnumbered greatly by stories detailing that first realization, that first encounter with the unexpected and unfamiliar.

Though the popularity of the “First Time” story type remains popular, revealing a broad common element between slash writers from every fandom and of every sexual persuasion, the corpus of fan writing shows itself to be increasingly diverse with the passage of time. Falzone’s

assertion that K/S slash is “an opportunity to rethink established patterns of social relationships and so more fully and credibly realize the utopian ideology of the original *Star Trek* mythos” (249) is therefore much more applicable to the entire genre as we experience it today: an almost Wild-West online terrain of spectacularly under-moderated content. While K/S slash in its zine-era heyday provided the foundation of the queering of popular texts upon which contemporary slash flourishes, this “utopian ideology” has come to include underrepresented identities and narratives that span far beyond the mere pairing of two white men. Television itself has also evolved to become a vastly more inclusive and representative space. In 1997, Joss Whedon’s *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* becomes one of the first top-rated action shows to feature a female protagonist (and a blonde at that), and the very first program to develop a lesbian relationship in two of its principal characters. Willow (Alyson Hannigan) and Tara (Amber Benson) meet in Season 4, but do not share their first on-screen kiss until Season 5, then quite an unusual sight on network TV.

But long before introducing this storyline, the *Boston Herald* was calling *Buffy* “the most gay show on network TV this year.” While this claim was made in the context of several episodes playing like coming-out stories for minor characters (Perigard, 44), slashers will have agreed, but for a different reason. Season 3 featured at the center of its major story arc a platonic relationship between Buffy and her darker Slayer counterpart, Faith (Eliza Dushku). Unromantic as it was, their relationship burgeoned with homoerotic subtext. Faith, a rebellious and sexually expressive character, arrives in Sunnydale announcing herself to be the other chosen vampire slayer, throwing off the principal characters’ group dynamic as she and Buffy form a closer and closer relationship. In the fourteenth episode of Season 3, Faith and Buffy begin to demonstrate that they have fundamentally different approaches to slaying: Buffy considers it her unfortunate

but unavoidable duty, while Faith seems to enjoy it – perhaps a little too much. “Tell me staking a vamp doesn’t get you a little bit juiced,” she nags Buffy (“Bad Girls”). Buffy, the camera cutting to a close-up, blushes. The two venture to a crypt later that evening, and Faith challenges Buffy to abandon her strategic fighting style in favor of a more animalistic show of carnage. Buffy seems to take to this method, because the next day she explains to her friends that “it was intense. It was like I just let go and became this force. I just didn’t care anymore” (“Bad Girls”). Out of context, Buffy’s words could easily have been describing a sexual encounter as much as they could have an underground vampire showdown. Immediately after, Faith gets Buffy to skip class, and the two don’t spend as much time slaying vampires as they do dancing together in a sweaty night club. While both Slayers dance with various other men, they remain close to each other, hands often intertwined as they gyrate to a very late-90s electronic beat. Faith functions throughout the show as a sexual instigator, a characteristic resulting from her resistance to authority and her distinctly erotic approach to slaying. In “Bad Girls,” under the guidance of Faith, Buffy seems to go through a kind of awakening, and though on the surface her transformation (and its subsequent consequences) has only to do with power, its forbiddenness rings also of newly realized sexual agency. It is not difficult, then, to see where the thousands of Buffy/Faith slash stories got their foundational validity. Buffy/Faith slash (often called “Fuffy”) lays claim to just around 200 stories on FanFiction.net, but a vast host of online archives dedicated solely to the ship that was never was.

The Slayers’ ship belongs to a minority: most slashed pairings are still male/male, partially due to the fact that most on-screen characters are still male, but also due largely in part to fan writers’ demonstrated preference for male pairings (Spike and Xander, for example, have been slashed with just about every male character in the Buffyverse). In Rhiannon Bury’s

examination of online female fandom, *Cyberspaces of Their Own: Female Fandoms Online* (2005), a slash writer comments, perhaps problematically, “I get a little miffed... when slash writers and readers complain at the lack of good female original characters and I usually say to them, ‘This is slash. By definition, we’re writing about two guys’” (“Phoebe,” quoted in Bury, 78). Most fan writers today would not agree with this definition. In fact, in Alexis Lothian et al.’s “Yearning Void and Infinite Potential,” much discussion from slash writers contained within seems to respond directly to this reductive notion. One slasher, identified in the essay as “Cat,” shares that “fandom was the only way [her friend] could express her queerness” (Lothian et al., 104). Slash is, for most, not just a space to write about men having sex, but a space to safely explore a shared desire to express one’s own queer identification and sexuality through narrative. Such an expression, of course, requires that slash not be limited “by definition” to writing about two men. All the same, female pairings are often referred to as “femslash,” ostensibly belonging to a different genre entirely, or at least a distinct and secondary subset of the genre. But most Buffy/Faith fics, indeed most femslash stories, tend to follow the same trends and tropes that dominate slash fiction, offering exactly the same thematic concepts and questions that arise in stories about men.

Although Buffy/Faith (often called “Fuffy”) slash draws from a television show whose supernatural premise seems like a natural choice for sustenance from which slash writers can draw narratives for their stories, most Buffy/Faith fics actually imagine their characters in more mundane scenarios, scenes and settings likely much more similar to the humdrum of the slashers’ own daily lives. In fact, some short stories place Buffy and Faith in such bizarrely tame and realistic scenarios, so far beyond their customary graveyards and crypts, that they qualify as members of the “Shore Leave” family. Though in most archives and websites, Shore Leave is

not recognized as its own category, the themes of escape, of scenarios removed from the stress and violence of slaying vampires, appear clearly and consistently in a vast number of Buffy/Faith fics. In “Crush,” by FanFiction.net user *aliceinwonderbra*, Buffy and Faith enjoy a first date that is party to several mundane high school clichés. They watch a horror movie together, Faith slowly putting the moves on Buffy until they inevitably being making out, eventually interrupted by the untimely arrival of Buffy’s mother. Another story, entitled “Five Times Buffy and Faith Never Kissed” by FF.net user *ImKindaOffBalance*, involves five short vignettes depicting various manifestations of sexual or romantic tensions. Strangely, none of the fic’s scenes involve moments where the girls are fighting vampires – instead, the five times the Slayers never kiss happen at a nightclub, during a “girl’s night in,” in Faith’s apartment, etc. Such conspicuous choices of setting demonstrate the author’s clear preference to explore Buffy and Faith’s emotional development in scenarios where they are removed from present danger. It is as though the writer recognizes that romance sparked in the face of stress or turmoil would not suffice, would not be as real or genuine as romance proclaimed by either character by their own unprompted volition, their declarations and physical encounters rendered all the more extraordinary when surrounded only by the mundane and unthreatening elements of daily life.

In a short fic by FF.net user *Mutant-Enemy-730*, Buffy has lost a bet to Faith and as a result must go rock climbing with her, presumably in an isolated, forested area. Though vampire slayers in Whedon’s universe are gifted with superhuman strength and agility, the writer goes to lengths to describe the struggle both women undergo in scaling the rock – struggle that may demote the characters to a more mediocre human status but which undeniably forms a basis upon which the reader can connect to them. Interspersed throughout the dialogue-heavy story are action details such as, “Faith paused in her assessment of the rock wall, and tited (sic) her hips

closer, dropping her right arm down to shake the blood to her fingers, using the moment to look hard at Buffy over her shoulder.” Buffy’s muscles are no less affected by the activity – in fact, she handles the exercise in almost exactly the same way. Just a few paragraphs earlier, “Buffy huffed again, shaking her left arm out behind her to get the blood to rush down into her fingers, her body hugging the rock face for balance. Glancing up at Faith as the younger Slayer shifted her foot...” (Mutant-Enemy-730, np). Each slayer’s action curiously mirrors the other’s, so that both women take a moment to relieve the muscles in their arms (though they take it on opposite sides of their bodies), and both use the motion as an opportunity to look at their counterpart. Many descriptions following such a look are highly physical, such as this one, after both characters have reached the top of the rock: “Faith turned her head to and took in the rapid rise and fall of Buffy’s chest; unabashedly raking over the curves of her abdomen and the swell of her breasts before meeting Buffy’s eyes.” In a lesbian narrative, moments such as these stretch and distort the notion of the cinematic male gaze Laura Mulvey writes of in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”

In much of Western film and television, *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* being no exception, “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (Mulvey, 236). Mainstream cinematographic techniques will overwhelmingly attempt to make the viewer identify with the male subject by means of objectifying a female subject, who is “simultaneously looked at and displayed” (Mulvey, 236). In structuring the manufactured “gaze” of the viewer in such a way, “mainstream film code[s] the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order” (233). That is, film and TV can and do serve as tools to propagate ideas of gender relations, more often than not at the expense of women. So when slash writers depicting lesbian relationships incorporate common ingredients of the male gaze into their writing, the result is

often half-baked: objectification of a female subject persists, but the reader now identifies with a female subject, a female sexuality, the very gender identity the male gaze would typically marginalize. In a fic entitled “The Pathological Liar” by Wicked & Divine (a Buffy/Faith archive) contributor Liv, the bulk of the narration is taken up by this very subject. Faith, ostensibly on a mission to kill Buffy (the story taking place after Faith wakes up from the canon coma Buffy put her in), spends a good deal of time trotting through an inner monologue rife with suppressed rage and sexual desire. Her primary mode of expression, though, is looking. “Been doing it for a month now. Watching. I guess the correct term would be stalking” (Liv, np). In the first part of the story, Faith lurks in the Bronze, a regular haunt of the main characters on the television show, and enjoys the position of unseen voyeuse. For awhile, the writer genders Faith as perfectly male according to Mulvey’s model, characterizing her not only as the gazer but as the more sexually aggressive subject, which the narrator bluntly reveals when she muses, “Or maybe... she’s just waiting for me to make the first move. I always make the first move” (Liv, np). But this traditional gendering is thrown out the window when, just a few paragraphs later, Faith is distracted from her staring by her own sexual arousal, an inconvenience she attempts to ignore, because “tonight’s the night and if I relieve my little nub’s throbbing now I’ll fuck up what I came here for” (Liv, np). Explicit references not only to female genitalia, but to female genitalia in the context of potential self-gratifying sexual agency, undermine completely any traditional heterosexual gendering the reader may have been building up. Just as in “The Trials and Tribulations of Scaling a Rock Wall,” slashers appropriate tropes of heterosexual romance narratives, in this case those of sexual agency expressed through the gaze, and either tear them down or expand them in order to make room for the dynamics of a non-hetero, egalitarian sexual narrative.

This does not mean, however, that slash stories do away altogether with unchallenged instances of visual objectification. In basing their stories off a parent narrative which exists as a broadcast visual medium, slash writers may in fact be more likely to focus on visual aspects of a character than not. The reader is met with obligatory descriptions of breasts, lips, and all the body parts a camera will focus on in narrative film. Especially in the case of Buffy/Faith slash one can encounter countless examples of writers referring to each as “the blonde” and “the brunette.” Such descriptors – epithets, almost – may be borne out of necessity. In traditional, two-person romantic narratives, the author may usually fall back upon gendered pronouns to clarify which character is speaking or acting. Take, for example, “may i feel said he” by e.e. cummings: the reader need never learn the names of the two actors in the poem; they are gendered as “he” and “she,” and this is enough to maintain clarity and continuity. But when both characters in a romantic setting are gendered as “she,” this coding becomes unavailable. Other more specific terminology likewise becomes difficult. A writer cannot, for example, refer to either character as “the Slayer,” since they both fill this role. So when use of each woman’s proper name is worn out, there seem to be few options left. However, resorting to calling Buffy “the blonde” comes off as rather impersonal and gruff, as though she is the character in a joke rather than the protagonist in a cult favorite. When writers use these descriptors, Buffy and Faith actually face a demotion in representation, reduced now to physical descriptors that, despite the best efforts of the slashers, still ring of midcentury chauvinism.

Despite recurring problematic hitches in language, Buffy/Faith endeavors just as much as Kirk/Spock to depict a relationship built upon equality of both partners, a relationship devoid of the gender-charged power structures we tend to find on television, even within *Buffy: the*

Vampire Slayer.⁴ Buffy and Faith, while foils, are equal matches in strength and their pervading senses of isolation, both side-effects of being chosen Slayers. They are privileged with a kind of understanding of each other, a dark kinship, that makes for prime slashing material. Buffy is often slashed with other characters, most notably her bookish (and someday lesbian) friend Willow, but stories about this relationship occur in fewer numbers. Slashing runs rampant across all the principal characters, but many stories involve relationships between non-Slayer humans and vampires, resulting in an incredibly imbalanced power dynamic. Whether it is a conscious decision-making process on the part of the fan writers or not, numbers indicate that these ships are significantly less popular, Buffy/Faith largely overshadowing every other ship (though quite a substantial amount was written about Willow and Tara later on, after their relationship became canon). The pairing appeals to fans on many levels, so wrong because of Faith's eventual, horrifying transformation into one of the bad guys, so right because the two are so compatible, so fundamentally equals.

Not every slash ship, though, relies on the premise of its principal actors being truly equals. The BBC's current Sherlock Holmes television adaptation, *Sherlock* (2010), is far and away one of the most popular source materials for slashing today. The Sherlock Holmes canon in no way involves the same dynamic of equally offsetting foils as we would find in Kirk and Spock, or Buffy and Faith. Holmes' and Watson's relationship, in fact, is traditionally characterized by narration given by the latter that frequently reminds the reader of Holmes' intellectual superiority over Watson and, it goes without saying, everyone else. In every film and television adaptation of the detective's adventures, the character of Sherlock Holmes enjoys

⁴ Buffy's canon boyfriend during the "Bad Girls" episode, for example, is a vampire. He represents everything which Buffy is meant to destroy, has been given special powers to destroy, and yet their romantic connection renders Buffy frustratingly powerless in a crucial element of her identity. It is all too easy to metaphorically translate slaying into any career a woman might have followed were it not for her romantic situation.

near-superhero status. But in two recent interpretations – Guy Ritchie’s *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) starring Robert Downey, Jr. and much more notably BBC’s *Sherlock* series – the relationship between Holmes and Watson has tended to be highlighted and complicated, giving these works the tense homosocial flair, the “buddy cop show” feel, so alluring to slashers.⁵ *Sherlock* often seems cheekily aware of the homoerotic undertones a template such as this allows for, and peppers its episodes with quips and missteps accordingly. In the show’s pilot, John and Sherlock move into their Baker Street flat. The landlady, Mrs. Hudson, expresses quite an open mind, much to the discomfort of Watson:

Mrs. Hudson: There’s another bedroom upstairs if you’ll be needing two bedrooms.

Watson: Of course we’ll be needing two.

Mrs. Hudson: Oh don’t worry, there’s all sorts around here. Mrs. Turner next door’s got married ones.

(“A Study in Pink”)

Sherlock himself also demonstrates something of a preoccupation with homosexuality, often making deductions about certain secondary characters’ sexual orientations. In the final episode of Season 1, John walks into the flat to find Sherlock yelling at his TV, “Of course he’s not the boy’s father! Look at the turn-ups on his jeans!” (“The Great Game”). Such casual and often

⁵ The Holmes/Watson relationship actually claims many more incarnations, proving to be subject matter almost as popular as teenage vampires in the last fifteen-or-so years. *House M.D.* (Fox, 2004) features as two of its lead character Dr. Gregory House and Dr. James Wilson, their relationship bearing many more parallels to Holmes and Watson’s than the mere similarities of their corresponding names. *Elementary* (CBS, 2012) features a female Watson, played by Lucy Liu. Every rendition demonstrates less of an interest in the Holmes character’s singular brilliance, and more focus instead on his fraught relationship with his friend and partner in crime-solving.

comedic mentions of gayness as these not only heighten the viewer's awareness of queer undertones in the show, but make *Sherlock* an even riper field for sowing slash than most.

Sherlock slash tends to gain sustenance not from the opposite-but-equal foil dynamic one finds in Kirk/Spock or Buffy/Faith, but instead from the complicated emotional dynamic found in the relationship between a self-proclaimed sociopath and a slightly shell-shocked veteran. Several popular fics capitalize on the canon disparity between Sherlock's intense relationship with John and his otherwise emotionless, cold interactions with others. These stories are often told from multiple perspectives, notably utilizing the points of view of the police officers and investigators who so often begrudgingly employ Sherlock's help. In particular, we find slashers using the character of D.I. Greg Lestrade and his New Scotland Yard inferiors: Sally Donovan and Phillip Anderson, both of whom express continual dislike of Sherlock throughout the series. In "Waiting For John" by FF.net user LadyNyxRavus, a fic that imagines Sherlock and John are in a pre-existing relationship rather than depicting their first romantic interaction, the narrative interest centers less on either Sherlock or John (or both) discovering their newfound sexuality but on secondary characters discovering that Sherlock even has a sexuality. In the section told from Lestrade's point of view, he remarks, "If Greg didn't know any better, he would have said that John was someone *important* to Sherlock. But Sherlock hasn't shown any sign of interest in anyone... and he's fairly certain Sherlock is asexual" (LadyNyxRavus, np). Upon confirming that Sherlock indeed has a boyfriend, Donovan and Anderson discuss this unidentified person with trepidation. "'He's got to be a complete psychopath,' [Donovan] mutters, 'putting up with the Freak *all the time*'" (LadyNyxRavus, np). ("Freak" is a canon nickname – Donovan constantly addresses Sherlock as such on the show.) Donovan and Lestrade's perceptions of Sherlock are similar, though phrased in varying degrees of delicacy. Lestrade, for his part,

receives quite an enlightened characterization from the slash author, having assumed Sherlock to be asexual. Asexuality is a commonly dismissed or ignored identity within the LGBT spectrum, even within the queer community, and for Lestrade to have made this (ultimately inaccurate) deduction speaks to a certain kind of sexual sensitivity with which we have reason to believe the canon Lestrade was not necessarily gifted (for the majority of the show he is blundering through an unsuccessful marriage). Here we find slash writers critiquing parent narratives not only by asserting their gender ideologies through the romantic subjects of their fiction, but by imbuing secondary players with characteristics they might like to see more of in their on-screen heroes.

In this regard, Sherlock Holmes makes for the ideal “project” for slash writers: his cold, sociopathic demeanor functions very much like an exaggerated display of masculine emotionlessness, of a performative, gendered callousness informed by patriarchal norms. Because there is so much emotional depth left for fan writers to unearth, the Hurt/Comfort subgenre seems to be even more popular within John/Sherlock than most. “Homecoming,” by FF.net user PeaceRoseG’ladheon, imagines the same scenario as “Waiting for John,” wherein John and Sherlock are in a pre-existing relationship, and John has only just returned from the war. In this fic, upon noticing John’s limp and bandages, Sherlock nearly enters into a frenzy, dismayed at his partner’s injuries, anxious to know what has caused them. John tries to calm him down, saying,

“I’ve spent twenty-three months in the desert getting shot at, what do you think happened? I got shot.”

That did nothing to calm Sherlock down. “Shot? Then what happened to your leg? John?”

(PeaceRoseG'ladheon)

Sherlock's frantic, mothering demeanor visibly perturbs Lestrade and Anderson, who look on. As soon as he turns away from John, however, Sherlock re-assumes his usual manner, snapping, "Close your mouth, Anderson, you'll catch flies." Sherlock's speeches, so close in proximity, reveal the author's belief that the cold and consistently rude Sherlock the viewer encounters on television is very likely a façade, a performance of unfeeling intellect. As soon as it comes face-to-face with John, however, it is soundly broken down to reveal Sherlock's highly emotional and caring interior.

While in Buffy/Faith, we repeatedly find fics detailing scenarios removed from their daily dangerous lives, in John/Sherlock it is more common to find fics recounting disastrous cases and close calls, and delving then into either John or Sherlock's emotional processes following the trauma. "Alone on the Water" FF.net user by MadLori imagines that Sherlock has developed a terminal brain tumor, and John takes care of him until the end. Already, the story weaves a tangled web: diseases of the brain – not to mention the simple, frail act of dying quietly – are traditionally aligned with feminine qualities; but caregiving and nurturing, near-synonymous with "mothering," are equally so. Both John and Sherlock, therefore, end up performing gendered actions opposite to their preset alignment. Before he succumbs to the full effects of his illness, Sherlock remains stoutly standoffish, but does eventually make himself emotionally available and vulnerable to his friend, likely prompted by John's similarly unassuming devotion to his care. When Sherlock elaborates on only two items in a list of "three things in the world I really care about," John ventures to ask him what the third is. To which Sherlock replies, true to form, "John. Surely you don't need me to tell you that." But after

Sherlock has taken a pill which will facilitate his death, an end preferable to a true surrender to disease, Sherlock exhibits no such stoicism. “‘I want you to be the last thing I see,’ he rasps” (MadLori, np), admitting with literally his final words the unspoken bond that had existed between the two all along. By introducing a deadly brain disease, necessitating the installment of a care- giver/given relationship between the two, MadLori essentially facilitates a gendered breakdown, requiring John and Sherlock to express traditional “femininity” in a way that is not demeaning to either, but instead gifts them with a kind of emotional enlightenment. In “Explosions, Literal and Otherwise” by FF.net user Jennistar1, a chemical factory has exploded while Sherlock and John are separated from each other on a case. Sherlock, believing John to be dead, is overwhelmed by anxiety when he learns that his friend is alive but knows not in what state. When the two eventually reunite, both men relatively intact, Sherlock is overcome with relief and “reaches down and pulls John into a tight hug. John freezes. Sherlock is not really one for physical contact” (Jennistar1, np). Once again, the slash author expresses her belief that Sherlock’s unfeeling mannerisms are performative by forcing the Sherlock in her fic to relinquish his protective exterior and render himself emotionally vulnerable when he experiences true and pressing fear for his friend.

Contrasting trends between Buffy/Faith and Sherlock/John slash reveal the various ways in which slash writers challenge societal gender expectations. Appropriation of the male gaze in Buffy/Faith in order to express aggressive female sexuality demonstrates a continual effort to assert female sexual subjectivity, to contest the commonly accepted notion that women, as the camera often shows, are at their best when acting as objects of male desire. The frequency with which Buffy and Faith are on “shore leave” in slash fiction, or at least not engaging in vampiric combat as they might normally be, may also indicate a desire to show women in action outside of

traditionally “male” scenarios. Setting a romantic breakthrough in a “girl’s night out,” rather than attempting to reconcile male and female attributes in the characters, instead conspicuously asserts uncompromising femininity, as though illustrating that a romantic narrative has no need of a masculine element to be complete. Sherlock/John, on the other hand, seems to favor storylines of trauma and urgency, inducing both characters into states of emotional expressiveness they would likely not express on the actual television program. Slash writers demonstrate androgynizing motives, seeking to make Sherlock and John perform traditional femininity in a way that removes stigma from the gender, contributes only to each character’s happiness. In examining these differences, slashers’ motives reveal themselves to align, after all this time, with those of the 70s: still, slash fiction is fuelled by the desire to subvert dominant stereotypes of masculinity and gender, wherein men must rule but must adhere to reductively manly codes of conduct. But today, slash is much less limited to expressing such motives simply through male/male romantic storylines. Instead, fan writers work to crush the patriarchy while also retaining the freedom to assert their identities, their own narratives, coming at the same television show with unique perspectives and sexual preferences, adding their particular code of erotics to the ever-growing chorus.

Since its inception in the 1970s, slash has expanded to include under its slightly perverted wings far more genders and sexual orientations than gay males, and far more species than human and Vulcan. While fans have the evolving values of television creators and studios – largely due to pressure from viewers – to thank for this change, a great deal of credit also goes to the major

shift in media on which slash was being presented in the 90s and early 2000s. Online fandom mailing lists cropped up as early as 1992 (Coppa, 53), but fan writing on the Internet didn't hit its stride until a few years later, when the "important fandoms" established their presences online with their own mailing lists. The shift of fan-written content from slightly ashamed zine transactions to more anonymous, more comfortable exchanges through the web "moved slash fandom out into the mainstream." The fan's experience became "customizable," affording slash readers and writers not only to curate their own electronic "zines," but also to "consolidate and talk openly to each other" (Coppa, 54), essentially to engage in meta conversation about their rather undisciplined discipline.

This "mainstreaming" of slash fiction, though, was not the only consequence of the genre's shift to digital. In his comprehensive work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Marshall McLuhan asserts that "it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action" (McLuhan, 11). As "extensions" of the human body, media ostensibly function as additions to certain human functions: print, for example, extends the mouth (or pen) of the writer as well as the eye of the reader, through time as well as space: I am fully able to read and comprehend, for example, something written by William Wordsworth, though he is long dead and lived half a world away. The electric, frantic Internet, especially as it pertains to slash dissemination, effectively makes instantaneous what print merely made efficient. In the 90s, slash readers and writers found themselves freed from the constraints of time – having had to wait for their next zine to ship out, or for the next convention where they would amass their materials – and suddenly able to consume slash from any author, in any fandom, instantaneously, all from the static position of the nearest computer. (Computers would soon, of course, be integrated almost ubiquitously into the Western household, allowing for the

further normalization of slash as a mere function of a household object, no more than *Saturday Night Live* was a function of the television.) Slash's new functionality, McLuhan would agree, itself served as a message separate from the messages slashers sent to each other. We could liken the "message" of budding online slash, then, to "the message of electric power in industry, totally radical, pervasive, and decentralized" (McLuhan, 11). Slashers of the 90s and those that came before them would of course already have referred to their hobby as "radical" and "pervasive," slash remaining a risqué subject even at the obscurest of fan gatherings. But online mailing lists – and, eventually, international, daily-updated websites – proved radical and pervasive regardless of the content their users were delivering: the online slash format quickly turned into a hyper-democratic free-for-all where any fan's work could be made public and, more dramatically, where any person within or without fan culture could expose themselves to the content cropping up on the web daily. The radical nature of slash was transferred from its controversial subject matter onto its now limitless capacity to amass new content and attract varying writers and readers. That online slash significantly "decentralized" the practice is indisputable: writers no longer had to filter their work through the cohesive entities of the IPAs, the independent press associations publishing fanzines. No longer was an editing presence required in the slash publication process at all.

The migration of almost all slash to online spheres happened gradually, in marked phases. As Coppa details, the 90s generally saw different fandoms creating their own ListServes to distribute content, limiting the consumption and especially publication of slash to the more tech-savvy (Coppa, 53). In the 2000s decade, a website called LiveJournal generally dominated the slash fiction scene. LiveJournal was in many ways a precursor to the social media platforms we more frequently use today: users of the site had their own blogs, and were able to connect to

and correspond with other blogs, forming communities and creating groups as they liked (Coppa, 56). LiveJournal's user-friendly, plain text interface facilitated navigation for those wishing to write, but more importantly its interactive capacities set a heightened precedent for meta-conversation between users: discourse networks of the slash community began to broaden from the straightforward giving and receiving of one's daily smut,⁶ and came quickly to incorporate thorough discussions probing why slash writers chose to write slash, how they felt about the "community" and the trends in content, and so on. The instantaneous nature of the Internet, its sudden and irreversible amplification of human thought, perhaps pressed LJ users into expressing themselves more frequently. Their stories were reaching strangers in far-off places, forging synthetic bonds of pseudo-literary camaraderie: why must not their opinions boldly go as well? Resulting online discussions were not necessarily fruitless, as weathered cynics of the Internet today might expect. In "Yearning Void and Infinite Potential: Online Slash Fandom as Queer Female Space," several LJ users engage in a discussion, moderated and semi-prompted by

⁶ "Smut" actually functions as a technical term within slash. To ensure the comfort of the reader, most sites require slashers to provide a rating for the content maturity in their stories. On FanFiction.net, the rating system follows that of video games: "K" for stories appropriate for kids, going up to "M" – for mature audiences. Most other archives follow the movie rating system, with "PG" fics containing little more than cheek-pecking and hand-holding, and "NC-17" fics leaving nothing to the imagination. Further, fan writers will tend to label stories that fall on either end of the spectrum as "fluff," for the very tame, and "smut," for the sexually explicit. Smut stories are often also categorized into mysterious "PWP" files. PWP stands for "Plot? What Plot?" and was created as a label to indicate rather aptly the unabashed motives of both writer and reader: those who click on a PWP fic know full well they are only in it for the sex. But explicitness in slash is not necessarily – is in fact very rarely – in keeping with explicitness as the consumer will encounter it outside of the fan writing world. We have already presented the view that slash fiction is "pornography by and for women" (Russ) because it deals with sex between characters in the context of their emotional relationship, not in spite of or disregarding it. Though even the use of the term "pornography" is perhaps a little strained here, especially in its reductive application to women, the idea that explicit slash aims to consider sex as part of a greater emotional and psychological network is upheld long after Russ considers it. By and large, smut stories imagine scenarios where the two characters in question are already in a relationship. Fluff stories, on the other hand, being about as sexy as the Easter Bunny, are overwhelmingly first-time narratives. There are, of course, many exceptions to this pattern, and the pattern holds much more true in Buffy/Faith than in John/Sherlock or other male pairings, but the relationship is strong enough to be noted.

the article's authors, about the nature of "queer female space" as slash has been commonly defined. Several participants in the discussion laud LJ and its slash communities as safe, positive spaces for members of the LGBT community and for women, spaces not necessarily available outside of such niche interest groups "because our culture silences female desire as effectively as it silences queer desire" ("T.," quoted in Lothian, 106). This idea of "silencing" desire is probed later on, in a lengthy debate as to slash's inclusivity when it comes to various sexual identities. "T.," previously cited, discusses the problematic, likely self-coined notion of "queer cred," giving the example of "mainstream gays and lesbians trying to distance themselves from the 'queerer queers'" (108). "Lila" adds on, stating that "the inclusion of 'queerer queers' is an emphasis on the importance of limit cases, of the margins of the margins" (108). Though unequipped with the vernacular of queer and feminist theorists, the LJ users are effectively engaging in a theoretical discussion concerning what impact their discursive space may have on members of the queer community not totally represented in a genre reductively termed "queer female space." They are criticizing their own genre, their own space, in the hopes of achieving productive consensus.

Nearly a decade after the publication of the above conversation, an avid reader of slash may see enacted what was previously only discussed: a radically inclusive online space that encourages those in the deepest recesses of marginalization to express their identities through fiction. This encouragement is largely passive, coming merely from the anarchic model of content publication most slash sites and the very small amount of effort it takes to post one's own fiction where, theoretically, the whole world can see it. While many fan fiction archives still use moderators and beta readers (volunteer fan readers who send unofficial feedback to hopeful contributors) to filter the content of their sites, more often than not an archive or database

containing slash is anyone's game: FanFiction.net, notably, uses no editors or moderators, and content is only refused or removed from the site when it is flagged as offensive or as too sexually explicit for a general reader. The site is arguably the most popular portal for accessing and publishing fan fiction today, and while the concentration of slash is likely very low in comparison to heterosexual – or even non-romantic – stories, it exists nonetheless in formidable numbers. The abundance of the genre allows for more and more variation within, slash writers becoming emboldened like genetic mutations, multiplying and changing constantly outward. On Tumblr, a social media blogging site that tends to attract members of fandom culture, several slash writers participated in a self-organized, unofficial “Femslash February” this year. Much in the same way that the government assigns certain months to celebrate and generate awareness of issues concerning minority populations, fan communities create similar dedicated months or weeks as a response to the privileging within fandom of white, gay male narratives.

One of the more intriguing phenomena among slash-related awareness efforts is the little-known Ace Beth Week. Beth Childs is a character on the recent BBC hit *Orphan Black* (2013). Beth actually dies in the first episode of the show, the viewer merely given small clues as to who she was beforehand. Strangely, this only increased fan writers' interest in her character, and she quickly became the subject of many (non-canon) slash pairings. Rather than removing her from *Orphan Black* fans' creative field of interest, Beth's relative mystery rendered her incomplete enough that fan writers could fill her in with much more freedom than they could principal characters in the shows. “Ace Beth” (or “Ace!Beth,” as it is sometimes written), an increasingly popular subcategory of *Orphan Black* slash, removes the crucial slash mark entirely by casting Beth as asexual, rather than romantically interested in a woman. The idea of asexual “slash” is novel, and still only celebrated by a few niche fandoms, but it makes a powerful statement as to

the direction of slash fiction, the capacity of the genre to be a force of good for young fan writers and readers. Slash fiction is not as private as it once was. Before, in the age of fanzines and tentative online mailing lists, a slash writer was essentially performing her (or his) fiction for her friends and comrades in fandom. But today fan writers are acutely aware that they are performing for potential, unknowable masses of strangers: the fan fiction stage is now essentially global. Every new fic is more than a mere exercise in adoration for a movie or book or television show; it is an opportunity to publicize, to generate sympathy for, identities and issues important to the writer. Many participants in Ace Beth Week will talk at length about their appreciation for the event, being themselves asexuals who seldom have the opportunity to read romantic (sometimes aromantic) narratives that they would relate to. We can no longer simply ascribe the motivation behind slash fiction to a “normal female interest in men bonking” (Jenkins, 2006) as the interests of slash writers are now almost explicitly expressed, and the “bonking” slashers are interested in is not necessarily male-on-male, does not necessarily occur at all. The motive to slash seems instead to be a normal human interest in identity representation. “When I think of the exuberance I felt participating in fandom,” explains “T.” from the LiveJournal study, “I think it was at seeing women stepping forward to describe their own erotics” (Lothian, 106). Slash is, in the end, not about the characters in a TV show; it is much more about the fans who write it, the frustrations and desires they hold but cannot express in less subversive discourses.

The overarching message of slash fiction is one of idealism, of stressing the normality of queer sexualities in direct response to a parent narrative’s proclivity to treat these identities as other and abnormal. And yet, in strange contrast with the central ethos of unearthing typically silenced perspectives and narratives, slash must necessarily continue as a fringe practice, a hushed subaltern genre. Copyright laws naturally prevent slashers from publishing their stories in

any capacity other than the utterly unofficial and amateur. Stemming more from politeness than concern for legal rectitude, it is considered protocol for fic authors to include disclaimers at the beginning of their stories, solemn pledges that they do not claim ownership of any characters over whose fates they have assumed temporary mastery. But slashers seem to practice discretion beyond this obligatory sphere of creative license. In “Alone on the Water,” the author gives this note before embarking upon her story: “Please DO NOT tweet, email, or otherwise refer to my fanfictions (or really, anyone else’s) to the showrunners or anyone else on the cast and crew. Fanworks need to stay in fanspace” (MadLori). This admonition expresses a usually unspoken understanding within fandom: that slash is not suitable material to present as an homage to those responsible for creating the parent narrative – especially the cast.

As previously mentioned, an early critic of slash fiction objected to the genre on the grounds that it was “character rape” (Jenkins). Slash, to some, “violates” the characters about which it is written by appropriating and re-engineering their given (or assumed) sexualities. When it comes to television, this objection holds more water, as the distinction between characters and the actors portraying them can become blurred. This is less an issue within fan fiction as it is within fan art, where a pornographic drawing of Kirk and Spock in coitus is just as much a pornographic rendering of William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy. Though many actors react generously to such artworks whenever faced with them,⁷ the practice of using a real person’s likeness within an imagined sexual narrative is no less questionable. And, of course, there exists the odd fan story written not about the characters, but about the actors themselves, at

⁷ On an episode of *The Graham Norton Show* (BBC) in which the show’s host talks at length about the obsessive hobbies of fans, James McAvoy and Michael Fassbender view some slightly provocative, though unexplicit, fan art depicting their characters in *X-Men: Days of Future Past*. One drawing renders McAvoy suggestively bent over a counter as he cuts out heart-shaped sugar cookies, with Fassbender standing behind. Upon seeing the image, McAvoy jokes, “Whoever’s created this artwork, I applaud your artistry... but if anybody’s giving...” The actors and host go on to read aloud several synopses of “creepy but sweet” fan stories that involve not their fictional characters, but the actors themselves.

which point we must examine whether such fan writing truly pursues the goals of slash laid out before.

Due to the tenuous position it holds somewhere between idealistic subversion and inappropriate perversion, slash is kept in the margins of fandom, a rebellious subculture unto its own. Though slash writers express their critiques on society somewhat differently than punks and hippies once did, they nonetheless remain members of a movement seeking to undermine the hegemonic patriarchal values that have dictated romance narratives in Western literature and entertainment for centuries. Dick Hebdige's work on subcultural movements in *Subculture: the Meaning of Style* illuminates appropriately the way in which slash does indeed operate less as a community and more as a fannish subculture. Hegemonic values, he writes, ensure that competing ideas are "contained within an ideological space which does not seem at all 'ideological': which appears instead to be permanent and 'natural'" (Hebdige, 16). We may easily apply the idea of such a space to the far margins where female and queer voices reside: kept there by cultural institutions designed and perpetuated to favor the heterosexual male archetype by casting him constantly as the default protagonist, the ubiquitously relatable character. Nothing perpetuates and propagates this notion of heterosexual male as default so well as film and television, whose visual tendencies to favor a "male" gaze only compound Western storytelling's tendency to favor a male perspective. As immensely popular, highly consumable media, film and television "reproduce" various facets of patriarchal values simply by making them look good, and by allowing them to go uncontested. Carey Grant and Grace Kelly remain to us images of the epitome of masculine and feminine ideals, because Western media have taken great care since their careers to present audiences with updated generations of attractive actors mimicking their qualities. It is through visual broadcast media that "particular sets of social

relations, *particular* ways of organizing the world appear to us as if they were universal and timeless” (Hebdige, 14). The perceived universality and timelessness of the patriarchal ideals expressed on screen is exactly what slash attempts to undermine, whether it be by means of dissecting concepts of masculinity as the early slashers were wont to do in the 70s, or by bringing marginalized, non-“default” perspectives to light through fan narrative as happens today.

Unlike other, slightly more stylish, youth subcultures, slash fiction has yet to be appropriated by a capitalist machine intending to stamp out its effectiveness and use its aesthetics for parts. For obvious reasons, slash and all fan fiction cannot be picked up by businesses and reconfigured to profitability: intellectual property laws keep fan works safely paralyzed in their liminal online spheres. Occasionally, though, television shows with particularly invested fandoms will give small nods in slash’s direction. Leonard Nimoy and other members of the *Star Trek* crew wrote letters of encouragement to the *Spockanalia* fanzine upon publication of its first volume (Verba). In the long-awaited third season of *Sherlock*, many fans claimed that the homoerotic subtext was at an all-time high, though the validity of such an assessment is difficult to judge, given most *Sherlock* fans’ ability to mine homoerotic subtext from impressive depths. It cannot be argued, though, that the first episode of Season 3 included several scenes crafted specifically for the benefit of participatory fandom. The very first scene in “The Empty Hearse,” and several throughout, involve (fictional) fans of Sherlock Holmes relating their theories as to how the detective must have faked his death. One girl’s theory even involves a passionate kiss shared between Sherlock and his nemesis, Jim Moriarty. While boons such as these may lend shows a certain credibility in the eyes of the fans, showing all the signs of generous recognition and allowing fan writers to believe that their contributions to the narrative have extended beyond

their own laptops, they do little to amplify the discourse slash fiction attempts to incite. Slashing, especially in the case of the “The Empty Hearse,” is reduced to a gaff, an oddity that the “normal” viewers of a show may laugh at and dismiss. The driving sentiment behind slash is itself so fundamentally incompatible with the hegemonic model of the media slash feeds from, that to incorporate any substantial elements of the genre into mainstream writings and productions would be to expose the artificiality of the patriarchal power structures which films and television shows so glamorously endorse. If the world of slash is one of sexual idealism, then to affirm its validity would be for the modern media to acknowledge themselves as creators of a sexual dystopia.

As though to affirm slash’s incompatibility with the standard model of media consumption and ideals, a somewhat recent fan-made story achieved such outrageous commercial success that the author changed her characters’ names, crafted an entirely different setting around them, so as to avoid the appearance of intellectual property theft. The story is, however, the antithesis of slash fiction: it depicts a heterosexual relationship, one in which the balance of power is so askew in favor of the man that it could objectively be called abusive. I am referring, of course, to *Fifty Shades of Grey*, a book series which unfortunately garnered enough income to make the author, E.L. James, *Forbes*’ highest earning writer in the 2012-2013 period (*The Guardian*), and which just as unfortunately was recently adapted into a film that grossed \$300 million worldwide in its first week. The series was successful because it sold gender stereotypes on crack, pushing the limits of our society’s patriarchal structure so far that the protagonist found herself in a situation that became as dangerous as it did “sexy.” *Fifty Shades of Grey* offered readers the opportunity to experience a glamorous version of dysfunction from the safety of their less eventful beds and couches. What readers get from slash is not the cathartic

experience of exploring new sexual territory while constantly being reminded of how it is taboo and abnormal; it is in fact quite the reverse. Reading slash may seem, indeed, underwhelming by comparison. Explicit sexual content abounds, but not as a conduit for the reader's vicarious behavioral transgressions. Instead, the sexual expression in slash is, for the most part, safe and deeply feeling, attempting to normalize where E.L. James and her ilk sensationalize. Slash writers seldom mean to sell their readers transgressive experiences, but instead are concerned with asserting the validity of their identities.

When we ask why, in the face of insurmountable hegemonic structures that keep slash in the outskirts of public conversation and fandom discourse, slash writers soldier on anyway, the answer is clear. Lothian et al. had the best of it when they described slash as filling a "yearning void" left by television's storytellers who, time and again, tell only the same few stories. Slash communicates not just the desires of fan writers, their fantasies for certain characters and even for themselves, but instead functions like the expression of an unfulfilled need. It is a lasting, sprawling testament to the importance of identity representation and inclusion in modern entertainment. More than that, though, slash fiction is the global realization that we need not wait for the right stories to fall into our laps: creative participation is the antidote for consumer dissatisfaction, not patience. Slash fiction in no way promises the queer television geek a brighter future, limited as it must be in scope and commercial success, but offers itself instead as respite. When the redundant romance narratives of mainstream media leave the thirsty fan feeling parched, he or she can always turn to the safe recesses of slash community, where stories and like-minded fans await without judgment, without pretense, and with hope.

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